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NATIONAL UNITY STRUGGLES IN MYANMAR

A Degenerate Case of Governance for Harmony in Asia

_____ Ian Holliday

Abstract

In common with many Asian governments, Myanmar's military junta makes frequent appeals to harmony. However, incessant demands that the nation cultivate a narrowly conceived and centrally imposed unity make this a degenerate case of governance for harmony in which militaristic calls for discipline, strength, and vigilance hold sway.

Keywords: Burma, governance, harmony, Myanmar, unity

In the early years of the new millennium, the classical Confucian concept of harmony occupies a prominent place in Asian political discourse. In part this reflects the decision of Chinese President Hu Jintao to make construction of a "harmonious society" the cornerstone of his governance strategy. Indeed, ever since Hu assumed China's top leadership position in March 2003, the ruling elite has sought to foster harmony not only within the fractious society created by freewheeling capitalism inside the People's Republic but also in the wider world, where China is currently making its "peaceful rise." As Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing put it, not entirely accurately, in September 2005, "The Chinese nation has always pursued a life in harmony

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with other nations.”¹ Making explicit reference to the Confucian tradition in which harmony finds full elaboration, China’s leaders promote this ideal as a core political concept for our age. “Confucius said, ‘Harmony is something to be cherished’,” noted Hu in February 2005.²

For centuries, the notion of harmony, though most closely identified with Confucianism, has also resonated in other Asian traditions and societies. It continues to do so today. Both Japan and Korea were deeply influenced by China and have long accorded great value to the concept. During Japan’s Tokugawa period, spanning more than 250 years up to the 1867 Meiji Restoration, a deep and pervasive neo-Confucianism put great emphasis on the preservation of social harmony.³ Similarly, even though many regional cultures outside East Asia’s Confucian heartland were shaped by Buddhism and a variety of other religious and moral systems, the importance of harmony remained considerable. In the Buddhist tradition as in the Confucian and Taoist, harmony is set up as the basis for social solidarity.⁴ The core Buddhist notions of the Middle Way, emphasizing a rejection of extremes, and of the Noble Eightfold Path, setting out the right route to wisdom, ethical conduct, and mental discipline, provide directly for this.⁵ It is therefore no surprise to find Fang holding that “an intoxication of thought with the interpenetration or harmonious working together of Nature, Man, and History . . . constitutes what is essentially Eastern Wisdom.”⁶ An almost identical point was made more succinctly by Nakamura, who argued that “[t]he term ‘harmony’ is almost essential to the traditions of the East.”⁷

However, it is an open question how essential harmony is and should be in a world that now prioritizes other political concepts such as justice, rights, and democracy. Indeed, it is striking that the most visible contemporary affirmation

1. People’s Daily Online, “Ancient Philosophy Guides China’s Modern Diplomacy,” September 5, 2005, <http://english.people.com.cn/200509/05/eng20050905_206471.html>, accessed June 12, 2006.

2. Benjamin Robertson and Melinda Liu, “Can the Sage Save China?” *Newsweek*, March 20, 2006, pp. 20–24, p. 22.

3. Martin Collcutt, “The Legacy of Confucianism in Japan,” in Gilbert Rozman, ed., *The East Asian Region: Confucian Heritage and Its Modern Adaptation* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 111–54.

4. Thomé H. Fang, *Chinese Philosophy: Its Spirit and Its Development* (Taipei: Linking Publishing Co., 1981).

5. In both Pali and Sanskrit, the word commonly translated as “right” encompasses notions of coherence, togetherness, and harmony.

6. Thomé H. Fang, *The Chinese View of Life: The Philosophy of Comprehensive Harmony* (Taipei: Linking Publishing Co., 1980), p. 12.

7. Hajime Nakamura, “The Significance of ‘Harmony’ in Buddhist Thought,” in Shu-hsien Liu and Robert E. Allinson, eds., *Harmony and Strife: Contemporary Perspectives, East and West* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1988), pp. 91–112, p. 91.

of harmony emanates from a Chinese elite struggling to combine capitalist market freedoms with authoritarian political control. It is in many ways still more striking that China's harmony discourse is echoed most consciously by a military regime in Myanmar that is far less adept at rolling out capitalism and far more concerned to impose authoritarianism on its long-suffering citizens. Moreover, in Myanmar there is a revealing difference in the rhetoric that dominates state propaganda. When leading members of the junta make their stock speeches, they drift incessantly toward top-down imposition of unity on a subject population. In this way, they not only call into question their own commitment to harmony but also point to problems with the wider political project.

To contribute to debates about governance for harmony in Asia, this article explores the Myanmar case. First, it draws chiefly on the dominant Confucian tradition to analyze the core concept, developing a two-by-two matrix to capture its central elements. Second, the article examines the context in which harmony is pursued in Myanmar. Third, it presents a snapshot of dominant modes of political discourse there and locates the regime's strategy on the governance for harmony matrix. Fourth and finally, the paper uses the Myanmar experience to think through the proper place of harmony in modern societies. The main argument is that while harmony merits a place alongside other key political concepts, it has value only if two conditions are met. On the one hand, it must strike a fair balance between unity and diversity. On the other, it must allow for inputs not only from the top but also from the base of society. On these grounds, Myanmar can only be viewed as a degenerate case of governance for harmony in Asia.

Conceptualizing Harmony

While the concept of harmony is by no means the sole preserve of Asian cultures and thinkers, it is in these contexts that it has been most fully developed historically and is most thoroughly discussed today.⁸ Furthermore, within Asian discourse both past and present, it is Confucians who have always taken the closest interest. Harmony is, for instance, a major theme of *The Analects*. Such has been the extent of Confucian influence, however, that many Chinese thinkers now identify harmony as being integral to the national tradition. An notes that it is central to the *Book of Changes*, the greatest of the five Chinese Classics.⁹ Moving forward to the late 20th century, Fang wrote that "Chinese mentality is best characterized by what I call the cultivated sense of comprehensive

8. Karl-Otto Apel, "Harmony through Strife as a Problem of Natural and Cultural Evolution," in Liu and Allinson, eds., *Harmony and Strife*, pp. 3–19.

9. Yanming An, "Liang Shuming: Eastern and Western Cultures and Confucianism," in Chung-Ying Cheng and Nicholas Bunnin, eds., *Contemporary Chinese Philosophy* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 147–64, p. 152.

harmony.”¹⁰ To conceptualize harmony, it therefore makes sense to start with debates in and around the Confucian tradition, where it has always been prominent, and to move outward from there. In doing so it becomes apparent that two main questions predominate. First, how does harmony relate to unity on the one hand and to diversity on the other? Second, to what extent is harmony developed by political figures operating at the top of society, or alternatively by regular citizens working at the base?

Unity and Diversity

The unity-diversity debate can be viewed as taking place along an axis defined by these two concepts. While scholars have staked out positions at many points on the spectrum, the two places where they rarely, if ever, make a stand are the twin poles. It is difficult to find individuals working in Asian traditions holding that harmony should be wholly aligned with either unity or diversity. Furthermore, many contributors are explicit in ruling this out.

Among contemporary writers, Angle is clearest in denying that harmony can be understood as unity, resting his case on a survey of recent Chinese scholarship: “Xia Yong, at least, insists that there is a crucial difference between unity and harmony. Unity leads to stability through making everyone the same; harmony seeks the same end through accommodating differences.”¹¹ Angle also gives his own reasons for holding that harmony cannot be equated with unity: “Unity demands sameness of thoughts and interests; harmony does not.”¹² Writing further about current debate, he notes that “there is an important distinction between trying to remove all differences and create a unity of interests, on the one hand, and respecting at least some differences while creating a harmony of interests, on the other.”¹³

This insistence that harmony can never be wholly identified with unity is affirmed by other Confucians. Zhang ambiguously maintains that harmony has meant “without conflict” from *Laozi* to today.¹⁴ Into this neat formulation could be read harmony as unity. However, in analyzing two prominent scholars, Zhang holds that “[b]oth Zhang Zai and Wang Fuzhi are saying that in the face of the diversity of things in the world what matters most is their reconciliation and harmony. This is the key theme of Confucian thought.”¹⁵ This rules out any reduction of harmony to unity. More generally, in the long Confucian tradition

10. Fang, *The Chinese View of Life*, p. i.

11. Stephen C. Angle, *Human Rights and Chinese Thought: A Cross-cultural Inquiry* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 234.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 235.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 229.

14. Dainian Zhang, *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*, Edmund Ryden, trans. and ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 273.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 276.

there are clear injunctions not to “swim with the tide” or become a mere cipher in a uniform social system. As Confucius wrote of his ideal moral character in *The Analects*, “The gentleman harmonizes but is not a ‘yes’ man.”¹⁶ This is an explicit rejection of any equation of harmony with unity.

At the same time, there is within Confucian thought a strong belief that harmony is not compatible with extreme diversity. Again, Angle captures this nicely by posing the question, “To what degree can people’s values differ from one another without impairing their ability to achieve harmony?”¹⁷ He himself argues that at least some degree of “common tradition” is a necessary foundation. On this basis, he maintains that “harmony is a reasonable goal to seek within a community that shares at least certain common goals or traditions.”¹⁸ Linking to Western debates about rights, he also sides with Raz against Dworkin: “the individual and common interests that ground rights are typically ‘harmoniously interwoven’.”¹⁹ Peerenboom puts it slightly differently by noting that for Chinese political theorists, pluralism is not inevitable: “The dominant belief has been that all interests, including the interests of the state and the individual, are reconcilable.”²⁰ At base, this is Angle’s contention that harmony is possible only in societies that are not too diverse at the sociocultural level. But it also draws a critical contrast that helps to establish the meaning of harmony. Pluralism and diversity can coexist because pluralism does not require all social interests ultimately to point in the same direction. Indeed, pluralists are deeply skeptical of this possibility and seek to determine how societies can nevertheless be made to function. Harmony cannot coexist with extreme diversity precisely because it presupposes an underlying unity of interests.

This too meshes with long-standing Confucian beliefs that, at the most fundamental level, the world simply is not an overwhelmingly dissonant place. An, writing of the centrality of harmony to the *Book of Changes*, sets down the key contention in this way: “In the universe, there exist no absolute, single, extreme, partial, and disharmonious things.”²¹ Li reports Fang’s claim that for the Chinese “the universe is a kind of well-balanced and harmonious system.”²² For a Confucian, the reality of extreme diversity never arises. As with unity, the possibility of taking harmony to the end of the spectrum is ruled out.

16. Ibid., p. 272.

17. Angle, *Human Rights and Chinese Thought*, p. 236.

18. Ibid., pp. 238, 225.

19. Ibid., p. 228.

20. Randall Peerenboom, “Confucian Harmony and Freedom of Thought: The Right to Think Versus Right Thinking,” in William Theodore de Bary and Tu Weiming, eds., *Confucianism and Human Rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 234–60, p. 239.

21. An, “Liang Shuming,” p. 152.

22. Chenyang Li, “Fang Dongmei: Philosophy of Life, Creativity, and Inclusiveness,” in Cheng and Bunnin, eds., *Contemporary Chinese Philosophy*, pp. 263–80, p. 266.

In the Confucian tradition that continues to dominate debates about harmonious governance, the core concept is construed as a form of unity in diversity. It is probably fair to say that in classic conceptions the role of unity outweighs the role of diversity: harmony can accommodate unity more easily than diversity. Among new Confucians, however, there is greater tolerance for diversity. In other Asian traditions, the unity-diversity theme is equally prominent. In general, thinkers agree with their Confucian counterparts that harmony is neither merely unity nor merely diversity, and cannot be equated solely with either extreme. Where they differ from Confucians is in the balance to be struck between unity and diversity. Taoists, as Ames and Hall put it, with their expansive attempt “to get the most out of what each of us is,” tend to favor greater diversity.²³ The project of “making this life significant,” of seeing each life unfold to its full potential, pushes Taoists away from Confucian ritual and turns them toward a wider variety of thinking throughout society. As Lau writes, “[T]he *tao* [roughly, “way”] that can be described, cited as authority, and praised is not the immutable way.”²⁴ Similarly, Buddhists rarely see the need for levels of ritually generated social unity sought by Confucians.

Top Down and Bottom Up

The debate about whether harmony should emanate from the top or bottom of a society can also be viewed as stretching along a continuum defined by two poles. Again, the two parts of the spectrum that are off-limits are the twin extremes. For scholars from the major Asian traditions, it is not possible for harmony to be either wholly imposed or utterly spontaneous.

The clearest indication that harmony might be generated by political leaders comes from the close association Confucians frequently make with social order. Roetz writes that, “For Confucius’ disciple You Ruo, harmony is subordinated to the social bounds defined by propriety. It needs just a slight modification of this idea to make harmony an ideological concept of reifying social inequality and upholding rule.”²⁵ More explicitly, he notes that for the Han Confucian Dong Zhongshu, harmony is a means to keep social order. Similarly, Henkin writes, “In traditional China the ideal was not individual liberty or equality but order and harmony, not individual independence but selflessness and cooperation, not the freedom of individual conscience but conformity to orthodox truth.

23. Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Daodejing: “Making This Life Significant”: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), p. 11.

24. D. C. Lau, “Introduction,” in Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin Books, 1963), pp. 7–52, p. 15.

25. Heiner Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age: A Reconstruction under the Aspect of the Breakthrough toward Postconventional Thinking* (Albany, N. Y.: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 110.

There was no distinction, no separation, no confrontation between the individual and society, but an essential unity and harmony, permeating all individual behavior."²⁶ In a more nuanced way, Peerenboom notes that the traditional view of politics in China required "unification of thought." While this did not entail total conformity, it did necessitate considerable social control: "Rather than all voices singing the same note, each distinct voice sings a different note that taken collectively comprise a chord. However, everyone must still sing from the same songbook."²⁷

For Confucians there is, then, a clear sense that harmony is to be built more from the top of society than from the bottom. That said, however, injunctions not to swim with the tide or be a "yes" man indicate that it should never be developed solely from the apex. Furthermore, the possibility that harmony might provide grounds for rebellion has always been present. Rozman notes that the utopian Chinese concept of the great harmony was commonly a force for conservatism, promoting conformity and a strong notion of duty.²⁸ On occasion, however, it could be a force for radicalism, for instance if an emperor was lacking in virtue, derelict in his duties and thereby an appropriate target for popular discontent and mobilization.

That there is in the Confucian tradition more conscious imposition than spontaneous bubbling up appears to be incontrovertible. However, harmony is never produced solely by the ruler. In different Asian traditions, the roles of other social actors loom much larger. Taoists place great faith in the abilities of ordinary people to help generate harmonious government; Taoist thinkers thereby develop a more pluralistic conception. Buddhists also turn less to the leader, and more to regular citizens, in seeking inputs to social debate.

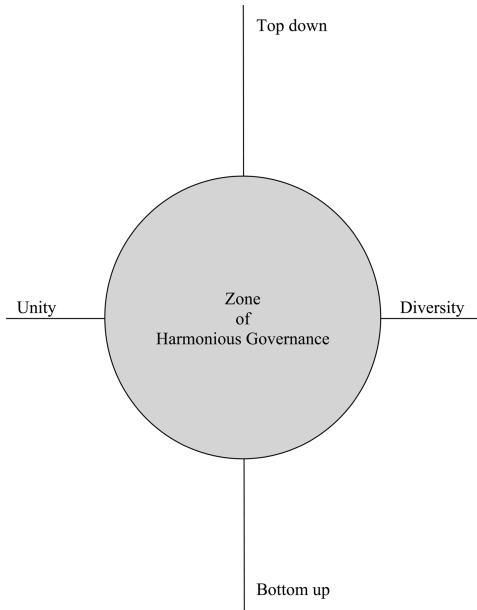
Conceptualization

Drawing on classical Confucianism and looking from it to other major Asian traditions that share its prioritization of harmony, it can be argued that there are two main strands to debate. One captures the substance of political life in a harmonious society. The other reflects processes of political decision-making. Each is a continuum of positions. Putting them together, harmony can be conceptualized in the form of the two-by-two matrix shown in Figure 1. On the horizontal axis lies the unity-diversity spectrum. On the vertical axis lies the tension

26. Louis Henkin, "The Human Rights Idea in Contemporary China: A Comparative Perspective," in R. Randle Edwards, Louis Henkin, and Andrew J. Nathan, eds., *Human Rights in Contemporary China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 7–39, p. 21.

27. Peerenboom, "Confucian Harmony and Freedom of Thought," p. 244.

28. Gilbert Rozman, "The East Asian Region in Comparative Perspective," in Gilbert Rozman, ed., *The East Asian Region: Confucian Heritage and Its Modern Adaptation* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 3–42.

FIGURE 1 *Conceptualization of Governance for Harmony*

SOURCE: By author.

between top-down and bottom-up approaches. The zone of governance for harmony marked out reflects an understanding that none of the four poles of debate actually generates conditions in which harmony is attainable. Governance for harmony is not possible in conditions of total unity or complete diversity. Equally, it cannot be generated uniquely from the top or the base of a society. At the same time, although harmonious governance is possible in all four quadrants, there is a clear drift in some Asian traditions toward one quadrant or another. In classical Confucianism, a substantive preference for unity over diversity and a procedural preference for top-down decision-making over bottom-up pull the zone of harmonious governance in a northwesterly direction. Among new Confucians, by contrast, the drift is less westerly, and may even tend toward the northeast. In Taoism, there is a drag toward the southeast, generated by a fuller conception and appreciation of diversity in civil society and a willingness to allow many voices to have their say in governance debates. In Buddhism, there is also less desire to allow understandings of governance for harmony to move to the northwesterly quadrant favored by Confucians.

The Myanmar Context

Before the British intervention in the course of the 19th century, the territory now mapped as Myanmar was occupied by a complex mix of kingdoms and tribal societies characterized by shifting forms of rule and patterns of alliance. For many centuries, the core territory was peopled by a dominant Burman race that remains preponderant today. Burman kings frequently exacted tribute from many surrounding peoples. Equally common, however, was a more centrifugal orientation that either saw tribute paid to monarchs outside the Burman core or featured a series of largely autonomous sociopolitical entities.²⁹

From early on, the land was affected more by India and Buddhism than by China and Confucianism; this pattern was reinforced when Britain administered Burma as part of the Raj for several decades down to the late 1930s. In recent years, however, the flow of influence has been less clear. At a sociocultural level, the place of Buddhism has been strongly reinforced by a regime that is desperate to link to popular dispositions at as many points as possible.³⁰ Indeed, Buddhism has been very vigorously promoted by the government in the years since a mass pro-democracy movement was crushed in September 1988.³¹ At the economic and political levels, however, the rise of China has had major repercussions in Myanmar, notably since the late 1980s when the defeat of Burma's democracy movement was replicated in Tiananmen Square in June 1989.³² For the past two decades, the political significance of China has been considerable, and the Myanmar regime's policy choices and rhetoric frequently reveal the influence of Beijing.

Today, Myanmar is idiosyncratic in many ways, having a tradition of elite recourse to astrological charts and predictions that imposes real distortions on the policy process, and with a junta known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) that is often aggressively chauvinistic. Throughout the postcolonial period, Burma/Myanmar has made determined attempts to pursue

29. Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

30. Juliane Schober, "Buddhist Visions of Moral Authority and Modernity in Burma," in Monique Skidmore, ed., *Burma at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), pp. 113–32; Keiko Tosa, "The Chicken and the Scorpion: Rumor, Counter-narratives, and the Political Uses of Buddhism," in *ibid.*, pp. 154–73.

31. Kyaw Yin Hlaing, "The Politics of Government-Business Relations in Myanmar," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 10:1 (June 2002), pp. 77–104; Gavin Douglas, "Who's Performing What? State Patronage and the Transformation of Burmese Music," in Skidmore, ed., *Burma at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*, pp. 229–47.

32. Chi-shad Liang, "Burma's Relations with the People's Republic of China: From Delicate Friendship to Genuine Co-operation," in Peter Carey, ed., *Burma: The Challenge of Change in a Divided Society* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 71–96.

its own course in regional and international affairs.³³ Having been one of five sponsors of the Non-Aligned Movement at the 1955 Bandung Conference, the country left the organization from 1979 to 1992, claiming that the grouping was not truly independent from the dominant structures of Cold War politics. Similarly, although Myanmar accepted an invitation to join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in July 1997, it has often been an awkward partner.³⁴ In July 2005, ASEAN leaders became so uncomfortable with the idea that Myanmar might chair the regional grouping when its turn came up by rotation in 2006–07 that they pressured the SPDC into standing down voluntarily. By December 2005, ASEAN leaders were so frustrated with the lack of political progress inside the country that they appointed an envoy to undertake a fact-finding mission. In the event, the March 2006 visit merely reinforced the divisions that exist between Myanmar and many of its fellow ASEAN members.

Myanmar is therefore by no means a regular or straightforward regional state. That it is Asian is not in doubt, however. It is deeply infused with Asian traditions and has long engaged in cultural exchange with peoples from many parts of the region. With its Buddhist heritage and Confucian overlay, discourses of harmony have long resonated in the country.

Unity and Diversity

Myanmar has complex sociocultural foundations, comprising a dominant Burman group, which makes up about two-thirds of the total population of 55 million, and a series of minority ethnic groups. According to the military regime that has ruled Burma/Myanmar in one guise or another since March 1962, the country has 135 different ethnicities. More reasonably, it can be said to have eight major groups: Burman, Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan. In the socialist Constitution promulgated in 1974, seven states were created for the seven non-Burman groups, and the Burman core was divided into seven divisions. Although this Constitution was abrogated when the mass pro-democracy uprising was suppressed in 1988, no replacement has yet been produced. For this reason, the country continues to be split into seven states and seven administrative divisions. In terms of ethnic make-up, Myanmar is clearly one of the more complex Asian states.³⁵

33. William C. Johnstone, *Burma's Foreign Policy: A Study in Neutralism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963); Chi-shad Liang, *Burma's Foreign Relations: Neutralism in Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger, 1990).

34. Mya Than, *Myanmar in ASEAN: Regional Cooperation Experience* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005).

35. Martin J. Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, rev. ed. (London: Zed Books, 1999); Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency since 1948* (Bangkok: Silk-worm, 1999).

Derived in large part from this complexity is a debate within the country about the degree to which its distinct ethnic groups can ever be said to have formed a unified people. Looking back through history, it is clear that shifting alliances on the one hand, and periods of conflict on the other, characterized much of the territory.³⁶ Furthermore, when the British drew firm boundaries around Burma, while administering it for most of the colonial period as part of the Raj, they distinguished clearly between Ministerial Burma or Burma Proper, and the Frontier Areas or Excluded Areas. In the latter parts lived the vast majority of the non-Burman population. While Ministerial Burma was brought under full colonial rule, the Frontier Areas were subjected to a form of indirect rule through princely leaders.

This division was reinforced in the Second World War when Burmese forces fought until March 1945 on the side of the Japanese before switching allegiance to the Allies, while soldiers from the hill country fought with the Allies throughout the conflict.³⁷ The split was then reflected in decisions taken during the run-up to independence. In particular, the February 1947 Panglong Agreement, signed by the British government and representatives of the Burman, Chin, Kachin, and Shan peoples, formally recognized some of the autonomy claims of some of the hill peoples.³⁸ The division subsequently found its way into the first Constitution of independent Burma, which came into effect with British withdrawal in January 1948. It became a source of growing political contention in the 1950s as civil war broke out in much of the hill country. It was the critical trigger for a March 1962 military coup, from which the current junta is a direct descendant.³⁹

During 26 years of behind-the-scenes military control down to the mass democracy protests in 1988, ethnic divisions manifested themselves chiefly as civil war. In those years, the national army, mainly Burman, was engaged in armed conflict on many different fronts, all of which were internal to the country. In a further two decades since 1988, a formal military dictatorship has overseen a measure of economic liberalization and at the same time sought to bring some peace to Myanmar's borderlands through ceasefire agreements with ethnic insurgents. The result has been less overt fighting but by no means real peace, and certainly not any degree of inter-ethnic concord.⁴⁰ Every day

36. Parimal Ghosh, *Brave Men of the Hills: Resistance and Rebellion in Burma, 1825–1932* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000).

37. Jon Latimer, *Burma: The Forgotten War* (London: John Murray, 2004).

38. Angelene Naw, *Aung San and the Struggle for Burmese Independence* (Chiang Mai: Silk-worm, 2001).

39. Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003).

40. Josef Silverstein, "The Civil War, the Minorities, and Burma's New Politics," in Carey, ed., *Burma*, pp. 129–58.

Myanmar is disfigured by low-grade civil conflict, and many days are marked by diverse forms of state violence against subject peoples. The knock-on impact of civil strife in Myanmar continues to be felt across its borders, as members of ethnic sub-groups flee army action and wind up in sprawling refugee camps in Thailand and other neighboring countries.

Neither today nor at any point in its history has Burma/Myanmar been unified. A degree of national feeling was generated in the middle months of 1945, when people from all ethnic groups came together to drive out the Japanese. However, any common bonds formed then quickly started to dissolve as individuals turned their attention away from liberation from Japan and toward independence from Britain and the prospect of self-government. As a sovereign state, Burma/Myanmar has never been a true nation.

Top Down and Bottom Up

For most of its modern history, Burma/Myanmar has been governed in an overwhelmingly top-down manner. British colonialism clearly had this character, though the indirect rule that was introduced in peripheral parts of the country modified it to some degree. In the bulk of Burma, however, the British largely destroyed local institutions and traditions that had long served to mediate central power, leaving the country with few channels through which ordinary people might express their views.⁴¹ In the early years of independence, the situation changed somewhat as democratic norms started to become embedded and supporting structures emerged in civil society. However, taking the long view, it is the 14-year democratic interlude that is atypical in the country's modern history.

That interlude was decisively curtailed in March 1962 when General Ne Win seized power in a military coup and proceeded to implement an Asian form of authoritarian state socialism with Buddhist characteristics. While the Burmese Way to Socialism had a number of idiosyncratic elements, its strongly hierarchical mode of governance replicated the model established in a number of East-Central European countries. In Burma, as in East-Central Europe, a single party, the Burmese Socialist Program Party, dominated the political process.⁴² Furthermore, the shift from authoritarian state socialism to military junta in 1988 made little difference in this regard. Although the governing party was instantaneously dissolved, there was no opening of the polity to popular participation. Rather, the junta renewed instruments of control by focusing on a series of regional military commands that remain decisive power brokers to

41. Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*.

42. Josef Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977).

this day.⁴³ A nationwide general election held in May 1990 turned out to be no more than a brief diversion from business as usual in a highly authoritarian state. When the election was won in a landslide by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), the military elite ignored the result and in 1993 set up a National Convention to draft a new constitution for an authoritarian polity. From the outset, the convention was tasked with reserving positions, powers, and domains for the military in order to create a "discipline-flourishing democratic state" that might ensure continuation of army rule by other means.⁴⁴

Today, there is some grassroots political mobilization in Myanmar. In peripheral parts of the country, the writ of central government is challenged both in zones of continuing civil conflict and in areas where ceasefire deals have handed de facto control to insurgent parties and movements. However, in the Burman core, where the junta is able to order things more fully to its liking, the leading popular organizations are fronts for military dictatorship. They comprise the Union Solidarity and Development Association, which reportedly has 18 million members; the Myanmar War Veterans Organization; the Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation; the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association; and so on.⁴⁵ Although the Buddhist priesthood and the NLD are ongoing focal points for political mobilization, their influence is essentially latent.⁴⁶ The NLD, for instance, is only allowed to maintain offices in Yangon. In the civil sector, a small number of NGOs provide health, education, and other services at a mainly local level.⁴⁷ Very few international organizations are active inside the country.⁴⁸ The general orientation of the polity and society is therefore highly top-down. All significant forms of political agency emanate from the military, and the major elements of contestation and tension are contained within its structures, notably in the interplay between a core group around Senior General Than Shwe and leading military commanders.

43. Andrew Selth, *Burma's Armed Forces: Power without Glory* (Norwalk, Conn.: EastBridge, 2002).

44. Janelle M. Diller, "The National Convention: An Impediment to the Restoration of Democracy," in Carey, ed., *Burma*, pp. 1–26.

45. Network for Democracy and Development, *The White Shirts: How the USDA Will Become the New Face of Burma's Dictatorship*, <<http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs3/USDAFinal1.pdf>>, accessed June 12, 2006.

46. Gustaaf Houtman, "Sacralizing or Demonizing Democracy? Aung San Suu Kyi's 'Personality Cult'," in Skidmore, ed., *Burma at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*, pp. 133–53.

47. Helen James, *Governance and Civil Society in Myanmar: Education, Health, and Environment* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005); Brian Heidel, *The Growth of Civil Society in Myanmar* (Bangalore, Karnataka, India: Books for Change, 2006).

48. David Tegenfeldt, "International Non-Governmental Organizations in Burma," in Robert H. Taylor, ed., *Burma: Political Economy under Military Rule* (London: Hurst, 2001), pp. 109–18.

Political Discourse in Contemporary Myanmar

While the underlying social and political tradition of Myanmar contains plenty of resources that could be tapped by advocates of a harmony strategy, the realities of contemporary politics mean that the country now forms rather unpromising terrain. On the one hand, even though the military dictatorship has for years sought to impose a heavy-handed Burman uniformity on the country, Myanmar remains highly diverse. On the other, although the first decade and a half after its release from top-down colonial control saw Burma begin to build a pluralistic polity, the 1962 military coup brought that development to a halt. Rigid central control has been a key feature of political life ever since. In consequence, Myanmar now combines extensive social and cultural diversity with tight central control. Neither is ideal grounding for governance for harmony.

Despite this, the junta has in recent years mimicked the harmony talk that for centuries has been at the heart of political discourse across much of Asia, and that currently emanates most conspicuously from Hu Jintao's China. In doing so, the Burmese junta partly attempts to align itself with the successful governance strategy launched by paramount Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s and modified by his successors. At the same time, Myanmar's military government also seeks to look inside its own political tradition and tap the resources of indigenous Buddhist thinking, which in common with Confucianism has long cast harmony as a central attribute of the good society.

Today the concept of harmony can readily be found in material put out by the regime in a wide variety of media outlets, including its English-language daily, *The New Light of Myanmar*, and in propaganda pages that have to be carried in the semi-autonomous English-language weekly, *The Myanmar Times*. There are references to the "harmonious endeavors of the Tatmadaw [army] members, who have restored and safeguarded the independence and who are the offspring of the national people, the State service personnel and the entire national races."⁴⁹ There are parallel mentions of the "harmonious efforts of the State service personnel and the people in implementing the [development] projects with the leadership of the government."⁵⁰ From time to time, calls are issued for distinct levels of government to work together harmoniously to attain major state objectives. Reference can also be found to Myanmar's harmonious relations with friendly foreign governments, notably China and Russia, and to the need for further harmony in international relations.

However, what is striking in the Myanmar case is that this discourse is overshadowed by a rather different discourse organized around the related, but distinct, notion of unity. Unity features at the heart of the junta's three main

49. *The New Light of Myanmar*, January 3, 2006, p. 1.

50. *Ibid.*, January 4, 2006, p. C.

FIGURE 2 *Myanmar State Peace and Development Council National Objectives*

Our Three Main National Causes

- Non-disintegration of the Union
- Non-disintegration of National Solidarity
- Consolidation of National Sovereignty

People's Desire

- 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 internal affairs of the State
- Crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy

Four Political Objectives

- Stability of the State, community peace and tranquillity, prevalence of law and order
- National reconsolidation
- Emergence of a new enduring State constitution
- Building of a new modern developed nation in accord with a new State constitution

Four Economic Objectives

- Development of agriculture as the base and all-round development of other economy sectors as well
- Proper evolution of the market-oriented economic system
- Development of the economy inviting participation in terms of technical know-how and investments from sources inside the country and abroad
- Initiative to shape the national economy must be kept in the hands of the State and the national peoples

Four Social Objectives

- Uplift the morale and morality of the entire nation
 - Uplift national prestige and integrity and preservation and safeguarding of cultural heritage and national character
 - Uplift dynamism of patriotic spirit
 - Uplift health, fitness, and education standards of the entire nation
-

SOURCE: *The New Light of Myanmar*.

national causes, is evident in its rendering of the "People's Desire," and is not difficult to discern in language used to convey the leadership's four political objectives (see Figure 2). All these statements are reproduced on a daily basis in the regime's major media outlets and must be carried in a number of other publications, including many books published in Myanmar. In addition, the "People's Desire" is painted on large red wooden hoardings located at key points around the country. In Yangon, for example, billboards have been erected across the street from the U.S. Embassy, on the main road from the international airport to the heart of the city, and close to major tourist attractions like

 FIGURE 3 *Exhortations Marking Myanmar's 58th Independence Day*

Objectives of the 58th Anniversary Independence Day

- All the national people to collectively safeguard the national independence and sovereignty of the State and ensure the non-disintegration of the Union and national unity
- All the national people to unitedly strive with might and main for emergence of an enduring State Constitution and for building a new modern and developed nation
- All the national people to work in concert for the success of the seven-point Road Map of the State with Union Spirit and nationalist spirit
- All the national people to make concerted efforts for building a new discipline-flourishing democratic nation

Resolution on the 58th Anniversary Independence Day

There is no nobler task than safeguarding Independence & Sovereignty. Let us thus dedicate ourselves to safeguard Independence & Sovereignty with the strength of national unity as well as with full patriotism and Union spirit at the risk of our lives.

Extract from Message Sent to the Nation by Senior General Than Shwe

In this age of advancing science and technology, the neo-colonialists instead of using much-obvious colonization and coercion resorting to force, are trying to encroach on and dominate others through the media, with social, economic, human rights and narcotic drugs excuses. In this regard, we all need to guard the nation against their perpetration with national awareness that originated in patriotism and Union Spirit.

SOURCES: *New Light of Myanmar*, January 4, 2006, pp. A, C; *ibid.*, January 5, 2006, p. 2.

the Shwedagon Pagoda. The discourse becomes especially prominent during set-piece mass mobilizations such as Independence Day celebrations, held on January 4 every year. In 2006, for instance, the language used to whip up enthusiasm was infused with the concept of unity (see Figure 3). The special 58th Independence Day supplement of the main English-language newspaper noted that true patriotism comprises cultivation and possession of “strong Union Spirit.”⁵¹ The main billboard erected on People’s Square to mark the day carried the declaration, “Towards a new nation with the united strength of the people.”⁵²

It is clear not only from the language used in its most emblematic statements—“Crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy”—but also from the drift of policy both before and after 1988 that the military leadership does not intend to foster a form of unity in diversity that builds common bonds while acknowledging ethnic differences and claims. Rather, the

51. *Ibid.*, p. A.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

regime's idea of unity is set within a Burman straitjacket formed by ongoing military action against minority populations and by policies requiring Burman culture to be accorded priority throughout the nation. In education, central policy since 1992 has mandated that Myanmar be the medium of instruction in schools at all levels. The fact that this does not in fact happen, notably at the primary level in many ethnic sub-regions, reflects state incapacity rather than policy preference. In religion, central policy equally insists that Buddhism be prioritized in all parts of the country. Although there is some tolerance of alternative faiths, both Christianity and Islam are starved of funds and frequently harassed. In Myanmar, then, unity comprises the imposition of a narrowly Burman conception on a diverse subject population—not the one and the many, but plainly and aggressively the one.

Moreover, the attainment of unity is cast by military leaders as a perpetual struggle to which all citizens are required to devote unceasing attention and energy. As is evident from the message sent to the nation by Senior General Than Shwe on Independence Day 2006, building on patriotism and Union Spirit to guard the country against neo-colonialist threats is a critical task. Similarly, a contributor to *The New Light of Myanmar* noted: "In the world today, each and every nation lacking national unity has met its end one by one. Even some of the apparently strong unions have collapsed and got [*sic*] disintegrated in a short period. Public lives and property and cultural heritage were destroyed in the process. All need to take lessons from these events."⁵³ It is only a small distance from such statements to the politics of fear about which Aung San Suu Kyi and others have written.⁵⁴

In this way, discourse mirroring the "peaceful rise" and "cooperative development" commitments routinely issued by China's top leaders is largely obscured by militaristic calls for discipline, strength, and vigilance in consolidation and defense of national unity. It is in this direction that the relentless efforts of the nation are directed. Indeed, the very objective to which political reform under the generals is officially headed—creation of a "discipline-flourishing democratic state"—makes this abundantly clear. Furthermore, Myanmar's military junta pursues unity so intensely and purposively, notably through persistent reference to the perils that await the nation should it fail in its collective task, that the space in which competing political values might develop is reduced to insignificance. Extensive media censorship reinforces this limitation of civil space.⁵⁵ In the Myanmar case, the discourse on harmony that resonates

53. Ibid., January 2, 2006, p. 8.

54. Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom from Fear: And Other Writings*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 1995); Christina Fink, *Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule* (London: Zed Books, 2001).

55. Jennifer Leehey, "Writing in a Crazy Way: Literary Life in Contemporary Urban Burma," in Skidmore, ed., *Burma at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*, pp. 175–205.

across much of contemporary Asia cannot disguise the determination of the junta to exercise extensive control over political space.

Myanmar cannot therefore be located within the zone of harmonious governance marked out in Figure 1. In terms of substance, the stress on unity is so heavy that the country is located beyond the western perimeter of the zone. In terms of process, the top-down control imposed with such rigidity by military leaders means that it is pushed beyond the northern perimeter. Stuck in the north-west corner of Figure 1, Myanmar is thus best characterized as a degenerate case of the governance for harmony project currently pursued in parts of Asia, and particularly in China. While harmony discourse is visible in official pronouncements, the concept is both thinly conceived and aggressively imposed on a diverse and complex society. Far more present is a militant and militaristic unity discourse, which becomes overwhelming. This orientation reflects the country's positioning on the matrix of harmonious governance, where it seeks to engineer rigid top-down control in pursuit of a severe, even draconian, social unity.

Conclusion: Governing for Harmony in Modern Societies

As the "thunder from the East" echoes around the world, important parts of the rising Asia that produced it are promoting harmony as one of the great political concepts, meriting a place alongside justice, rights, liberty, equality, democracy, pluralism, and so on.⁵⁶ However, the Myanmar case demonstrates that harmony can collapse into something with no more than a superficial link to the main concept. Under the SPDC, harmony has turned into a militaristic unity that, as many scholars in the Confucian and other traditions have noted, is best viewed as a disfigured corruption of the core idea. Put differently, the Myanmar experience shows that harmony can be harnessed to a repressive governance strategy. Three conclusions flow from this.

The first is that although harmony clearly merits a place alongside other key political concepts, it has value only if two conditions are met. On the one hand, there must be a reasonable social balance between unity and diversity. On the other, there must be political inputs not only from the top but also from the base of society. Unless these conditions are met, harmony is likely to degenerate into something very different, and far less pleasant. Indeed, the Myanmar case shows that pursuit of this kind of governance strategy can result in an imposed unity. The consensus among analysts is that this is very different from governance for harmony.

56. Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *Thunder from the East: Portrait of a Rising Asia* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001).

The second conclusion is that it is difficult to accord harmony the same status in the pantheon of political concepts as some others that have become embedded in leading traditions over a number of centuries. In many ways, justice, liberty, equality, democracy, and pluralism are foundational to governance for harmony. Without them, it is hard to access the zone of harmonious governance in which the competing demands of unity and diversity, and of top-down and bottom-up decision making, are reconciled. That is, unless there is in a society a basic level of justice, rights, liberty, equality, democracy, and pluralism, it is unlikely to be a fitting candidate for governance for harmony. Only in reasonably open and tolerant social contexts are the underlying conditions met.

The third conclusion is that in societies that are simply too diverse to enable a governance for harmony project to get off the ground, the best way forward is to entrench rights and duties in explicit foundational documents, such as a constitution. In the Myanmar case, the extent of social division at the very basic level of ethnic identity, combined with the degree of suspicion generated between Burman and non-Burman peoples, make appeals to harmony inherently difficult to sustain. In these circumstances, it would be better to push harmony discourse to one side and engage in open and transparent codification of rights, powers, responsibilities, and duties.