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Precarity and Political Immobilisation: Migrants from Burma in Chiang Mai, Thailand

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ABSTRACT  An estimated 1.5 million citizens of Burma reside as refugees or migrants in Thailand, where harsh treatment, harassment and social stigmas contribute to a climate of precarity. Although one possible course of action for any community under strain is political mobilisation, for migrants from Burma in the northern city of Chiang Mai, high degrees of exploitation and insecurity have generated an overwhelming disinterest in political issues. The article examines this relationship in five main sections. The first presents the two key concepts that structure the analysis: precarity and political mobilisation. The second examines the context of migration from Burma to Thailand, focusing both on the climate of unrest found in much of Burma and on Thailand’s treatment of migrant workers, its non-participation in core international legislation and its sub-standard migrant registration system. The third explains how this study of Burmese migrants in Chiang Mai was undertaken and reviews the ethical considerations required in a study of vulnerable groups. The fourth documents the study’s findings and presents migrants’ testimony. The fifth seeks to explain the link between precarity and political passivity in this case, and considers the wider implications. The concluding section restates the core finding.

KEY WORDS: Burma, Chiang Mai, migration, mobilisation, Myanmar, precarity, Thailand

Over the past two to three decades, hundreds of thousands of individuals facing problems of civil conflict, political repression and endemic poverty in Burma have fled across the border to neighbouring Thailand.¹ The result is that in 2011 an estimated 1.5 million people from Burma are resident in Thailand short or long term.² A small proportion has refugee status through registration with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). A larger number has legal migrant status through registration with the Thai authorities. The vast majority subsists beyond both domestic and international law in the shadow world of illegal migration. Together, these groups occupy some of the lowest and most marginalised segments of Thai society. In recent years a steady inflow of workers from Burma has challenged the position of some indigenous Thai workers and created intense competition for work among migrants. Harsh treatment and harassment at the...
hands of employers and police alike have made life in Thailand still more difficult. Both in the workplace and in public spaces, prevalent social stigmas attach to migrant workers. Together, these factors contribute to a climate of precarity that is a dominant feature of the migrant experience. Furthermore, although one possible course of action for any community under strain is mobilisation, for the Burmese migrants in this study, high degrees of exploitation and insecurity have generated an overwhelming disinterest in political issues.

This article examines the relationship between precarity and political immobilisation among Burmese migrants in Thailand. Precarity is a condition experienced by workers whose day-to-day existence is characterised by insecurity and instability. Political mobilisation is a response to circumstances considered intolerable by a group of individuals, and typically takes the form of community building and political participation. At the core of this study is an attempt to understand the precarious experience of migrants in the northern city of Chiang Mai, a major migrant hub located about 150 miles from the closest border with Burma, and to draw from that understanding an explanation of their political passivity. The study has five main sections. The first presents the two key concepts that structure the analysis: precarity and political mobilisation. The second examines the context of migration from Burma to Thailand, focusing both on the climate of unrest found in much of Burma and on Thailand’s treatment of migrant workers, its non-participation in core international legislation and its sub-standard national migrant registration system. The third briefly explains how this study of migrants in Chiang Mai was undertaken and also reviews the special ethical considerations that need to be met in a study of vulnerable groups. The fourth documents the study’s findings and presents migrants’ testimony. The fifth seeks to explain the link between precarity and political passivity in this case, and considers the wider implications. The final concluding section restates the core finding that precarity contributes forcefully to political immobilisation.

Political Mobilisation and Precarity

Studies of political mobilisation stretch back across many decades. With the expansion of political science in the 1950s, and the development of mass society and political consciousness, scholars began to document the activities of fledgling phenomena, such as the American civil rights movement. Tilly and Rule’s early study of political upheaval, which identified social movements as mechanisms for political dissent, was especially influential (Tilly and Rule, 1965). Over the next half-century, movements became the central unit of analysis in the discourse on mobilisation. Also present from the start was an interest in the stimuli that galvanise dissenters to participate in collective action and mass protest. Scholars have long sought above all to understand the group socialisation process and to define what it means to constitute a group. For many years they have taken a critical look at movements’ assets and the process by which they gain support and issue change-orientated demands.

Historical studies show that movements have typically emerged in response to discontent provoked by socio-political or socio-economic instability: economic crises, state-building activities or industrialisation (Tilly, 1978). McAdam and Snow (1997) identified motivating instability as “strain” to the social system, adding to
Tilly’s factors social instability and socio-political factors that transgress political systems (such as migration). They argued that though poverty alone does not create sufficient strain to prompt a social movement, mobilisation often occurs among less powerful groups within a population. Once formed, social movements are often more dynamic than bureaucratic institutions. As a result, movements manifest themselves through a variety of channels. They may contribute to awareness and grievance-raising in society at large, they may form interest groups which operate within the political sphere or lobby the government, they may attempt to convince authorities to change policies by non-institutional means, such as protests and boycotts, or they may take direct action against the system of authority (Zald et al., 2005).

One of the most important questions thereby arising is how and why social mobilisation occurs. Central to the debate are the numerous structural and cultural factors which influence the nature and extent of successful mobilisation. Structural factors frequently have institutional roots. They are those systematic channels established by law that enable dissenters to express their opinions through legal means. Often they include specific institutions and are shaped by precedents for direct interaction between the government and interest groups. For example, social movements may benefit from government institutions, such as the town meeting or public interest forum. Countries guaranteeing freedom of association often have many precedents that provide social movements with a secure forum for opposition. Cultural factors are more nebulous. Social movement momentum can be affected formally by cultural institutions, such as religious associations, or informally by communitarian networks. For example, mobilised groups arising within religious institutions are classified by Aberle (1966) as redemptive, in that they effect complete change in individuals. Religious institutions are meeting grounds for people with similar moral and spiritual beliefs. Shared values build collectivity and may encourage activism in furtherance of moralistic or value-orientated goals. Historically, social movements have sought endorsement from religious groups in order to broaden their public appeal among people of common moral beliefs and to attract new participants. In addition, basic sociological phenomena, such as language, heritage and artistic tradition, may contribute to or detract from mobilisation. Explanations for variation in the impact of social movements have also been chiefly divided between these two camps. Some privilege structural factors in contending that the success of movements is largely state-driven. Others privilege cultural, community-driven explanations.

Perhaps the most significant early explanation for mobilisation was semi-structural. In the late 1970s, resource mobilisation theory applied the economic relationship of resources and output to a political setting. McCarthy and Zald (1977) argued that resource availability is a key determinant of mobilisation outcomes. Against them, Fireman and Gamson (1979) argued for greater attention to be paid to the relationship between urgency and collective action, and others have also placed great emphasis on external factors. More recently, researchers have revisited resource mobilisation theory. McAdam and Snow (1997) identified three preconditions for mobilisation: discontent, political opportunities and organisation. McAdam and colleagues (2001) opted for a more politically guided interpretation, contending that social movements develop once a dissenting group gains an exploitable resource base and capable political organisers. Mobilisation thus
depends less on access to resources than on the quality and nature of the resources themselves. More substantial as a critique were analyses that brought the state back in. Looking at anti-nuclear movements during the Cold War era in Europe, Kitschelt (1986) argued that resource mobilisation theory was unable to explain significant variations in mobilisation between anti-nuclear movements in different countries despite access to similar organisational resources. The key difference for him came in distinct political opportunity structures, including organisational resources, institutional channels and historical precedents (Kitschelt, 1986).

On the cultural side, a movement’s ability to attract participants and mobilise them to action has long been viewed as critical. Thus, Orum (1972) advanced a pathway model in which participation is the end result of a chain of events: socialisation, deprivation, development of psycho-political ideals, and engagement in mass society. Later, social-influence theory sought to rule out structural analyses in favour of a cultural argument by identifying several mobilisation-influencing factors outside of political opportunity structures. Analysts criticised state-centric explanation as too narrow in scope, arguing that it overlooks the influence of culture, emotions and identity in determining the likelihood of mobilisation (Goodwin and Jasper, 1999). Here, communitarian structures significantly affect social movements through direct participation, indirect support, sympathy with the cause, apathy, indirect disdain, or even active opposition. Campbell identifies three classes within social mobilising mechanisms: environmental (external factors influencing movement participants’ capacity to participate), cognitive (factors affecting how participants view their own limitations and prospects), and relational (factors enabling or disabling co-operation between actors) (Campbell, 2005). This allows for a more detailed examination of social-influence theory. Whereas previous discussions of social influence focused on rather vague aspects of culture and tradition, Campbell’s social mechanisms provide a means of detailing the interaction of participants and their society.

Looking beyond developed societies characterised by social movements, the developing world appears to elevate the importance of structural factors, with threats being far more prevalent than opportunity. Indeed, whereas in a democratic society the state may be more passively involved in responding to protests, in authoritarian or undemocratic nations the state may adopt a very active role, using a measured strategy that mixes concessions and repression, thereby manipulating the value of success and costs suffered by those involved in social movements (Goldstone and Tilly, 2001; Tarrow, 1994).

The concept of precarity appears to be highly relevant to this kind of setting. Originally it emerged in mature industrial contexts previously characterised by some form of implicit or explicit social guarantee, such as lifetime employment in Japan, a social security net in many Western Europe countries or employment “benefits” in the USA, and was used to refer to withdrawal of these guarantees, often through neo-liberal reforms linked to the pressures of globalisation. However, there is nothing in the concept that mandates a mature industrial trajectory of welfare boom and bust or limits its application to this setting.

For the purposes of this analysis, precarity is defined as a social context characterised by political insecurity, instability and uncertainty. It can be expressed in legal status, job security, competition, physical safety and communitarian security nets. According to Neilson and Rossiter (2005: 1):
the term refers to all possible shapes of unsure, not guaranteed, flexible exploitation: from illegalised, seasonal and temporary employment to homework, flex- and temp-work to subcontractors, freelancers or so-called self-employed persons. But its reference also extends beyond the world of work to encompass other aspects of intersubjective life, including housing, debt, and the ability to build affective social relations.

They asked two important questions. First, can groups experiencing permanent insecurity identify and exploit a resource base leading to political organisation? Second, how can precarity be used as a strategy for dissent?

Precarity as a concept has an additional layer of interest. Although it may sometimes curb access to social and political opportunities, it may on other occasions serve to further discontent and motivate mobilisation (Neilson and Rossiter, 2005). While precarity may limit access to resources, in doing so it may also fuel an even stronger sense of dissent. Indeed, activists motivated by deprivation perhaps experience a still more fearsome drive to mobilise than those who have social and institutional channels at hand. By the same token, however, increased passion for dissent may be limited to individuals and collectives whose basic understanding of rights and representation is above a requisite threshold. Those experiencing extreme deprivation may be unable to sense or understand their own relative social condition, let alone manifest indignation through mobilising means. Neilson and Rossiter (2005: 4) hold that “precarity supplies the precondition for new forms of creative organisation that seek to accept and exploit the flexibility inherent in networked modes of sociality and production” (see also Hewison et al., 2008). In such instances, it is very possible that increased passion for dissent may provide what is necessary for a movement to override institutional constraints and limitations. By contrast, however, living in a precarious situation may mean little education, oppression and preoccupation with a hand-to-mouth existence. Hence, for those who are ignorant of their rights or potential, precarity may inspire even further alienation and indifference.

Within the broad domain of precarity, migration is an especially important issue. While most professional migrants are readily embraced in new societies, unskilled and semi-skilled workers have been a traditional target for regulation and repression (Hewison and Young, 2006). Within the lowest bracket of society, unskilled migrant workers face many legal complications that may thus interfere with their ability to find and maintain decent employment. Verba et al. (1978) found that poverty limits participation. Leal (2002) found that non-citizenship is similarly restricting. Busza and Schunter (2001) found that competition between migrants for jobs impedes the formation of collectives.

In this paper, we examine precarity and mobilisation among one marginalised population of increasing concern – migrant workers. The current milieu of societies transformed from decades of migration poses a challenge to the traditional construction of a social movement. Migrants straddle two national orders: that of their origin and that of their host country. Because of tenuous status within a legal system, migrant workers face few political opportunities, no access to resource channels and social options limited by competition within their community. These factors, in addition to fear, poverty and cultural barriers, create a real experience of precarity that may trump potential social mobilisation altogether.
Migration Triggers and Reception in Thailand

Migration across the Burma-Thailand border has taken place ever since state frontiers were first created in this part of Southeast Asia. At well over 1000 miles, the border is long. It is also extremely porous and, in many parts, can be crossed simply by walking, swimming or rafting across. No systematic attempt is made to police this lengthy land frontier. In consequence, many people slip to and fro across the border on a daily basis and others cross it many times a year. Since the early 1980s, however, the pattern of border crossings has changed significantly, as waves of migrants have crossed from Burma to Thailand and sought to settle either temporarily or permanently in the host country. Today, the total number of migrants from Burma living or working in Thailand is unknown, but is estimated to be in the region of 1.5 million. Roughly 150,000 have formal refugee status with UNHCR and reside in a network of 10 UNHCR-supervised camps strung along the border (TBBC, 2010). A much larger group, probably totalling somewhat less than one million, has legal status under Thai law. Another large group of maybe half a million has no status whatsoever and subsists as a shifting body of illegal migrants.

Several important factors together have triggered recent waves of migration from Burma to Thailand. First, the rise of the military and its subsequent perpetration of widespread violence has generated endemic humanitarian abuse, such as forced portering, forced labour, use of child soldiers and mass resettlement (Harvard Law School, 2009). Military dominance is the central feature of modern Burmese life, tracing back to the unstable period after independence from Britain in January 1948, when the country rapidly descended into civil war and the army emerged as the central institution within the state (Callahan, 2003). A March 1962 coup against Burma’s fledgling democracy confirmed this status and set in place a system of military control that continues to this day (Callahan, 2009). The introduction of “discipline-flourishing democracy” through a 2008 constitutional referendum and a 2010 general election, both heavily state-managed, made little change to the control system. Second, the question of ethnic self-rule left unresolved at the time of Burma’s independence has perpetuated tense relations between core and periphery (Smith, 1999; Walton, 2008). It has also generated real hardship in Burma’s ethnic sub-states. Repeated military incursions into ethnic territories have considerably exacerbated that hardship (Callahan, 2007; South, 2008). Third, the regime’s tightening grip over all aspects of society, alongside the military’s destructive campaigns into agriculturally productive regions, has devastated the economy, and generated pervasive impoverishment (Prager Nyein, 2009). Lastly, on a political level, the regime continues to wage a campaign of repression, through imprisonment of political dissidents and suppression of all forms of public voice and expression. Brutal repression of the 2007 “saffron uprising” is merely the most recent large-scale instance of a pattern of harsh control that was at its height in 1988, the year of Burma’s mass democracy struggle (Human Rights Watch, 2009; Lintner, 1989). While these migration-inducing forces can be examined as discrete triggers, they are largely interrelated. For example, as one of the major political actors in the country, the military enforces the regime’s policies of domestic repression. Economic decline has hit ethnic areas especially hard, in combination with harassment from the
military. Many migrants cite a combination of these factors as their reason for moving to Thailand.

On arrival in Thailand, migrants transfer from a non-representative state to a nominally representative one, a move that should, in theory, improve their access to structural resources. However, their legal status, whether it be refugee, documented migrant worker in possession of a work permit, or undocumented (illegal) migrant worker, will determine which state protections they can access. Thailand is a signatory to a number of international conventions on human and labour rights. Critically, however, it has not ratified the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol. Rather, it has implemented its own, more limited, notion and has thereby transgressed a number of international understandings. Notably, the definition of "refugee" used by the Thai government to determine whether deportation would constitute refoulement limits consideration only to persons directly fleeing from fighting, and not from forced labour, forced relocation, rape, torture or forced resettlement. While this has generated repeated UNHCR statements indicating that many migrants facing deportation by Thai authorities have legitimate fear of persecution upon return to Burma, this is insufficient to halt regular rounds of deportation (UNHCR, 2008).

Nevertheless, while accused by numerous critics of avoiding its international obligations (AHRC, 2010), Thailand is a state party to many major international human rights treaties: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the International Covenant on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination; and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. In addition, Thailand has ratified many of the major labour rights conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO). Beyond this, the 2007 Constitution has sections that promise guarantees for basic human rights to all individuals, and international law extends essential protections for citizens to non-citizens (Human Rights Watch, 2010: 25). Many gaps remain, however, notably through non-ratification of key ILO conventions, including: Convention Number 87, Concerning Freedom of Association and Protection for the Right to Organize; Convention Number 98, Concerning the Application of the Principles of the Right to Organize and to Bargain Collectively; Convention Number 111 on racial discrimination and sexual harassment; and Convention Number 138 on the minimum working age (Amnesty International, 2005). While the ILO Fundamental Declaration of Rights and Principles requires even ILO members that have not ratified its core Conventions to uphold them in full, the impact in Thailand is limited (Arnold and Hewison, 2005: 322). Similarly, although many non-signatory countries have incorporated the essential parts of ILO conventions into domestic law, Thailand has largely failed to do so. Finally, although Thai labour law has, for many years, entitled migrant workers to core labour protections, most employers ignore these legal provisions (see Arnold and Hewison, 2005).

At the heart of the migrant worker management system established by the Thai government over the past two decades is a registration system first introduced in the 1990s (Beesey, 2004; Martin, 2004). By 2001, a little over half a million migrant workers were registered. In 2002, all registered migrants were required to re-register, though only half chose to do so. In 2003, a new policy extended consideration only
to those who had been registered previously (excluding those who had never before applied) and enacted new specifications for sectors in which registered migrants would be permitted to work (Amnesty International, 2005). At this time, further restrictions provided for termination of the permit should a migrant become unemployed, which was inherently problematic as many of those registered were employed in seasonal labour. In addition, any minimal protection migrants received from their work permit status was not transferable to their family members, who would, in theory, still be liable for deportation. In 2004, the registration process was again changed in the wake of a Memorandum of Understanding signed by the governments of Thailand and Burma. Under the new system, migrants were required to pay a total of THB3800, including a THB1900 fee for mandatory health examinations. Upon issuance, the permit would be valid for a period of one year. Family members of permit-holders would also be eligible for temporary permission to remain in Thailand for one year. The final section of the Memorandum of Understanding specifically stated that permit-holders would be granted equal protection under labour laws as Thai workers. In practice, however, permit-holders have not received the same labour protections as Thai workers (Amnesty International, 2005; Arnold and Hewison, 2005). Countless studies attest that migrant workers continue to receive less than the minimum wage, work longer hours in worse conditions and are prohibited from organising (Martin, 2007; Pearson, 2006).

Meanwhile, the registration process has continued to change on a regular basis. In 2006, the window for registration opened between 1 and 30 June. If migrants failed to submit an application within this period, they were required to wait until registration opened again the following year. By then, the system could have been changed again. Thus, the complexities and complications inherent in the registration process, together with steep fees, could easily dissuade migrants from making an application for a work permit. A substantial analysis published by Human Rights Watch (2010: 1) asserted that “many migrants face an existence straight out of a Thai proverb – escaping from the tiger, but then meeting the crocodile.” At the heart of the problems identified in this report was a registration system that set a tight deadline for all documented migrant workers to formally apply for nationality verification with officials of their own government. While the rights then conferred on migrant workers would be extensive, the chance that many migrants would complete the process was always slim.

Nevertheless, migrants continue to cross the border and to look for work. The lack of legal provisions to accommodate them is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to migrant life. However, for those migrants who seek it out, there are opportunities available in Thailand for not only economic gain, but also for social networking and community building.

Studying Burmese Migrants in Thailand

In 2004, Thailand’s Mahidol University conducted a study of migrant domestic workers from Burma in two regions of the country: Chiang Mai and Mae Sot, a border town on the north-western border, opposite the Burmese town of Myawaddy. The findings of this study indicated that migrants working as domestic workers suffered extreme alienation and general disregard for labour and human rights,
despite growing public awareness of their condition in Thailand. In undertaking its research, the Mahidol team focused on three major themes: reasons for migration, workplace experiences and hopes for the future. The findings supported the push-pull theory that economic and political hardships in Burma were driving individuals over the border to seek new opportunities in Thailand. In their work life, domestic workers faced great adversity, from having no written contract to being expected to work on demand and to facing physical abuse from their employers. Yet migrants appeared to remain hopeful that a better future was at hand and that they might someday move back to their homes in Burma (Sureeporn et al., 2004).

The study gave unprecedented insight into the precarious work and home life of migrants in Thailand. However, its respondent base was limited to domestic workers. In this study, we pose similar questions to non-domestic workers, including migrants who work in visible locations, such as agriculture, construction sites, factories and restaurants. The possibility of exposure to social mobilisation and political ideals among workers in these locations is far more likely than among migrants employed in solitary domestic positions. The critical difference between those working in private homes and those working in a public setting is the opportunities afforded by a multi-employee workplace for interaction and socialising. With more and more migrants finding work in these settings, it is important to understand their experiences and how they cope with exploitation together with other migrants in a shared workplace. While the Mahidol study drew from two geographical areas, we focus on just one. We chose Chiang Mai because we want to shed light on the situation of a migrant population that relies so heavily on invisibility for safety. The need for invisibility is a crucial dimension that heightens the level of precarity these migrant workers face. As there are no refugees in Chiang Mai (by law), all migrants must work to support themselves. As such, the need for employment is more urgent. In addition, we hope to give voice to migrant workers in Chiang Mai whose experiences are acknowledged far less than others in the Thailand-Burma human rights literature.

Due to the sensitive nature of the subject population, special ethical precautions were adopted. Migration, and particularly illegal migration, is often a product of sustained cyclical poverty and humanitarian problems. Therefore, in accordance with US National Research Council best practice, special protocols are required when conducting research with illegal migrant workers. In situations where people are powerless and insecure, the gap between the goals of the subject and those of the researcher becomes still wider. Many researchers note the implicit inequality of the power relationship between researchers and subject populations in complex contexts (see, for example, Levine et al., 2004). Also, the immediacy of the subjects’ needs may induce something of a clash of interest with the needs and goals of research. For example, while research may benefit future migrants or refugees, it may do little to address the current deprivation and needs of the respondents themselves (Reed, 2002). This divide, while impossible to eliminate, can be minimised or at least ameliorated through constant vigilance and attention to the ethical implications of research protocol.

Migrant workers with a complicated legal position constitute a vulnerable population – one that has limited rights and is, therefore, especially susceptible to exploitation. Social groups become vulnerable when individuals lose the ability to exercise the “freedoms that form an essential part of choosing the basic course of
their life” (Zion et al., 2000: 615). Vulnerability can be understood in terms of a loss of welfare through poverty in which physical circumstance may be so variable that it is beyond the control of an individual (Ligon and Schechter, 2003). This designation is used primarily as an instructive research tool which signals researchers to implement proper ethical strategies. The central objective of data collection for this study was to lay the groundwork for an analysis of the relationship of precarious conditions to social mobilisation outcomes. There were, thus, two core questions we wanted to answer. First, how are the qualities of precarity present in migrant life? Second, is mobilisation occurring either around immediate issues, such as human rights and labour standards, or even around more distant political issues?

To collect data for the study, we worked with a female migrant to conduct interviews with migrant workers from Burma in Chiang Mai. Respondents were identified via “snowball sampling” (Jacobsen and Landau, 2003). In speaking directly with respondents, the interviewer not only recorded their testimonies, but also noted the cultural subtleties and nuances that might provide further insight into their narratives. Journal keeping was a means of recording behavioural and social trends observed during the interviewing process. As Jacobsen and Landau (2003) note, researchers hoping to involve vulnerable groups as respondents in their study must be creative, looking for causal linkages within limited data and supplementing this analysis with comparative studies and references from the literature.

In total, 124 migrant workers were surveyed in 2008 and 2009. Of these, 57% were female and 43% were male. Most were under the age of 30: 21% between ages 16 and 19, 35% between 20 and 24; and 29% between 25 and 29. The remaining 15% were aged 30 or older. Among 13 different ethnicities represented in the sample, the majority (61%) were of the Shan ethnicity. All of the interviews were conducted in the national Burmese language, or in Shan.

Of the 124 respondents, 46% had some form of official identification card issued by the Thai authorities. Possession of an ID card gives documented migrants something of an advantage over their undocumented counterparts. In theory, permit holders are entitled to some human and labour rights guarantees, including minimum wage, though in practice this is not always the case. In addition, permit holders are legally allowed to remain in Thailand as long as they are gainfully employed according to the specifications of their permit.

Findings

At the start of the interview, respondents were asked about the problems they encountered in the workplace. Approximately 24% of respondents reported either that they had no problems or that the problems they had encountered at their current job were negligible in comparison to problems they had faced in the past. One commented: “Since I ran away from Burma I can deal with the hardship out here [in Thailand] and live happily” (R58). Another commented: “I have faced so many problems [in the past] that my current situation is wonderful in comparison” (R85), while another noted: “I don’t have as many problems as I did when I was living in the midst of a clash between the two armies in my hometown, so [my life now] is okay” (R19). Others were pragmatic and observed, like R106: “Every job has its problems.”
However, a much larger percentage (73%) reported facing difficult issues in their workplace. These ranged from language barriers to dangerous working conditions, to verbal and sexual abuse. One female respondent working as a waitress said: “Some customers have been rude and touched me. I really hated that and I told them I don’t like it and not to do it. But my boss said not to say such things because it’s normal and we could lose the customer” (R28). It seems that these kinds of problems are relatively common among migrant workers. R100 said: “The biggest problem I have is when I am treated cruelly by my boss. He treats me as though I am not human.” Another respondent (R121) explained “I tried to help my sister with her work load, and our bosses yelled at us saying we just wanted to socialise. They are cruel and unfair.”

Migrant workers in our study were uniformly underpaid. Excessive financial troubles featured prominently in conversations with most respondents. In addition to insufficient pay, many migrants indicated that they received payments in a very erratic manner. In this region of Thailand, it is well known that employers often delay or withhold payments from migrant workers who have little bargaining power due to their lack of work permit documentation. Migrants also worried about workplace police raids. It is common practice in Thailand for police to raid establishments known to employ undocumented migrant workers, unless the owner bribes them to overlook the infraction. Some owners do not pay off the police and instead simply alert their undocumented workers ahead of an oncoming police raid, telling workers to hide as best they can.

A large majority of respondents (71%) reported suffering physical or mental abuse. R85 recalled that a “group of Thai workers assaulted me by throwing a brick at my head. My husband and others retaliated, but the Thais threatened to call the authorities, and we have no power in this case. We left instead, but I have been ‘brainsick’ ever since.” Another worker said: “I have to endure my boss’s complaints and threats. He says that we will get into trouble for living here illegally if we ever try to stop working for him” (R54). R101 explained the mistrust that exists, when claiming: “My sister was killed in a hit and run accident, and we weren’t informed that medical procedures took place until the morning afterwards, after she had already died. I believe they used her for black market organ opportunities, selling her parts to rich Thai people.” R106 told of her tragic experience: “I was raped by my previous boss. He was drunk and assaulted me when his wife went away, and then tried to silence me with 2,000 baht. I try to think it was all a bad dream.” Many respondents indicated that it was not possible to protect oneself from this kind of abuse. Some suggested that the only potential response was to assume responsibility and apologise to the abusive employer (see Table 1). Similarly, the near-unanimous response to the Thai authorities was much the same: there is no way to protect yourself, and the only thing to do if you are a migrant targeted with abuse is to bribe the police. Without legal guarantees, migrants felt there was no security to be had as abuse was often random and unpredictable. None of the respondents in this survey sought legal action or aid from advocacy groups. This omission is significant because it demonstrates the extreme alienation of migrants from their legal rights and, perhaps, even the opportunities afforded them by non-governmental organisations, both in perception and reality.

Despite the great variety and severity of problems respondents cited, 50% nevertheless indicated that they were satisfied and would not want to change jobs.
Migrants indicated that they feared police raids, regularly faced abuse and frequently encountered many other problems at their workplace; to which they responded with capitulation, compliance and passivity. Yet half of them indicated that they were satisfied with their situation.

One possible source of satisfaction could be solace in a tightly-knit community. In order to capture this, respondents were asked about their participation in cultural, religious and social events. Most migrants reported that they regularly or somewhat regularly attended religious services and celebrated traditional festivals, with only 19% stating that they did not. Attending holiday festivities provides an opportunity for migrants to socialise with their family members and other migrants from Burma. However, though most respondents claimed to have many friends, 53% said they socialised only at work. Others indicated that they were not supposed to socialise during working hours. When asked directly, “Do you feel that there is a sense of community among migrants from Burma?,” 78% responded in the affirmative. Most respondents communicated a desire for social space and communitarian networks, and believed that they had created that social safety net to some extent. However, many also conceded that the constraints of long working hours and financial struggle also had a significant negative impact on migrants’ ability to reap the full benefits of community.

Respondents were also asked how they felt the Thai government responded to the migrant community. The vast majority said they felt their views were not represented in local or national government, with 76% giving a negative response to this question and 22% saying they did not know. At the same time, 34% voluntarily added that they could not expect to have any representation since they were not citizens. While this claim is valid in terms of Thai law and policy making, there are – in theory – many international and domestic advocates supporting the cause of migrants. Despite the prevalence of abuse, most migrants felt strongly the lack of protection under the law. Fifty-six percent of respondents said there was nothing migrants could do about abuse, 13% said the best response was to apologise and try to work harder, 9% said the migrant should quit, 2% said the migrant should take the issue to the law, 1% said the migrant should contact the ILO and 19% did not know (see Table 1). Overwhelmingly, migrants indicated that not only engagement in mobilisation, but also in some cases holding opinions about political and social issues, was something they did not wish to do. For example, one respondent (R134)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If you have a complaint about the way you are treated</th>
<th>The way you are treated by your employer (%)</th>
<th>The way you are treated by the Thai authorities (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do nothing</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss the problem</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quit and leave</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take the issue to the law</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take the issue up with the ILO</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pay bribes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No opinion</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Dealing with problems and complaints
said “I don’t know about this, and I don’t want to know about it, it is too dangerous.” Many feared the repercussions of involvement, with R12 stating: “I don’t know and I don’t want to talk about political things because I don’t want to be sent back to Burma” and R90 saying: “I don’t know about politics here or in Burma. I don’t want to join because I want to stay safe.” Safety, protection and safe passage back to Burma were all important goals that prevented respondents from engaging in political activity. Respondents believed they might be fired from their job, incarcerated, abused by police or even deported should they engage in political activity. Still others viewed political activities as futile and ineffective. When asked whether he would be interested in participating in some political programme, one respondent (R105) replied: “No. I feel powerless against a big and evil entity.” However, when asked for their opinions about peers who were involved in political activities, 73% said they did not have an opinion or did not know, 16% were against such involvement and 11% were supportive of it. Many also suggested that even having political views was inappropriate, as they considered themselves too “uneducated” or “uninformed” to have an opinion.

Lack of support for mobilisation, however, was not unanimous. When asked a general question about whether migrants should protest their situation in Thailand, 16% were in favour, 34% were against and 50% were unsure. When asked a more focused question about actual participation in a programme sponsored by a political organisation, 5% said they had done so, 7% said they were interested in doing so, but most were not interested in doing so or had no opinion. Figures for joining a political organisation were broadly similar, with 2% having done so, 15% keen to do so and the remainder not interested or not sure (see Table 2). In both cases, many of the roughly 20-30% of respondents without an opinion added that they were “too uninformed” to have an opinion or that they simply did not care to know. Finally, some held that mobilisation would be good for the migrant community so long as participants had work permits and educational backing. For example, R20 stated: “I think they should protest so that we might have a chance to get work permits and drivers’ licenses. If we have money, we can buy everything that we want. Also they should protest so that when we face the police, we will not be arrested.”

The final question asked respondents to stipulate how their lives could, in theory, be improved by actions of the Thai government. Aggregating the responses shown in Table 3, only about 40% of respondents made any positive recommendations for change, most of which were vague at best; the other two-thirds indicated either that they did not know or that the government could not do anything for them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Political participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever participated in/joined . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not yet, but I am interested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, and I am not interested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No opinion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Taken together, the results of this study paint a picture of extreme political alienation among migrant workers in Chiang Mai. Throughout the study, many respondents expressed extreme reservations not only in voicing opinions, but also in having them. The clear suggestion is that they are fearful as a result of experienced or potential repression and exploitation. Political activism thus appears to be constrained to a very small minority who are acting largely without the support of the community. In fact, the percentage of the community who are wary of and distant from political activism is larger than those who actually participate.

Accounting for Demobilisation

The literature on social mobilisation posits that mobilisation will often take place among disadvantaged groups, and focuses on structural factors and opportunity structures that can facilitate or impede it. The literature on precarity notes that while such a situation can limit access to resources and opportunities, it can also fuel greater dissent. At the same time, however, it notes that in a context of substantial migration, precarity can make mobilisation highly problematic. The three major findings of this study confirm this.

First, a majority of migrant workers from Burma in Chiang Mai have experienced mental or physical abuse either first hand or had friends and relatives who have suffered abuse at the hands of employers or authorities in Thailand. Respondents reported an array of abuses from withholding of pay and excessive fining to emotional and physical abuse. In addition, migrants indicated that they were frequently under threat of harm and feared for the safety of their family members. One central finding of this study is thus simple but also charged with significance: migrants are being taken advantage of in a very substantial way. Parallel recent analyses confirm this finding (Human Rights Watch, 2010).

Second, a majority of migrants reported both dissatisfaction with their quality of life and anxiety about the future. Naturally, the potential for regular abuse builds a culture of worry and anticipation, and of hopelessness and mounting stress. Migrants recognised their dissatisfaction. However, the majority of respondents also reported a sense of futility leading to psychological and political acceptance of their
situation. This finding is also confirmed by other studies. The 2010 Human Rights Watch report opens with testimony from a Burmese woman who was raped by two unknown Thai assailants after they had shot and killed her husband in November 2007: “I am Burmese and a migrant worker that is why the police don’t care about this case . . . [My husband and I are only migrant workers and we have no rights here” (Human Rights Watch, 2010: 1). Here the sense of despair felt by many migrants comes across very clearly.

Third, a majority of migrants said they were wary of or disinterested in political participation. Many claimed to have no opinion on political issues. Others stated that they were too uninformed to participate in activism, or even to demand protection of their most basic human rights. Many responded that political action, however small-scale, was too risky. Perhaps the most common response, and also the most telling, was the notion that poor quality of life was somehow self-imposed and that the authorities were not responsible for taking measures to alleviate their suffering.

Put together, these three findings indicate that migrants in Chiang Mai are experiencing a high degree of precarity, suffering abuse at the hands of authorities and employers intent on exploiting their vulnerability, and yet feeling so disenchanted and disinherit as that they come to accept these circumstances as fate. This phenomenon is symptomatic of a critical level of repression, political alienation, passivity and hopelessness. As seen in the dataset, a significant number of migrants are the victims of mental and physical abuse in the workplace and by the authorities. They display characteristics of high-level stress and anxiety over issues such as personal safety, the safety of family members and job security. Many display symptoms of encroaching despair, being unable to make many prescriptions for the future. In addition, the tone of hopelessness is a significant undercurrent throughout the majority of migrants’ testimonies. Hopelessness, fear, anxiety and debilitating stress are tell-tale signs of degrading, precarious conditions that can, over time, result in serious psychological symptoms akin to post-traumatic stress disorder. All are the result of precarious life circumstances set within a context of repression and abuse. While the degree to which migrants experience these lifestyle stressors varies greatly, the presence of higher than normal levels of anxiety appear in the testimonies of a majority of respondents in this study.

At the heart of the migrant political immobilisation that results from precarity in Chiang Mai is a lack of political status. Migrants’ documentation deficit cuts them off from political opportunities and access to traditional participatory channels. Not only can they not vote, but also they are denied judicial recourse should the government or authorities infringe upon their human rights, even at the most basic level. Political alienation that begins with the individual can spread through communities with little voice in the wider social system. Minority status – be it based on ethnic, socio-economic, ideological or other divisions – can decrease perceptions of community and voice resonating with a national or state-level government. Naturally, the smaller and more esoteric the social group, the greater chance it has of being engulfed in a political system which may seem altogether foreign. Migration can thus act as a trigger event for the alienation of minority groups. A reinforcing factor is that migrants’ high tolerance for oppression and economic hardship is often a condition acquired over a lifetime of state-sponsored oppression in Burma.
Because of this, many workers can sustain much higher levels of strain before taking action. Employers frequently capitalise on the opportunity to encroach on workers’ rights, which is afforded by their high tolerance to strain.

Looking at other migrant cases, it is clear that alienation can result from non-representation at the national level, or perhaps from simply feeling disconnected from one’s community. In a study of Vietnamese refugees resettled in the USA, Van Tran (1987) found that community support helps to relieve the stress and anxiety that are typical psychological by-products of migration. He found that this kind of communitarian support among migrants had significant direct effects on the psychological well-being of migrants (Van Tran, 1987). Strong community networks thus help to decrease stress factors. Community members can take the emotional place of family members and loved ones left behind in the migrant’s country of origin. They can also help new migrants to settle in a foreign place by providing practical support and advice that can significantly improve a migrant individual’s state of well-being. In migrant populations where communitarian sentiments are strong, Haines and colleagues (1981) found that a focus on individual needs or deprivation is conspicuously absent. Instead, communities can provide a kind of safety-in-numbers haven for individuals who crave interaction with people of their own ethnicity.

Community support serves to ease the re-socialisation process whereby migrants must establish a new identity for themselves within a foreign society. Especially in countries where migrants find themselves not welcomed by the majority of people they meet on a daily basis, community can serve as a refuge. This refuge may act as an emotional safe haven that individuals cannot achieve in other aspects of their life that are flooded with stress, fear and anxiety. Thus, strong communities breed a stronger sense of well-being among community members (Bar-Yosef, 1968). In a 2001 study of Salvadoran refugees, Young (2001) found that communities are a source of critical self-esteem that can moderate between life events and personal contentment. By associating with community groups, individuals find others who have suffered similar hardships. Together, they can support each other in overcoming the trauma of not only a difficult past, but the prospects of more difficulties to come. Communitarian support appears to ameliorate the repercussions of these past events and anxiety in migrants’ daily life.

In sizeable migrant communities, people sharing similar circumstances begin to define themselves not in isolation but in relation to other individuals who are part of that group (Haines et al., 1981). The manifold bonds of community – such as shared language, traditions, religion and other cultural practices – help migrants to feel more at home in a foreign land, through their relation to others facing similar challenges. Communities promote solidarity through the practice of cultural norms that might otherwise cease to be a part of a migrant’s life. They also urge individuals to overcome the challenges of being foreigners; for example, communities encourage learning the language of the host country (Scott, 1982). In the end, we see that the presence of a strong community helps with the re-socialisation process. Communal support may counter political alienation by replacing the perceived disconnect from politics with connections to a social network that fosters political sensibilities within the more comfortable confines of the collective.

The findings of this study indicate that migrant workers in Chiang Mai face a gamut of abuses both within their workplace and in their daily life. They report
abuse at the hands of their employers and by authority figures. Yet most suffer in silence, believing themselves to be undeserving of any legal protections. However, while many migrants may believe that they are not entitled to human or labour rights as they are not citizens of Thailand, this belief may stem in part from lack of information. There are a number of legal precedents through which migrants are entitled to certain protections, though the findings of this study suggest that these provisions are not widely known among the migrant population. All migrants – whether they are in possession of a work permit or not – are entitled by international law to human and labour rights protections, as discussed previously. However, as documented in this study, this guarantee is largely unheeded in the case of migrant workers in Chiang Mai, regardless of their legal status. Despite the universality of this oversight, migrants who lack official work permit documentation face even greater discrimination and difficulties in Thailand.

In theory, a worker cannot be arrested and deported while in possession of a valid work permit. Unfortunately, additional policy loopholes stipulate that any person found not to be carrying the permit on their person at any given time is still eligible for deportation. Considering that it has become common practice in Thailand for employers to retain their workers’ permits (ostensibly to prevent them from leaving the job), this loophole may serve nearly to cancel any potential benefit. The finding of this study that more than half of respondents had no official identification documents is consistent with the findings of other research studies. In 2004, Amnesty International found that while some migrants were able to obtain identification cards from the Thai authorities, a majority had no identity card even though many expressed a desire to obtain one. A common reason for not having official identification cited by those in the Amnesty study was the inability to pay the registration fee (which in 2004 was 3800 baht) (Amnesty International, 2005: 9).

Migrant workers in Thailand face a number of serious deterrents to mobilisation. In addition to official prohibitions of the formation of labour unions by migrant workers, employers may impose their own disincentives for workers. Dismissal is often arbitrary and can be accompanied by the employer notifying immigration officials. The threat of dismissal, coupled with that of deportation makes mobilisation a serious, high-risk endeavour (Arnold and Hewison, 2005). However, there have been a number of incidents, particularly in Mae Sot, a centre for many émigré political organisations, in which migrant workers have mobilised to demand better treatment in the workplace.

Following the enactment of registration system reforms and the ongoing yearly issuance of new work permits, several significant events brought the enforcement of Thai government policies into question. The first occurred in October 2002 when 60 migrant workers from Burma employed at the Nut Knitting Factory in Mae Sot, Thailand were fired after they began protesting that the factory had reneged on its promise to assist undocumented employees if they were apprehended by immigration authorities (Arnold and Hewison, 2005: 325-6). In addition, they contested the unfair conditions of their employment, including wages that were 40% less than minimum wage. Several months later, they were arrested and taken to the border for deportation. However, after a rather drawn-out process and aid from the Law Society of Thailand, Young Chi Oo Burmese Workers’ Association and the Migrant
Assistance Programme (MAP), the migrants won their case against the factory in the Nakhon Sawan Labour Court.

A similar incident in 2003 followed much the same course: over 400 migrant workers were dismissed after filing a complaint with the Tak Labour Protection Office. Soon thereafter, immigration authorities were notified and the dismissed workers were deported. Upon returning to Thailand, however, they were able to win the case in court two years later when the Labour Office ordered the factory to pay the workers 15 million baht in back wages. The factory, however, failed to follow through on the order, and it is uncertain whether workers ever received the back pay that was due (Amnesty International, 2005). Compensation was also an issue during an incident at Siriwat Garments factory. In September 2003, 78 Burmese migrant workers, all of whom had work permits, notified the Labour Protection Office after being forced to work for a continuous 28 hours under threat of dismissal. In this instance also, the workers were dismissed with insufficient compensation (Arnold and Hewison, 2005: 326-7). Later that year, nearly 300 migrant workers were deported after a walk-out from the Nasawat Apparel factory in Mae Sot. The workers had negotiated with the factory to receive the legal minimum wage and overtime pay; however, the employer had reneged on the agreement at the first pay period (Arnold and Hewison, 2005: 327-8). When the next day, the employer held a meeting with the group’s leaders and a Labour Protection Officer, it was proposed that only the leaders receive the minimum wage, and the workers walked out with their leaders in protest.

These incidents provide a prime example of the great difficulty and risks protesting can incur. There are countless documented incidents of threats, harassment and intimidation of human and labour rights defenders in Thailand (Amnesty International, 2005; Human Rights Watch, 2010). As a result, some activists have been chased into hiding, or at least experience a serious interruption in their advocacy work. In most cases, protesting workers first lose their jobs and are then arrested and deported. Those who later return to Thailand (a considerable expense in itself) must then enter into a drawn-out legal process for remuneration. In order for mobilisation to occur, workers must be willing to undergo a daunting, drawn-out process, as well as face the potentially devastating implications their participation might have for their family members and dependents. If, indeed, migrant workers are hearing stories such as this, it would seem quite obvious why most workers are not eager to instigate mobilisation.

Another notable incident of social mobilisation is the series of protests that sprang up with the proposed Salween dam projects. The Salween River is the most important river in eastern Burma and the primary source for irrigation systems in the Shan, Karenni and Karen States. The Salween’s considerable size and length brought it to the attention of the Burmese government as early as 1960 as a potential site for a hydropower project. Several years later, that project took the form of the Lawpita Falls dam on the Balu Chaung River in the Karenni State, the government’s first large-scale hydropower project. Over the ensuing decade, 30,000 people were affected by water shortages, massive flooding and the creation of a reservoir that displaced many settlements (KDRG, 2006). The arrival of several new army deployments introduced forced labour, forced displacement, sexual violence, the planting of hundreds of landmines and extrajudicial killings to the region surrounding Lawpita Falls (KDRG, 2006). The project also had a severe
environmental impact; ruining vast tracks of prime agricultural land and displacing animal populations.

The outcome of the Lawpita Falls dam project fell far short of government promises. Despite the passage of nearly 50 years of the promise of electricity, today 80% of the population of Karenni State remains without power. Fifty years on, the Lawpita Falls dam seems to be a rather sound failure, yet the government in Burma is now proposing to replicate the Lawpita project with a new series of dams on the River Salween (KDRG, 2006). Of the four proposed dam sites at Tasang, Weigyi, Hatgyi and Dagwin, the Weigyi dam will be the largest, at over ten times the size of the Lawpita Falls dam. To accomplish this, the government of Burma is working in conjunction with its Thai counterpart, creating a situation in which the Salween dams represent merely a “win-win” situation – electricity supply for [Thailand] and needed income for [Burma]. This simple equation ignores the regime’s internationally condemned human rights and corruption record (KDRG, 2006: 2).

In the wake of the announcement of the Salween dam project, however, protesters in Thailand turned out en masse to demonstrate against the authorities involved. A considerable number of migrants joined Thai citizens in public protest efforts. Ongoing protests repeatedly made local headlines in several states of northern Thailand. In May 2003, a crowd demonstrated outside a hotel in Mae Hong Son where Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs member Kraisak Choonhavan was staying (Autsadaporn Kamthai, 2003). While the protests on the whole were quite subdued, and dispersed early, this flurry of political activism represents a significant step for migrants from Burma, who were willing to accept the risks of highly visible demonstration and associate themselves publicly with other potentially undocumented migrants. This kind of action sets a precedent in which migrants judged the value of political activism to be worth the risk of exposing themselves as people from Burma in Thailand.

The Chiang Mai case studied here falls far short of experience on the Thailand-Burma border and it is instructive to consider what might be learnt from this contrast. One lesson is that every major migrant area in Thailand is different and drawing inferences across such a patchwork quilt is not possible. A second is that leadership and political cover provided by a concentration of international non-governmental organisations and indigenous activist groups along the Thailand-Burma border and, above all, in the key hub of Mae Sot, generates enhanced levels of mobilisation and makes the border zone both reasonably well known and at the same time atypical of migrant conditions elsewhere. A third is that there does not appear to be much outreach from the Mae Sot hub to other parts of northern Thailand, such as Chiang Mai.

Conclusion

The basic human rights of migrant workers from Burma continue to be seriously compromised both in the workplace and at the hands of Thai authorities. In the workplace, reported abuses include rape, verbal abuse, battery, withholding of pay, subjection to dangerous work environments and long working hours, among others.
During encounters with authorities, respondents reported being threatened, assaulted and required to pay bribes. Day to day, they indicated an overwhelming and disabling fear of discovery while at home, on the street and at work. The consistent trend of suffering that has emerged from the dataset suggests that migrant workers in Chiang Mai are a vulnerable population enveloped in a dangerously precarious cycle.

Though vulnerable populations may receive few protections from the state, international customary law entitles all people, regardless of nationality or legal status, to fundamental human rights guarantees. The Thai government has been negligent in enforcing necessary protections mandated by the international conventions to which it is bound. This marked failure to act, coupled with persistent suffering, appears to be sufficient cause for precarious groups to engage in change-orientated protest action. However, the migrants’ reaction is overwhelmingly one of passivity, alienation and inaction, rather than social mobilisation.

The failure of migrants in Chiang Mai to mobilise may be explained in several ways. For one, not only has this migrant community been experiencing a severe lack of access to resources and political opportunity structures, but also it lacks access to information. Furthermore, this group has not yet made the critical step of developing psycho-political ideals. As such, it remains mired in the perception that, as a group of migrants, it is powerless to change its circumstances. Among these migrants in this city, precarity contributes forcefully to political immobilisation.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1 Burma is now officially known as Myanmar. The change was decreed in June 1989 by the military junta that seized power from a collapsing version of its own self in September 1988. As part of a broad exercise, many states, divisions, towns, streets, mountains and rivers were also given new English names. Rangoon, for instance, became Yangon.

2 Numbers are very hard to gauge and may be much higher than this figure. This 2006 estimate from the MAP Foundation (2006: 36) is commonly cited.

3 At the time, provincial regulations prevented migrants from obtaining drivers’ licences.

References


