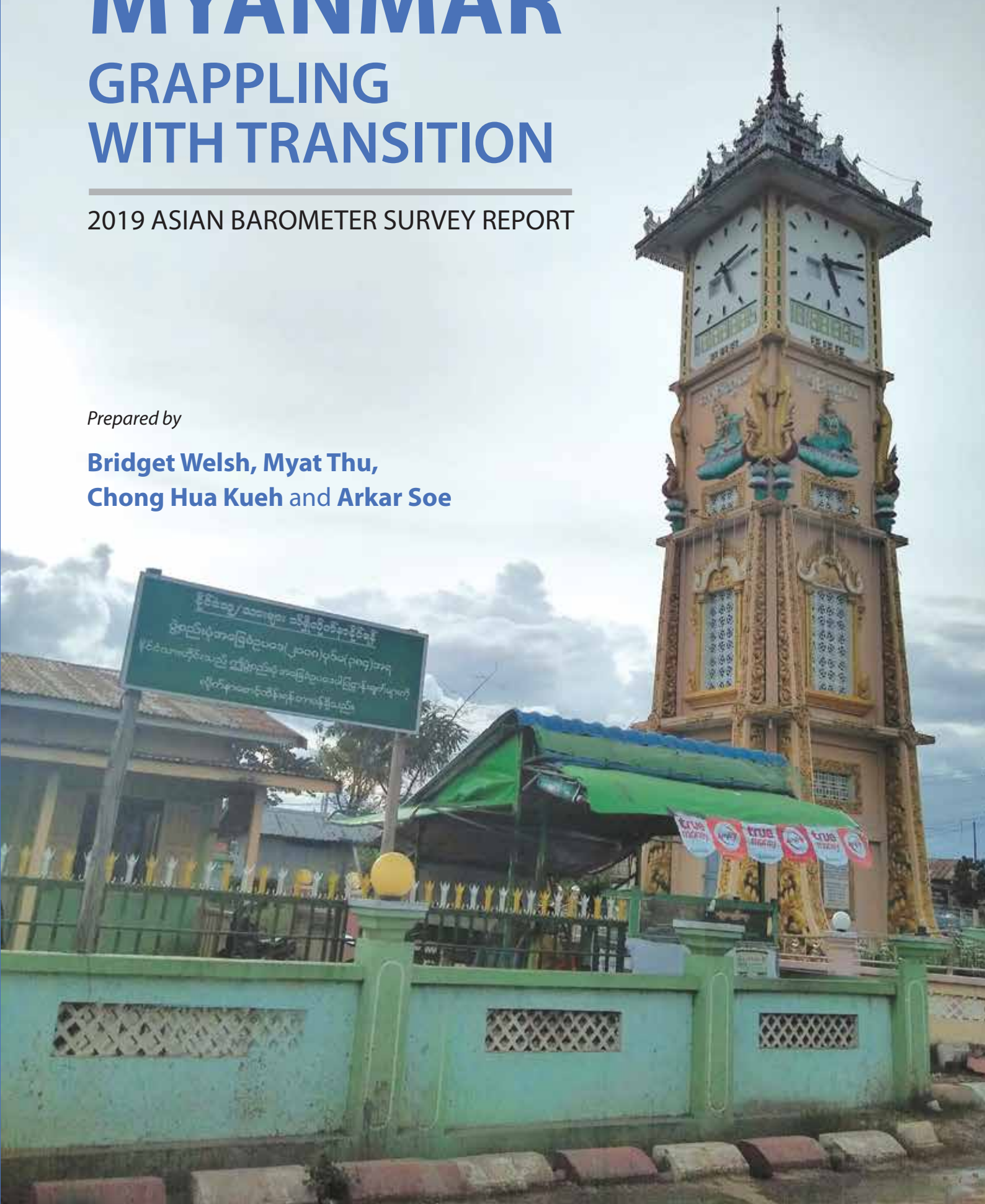


MYANMAR GRAPPLING WITH TRANSITION

2019 ASIAN BAROMETER SURVEY REPORT

Prepared by

**Bridget Welsh, Myat Thu,
Chong Hua Kueh and Arkar Soe**



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First published in 2020 by:
Strategic Information and Research Development Centre
No. 2 Jalan Bukit 11/2, 46200
Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia
Email: gerak@gerakbudaya.com
Website: www.gerakbudaya.com

eISBN: 978-967-2464-09-9

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Myanmar: Grappling with Transition

2019 Asian Barometer Survey Report

Prepared by Bridget Welsh, Myat Thu, Chong Hua Kueh and Arkar Soe
Center for East Asia Democratic Studies
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May 2020

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About Myanmar Asian Barometer Survey

The Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) is a cross-national survey conducted in 15 East and Southeast Asian countries including Myanmar.¹ The survey is a research project implemented by a consortium of academics based throughout East and Southeast Asia, Australia and the United States. The survey questions examine a range of political attitudes and behavior, from social capital and political culture to views on international affairs and globalization. The survey is particularly associated with the study of democracy. The project is based at National Taiwan University and is now in its fifth wave of surveys in the region beginning from 2000. The fifth wave began in 2018 and will be completed this year. The ABS is affiliated with the Global Barometer Surveys project conducted throughout the world. Myanmar was brought into the survey in the fourth wave in 2015, with the country's first findings released in 2016.²

This report summarizes the findings of the second Myanmar ABS conducted between September-October 2019. Following the pattern of the earlier survey, the 2019 Myanmar ABS survey was implemented by the Yangon School of Political Science (YSPS), now the Myanmar Political Science Association (MPSA). The local team was comprised of nearly forty staff and interviewers. The Myanmar survey was led by Myat Thu, Chairperson of YSPS, and Arkar Soe, Research Survey Director, in consultation with the YSPS/MPSA Board. The Myanmar academic team was comprised of ABS Senior Advisor for the Myanmar project, Dr. Bridget Welsh, Professor Min-Hua Huang, Director of the Hu Fu Center for East Asia Democratic Studies of National Taiwan University, Dr. Hsin-che Wu and Osbern Chung-wei Huang. The ABS fieldwork and data entry was managed by Arkar Soe based in Yangon. There were four teams conducting fieldwork, led by four field supervisors. The team included over thirty young Myanmar citizens who were part of the capacity-building training of the project as interviewers, quality controllers, and data entry clerks. The survey team was also assisted by Phyo Wai Min, Wah Wah Su Mon Kyaw, Thet Thet Aye and Ei Mon Mon Kyaw, and volunteer staff of YSPS. The 2019 Myanmar survey also received assistance from other members of the ABS team, Dr. Alex H. Chang of Academia Sinica, Dr. Kai-Ping Huang of National Taiwan University, Tan Seng Keat of the private polling outfit Merdeka Center of Malaysia and Chia-yin Wei of National Taiwan University. The

1 The countries/territories included in the ABS are Australia, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, the Philippines, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam. As of the timing for preparation of this report, eight countries have completed surveys for analysis in the fifth wave 2018-2020.

2 The 2015 Myanmar ABS report can be found at this link: <http://www.asianbarometer.org/pdf/MyanmarReport2016.pdf>.

ABS project is led by Professor Yun-han Chu, Professor Yutzung Chang and Professor Min-Hua Huang, all based at National Taiwan University.

The Myanmar ABS was conducted in all fourteen states and regions (including the capital Nay Pyi Taw) from September 3 to October 31, 2019. The survey questionnaire consisted of 223 questions and is available on the ABS website. A total of 1627 respondents were surveyed. The project was funded by two organizations. The Henry Luce Foundation funded the survey as part of its broader support of the ABS project and the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy funded the training for the Myanmar survey. The findings were made public in May 2020, alongside this report, an extension of those findings.

Acknowledgements

The Myanmar ABS would not have been possible without the assistance of many organizations and individuals who have made it possible. We are grateful to all of them.

In Myanmar, the YSPS/MPSA played the leading role in implementing the survey. Special thanks are given to Myo Aung Htwe who played an important role behind the scenes and was the person who helped bring the survey to Myanmar in 2014-2015. Gratitude is also extended to all of the YSPS Board for their support of the project, especially the YSPS President Myat Thu whose commitment to expanding public knowledge of political attitudes and behavior anchored our collaboration.

The Myanmar team of the ABS was managed by Arkar Soe who as the research director supervised the project in the field and steered the quality control and data entry procedures. Without his hard work and dedication, the project would not have been possible. All of the YSPS staff played an important supportive role, but we would like to acknowledge Ma Rosei, Ma Nyein Su Wai and Ma Kharay Oo for their assistance. The field supervisors included Ko Chit Wai, Ko Nay Zar Myo Win, Ko Zeyar Hein Htet and Thang Suan Sian Khai whose hard work was instrumental in the project's success. The ABS also included nearly forty interviewers, data entry and quality control staff whose energy, enthusiasm and hard work are greatly appreciated. A vital component of the project was the cooperation of national, state and local authorities, who offered assistance as needed.

The financial support for the project was essential. In this regard we extend our deep appreciation to the Henry Luce Foundation, which supported the survey, and the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD) whose support for the capacity-building and public dissemination of the project was among the most valuable contributions to the ABS. Special thanks is given to Professor Min-Hua Huang for his work in developing the sampling frame, to Dr. Hsin-che Wu and Osburne Chung-wei Huang who helped pioneer the GIS/GPS sampling method in the field and for engaging in training/retesting, Dr. Alex Chang, Tan Seng Keat and Dr. Kai-ping Huang for their early training engagements and to the entire Taiwan-based ABS team and broader academic team for their assistance and support. The project would not be possible without the leadership of Professors Yun-han Chu, Yutzung Chang and Min-Hua Huang.

This report is a collaborative effort, with each of the authors providing key inputs and insights. We would like to thank Gerakbudaya for their assistance in the copy-editing and formatting, especially Charles Brophy and Janice Cheong. We would like to thank Arkar Soe for his translation of the report into Burmese and publication of the Burmese version. Appreciation is also extended to YSP Printing House for their assistance with the Burmese

language publication. We would like to thank those who kindly anonymously reviewed the report before publication and the stakeholders who provided valuable inputs during our meetings in Myanmar in March 2020.

On a personal level, Professor Bridget Welsh would like to thank her fellow authors on the project for their hard work and Kyaw Kyaw Lwin and Win Ma Ma Aye for their kindness and support during the Myanmar ABS project, as well as many friends and sages who offered insights but prefer to remain anonymous.

We are very happy to be able to continue the survey and provide valuable insights into Myanmar's changing conditions. We thank the people of Myanmar for their graciousness in sharing their views and their time.

Summary of Key Findings

This report lays out the findings over eleven different thematic sections corresponding to the survey, detailed below. The focus is on changes over the last four years. The report finds higher trust in political institutions, greater confidence in government capacity, and a decline in perceived religious conflict as national identity has strengthened. At the same time, the findings point to three worrying trends compared to the earlier 2015 survey – continued perceived economic and social precarity, weakening in the social foundations for building democracy and increasing political polarization in Myanmar's society. Among Myanmar citizens, the urban-rural cleavage emerged as the most important social cleavage differentiating public perceptions, with gender, generational and ethnic differences important on a narrower range of issues. The summary of the key findings are below:

Economic Conditions and Vulnerabilities

- Despite high economic growth and steady poverty reduction in the economy, most Myanmar citizens did not perceive improvements in economic conditions.
- While Myanmar citizens perceived current economic conditions negatively, they remain optimistic about the future. Myanmar citizens remain positive about social mobility and future opportunities for themselves and their children.
- More optimistic views on the economy were found among younger citizens compared to older citizens and rural citizens compared to those in the urban areas.
- The economy stood out as the most important problem facing the country, followed by conflict and concerns with infrastructure.
- Poverty was also a concern of citizens, with high levels of reported precarity. Reported vulnerabilities have increased in the last five years, with more citizens concerned with potential losses of income and economic insecurity. Despite facing more economic challenges, Myanmar citizens remain confident in their resilience to cope with economic insecurities.
- Rural Myanmar citizens perceive themselves more vulnerable in terms of losing income and the potential impact of this loss of income than urbanites.
- A majority report that their incomes do not meet their basic needs and they experience difficulties.

- Myanmar citizens increasingly identify themselves as middle income and aspire to be middle class.

Social Capital and Trust

- While social capital remains high compared to regional neighbors, there has been a marked decline in social capital. The number of Myanmar citizens joining organizations has contracted sharply.
- Myanmar citizens continue to join religious, charitable and local residential and community organizations to a greater extent than political parties and other groups, as social ties intertwine with merit-making and faith.
- Myanmar citizens join social media groups and connect to the Internet in very high numbers, with the majority doing so to connect to others and share information. Less than a quarter of Myanmar citizens engage social media or the Internet for political information or news.
- Myanmar citizens recorded low levels of social trust and trust has declined as the political system has opened up.
- A fifth of Myanmar citizens lack social networks for support, reinforcing vulnerability. This social vulnerability is concentrated among those less educated, with lower incomes and urbanites.
- The contraction of social capital points to an erosion of the social fabric needed to strengthen democracy.

Political Culture and Values

- In 2015 Myanmar citizens recorded the most conservative traditional political culture in the countries surveyed in Southeast Asia. They continue to hold this position.
- At the same time, there has been the largest decline in traditional values across the region, as rapid modernization has led to a value liberalization in Myanmar society.
- The changes in traditional values are not across all areas, e.g. conflict avoidance, acceptance of pluralism or decline in feudalism. The changes surround issues of gender equality and individualism.
- Urbanites, younger and more educated citizens adopt less traditional values compared to others.
- The intensity of traditional values in society, notable in areas of tolerance and inclusion, are an obstacle for strengthening democracy.

Support for Democracy

- Support for and preference of democracy remains high, but the intensity of the support and preference for democracy has declined. In a reversal of the results of four years ago, Myanmar now has among the lowest support for democracy among the Southeast Asian countries surveyed in the ABS.
- Myanmar citizens do not see their country as a full democracy although most perceive current conditions as democratic and in a positive light. Differences in assessing levels of democracy in Myanmar indicate different understandings and aspirations in society.
- How Myanmar citizens understand democracy has changed, moving from more procedural dimensions of freedom and elections to more substantive issues of governance and equality.
- Support of and preference for democracy is higher among urbanites and more educated citizens.
- Similar to findings in 2015, when asked to choose between democracy and economic development, more Myanmar citizens opted for economic development. In a choice between democracy and economic equality, Myanmar citizens were more equally divided.
- When asked about horizontal accountability and how democracy is working in Myanmar, majorities adopted negative and undemocratic views. Myanmar has the largest share in the region who feel that its citizens are not ready for democracy. Attention to the practices and norms associated with democracy point to weak underlying public support for democracy.

Psychological Involvement in Politics

- Less than half of Myanmar citizens are interested in politics, with no substantive change over the past four years.
- There has been a sharp drop in perceived political efficacy, with more Myanmar citizens believing that they cannot impact politics.
- Most Myanmar citizens remain uninformed about politics with the largest number of Myanmar citizens reporting that they ‘practically never’ follow the news. At the same time, there has been a small increase in those who follow the news. A widespread lack of political knowledge is a problem for strengthening democracy.
- Gender, education and to a lesser extent generational and urban-rural differences were found to account for the variation in psychological involvement with politics, with men, more educated and younger citizens more interested in politics,

confident of their political engagement and following news. Rural dwellers were less likely to follow the news compared to urbanites.

- Myanmar citizens are changing how they get their news, with over a quarter now getting their news from the Internet/social media. Internet/social media use is concentrated among the young and urbanites. Television continues to be the main news source.
- Myanmar has the lowest trust in the Internet/social media as a news source among the Southeast Asian countries surveyed.

Political Participation

- Electoral political participation in Myanmar has increased, with higher numbers voting and more involvement in campaigns. There is greater confidence in the electoral process and in electoral administration. Myanmar has joined the ranks of those countries with an electoral commission with public confidence.
- Non-electoral participation remains low. In the one area where Myanmar citizens participated outside of elections – solving local problems – there is a marked decline.
- Gender differences exist across all forms of participation, with women participating less than men, especially with regard to participation outside of elections.
- When asked who they would support in the next election, a majority of Myanmar citizens showed reserve in answering this question. Those who did not answer were disproportionately rural and less educated. Of those who did answer, the majority supported the National League for Democracy (NLD), which received three times more support than alternatives, notably the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).
- The most salient cleavage in voting intention was ethnicity. Non-Bamar were more likely to support ethnic parties and less likely to support the NLD and USDP. The overall share of Myanmar citizens supporting ethnic parties remained low.
- Ties to political parties remain weak, with a two-thirds majority reporting that they were not close to any political party. Of those who reported party ties, these ties were also weak, with only small shares reporting 'very close' ties. Political parties have not institutionalized in Myanmar through forging strong ties with the public and building organizations in communities.

Government Support, Services & Governance

- There has been an increase in perceived government responsiveness and capacity. There are differences along the gender and rural-urban divides in assessments of capacity, with men and urbanites having more confidence in the government.
- Government satisfaction remains high, although this has not changed over time.
- Most Myanmar citizens recognize reforms in the political system, but a majority continue to believe further reforms are necessary.
- Over a third of Myanmar citizens report difficulty in receiving services. The problems are highest with regard to the police, electricity and roads. The least difficulties are related to healthcare and the Internet. The urban-rural divide remains the most significant barrier for service delivery, with rural dwellers experiencing more than twice the difficulties as compared to those in the urban areas, notably related to electricity.
- More Myanmar citizens believe their basic needs are not being met, pointing to differences in public perceptions of service provision and government delivery. Myanmar citizens reported the lowest assessment of basic needs met among the Southeast Asian countries surveyed.
- A majority of Myanmar citizens believe the government treats rich and poor equally.
- More than half of Myanmar citizens believe their governments (national and state) are corrupt, the highest among the Southeast Asian countries surveyed. In contrast, Myanmar citizens do not see their leaders as abusing power in office, the lowest in the region. The finding suggests that Myanmar citizens see corruption as systemic, rather than focused on elites in office.
- Myanmar citizens express more trust in their education system, and see land grabbing as a less serious issue, except in urban areas. There is growing concern with the management of the environment, as governance issues resonate among more Myanmar citizens.

Trust in Political Institutions

- The area where there was the most positive swing in public confidence was trust in political institutions, as every institution recorded greater trust. There remains considerable variation in the trust in different institutions, with the executive, military, and NGOs receiving the highest trust, and police and courts the lowest level of trust across institutions.

- Cross-nationally Myanmar's legislature compares favorably with other countries, as more Myanmar citizens found the Parliament to be a more effective check on the executive.
- Despite an increase in trust in the judiciary, the courts received the lowest assessment among the countries surveyed in Southeast Asia.
- There is a sharp increase in trust in the military over the past four years, with non-Bamar more distrustful of the military compared to Bamar. The military has the lowest level of trust among the Southeast Asian countries surveyed.

Military and Constitutional Reforms

- More Myanmar citizens favored military rule and military involvement in politics, with Myanmar's results favoring military rule the second highest in the region among the countries surveyed.
- Most Myanmar citizens did not answer questions on constitutional change, but those that did were in favor of reforms. This is in line with earlier findings.

Political Identity and Conflicts

- The ABS results point to a mixed picture for conflict reduction.
- Myanmar citizens increasingly identify with their nation rather than their religion or ethnic community. A large share of citizens continue to identify with religion, reflecting a continued but reduced role for religion in political life.
- Myanmar citizens remain highly religious, the third highest reported religiosity in the region, but support for consulting religious authorities when making the laws has dropped precipitously, pointing to an embrace of more secularism. Myanmar has among the lowest levels of support for consulting religious authorities in politics of the countries surveyed, along with Thailand.
- Fewer Myanmar citizens believe citizenship should be based on religion, with a third rejecting this notion altogether. A majority of citizens, however, do tie religion to citizenship.
- A strong two-thirds majority believes that all ethnic and religious communities are treated equally, but the intensity of this belief is more measured over the two surveys with most qualifying their answers as 'somewhat agree'.
- Most Myanmar citizens believe ethnic conflict has worsened. In contrast, Myanmar citizens do not see religious conflict as worsening, with a majority seeing this issue as less serious or not serious at all. The focal point for understanding conflict among Myanmar citizens is ethnicity not religion.

- Ethnic differences do not factor in regarding assessments of ethnic equality, but religious minorities see religious equality more negatively than the Buddhist majority.
- More Myanmar citizens perceive greater religious freedom in Myanmar compared to the results four years ago. Non-Buddhists, however, are less optimistic about religious freedom compared to Buddhists.
- Fewer Myanmar citizens support ethnic autonomy as compared to the earlier survey, with citizens more divided over this issue and stark differences over autonomy between Bamar and non-Bamar ethnic communities. This has negative implications for reaching a consensus on autonomy issues.
- Myanmar citizens continue to have faith in the peace process, including ethnic minorities, with increased support for the peace process over the period of the two surveys.

Globalization and Global Affairs

- Greater openness to the international community has coincided with less defensive nationalism, a drop from results four years ago. Myanmar is not as nationalistic as other countries surveyed in Southeast Asia, notably Indonesia and Vietnam, despite a majority adopting nationalistic views.
- A majority of Myanmar citizens support protectionist measures, but the level of protectionist sentiment is among the lowest within the Southeast Asian countries surveyed.
- There is very little change across the surveys as Myanmar citizens continue to not be willing to go abroad.
- Views on migration among Myanmar citizens have changed, with the adoption of more support for maintaining and increasing migrants, an issue that speaks to the sensitive concerns of the Rohingya community and other migrants. Myanmar records the lowest opposition to migration among all the countries in Southeast Asia surveyed.
- Myanmar citizens remain very proud of their country, but the intensity of this sentiment has somewhat dissipated.
- Most citizens do not answer questions about international affairs, but those that do point to the perceived greater influence of China in the region. Myanmar citizens see the influence of the United States in Asia as declining.
- When asked about the impact of China or the United States on the region, Myanmar was among three countries that strongly felt China caused harm to Asia, along with Vietnam and the Philippines. When asked about the impact of China on Myanmar

specifically, the negative sentiments were even higher, reflecting deep suspicions about China's role in Asia. Only a small minority of Myanmar citizens perceive the US role in the region as harmful.

- Almost half of Myanmar citizens feel close to ASEAN, but this sentiment has not changed over the span of the two surveys.



Introduction

The 2019 Myanmar Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) is part of a growing body of survey research being conducted in the country by academics, non-governmental organizations, the media and marketing companies. As Myanmar has opened up politically, the use of surveys – and the inclusion of the views of the public – has increasingly become the norm. In 2015 one of the aims of including Myanmar in the ABS was to ‘normalize’ the use of surveys and allow those in, and engaged with, Myanmar to include public views more broadly for implementing politics, programs and academic study. Myanmar was brought into the ABS in Wave 4, bringing our total countries surveyed then to fourteen. This 2019 round of the survey, Wave 5, with fifteen countries (now including Australia) and Myanmar’s second survey, aims to provide a similar tool, to allow for an understanding of how citizens are responding to the political, social and economic changes taking place since the military government formally turned over power to citizen leadership after the November 2015 election. As the ABS is cross-regional to East Asia, we are able to compare views in Myanmar to other countries in Southeast Asia as well as compare the current results with the earlier ABS study.¹ This report is part of our effort to deepen understanding and foster engagement.

This report is entitled ‘Grappling with Transition’. Its focus is to compare changes in public views over time as well as to understand how the public is responding to the intensive and broad scope of changes the country has undergone since 2015. Arguably, no country in Southeast Asia has experienced such intense changes in as short a period of time. On the surface these changes are clear to long-time Myanmar watchers who observe the changes in the skyline and infrastructure of Yangon and Mandalay, as new buildings have been erected – along with changes in public transportation. Tea shops have given way to cafes, and corner shops and wet markets have been displaced by shopping markets and shopping malls. Even in the remote corners of the Shan and Chin states there is greater connectivity than in earlier years. On social media, an embrace of new voices has been overshadowed by the rise of hate speech and ethnonationalism. Internationally, Myanmar has gone from being seen as a beacon of democracy to one seen as deeply flawed in how it has handled the treatment of the Rohingya in Rakhine state. In all of this, ordinary Myanmar citizens – both the majority Bamar and over one-hundred ethnic minorities – have moved forward, embracing the uncertainty and maintaining hope in the country’s ongoing transition.

¹ At the time of the writing of this report, the data was available for five countries besides Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam. It is projected that Singapore and Cambodia will become part of Wave 5 by the end of the year.

It is important to appreciate that the transition that Myanmar is undergoing involves changes on multiple fronts. Scholars have focused intensely on the changes taking place in the country across disciplines.² This report hopes to contribute to these discussions by bringing in the voice of ordinary Myanmar citizens. It offers insights into how Myanmar society is itself changing in response to new conditions.

It is worthwhile unpacking some of these changes further. Economically the country has experienced record year-on-year economic growth for the past decade, reaching 6.4% last year.³ Income levels have risen and poverty has decreased. These positive developments have been unevenly distributed, regionally and across society, however, and, as the report shows below, are perceived differently among citizens. One cannot deny that there have been substantial changes in the well-being and robustness of the economy. What has markedly differed in recent years has been the access to foreign goods/markets and the scope of foreign investment and international exposure. This includes more foreigners visiting Myanmar. From 2015-2017 Myanmar was flooded with tourists. After 2017 the composition of tourists has changed, now primarily from East Asia and China, but remained high, increasing over 40% in 2019.⁴ Myanmar citizens themselves are also traveling more, both within the country and outside. This is not just to work, the rise in incomes has also contributed to more Myanmar citizens traveling abroad for leisure. Yet as incomes have risen, so have prices. The economic shifts are being very differently perceived across Myanmar society.

The economic transformation coincides with social changes as well. Nowhere is the rapid change in conditions starker than in the access to the Internet and social media, as Myanmar has become a connected society, with both negative aspects and spillovers evident from the rise of this medium. The investments in telecommunications have opened Myanmar citizens to the world and to each other. There are other noticeable changes resulting from international exposure and new forms of social engagement, new hair styles and fashions as well as new attitudes about self and society. These social changes permeate shifts in values and behavior, as some traditional and conservative views have shifted. Others have not, and in some cases, there is a rejection of the intensive changes the society is undergoing.

These same tensions are evident in views of politics and political behavior as well. With the more open political space, citizens have also engaged in politics differently and adopted new means of political participation. There are simultaneously greater demands on government to deliver services and improve governance and varied perceptions of foreign powers engaged in Myanmar. At the same time, views of democracy, what it means and

2 For excellent academic studies of this period, see Justine Chambers, Gerard McCarthy, Nicholas Farrelly, and Chit Win, (eds) (2018). *Myanmar Transformed?: People, Places and Politics*. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute; Pavin Chachavalpongpun, Elliot Prasse-Freeman and Patrick Strefford, (2020), *Unraveling Myanmar's Transition: Progress, Retrenchment and Ambiguity amidst Liberalisation*, National University of Singapore; Thant Myint-U, (2019) *The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism, and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century*. W.W. Norton and Company.

3 World Bank (2019). *Myanmar Economic Monitor: Resilience Amidst Risk*. Washington, DC: World Bank. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/501141578669463216/Myanmar-Economic-Monitor-Resilience-Amidst-Risk>

4 'Myanmar Tourism Increases a Massive 40% in 2019,' *The Thaiger*, February 11, 2020. <https://thethaiger.com/hot-news/tourism/myanmar-tourism-increases-a-massive-40-in-2019>

the trustworthiness of different political institutions varies sharply. The report shows that after years of citizens wanting more democratic rule, there are mixed reactions to greater political openness. While Myanmar citizens broadly continue to embrace democracy, they do so in contradictory ways as the political transition has provoked both a rise in authoritarian values and support for military rule as well as greater embrace of freedoms and empowerment. Studies increasingly point to the consolidation of a more hybrid, less democratic regime.⁵ The Myanmar ABS report examines whether the views of Myanmar's public reinforce this trend away from democratization, and finds a similar hybridization in the support for and of democracy.

This report summarizes the findings of the 2019 national survey conducted in all fourteen states and regions including the capital Nay Pyi Taw. The methodology for the Myanmar ABS is detailed in the next section, and in the Myanmar Technical Report available on the ABS website. Comprised of eleven sections, this report focuses on answers to the main questions in the different sections of the survey from political culture and engagement, social trust and social capital to views of economic conditions, governance, democracy, political participation, and globalization. It does not include answers to all the questions in the survey, rather the most illustrative and important questions.

There are three points of comparison for the findings. First, careful attention focuses on changes over the four-year period of the two different ABS waves, from 2015 to 2019. This focus on changes in recent years anchors the discussion on how Myanmar society is responding to the ongoing transitions. Second, attention is paid to divisions within Myanmar society – the social cleavages of the urban-rural divide, ethnicity/religion, generation and gender as well as different income and education levels. Where there are large differences, these are incorporated into the report. Finally, Myanmar is compared with other Southeast Asian countries already surveyed in Wave 5 of the ABS, namely the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia. The Cambodia and Singapore data are not yet available. This allows us to understand how Myanmar compares with the rest of the region in ASEAN.

The discussion is largely descriptive, as the report focuses on survey findings rather than analysis. We recognize that the ABS is only a modest effort as part of an evolving understanding of the complexities and vibrant political developments taking place in Myanmar. The findings below often raise questions and call for further research. Our approach has been not to over-interpret the findings, leaving the readers space for different and even contradictory interpretations. We do however integrate the findings with ongoing academic debates, fleshing out the implications for strengthening democracy in Myanmar – as this is the core issue of the Global Barometer survey project. We hope that others will take up the mantle and use the data for their own research as the data can be requested for use by academics and practitioners.⁶

5 Kristian Stokke and Soe Myint Aung. 'Transition to democracy or hybrid regime? The dynamics and outcomes of democratization in Myanmar.' *The European Journal of Development Research* (2019): 1-20 and Stefano Ruzza, Giuseppe Gabusi, and Davide Pellegrino. 'Authoritarian resilience through top-down transformation: making sense of Myanmar's incomplete transition.' *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica* 49, no. 2 (2019): 193-209.

6 The data is embargoed within the academic network for one year. For interest in the data, please contact

Before we get into the body of the findings, let us note a bit of detail about the preparation of the findings. Generally, when there was less than 10% of no answers, the results presented are the share of those who answered the question. When the ‘no answers’ – don’t understand the question, refuse to answer, not sure – were significant in share, they are included in the results. The data was weighted to conform to the age breakdown of the population based on the census, with the original sample conforming to the urban-rural divide as well as ethnic diversity of the country. While we appreciate there are meaningful differences in views and behavior among different ethnic minority communities, the ethnic divide used (and of statistical significance) is a simplistic one of Bamar versus non-Bamar. We also make a similar divide between Buddhist and non-Buddhist when appropriate in discussion of issues related to religion and politics. These heuristic frames are imperfect but provide insights and starting points for further analysis.

As with all ongoing projects, we welcome feedback on the report, acknowledging up front that we may not be able to answer many of the questions about why these results are evolving as they are. Thank you for reading the report.



Myanmar 2019 ABS Methodology

Data was gathered through face-to-face interviews of adult citizens aged 18 years old and above. The baseline information for the sampling for the national survey was drawn from the 2014 National Survey population data collected by the Myanmar Ministry of Immigration and Population. Monks, prisoners, military personnel stationed on military facilities and individuals in Internal Displaced Persons (IDPs) camps including Rohingya were not included in the survey. Attention was placed on assuring that the sampling points at different points in the sampling process corresponded to the urban-rural, ethnic, generational and gender differences in Myanmar society.

The Myanmar ABS survey included over 232 questions (available on the ABS website), including the core questions of the Global Barometer and Asian Barometer surveys that allow for cross-regional comparisons, as well as specific questions directly related to Myanmar. The main topics explored range from perceptions of governance, trust in institutions and social capital to political culture, partisanship and political participation, views of democracy, globalization and regional powers. Many of the Myanmar-specific questions are directly related to conflict, constitutional reform and the role of the military, laid out below. The questionnaire was prepared in both English and Burmese, with show cards prepared in the ethnic languages of Chin, Shan, Kayin, Kachin and Rakhine. In other ethnic areas, translators were used for the interviews.

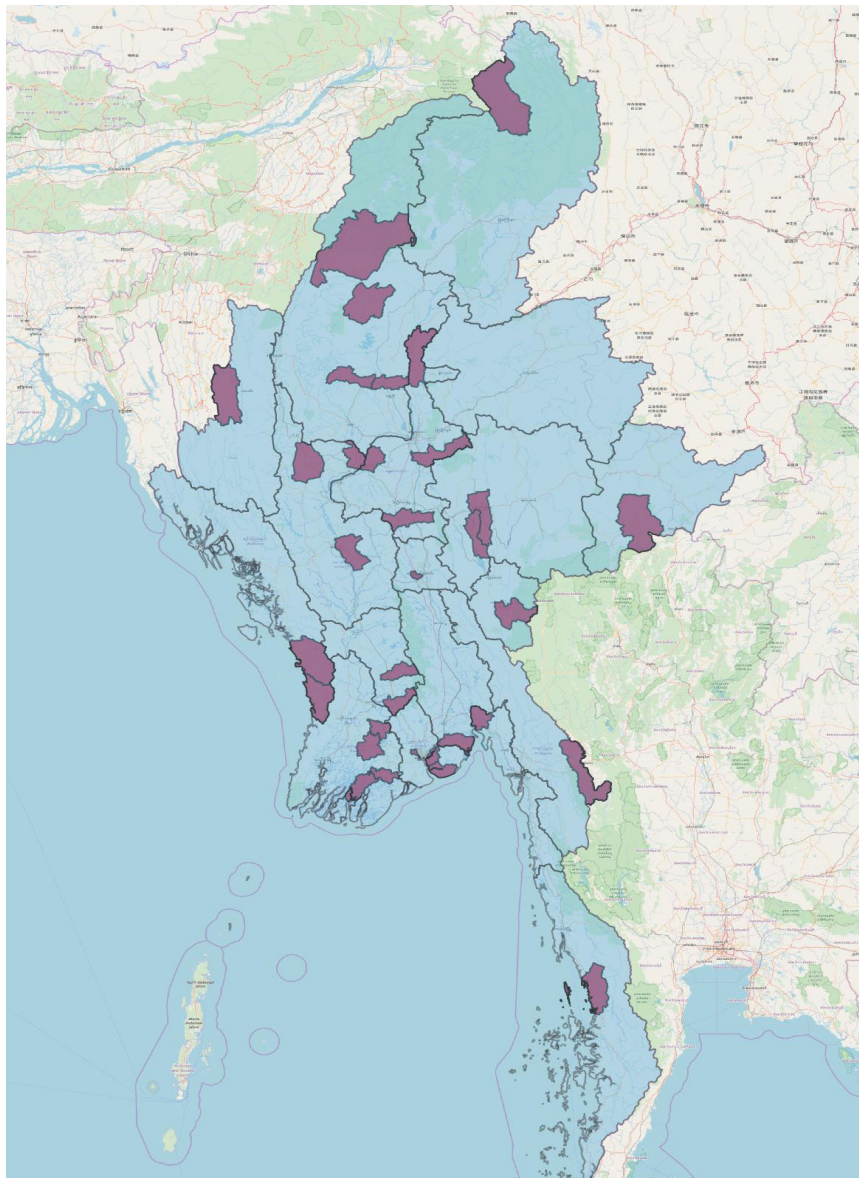
The ABS created its own sampling frame. We used the 2014 population data in Myanmar provided by the Ministry of Population and Immigration. The data comprised a total of 317 townships in all 15 of Myanmar's administrative regions (including Nay Pyi Taw). The sample size was set at 1620 to assure a high quality national representative sample, drawn from 35 randomly selected townships. These areas are shown in Figure 1 below. The findings do not represent any individual state but speak to the country as a whole. A total of three wards/urban areas or villages were randomly selected per township, with 15 households per ward or village. Sampling was thus carried out in two stages (township and ward/village levels) in accordance with the probability proportional to size (PPS) method. At the third stage for the household selection GPS/GIS assisted PPS sampling was adopted due to the lack of reliable and available population data at the village level. After the households had been drawn from GIS/GPS methods, an eligible respondent was randomly selected by using a Kish table in each household. The details of these stages of the sampling are available in the 'Myanmar Technical Report', also available on the ABS website.

A total of 1620 people were surveyed. Two replacements had to be made to the 35 randomly selected sample points due to conflict in one case and an unwillingness of local

authorities to allow the survey in the other. All states and regions were sampled. The overall sample size of 1620 voting-age adults gives a maximum error margin of $\pm 2.43\%$ at the 95% confidence level, following a simple random sampling design. Given general concerns about ongoing conflicts and the history of authoritarian rule, the survey response rate above 75% was exceptional and interviewers reported high cooperation on behalf of the majority of respondents. During the nearly two months of fieldwork, two weeks were devoted to quality control where over 25% of the surveys were randomly reviewed. After repeated checks on data entry and cleaning of the data, we tested the reliability of the findings.

The methodology is detailed in the 'Myanmar Technical Report'. We are confident the data conforms to a high quality, in line with the high standards we have used in twenty years of survey research at the ABS.

Figure 1: Map of Sampling



Economic Conditions and Vulnerabilities

We begin this report with the findings evaluating the economy. While Myanmar citizens continue to have a positive outlook on economic issues, especially compared to neighboring countries in Southeast Asia, views are less optimistic than they were four years ago.

Myanmar's economy has undergone major changes in the last decade. Economic growth levels have risen sharply, averaging a growth of 6.2% in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) since 2015, with the highest level of growth of 6.3% of GDP reported in 2018. Economic growth is estimated to have grown by 6.3% in 2019, the year of the survey.⁷ Myanmar's economy is estimated to be worth US\$71.2 billion in 2018. Strong economic growth has translated into a reduction in poverty from 48% to 25% between 2005 and 2017.⁸ Despite this impressive poverty reduction, one in four are estimated to live in poverty with another 38% vulnerable to shocks and other risks.⁹ There are significant regional variations across the different states and regions, with those in conflict areas and remote regions experiencing higher levels of poverty. Myanmar remains largely a rural society, where an estimated 70% of the population lives, with poverty concentrated in rural and remote areas.

The positive economic growth in recent years and steady decline in poverty has not translated into positive changes in public perceptions. Less than a third of Myanmar citizens view the economy positively (29%). Despite having similar lower growth rates, citizens in the Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam are more positive about their economies compared to Myanmar – as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 3 details views on the past, present and future of the economy. It shows that most Myanmar citizens (39%) see the present condition of the economy as 'so so' – neither positively nor negatively, in line with levels reported in 2015 (43%). The notable shift in perceptions is that a larger share of Myanmar citizens (27%) see the economy negatively, compared to 2015 (20%). Positive views of the economy essentially stayed the same, from 30% to 29%, indicating that the movement toward more negative views of the economy

7 World Bank (2019). *Myanmar Economic Monitor: Resilience Amidst Risk*. Washington, DC: World Bank. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/501141578669463216/Myanmar-Economic-Monitor-Resilience-Amidst-Risk>

8 Central Statistical Organization, United Nations Development Programme and World (2019) *Myanmar Living Conditions Survey 2017: Poverty Report*. Nay Pyi Taw and Yangon, Myanmar: Ministry of Planning and Finance, UNDP and WB.

9 World Bank. (2020). *Myanmar Living Conditions Survey 2017: Socio-Economic Report* (English). Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/151001580754918086/Myanmar-Living-Conditions-Survey-2017-Socio-Economic-Report>

was among those who were more neutral about the economic performance of the military-linked Thein Sein government that was in power in 2015. These findings suggest that gains from the economic reforms and growth under the NLD government have yet to be widely perceived by ordinary citizens, although a large majority (70%) remain hopeful for economic improvements in the future.

Figure 2 Positive Views of Present Economy Cross-National Comparison, ABS Wave 5

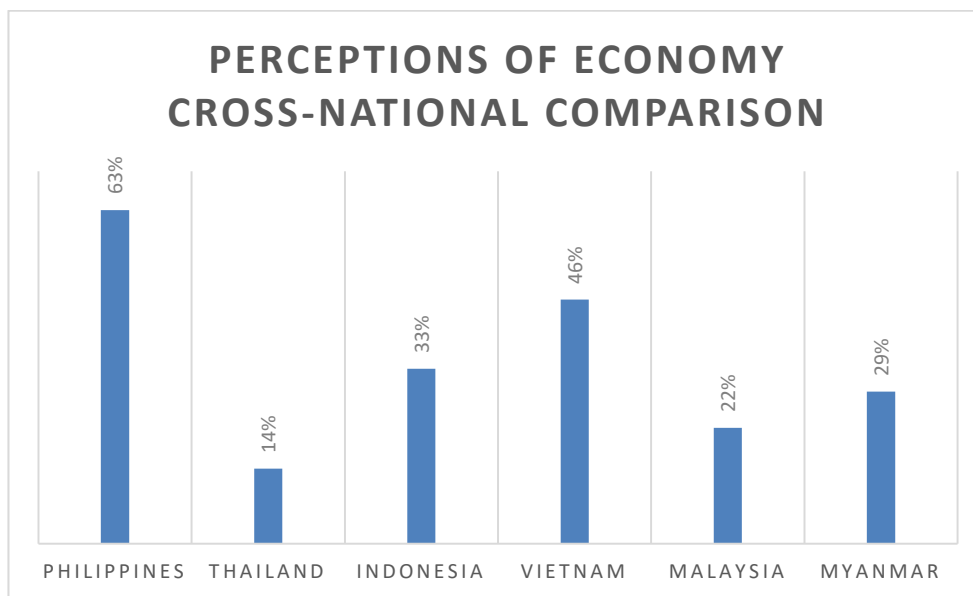
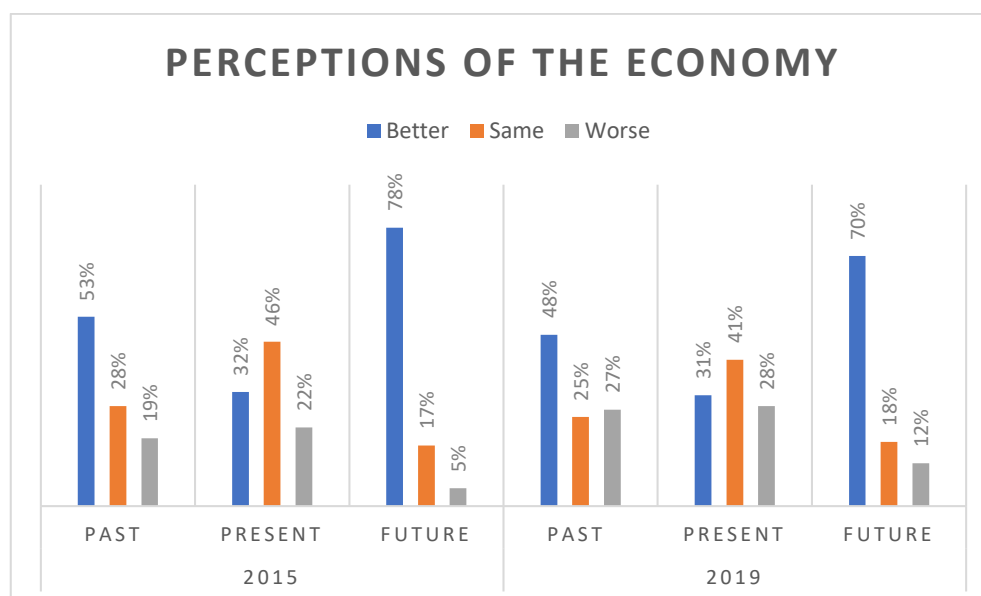


Figure 3 Perceptions of Economic Conditions 2019

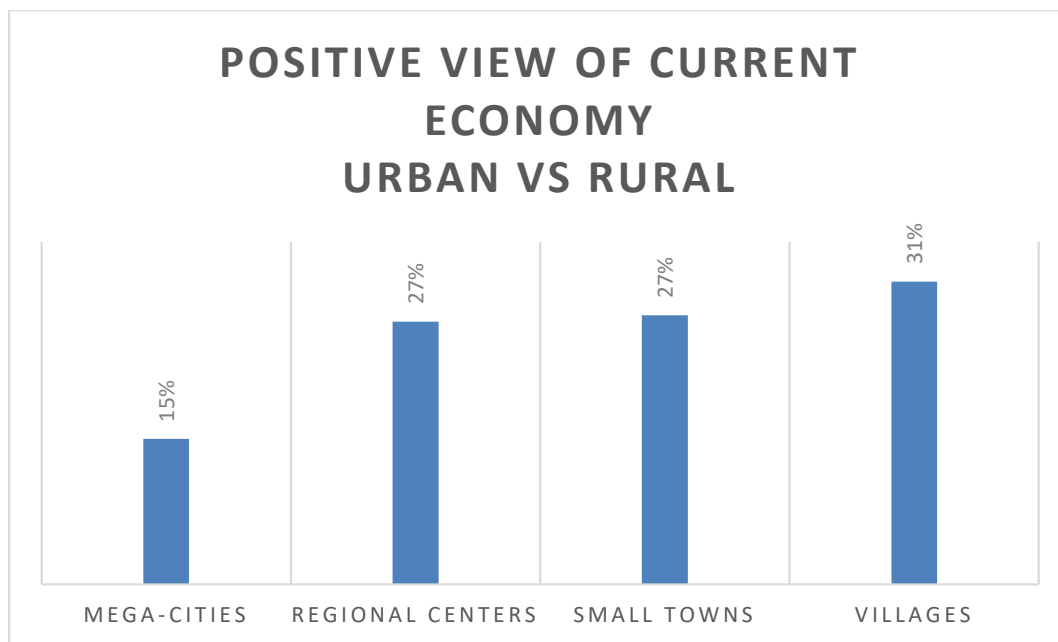


Understandably views vary among Myanmar citizens regarding the economy. Generational differences in outlook were found; those surveyed under 20 years of age were much more positive about the economy compared to older cohorts, 40% compared to a 28% average of those above 20. This greater optimism among the youngest cohort (18-20 years) compared to older citizens permeated the survey results on economic issues. More often than not, however, generational differences in perceptions were marginal in other areas of

public perception – a surprising finding given the large share of youth in Myanmar society, and research pointing to different outlooks and behaviors.¹⁰

The most striking differences in views were along the urban-rural divide. This difference has long been understood as a major social cleavage in the country. As the report below shows, the urban-rural divide is the most salient marker of different views among Myanmar citizens in the widest range of issues.¹¹ The changes taking place in rural areas in particular are also eroding long-standing isolation of rural communities.¹² On the economy, as shown in Figure 4, those in the countryside (31%) have more than double the positive outlook compared to those in the mega-cities of Yangon and Mandalay (15%). Myanmar's economy has become more integrated in recent years, with better transportation and access to markets, but the changes have been felt differently. The urban centers, which have experienced the most intensive changes and where class differences are stark, have the most negative views on economic performance. This reinforces the need for current attention to, and new policies for, the profound transformations taking place in urban areas as well.¹³

Figure 4 Perceptions of the Economy Urban vs. Rural, 2019



10 See Jacqueline Menager. (2018). 'Youth'. In Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly, N., & Ian Holliday, (eds.). *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*. Routledge. pp. 194-203.

11 For excellent recent discussion of these spaces see: Nicholas Farrelly, 'The capital.' In *Ibid.*, pp. 80-88; Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, 'Rural.' In *Ibid.*, pp. 97-107; and Jayde Roberts, 'Urban' In *Ibid.*, pp. 89-96.

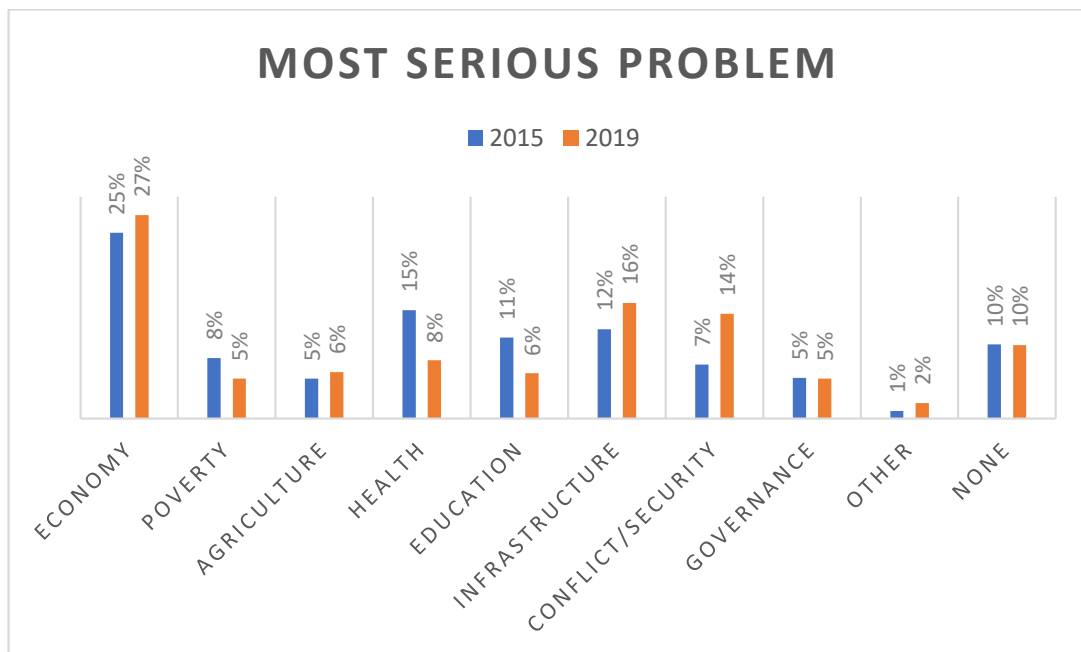
12 For two insightful recent discussions on rural transformation see: Samuel Pursch, Andrea Woodhouse, Michael Woolcock, and Matthew Zurstrassen (2017). *Documenting Myanmar's social transformation: insights from six rounds of research on livelihoods and social change in rural communities*. The World Bank and Ben Belton & Mateusz Filipski. (2019). 'Rural transformation in central Myanmar: By how much, and for whom?', *Journal of Rural Studies*, 67: 166-176.

13 World Bank. 2019. *Myanmar's Urbanization (Vol. 2): Creating Opportunities for All – Overview* (English). Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/myanmar/publication/myanmars-urbanization-creating-opportunities-for-all>

Irrespective of the location, Myanmar citizens consider the economy the most important problem facing the country, with over a quarter (27%) pointing to bread-and-butter issues as their primary concern and the country's most serious problem. This includes prices, wages and employment. Figure 5 shows this is in line with similar views four years ago in 2015. Public priorities continue to call for greater attention to promoting economic growth and inclusion.

While views on the importance of the economy remain the same, there were other shifts in public perceptions of the most serious problem facing the country. More citizens identify conflict as the most serious issue (14%), double the case in 2015 (7%). After the economy, conflict is seen as the second most serious problem currently facing Myanmar. Given that there is more ongoing conflict in Myanmar now compared to 2015, this concern is not a surprise. There is also an increased focus on infrastructure, (from 12% to 16%), but where there are interesting drops are in health (15% to 8%) and education (11% to 6%). Improvements in both of these sectors have reduced attention to these public services, a finding that is also echoed in other questions detailed below.

Figure 5 Most Serious Problem, 2015 vs. 2019

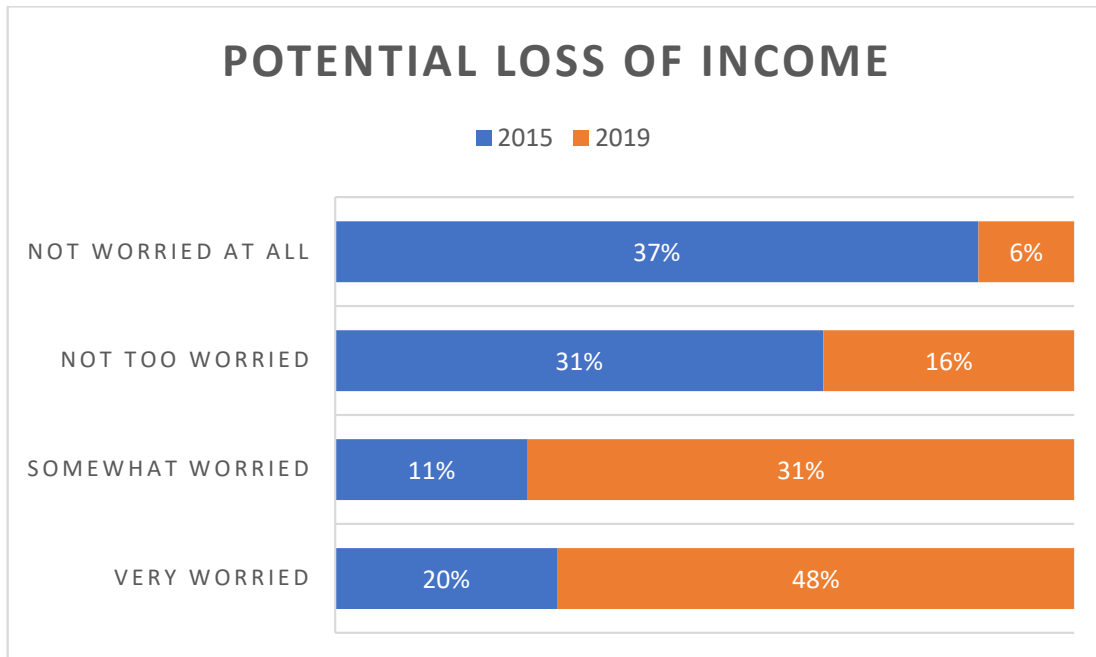


One answer that stands out is the persistent recognition of poverty among the most serious problems facing the country. The share has dropped (from 8% to 5%) as reports have also confirmed a decline in real poverty levels.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the issue of poverty remains one of the leading national problems. Large shares of Myanmar citizens are vulnerable. In fact, the ABS found that more Myanmar citizens are concerned about a potential loss of income than in 2015 (48% compared to 20% 'very worried' and 31% compared to 11% 'somewhat

14 World Bank. (2020). *Myanmar Living Conditions Survey 2017: Socio-Economic Report* (English). Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/151001580754918086/Myanmar-Living-Conditions-Survey-2017-Socio-Economic-Report>

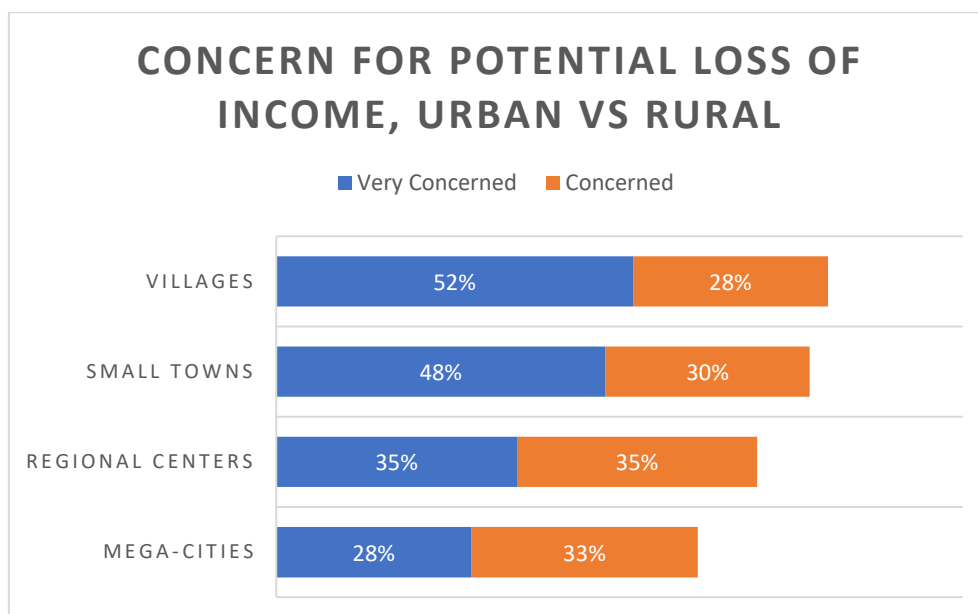
worried'), as shown in Figure 6a. The opening of the economy has brought with it greater concerns about livelihoods.

Figure 6a Concern Potential Loss of Income, 2015 vs. 2019



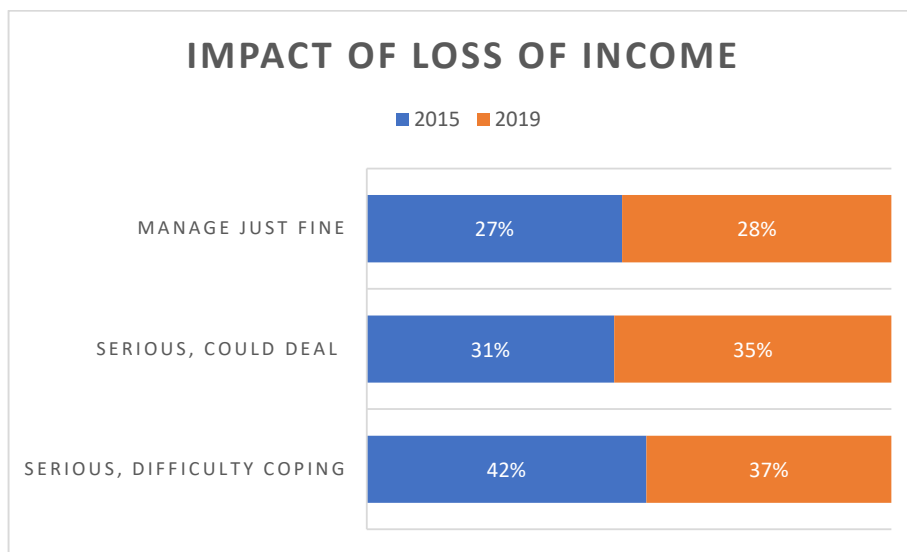
The concerns about economic security vary across the Myanmar population. They are considerably higher in the rural communities than in the urban areas, (80% versus 61% 'very concerned' and 'concerned'). Figure 6b also shows that a majority of rural dwellers (52%) are 'very concerned' about their loss of income. With a dependence on the vulnerabilities of agricultural livelihoods and limited savings, among other reasons, villagers are highly cognizant of the economic insecurities they face. This points to an interesting paradox: while villagers have the most positive views of the current economy, they simultaneously record the highest level of economic vulnerability.

Figure 6b Concern Potential Loss of Income Urban vs Rural, 2019



While there are greater worries about a potential loss of income, views on whether citizens could cope have not changed significantly. The majority of Myanmar citizens see the impact of a loss of income as serious. As shown in Figure 7, less than a third of citizens (28%) recorded that they could manage if they lost their income, on par with the earlier 2015 ABS findings (27%). The share of those recording difficulty in coping dropped only marginally (from 42% to 37%). The level of vulnerability among citizens remains high as the economic changes have not coincided with greater perceived personal economic insecurity. Myanmar citizens continue to have faith in their own resilience. They are however responding to greater uncertainty in the economy brought about by liberalization and pointing to a gap in economic performance with their aspirations.

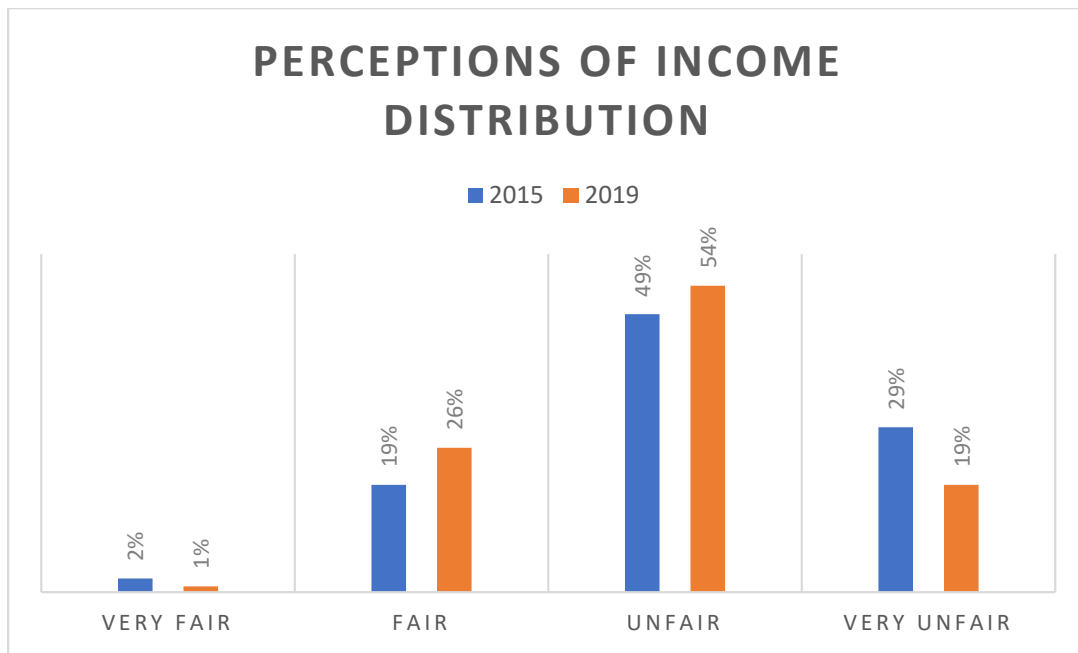
Figure 7 Recorded Impact of Potential Loss of Income, 2015 vs 2019



Studies have pointed to the changing class structure in Myanmar, the emergence of a small middle class, expansion of a capitalist class (crony elite) tied to the control and access to state and natural resources and widening inequalities.¹⁵ New ownership and rising incomes have coincided with changing habits in consumption, as the divide between the rich elite and poor majority has taken on a new distribution and public manifestation. Myanmar citizens were asked about how they perceived the fairness of income distribution. As was the case earlier, noted below in Figure 8, the majority felt that the distribution was unfair (73% combined 'unfair' and 'very unfair'). This was a small drop from 2015 (72%), as more respondents perceived conditions fairer a few years ago. For the majority of citizens class inequality is a serious issue, but the data also shows that some see inequality as improving with a 'fair' income distribution (from 19% in 2015 to 26% in 2019).

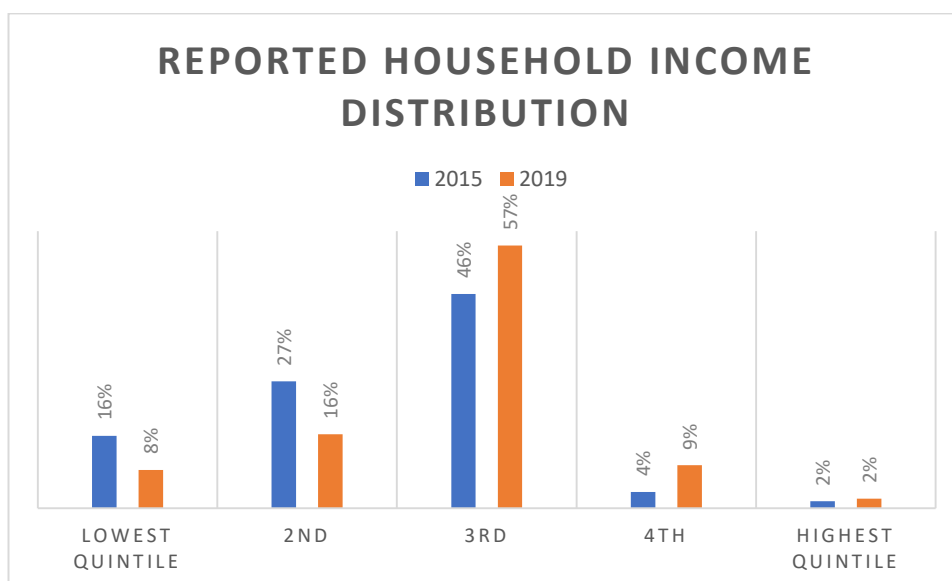
15 Nicholas Farrelly, (2015) 'Myanmar's middle class bulge,' *The Myanmar Times*, July 27, 2015. Available at: <https://www.newmandala.org/myanmars-middle-class-bulge/> and Elliot Prasse-Freeman and Phyo Win Latt. 'Class and inequality.' In Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly, N., & Ian Holliday, (eds.). *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*. Routledge, pp. 404-416.

Figure 8 Perceptions of Income Distribution, 2015 vs. 2019



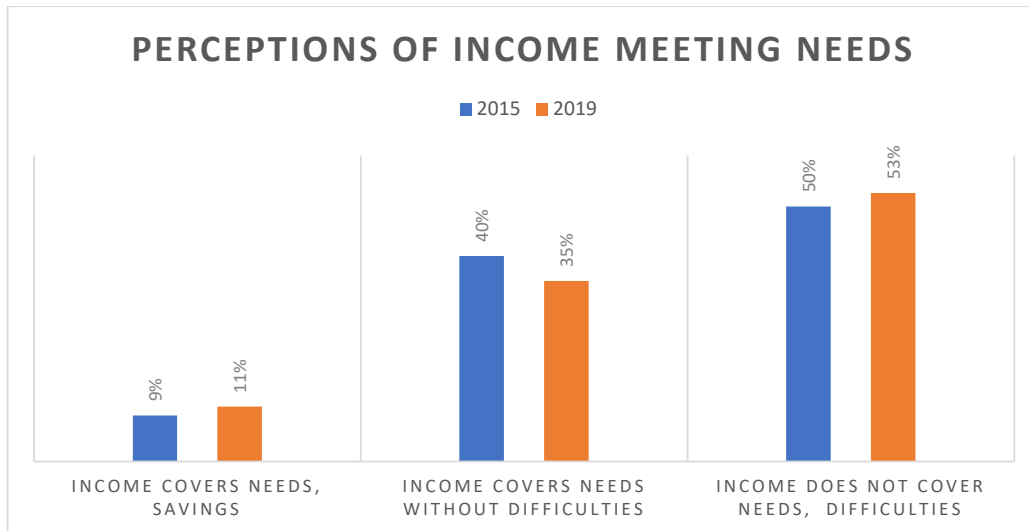
This can be in part understood as a product of perceived rising incomes. Citizens record higher incomes. Figure 9 shows that there is a marked shift in the distribution of recorded household income, as more Myanmar citizens place themselves in the middle (57% compared to 46%), with drops in the lowest two quintiles (a drop from 16% to 8% in the lowest quintile and from 27% to 16% in the second lowest quintile). There is a rise in the second highest quintile as well (from 4% to 9%), although the share recording in the highest quintile remains the same. The increase in recorded incomes coincides with studies of higher incomes more broadly in the population, as more citizens perceive themselves as middle class (rather than other class groups).

Figure 9 Reported Household Income Distribution, 2015 vs. 2019



This change in recorded incomes has not translated, however, into meeting citizen needs. Citizens were asked to assess whether their income covers their needs to allow savings, without difficulties or does not cover their needs, leaving difficulties. The changes over time were marginal, as shown in Figure 10, with a slight increase in those who could save and those who felt their income could not cover their needs. The situation remains that more than half of Myanmar citizens feel that their incomes do not meet their needs, highlighting the persistent vulnerability felt among the population.

Figure 10 Perceptions of Income Meeting Needs, 2015 vs. 2019



These perceived difficulties do not take away from underlying optimism for future social mobility. When asked about how they compared their standing with that of their parents and of what they believed for their children, citizens recorded higher social mobility for their own generation compared to their parents and were hopeful for future gains for their children. Figure 11 shows that most citizens perceived themselves as part of the middle class (50%), although larger shares were distributed among higher levels for their children.

This positive outlook is also seen in the responses about future opportunities. As shown in Figure 12, the overwhelming majority (81%) believe that the future will be better for their children, with nearly a third (31%) believing there will be substantially more opportunities. Despite the prevalence of negative views on economic performance and recorded vulnerabilities, citizens remain optimistic about Myanmar's future for their children.

Figure 11 Social Mobility, 2019

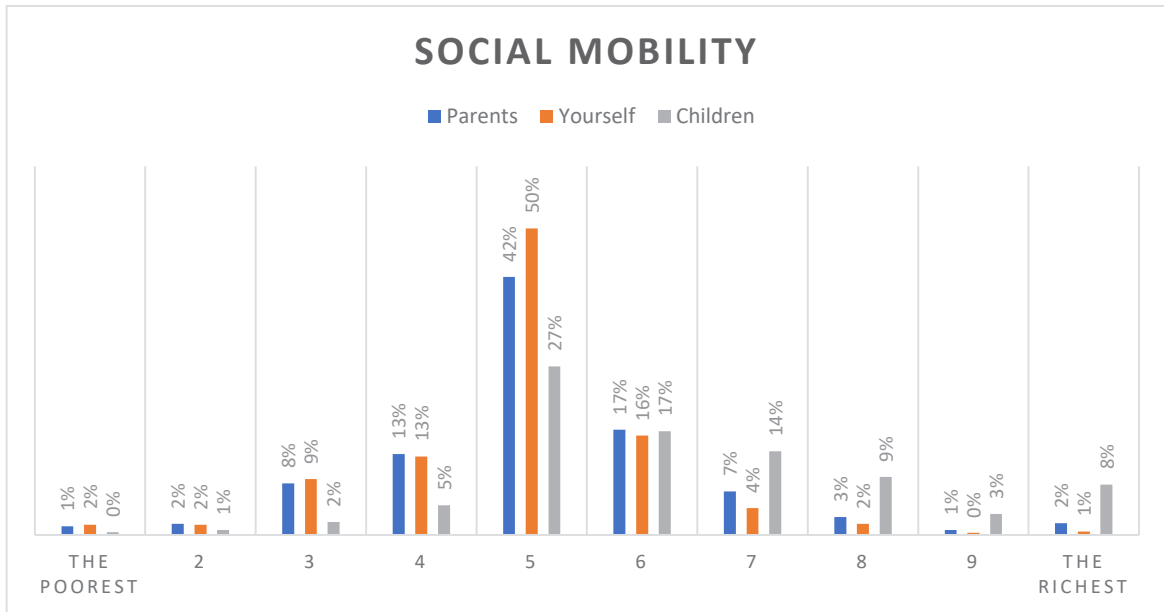
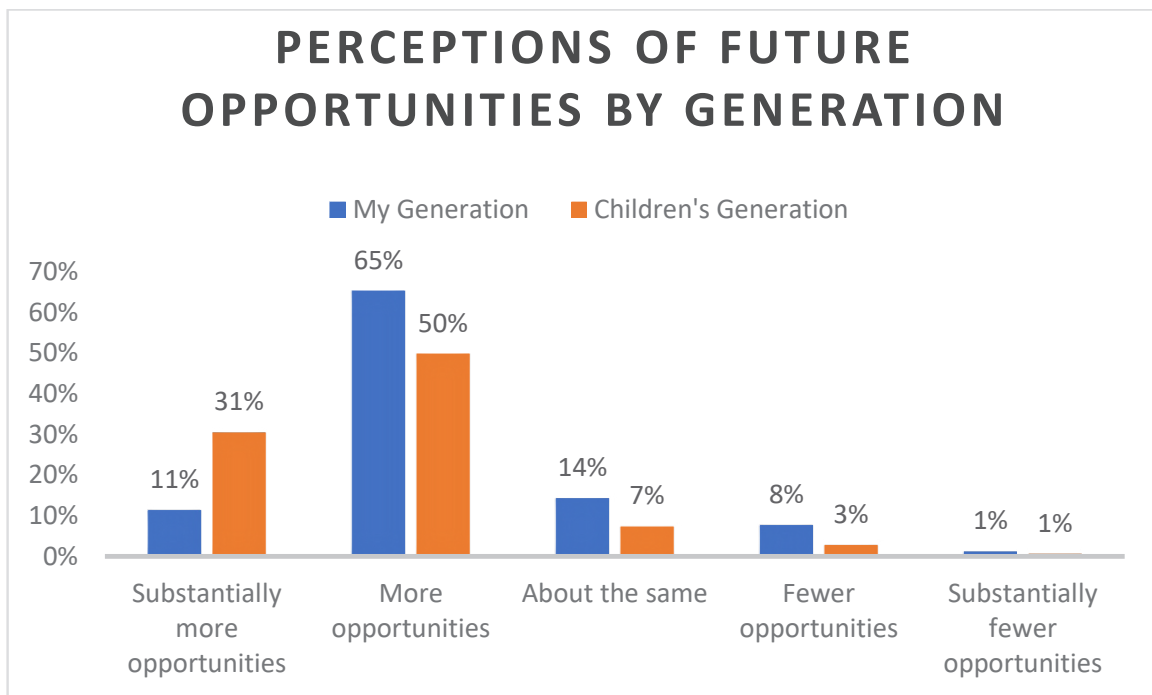


Figure 12 Perceptions of Future Opportunities by Generation, 2019



Social Capital and Trust

Studies have shown that social capital – the networks and connections individuals have – can help them sustain periods of economic instability, ameliorate vulnerability and underscore a robust civil society, a key ingredient in a healthy democracy. Considerable research on Myanmar has focused on the expansion of civil society in Myanmar, initially after the responses to Cyclone Nargis in 2008 and, more recently, with the opening up of political conditions.¹⁶ The focus has been primarily centered on how civil society engages with political parties and the state, rather than in society itself. The ABS points to worrying trends in how citizens are engaging with each other and suggests these developments undercut the building of a social fabric to support expanding democracy.

Social capital has changed during this transition period. There has been a sharp drop in the number of Myanmar citizens reported to be joining organizations, (down from 61% to 39% from 2015 to 2019). More Myanmar citizens are opting not to be part of organizations – a trend that is worrying for building social trust and strengthening democracy. Normally, the democratizing trend has seen more engagement in organizations, rather than the opposite. Figure 13 shows that this dimension of social capital amongst Myanmar citizens has also dropped compared to regional neighbors, behind Indonesia (80%), Thailand (48%) and Malaysia (42%).

The decline in social capital is across different types of organizations – charities, religious groups, residential and community organizations, public interest groups and political parties, as shown in Figure 14. One would think this might be a product of generational differences, with younger Myanmar citizens not joining organizations, choosing, for example, to join online groups or participate indirectly. This is not the case, as there are no sharp differences in the number of joiners across age cohorts. What has changed is the structure of organizations themselves. Consider the nature of political parties, which declined in its share of joiners from 4% to 1% from 2015 to 2019. The military-linked Union Solidarity Development Party (USDP) is no longer the mass organization it was, as membership is no longer required on the part of officials and local leaders. The National League for Democracy (NLD) seems to rely more on elite leadership rather than building

16 See Christina Fink and Adam Simpson (2018), 'Civil Society,' Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly and Ian Holliday, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*, Routledge, pp. 257-267 and David Brenner and Sarah Schulman. (2019) 'Myanmar's Top-Down Transition: Challenges for Civil Society.' *IDS Bulletin* 50, no. 3: 17-36; Mael Raynaud, 'Civil society and the 2020 election,' *Frontier Myanmar*, November 25, 2019, <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/civil-society-and-the-2020-election> and World Learning's Institute for Political and Civic Engagement. (iPACE) (2017) *Civil Society in Myanmar's New Democracy*, (September) Yangon. <https://www.worldlearning.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Civil-Society-Report-iPACE.pdf>

a mass party. There have been changes in mass religious organizations as well, with the largest Buddhist mass organization Ma Ba Tha being banned in 2017. This can help us understand, in part, the decline in joining religious organizations (from 14% to 9%). Some of the organizations that have emerged have also been more ‘uncivil’ in character, fueling division and hate speech – which may also have contributed to less joining by society.

Figure 13 Joining of Organizations Cross-National Comparison, ABS Wave 5

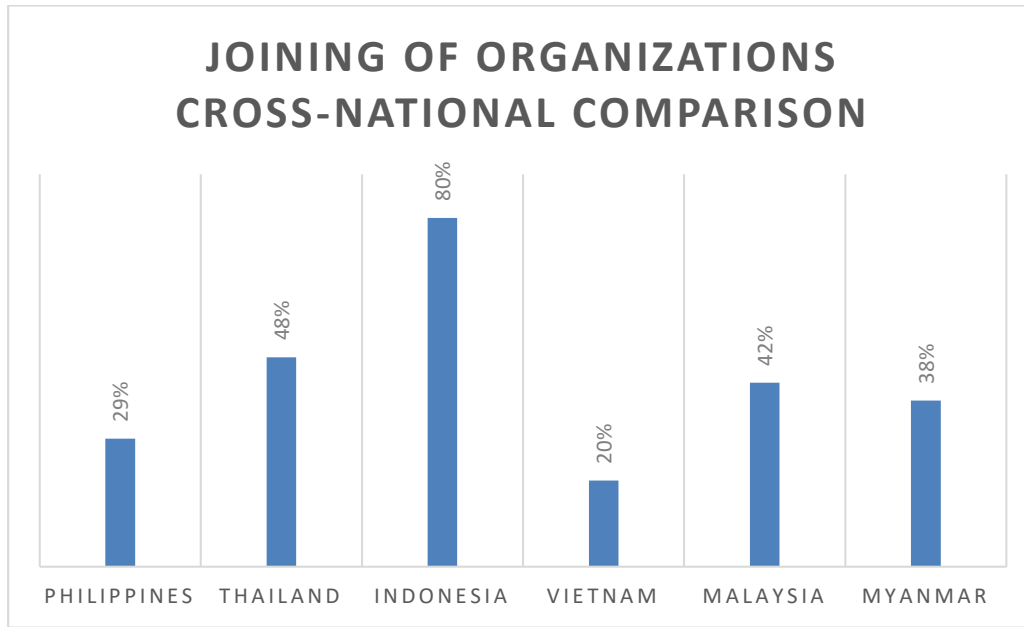


Figure 14a Types of Organizations Joined, 2015 vs 2019

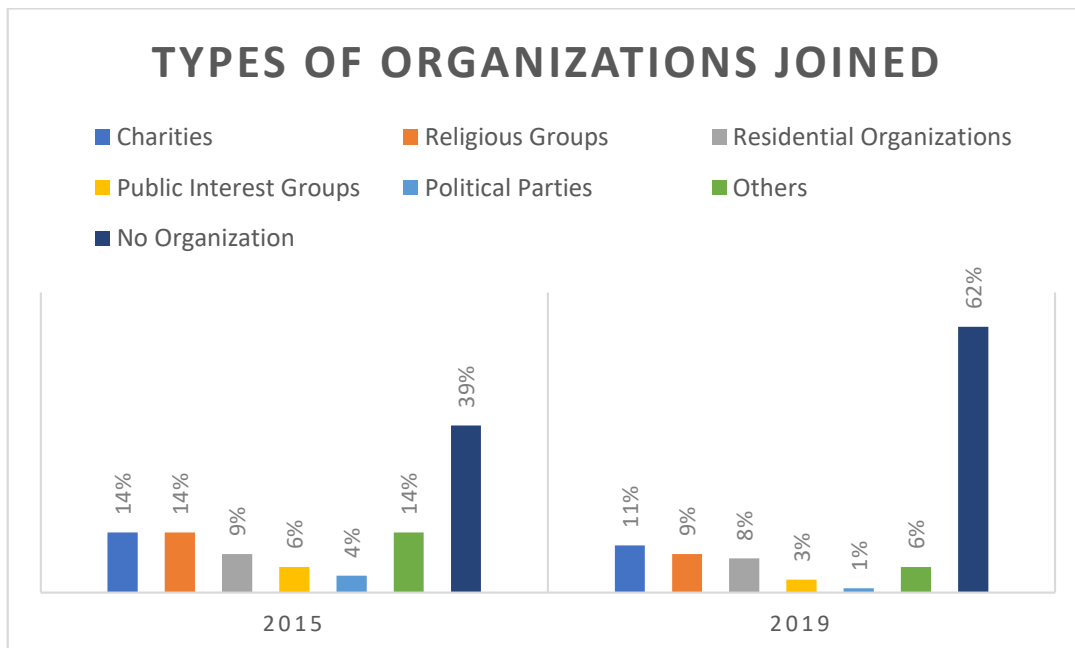
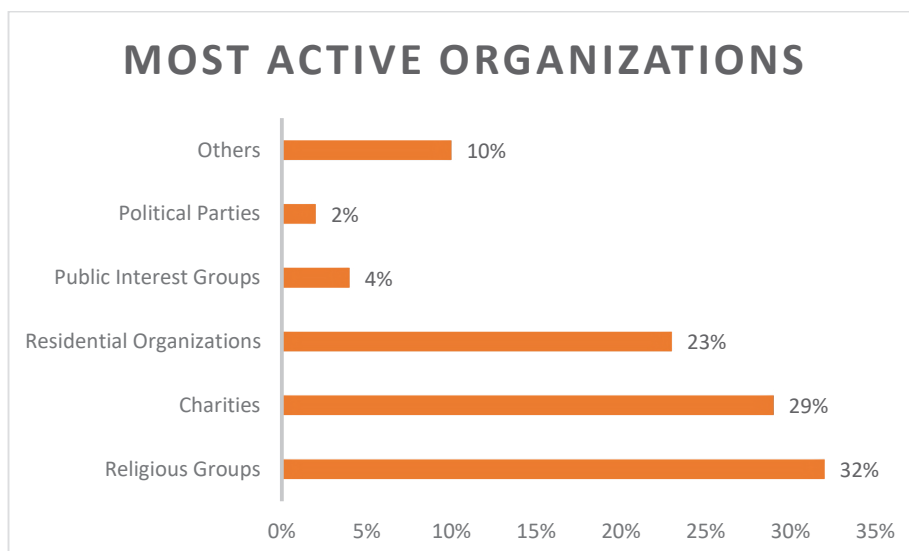


Figure 14a shows that there are largely no major differences in the priority of which type of organizations citizens joined. Charities and religious organizations are the most important, confirming the attention scholars have given to the importance of earning merit

in Myanmar society and the central role that networks play for reciprocity and social welfare at the local level.¹⁷ In 2015 we highlighted rural-urban differences in the type of organizations Myanmar citizens joined. This time round the urban-rural divide is not as significant. Instead, the only notable differences were along religious and ethnic lines. Non-Buddhists were almost twice as likely to join a religious organization, 16% compared to 8% Buddhists. Bamar were in contrast twice as likely to join a charity (12%) while non-Bamar ethnic communities less so (6%).

Among joiners, we asked which of the organizations they were most active in. The answers detailed in Figure 14b show that citizens are most active in religious groups (32%), charities (29%) and residential and community organizations (29%). This conforms to the earlier pattern and reinforces the central role of merit-making in Myanmar society. This close connection to religious groups, charities and local engagement is reinforced by other questions in the survey, on religion and local participation, but show that the profile of social capital in Myanmar is strongly tied to faith and community.

Figure 14b Most Active Organizations Joined by Type, 2019

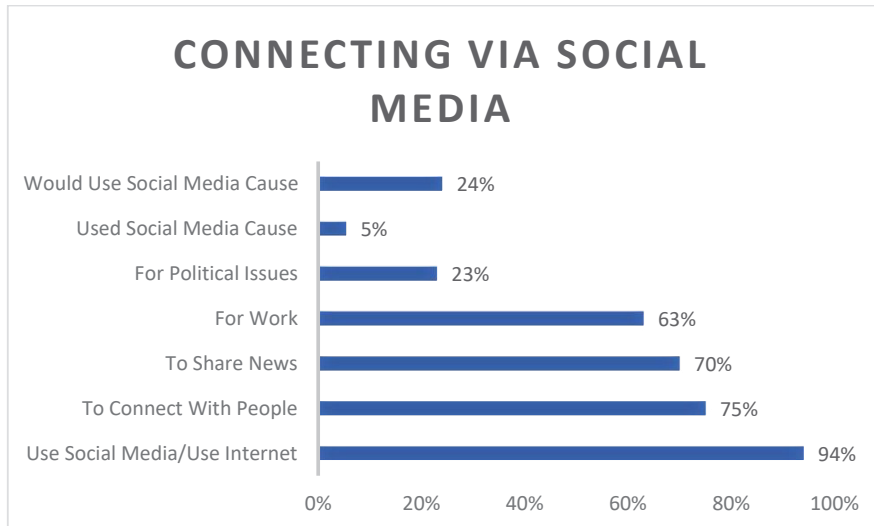


This helps us interpret how social capital is concentrated. Yet, the pattern of an overall decline in joining organizations remains puzzling. An explanation of why Myanmar citizens record low levels of joining organizations is that they could be joining organizations online. Given the rapid change in access to the Internet and use of social media, the move may be away from organizations toward more informal online networks, detailed below in Figure 15. The findings do show that a large share of Myanmar citizens (94%) use social media, including Facebook, Line and WhatsApp. Most use this to connect with others (75%), share

17 See, for example, Hsu, Mu-Lung. (2019) 'Making Merit, Making Civil Society: Free Funeral Service Societies and Merit-Making in Contemporary Myanmar.' *Journal of Burma Studies* 23, no. 1: 1-36; Gerard McCarthy, (2016) 'Buddhist welfare and the limits of big "P" politics in provincial Myanmar.' Nick Cheesman and Nicholas Farrelly (eds.) *Conflict in Myanmar: War, Politics, Religion*, ISEAS, pp. 313-32; Michael Griffiths, (2019) 'Networks of Reciprocity: Precarity and Community Social Organisations in Rural Myanmar.' *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 49, no. 4: 602-625 and Gerard McCarthy, 'Democratic Deservingness and Self-Reliance in Contemporary Myanmar.' *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 34, no. 2 (2019): 327-365.

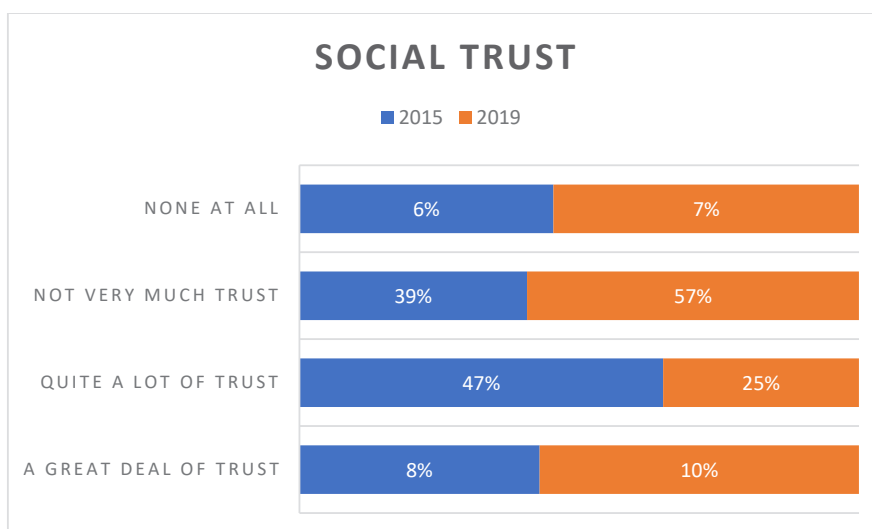
news (70%) or for their work (63%), with less than a quarter (23%) opting to use social media for understanding of engaging in politics. When asked, an even lower share say they have used social media for a political cause (5%), although more (23%) were open to this idea. The use of social media, while high, does not necessarily complement the social ties lost through joining organizations, particularly given the low number of citizens using social media for causes.

Figure 15 Connecting Via Social Media, 2019



The decline of social capital could in part be tied to changes in social trust, developed below. There is a contraction in the level of recorded social trust, as Figure 16 shows, with more citizens (64% in 2019 compared to 45% in 2015) noting that they have either 'not very much trust' or 'none at all'. The drop in social trust is significant and indicates that as Myanmar has opened up politically and economically, it has not coincided with stronger social relationships. In fact, this is also another dimension of the decline of social capital in Myanmar.

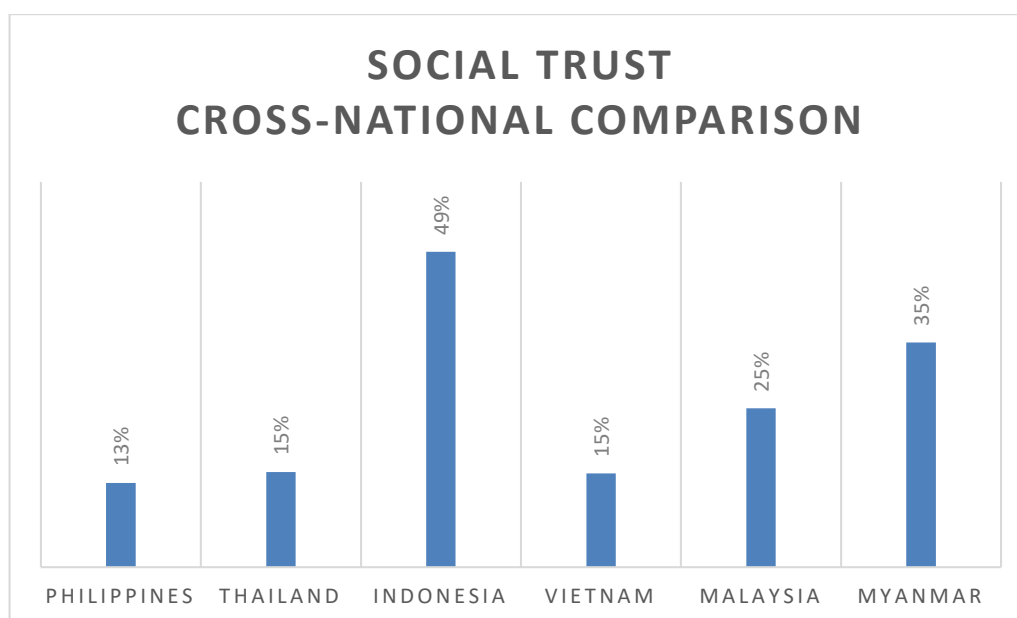
Figure 16 Social Trust, 2015 vs 2019



Among Myanmar citizens, there were no major generational differences in the level of social trust, but wealthier citizens were less trusting than those with lower incomes, urbanites less trusting than those in the rural areas and Bamar citizens less trusting compared to non-Bamar communities. The lack of social trust can both explain why citizens are not joining organizations, and at the same time be a product of not joining organizations. This downward trend, especially in a relatively short period of time, is worrying for building the social foundations necessary to strengthen democracy and to reduce conflict.

When compared across the region, however, Myanmar's level of social trust is the second highest of the Southeast Asian countries with available Wave 5 data. Indonesia, which has the highest level of joining organizations, has higher levels of social trust (49%) compared to Myanmar (35%) – as shown in Figure 17. Thailand (15%), Vietnam (15%) and the Philippines (13%) have considerably lower social trust.

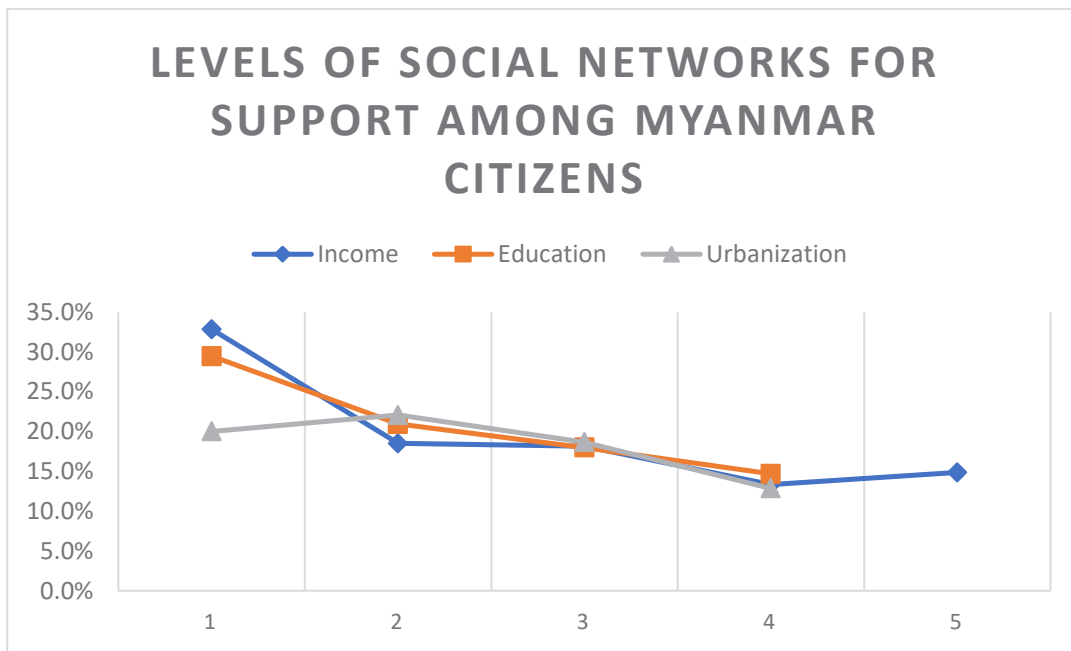
Figure 17 Social Trust Cross-National Comparison, ABS Wave 5



As another measure of social capital, the ABS asked Myanmar citizens whether they had a support network when they might need help managing problems. A fifth of citizens (20%) said they did not have anyone they could turn to, underscoring the vulnerability of many citizens. It is important to understand that vulnerability in Myanmar is not just economic, but social as well.

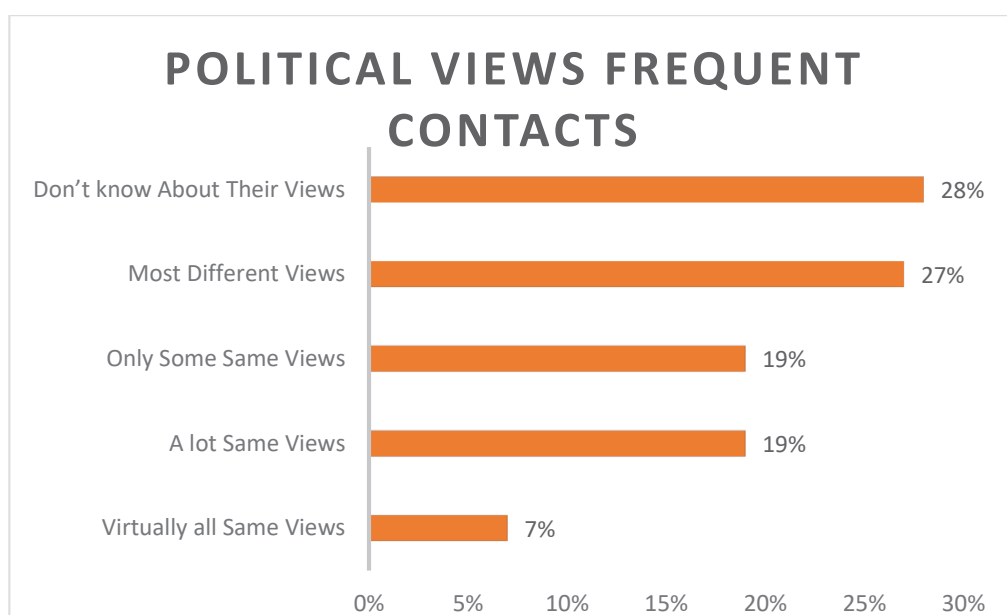
As expected, three social cleavages are important in understanding the distribution of social vulnerability across Myanmar – income and education levels as well as urbanization. Figure 18 shows that lower income and education levels translate into higher levels of social vulnerability as there are fewer supporting social networks, with a third (33% and 30% respectively) of those reporting among the lowest income and education levels having no one they can turn to when they need help. Similarly, Myanmar citizens in rural areas have fewer social networks for support than in urban areas, with one fifth (20%) and over one fifth (22%) in small towns having no social networks for support.

Figure 18 Social Networks for Support Variation, 2019



The ABS also asked citizens about their relationships with others, specifically involving political differences among their frequent contacts. This is a measure of tolerance, but also how people engage with each other. The responses detailed in Figure 19 show that a bit more than a quarter (28%) do not know about the views of others (indicating that they do not speak about politics), while another quarter (26%) have frequent contacts with ‘a lot’ or ‘virtually all’ the same views. More than half of Myanmar society does not engage with political differences in daily life.

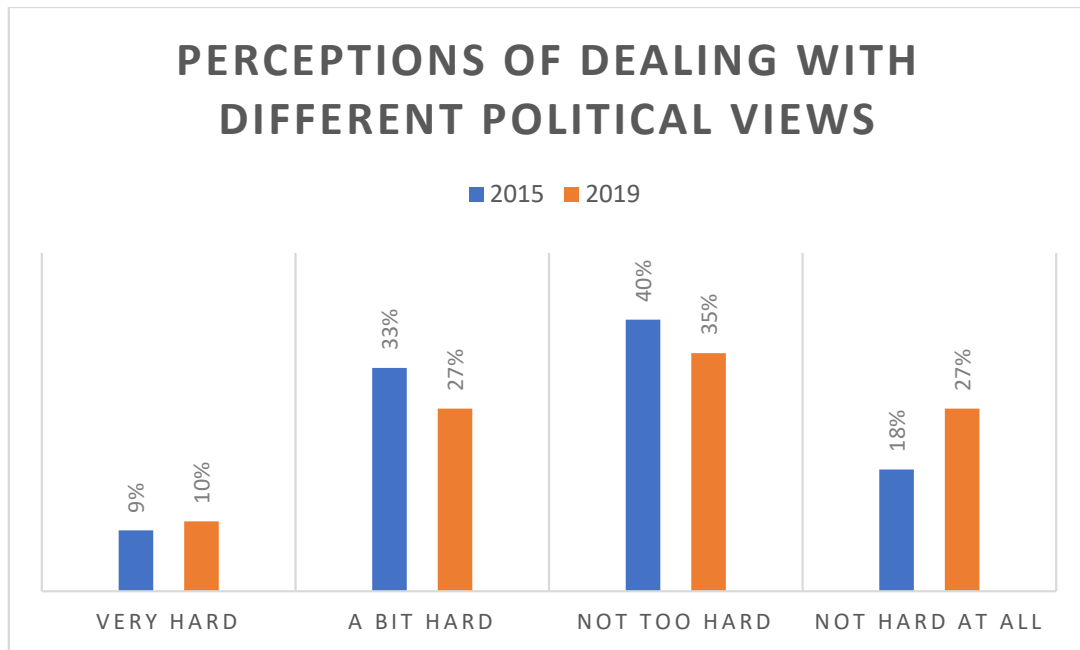
Figure 19 Political Views Frequent Contacts, 2019



The remaining diversity in political views is to be expected. What is interesting is that the survey found only a modest shift among citizens in their being able to deal with different

views, (from 42% to 37% finding it hard to deal with differences) over the period of the two waves of the ABS. As shown in Figure 20, a majority of citizens recorded no difficulty, with the largest gains in openness coinciding with 'no difficulty at all' in expressing views (from 18% to 27%). This indicates that while most citizens (62%) embraced political diversity, over a third continued to wrestle with the more open environment and reconciling the difficult history of the authoritarian past with current conditions.

Figure 20 Perceptions of Dealing with Political Diversity, 2015 vs 2019



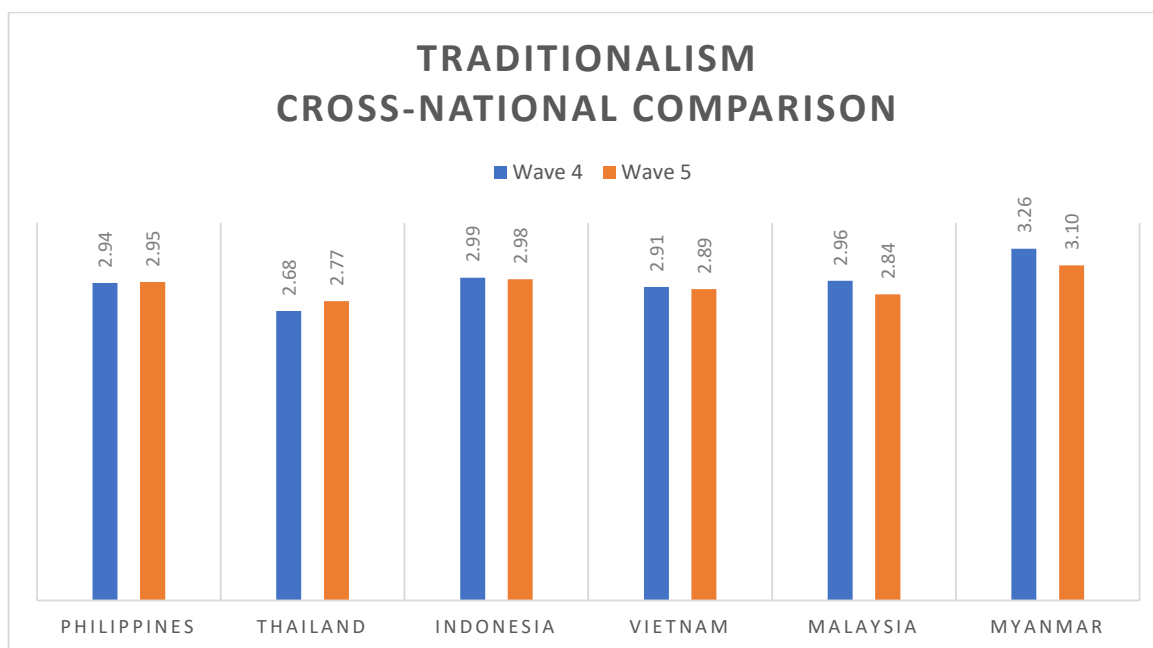
The changes in social ties are overall quite significant in that the decline in joining organizations, erosion in social trust, sizable shares without social support networks and difficulty in engaging with others of different political views point to social conditions that are challenging for strengthening democracy.

Political Culture and Values

One of the most important findings of the 2015 ABS report was the high persistence of traditional values in Myanmar.¹⁸ The 2019 report stands out in illustrating a qualitative change of values taking place in society. It reveals that an important dimension of the changes taking place in Myanmar in recent years has been the adoption of more ‘modern’ or ‘Western’ values – but this change is uneven across issues and Myanmar society as a whole.

As a measure of values, we created a composite ‘traditionalism’ index that captures different dimensions of traditional values – the role of the individual versus the collective and nation, relationships within the family and views of conflict and fate.¹⁹ The cross-national findings and comparisons over the last two waves are detailed below in Figure 21. The index is based on a scale from 1-4, with higher scores reflecting higher adoption of traditional values.

Figure 21 Traditionalism Index Cross-National Comparison, ABS Wave 4 vs. Wave 5



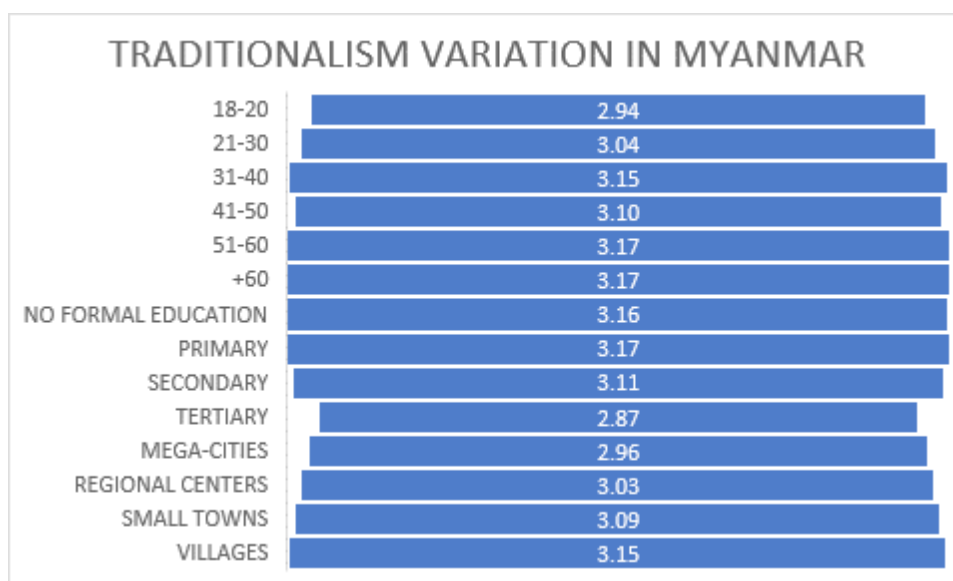
18 For a discussion of these values, see Bridget Welsh, Kai-Ping Huang and Yun-han Chu, (2016), ‘Burma Votes for Change: Clashing Attitudes Toward Democracy’. *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 2 (April), pp. 132-140

19 The traditionalism battery includes questions 58-69 in the questionnaire.

With the highest score, Myanmar (at 3.1) continues to stand out as the country with the most traditional values in the region, higher than Indonesia and the Philippines which follow next. There is consistency across most of the Southeast Asian countries with regard to traditional values over time, with the exception of Malaysia and Myanmar – both of which have opened up politically in recent years and seen declines in traditionalism. The drop is the largest in Myanmar, from 3.26 to 3.1, pointing to the most change in values in recent years.

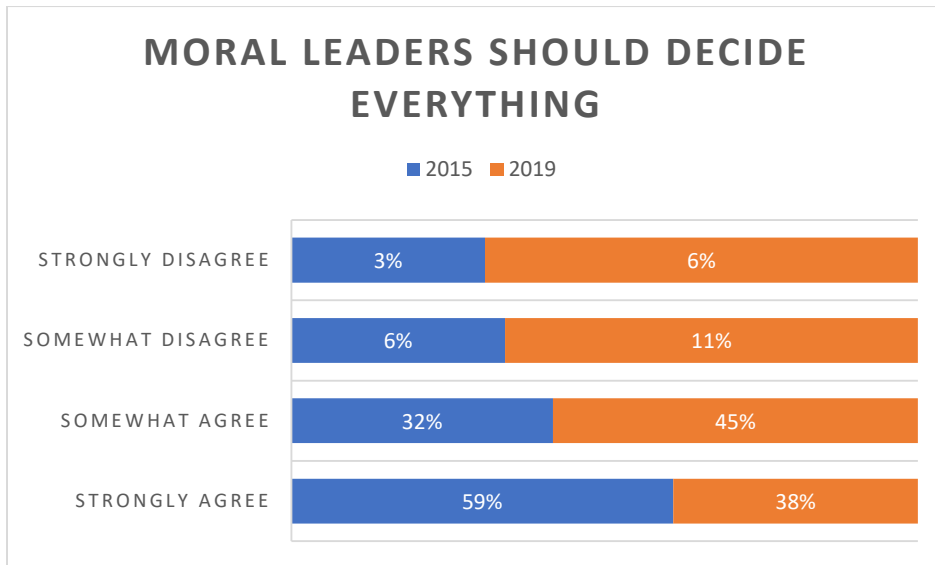
The most important social cleavages that differentiate traditional values in Myanmar society are generation, education and the urban-rural divide. As Figure 22 shows, younger citizens are less traditional than older ones, more educated citizens are less traditional than less educated citizens and urban citizens less traditional than rural citizens. These divides are common elsewhere. The education divide is the widest of the three, but not by much. Given the intensity of the changes the country has experienced in the last four years, these differences and the overall drop in traditionalism is not unexpected. The decline of traditionalism confirms that rapid modernization has shaped the society – Myanmar's liberalization has led to a liberalization in values as well.

Figure 22 Traditionalism Index Variation in Myanmar, 2019



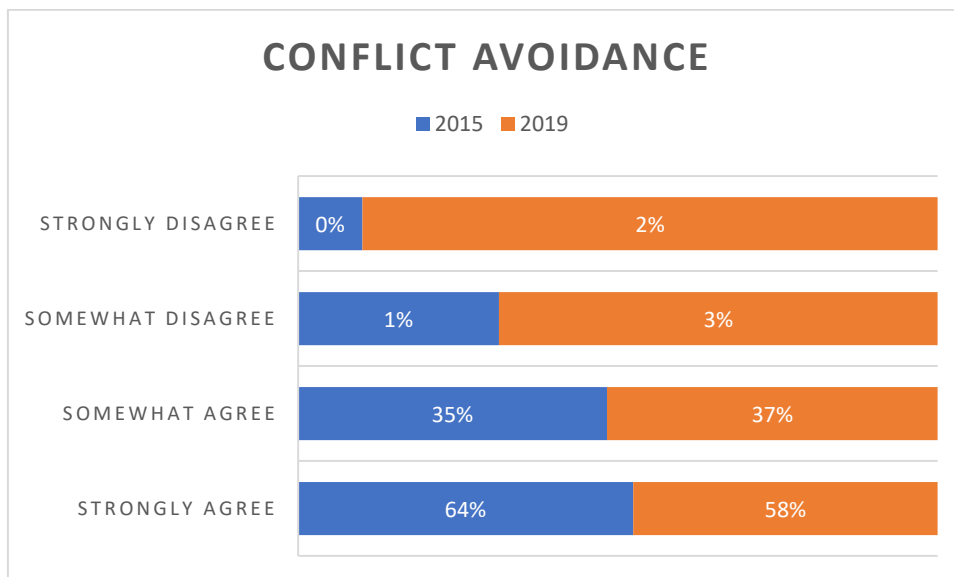
It is useful to look more specifically at the responses to certain questions to shed light on which of the traditional political values are (and are not) changing. Citizens were asked whether they believe moral leaders should be able to decide everything, shown in Figure 23. This is a proxy of support for feudalism. The ABS found less support for this in 2019 compared to 2015, with the drop most precipitous in those that 'strongly agree' (from 59% to 38%). Despite the change over time, the overwhelming majority (83%) were still willing to turn over decisions to moral leaders.

Figure 23 Moral Leaders Decide Everything, 2015 vs 2019



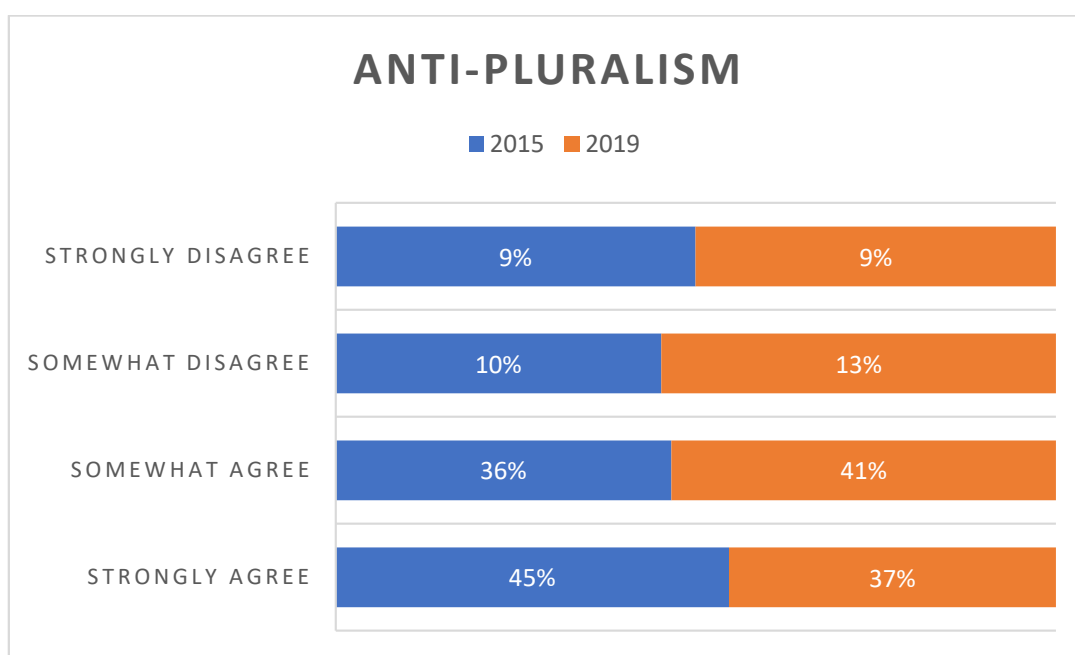
A similar overwhelming majority of citizens (95%) agree with the statement: ‘Even if there is some disagreement with others, one should avoid conflict.’ There was very little change in views involving avoidance of conflict over time, as shown in Figure 24.

Figure 24 Conflict Avoidance, 2015 vs 2019



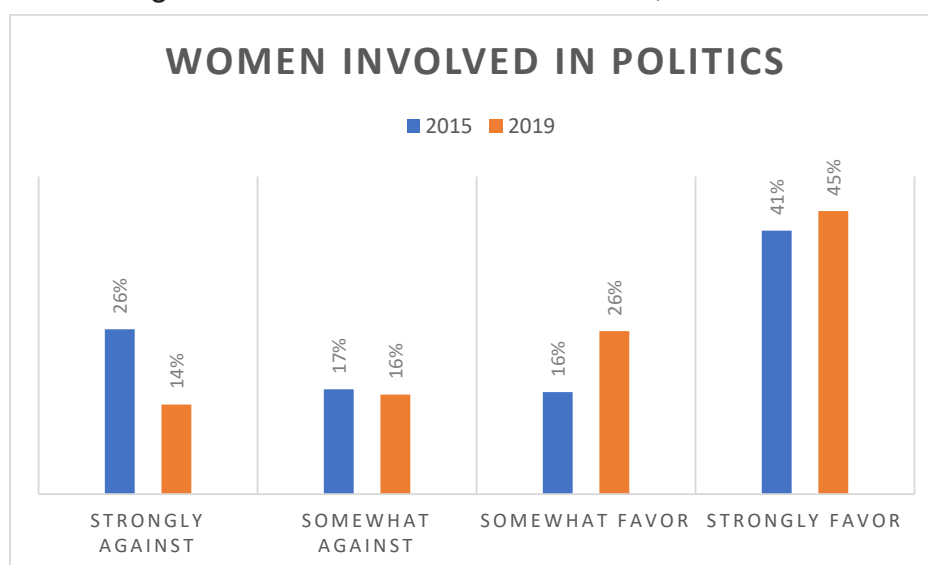
We asked citizens of their views toward pluralism, measured by views of the statement ‘If society has too many ways of thinking, society will be chaotic.’ Here too, as shown in Figure 25, there is a shift in the intensity of views, as more citizens expressed ‘somewhat agree’ as opposed to ‘strongly agree,’ but the overwhelming majority continued to hold anti-pluralist views (78% in 2019 compared to 81% in 2015.)

Figure 25 Anti-Pluralism, 2015 vs 2019



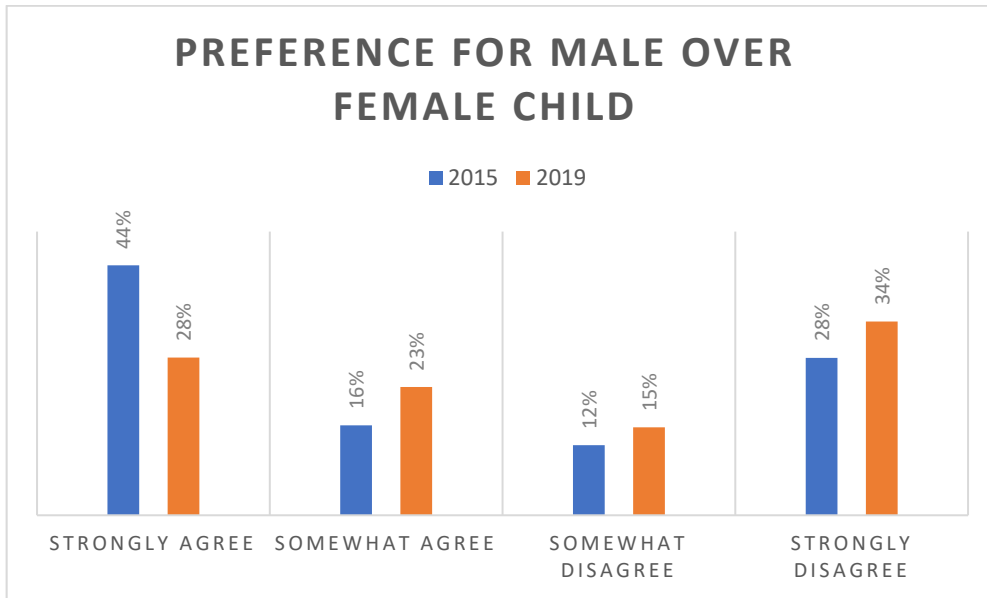
Where the survey found a marked difference in traditional values was toward women in politics, as more citizens (71%) were willing to accept female involvement in politics in 2019 compared to 2015 (57%), as shown in Figure 26. Given the high popularity of the country's State Counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi in power since 2016, this change in outlook, in part, reflects an appreciation of her leadership and her popularity. The changes also point to the importance of civil society organizations working to promote gender equality. Myanmar continues to have a low overall share of female representation, with 11% women in parliament, far below the regional and global average.²⁰ The ABS findings show that Myanmar society favors greater female involvement in politics.

Figure 26 Women Involved in Politics, 2015 vs 2019



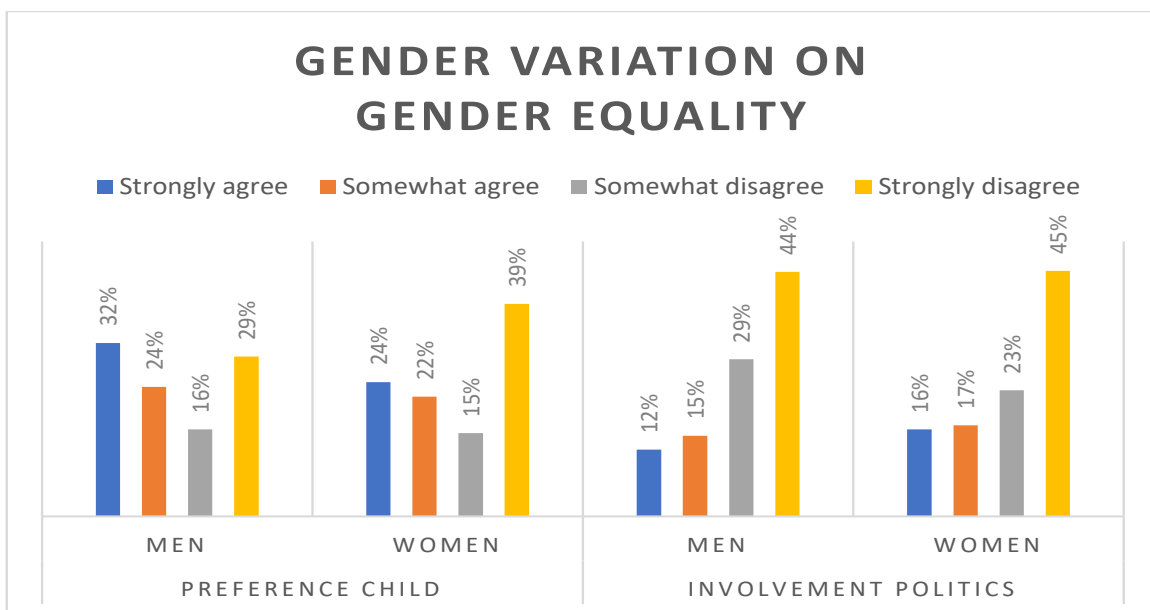
Views on gender equality in society have changed too, as more citizens (9%) disagree with a male preference for a child. As shown in Figure 27, there was a sharp (16%) drop in those who ‘strongly agree’ with preferring a boy (from 44% in 2015 to 28%). This change shows that in this area at least, there is the adoption of more inclusive values.

Figure 27 Preference for Male over Female Child, 2015 vs 2019



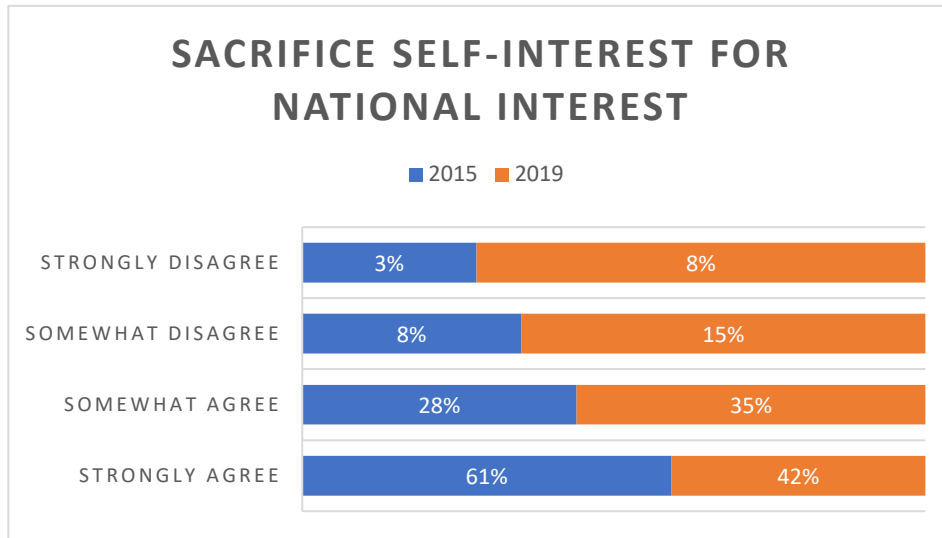
The ABS found that the views on gender political equality do not differ by gender, with essentially the same share of men and women adopting similar views. In fact, as shown in Figure 28, slightly more women were ‘strongly’ opposed to women’s involvement in politics compared to men (16% to 12%). Where there was more gender difference was in child preference, with more women rejecting a male preference in a child (11%).

Figure 28 Gender Variation on Gender Equality, 2019



The area where there is the greatest shift in traditional views is in how citizens see themselves as individuals. Figure 29 shows that there is a notable drop in those willing to sacrifice self-interest for the nation (11%), with marked change in intensity of views as well, as more citizens were less willing to ‘strongly agree’ to sacrificing self-interest for the nation (19%). Nevertheless, a large majority (77%) are willing to sacrifice themselves for the nation, reinforcing the overall finding that while there has been a shift away from traditional values, these views remain deeply ingrained in Myanmar society.

Figure 29 Sacrifice Self-Interest for National Interest, 2015 vs 2019



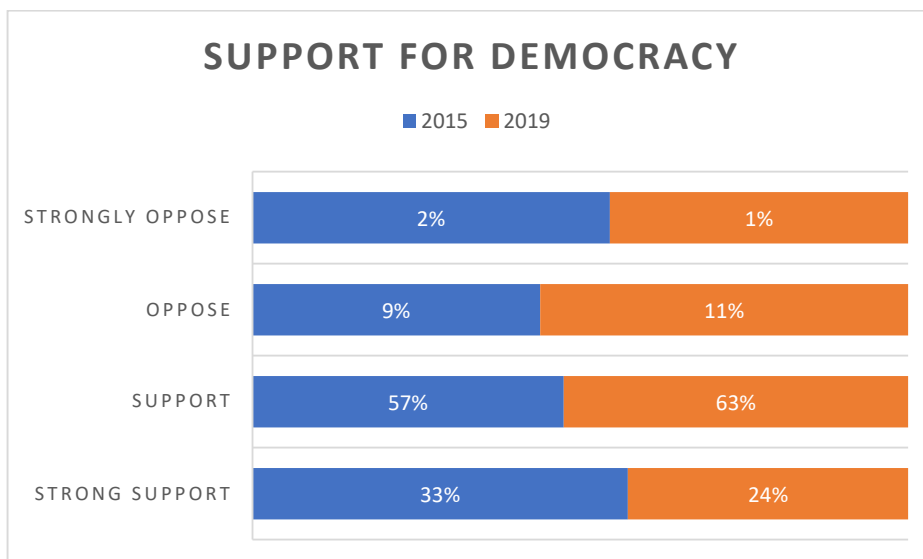
Despite the intensive changes taking place in Myanmar, the majority of its citizens continue to report traditional views, the highest in Southeast Asia. Traditional values are more common in the rural areas and among older citizens and the less educated. Over the last four years, there have been modest changes in these views in areas such as gender inclusion and individualism, but overall Myanmar citizens hold conservative outlooks that are at odds with building a more inclusive robust democratic society.

Support for Democracy

The core of the ABS survey examines issues associated with democracy. Myanmar's transition to more democratic rule raises the question of whether there continues to be strong support for more democratic practices. The earlier section shows the persistence of traditional values. A closer look at how Myanmar citizens see democracy shows that while overall support for democracy broadly remains high, there are indicators that point to underlying weak support for specific democratic values and practices.

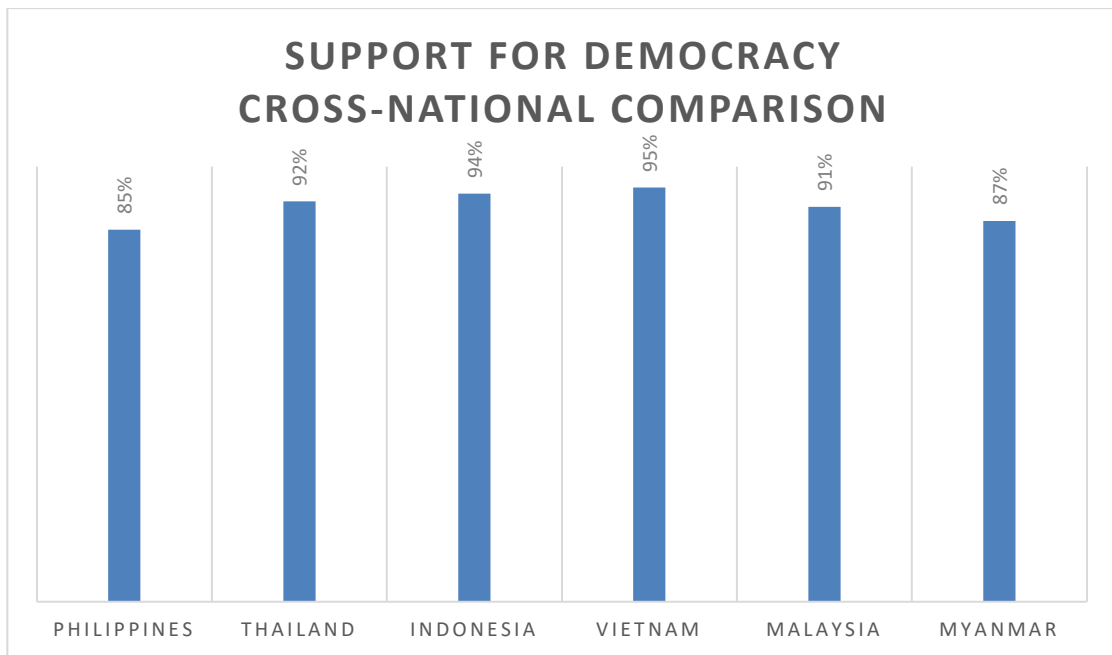
We begin below by highlighting changes over time in the support for democracy, as shown in Figure 30. The ABS asked citizens whether they think that democracy is the best system and finds no real change in the share of those who support democracy from 2015. A large majority support democracy (87% compared to 90%). The main shift is in the intensity of support for democracy, as fewer citizens 'strongly' support democracy compared to the past (from 33% to 24%), opting instead for 'support'.

Figure 30 Support for Democracy, 2015 vs 2019



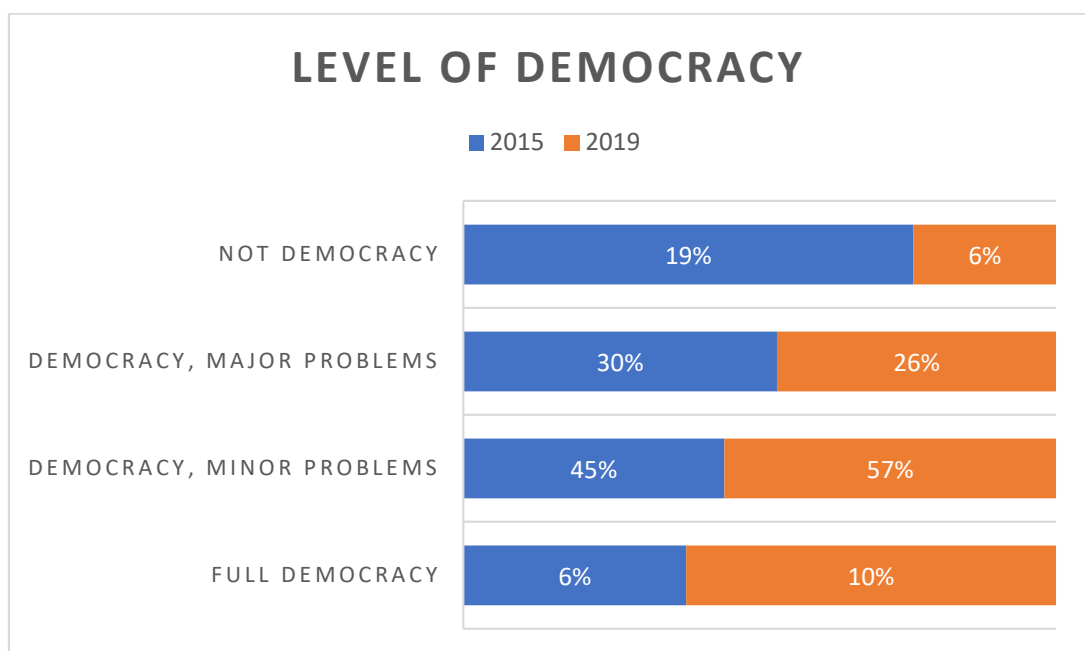
The cross-national results with regard to support for democracy are interesting, as shown in Figure 31. Myanmar joins the Philippines as the country recording the lowest support for democracy, but the variation is not considerable and the overall support for democracy remains high.

Figure 31 Support for Democracy Cross National Comparison, ABS Wave 5



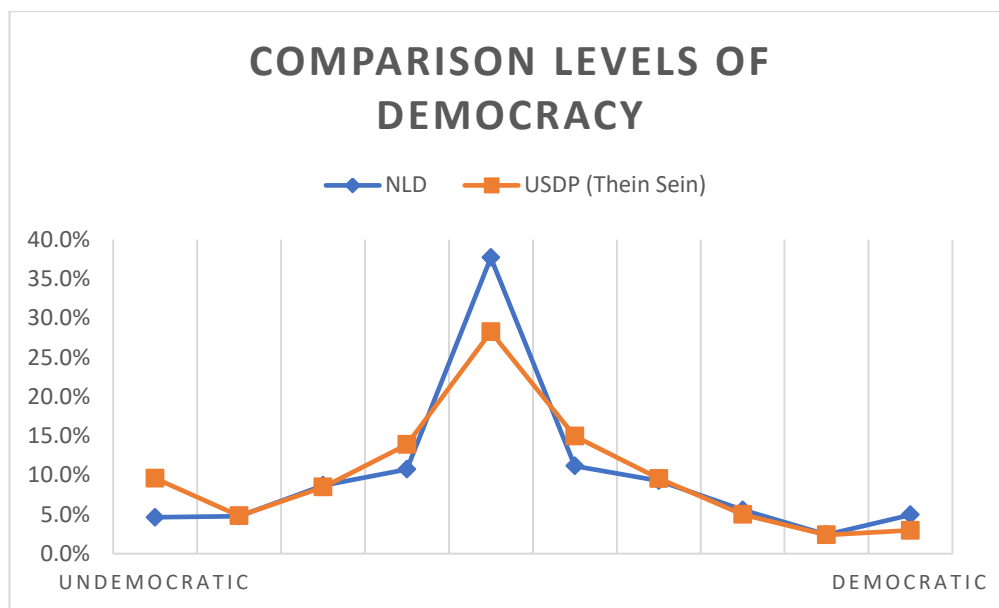
Myanmar citizens recognize the political change the country has undergone since 2015, with considerably more citizens (94%) believing the country is a democracy. Figure 32 shows that most see the country as a ‘democracy with minor problems’ (37%), followed by a quarter of the population (26%) seeing Myanmar as a ‘democracy with major problems.’ This move towards recognizing the greater democratic space reflects the ongoing political transition in the country. The divide between those who see ‘minor’ versus ‘major’ problems points to different understandings and aspirations about democracy among Myanmar citizens.

Figure 32 Assessed Level of Democracy, 2015 vs 2019



The ABS finds a similar acknowledgement of change when citizens were asked to compare the level of democracy of the current NLD government with that of the government four years ago, then led by the USDP's Thein Sein, the former president. Figure 33 shows the distribution of views, with the greatest share of citizens believing Myanmar's level of democracy is in the center. What is striking about this finding is the similarity of the distribution of views across time, suggesting that despite the political transition through the 2015 election, some citizens do not see significant changes in the level of democracy.

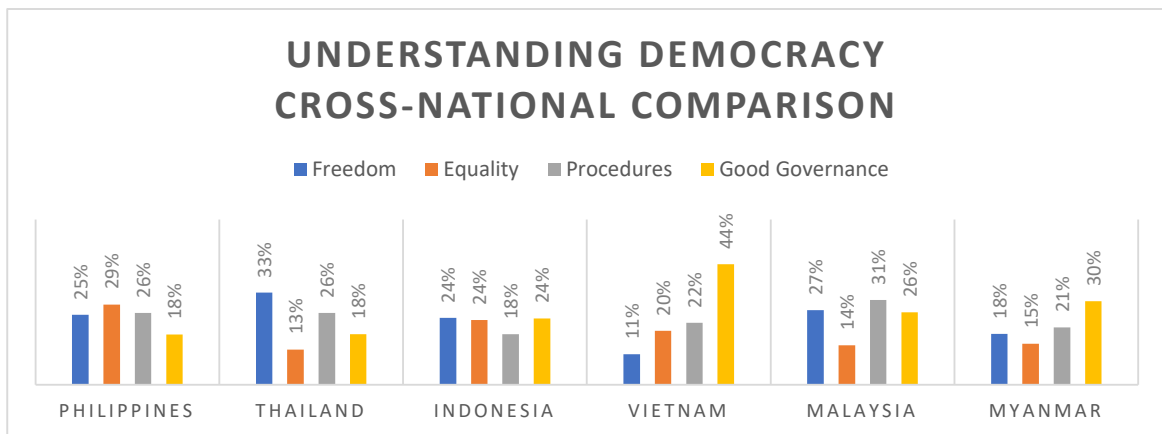
Figure 33 Comparison of Levels of Democracy NLD vs. USDP (Thein Sein) Governments, 2019



While this can be explained in part by different and changing aspirations for democracy, this can also be the product of different understandings of democracy. Figure 34 details the cross-national different understandings of democracy, two dimensions associated with liberal conceptions of democracy 'freedom' and 'procedures' notably free and fair elections and two dimensions tied to a more substantive understanding of democracy, 'equality' and 'good governance'.²¹ As with other countries in the region, citizens' understandings are divided. Of those who answered these questions, more than half of Myanmar citizens (45% compared to 39%) associate democracy with substantive outcomes compared to procedures or freedoms.

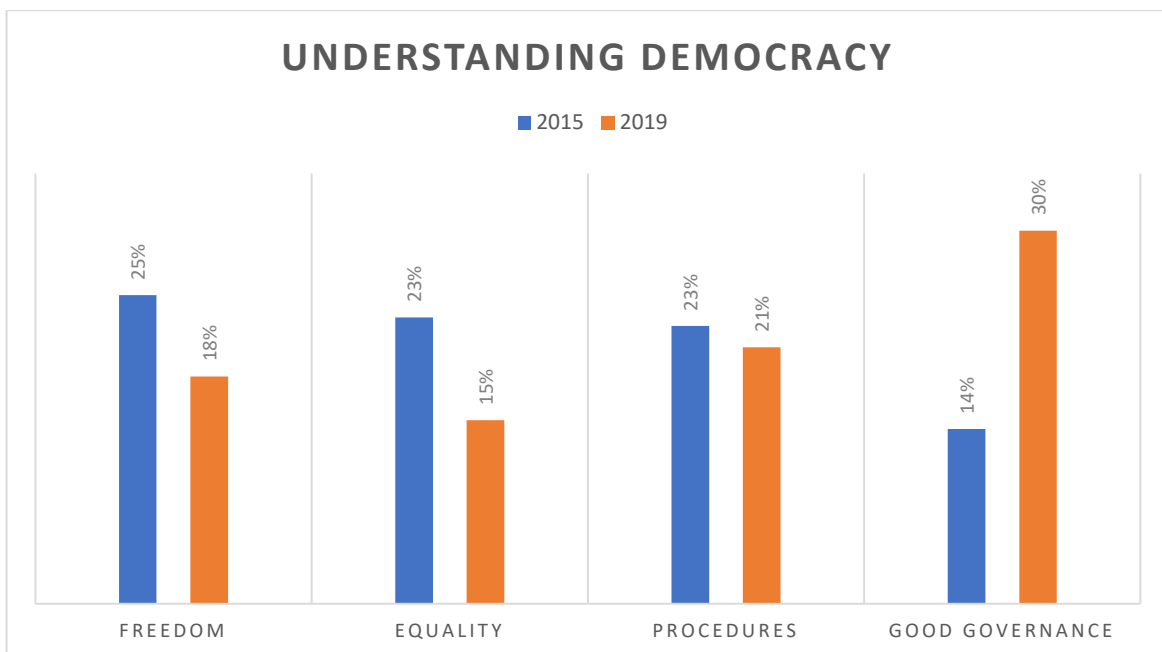
21 This framework is the one we adopt for the region as a whole. For a more in-depth discussion of understandings of democracy in Myanmar, see: Tamas Wells, 'Narrative and elucidating the concept of democracy: the case of Myanmar's activists and democratic leaders.' *Democratization* 26, no. 2 (2019): 190-207.

Figure 34 Understandings of Democracy Cross-National Comparison, ABS Wave 5



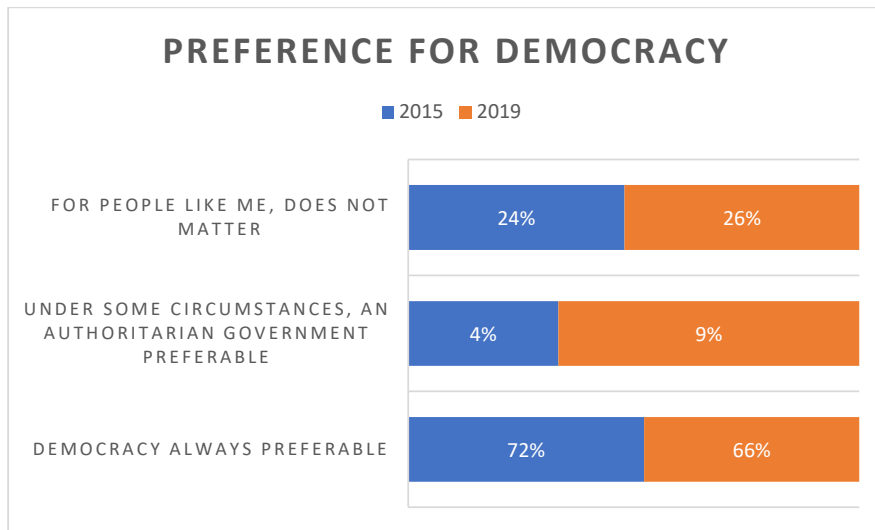
Over the two waves, Myanmar citizens have prioritized different dimensions in their understanding of democracy. There has been a move away from a focus on freedom (from 25% to 18%) to a greater emphasis on good governance (from 14% to 30%), as shown in Figure 35. This shows that the political transition has led to new priorities, with more attention to the deliverables of democracy.

Figure 35 Understandings of Democracy, 2015 vs 2019



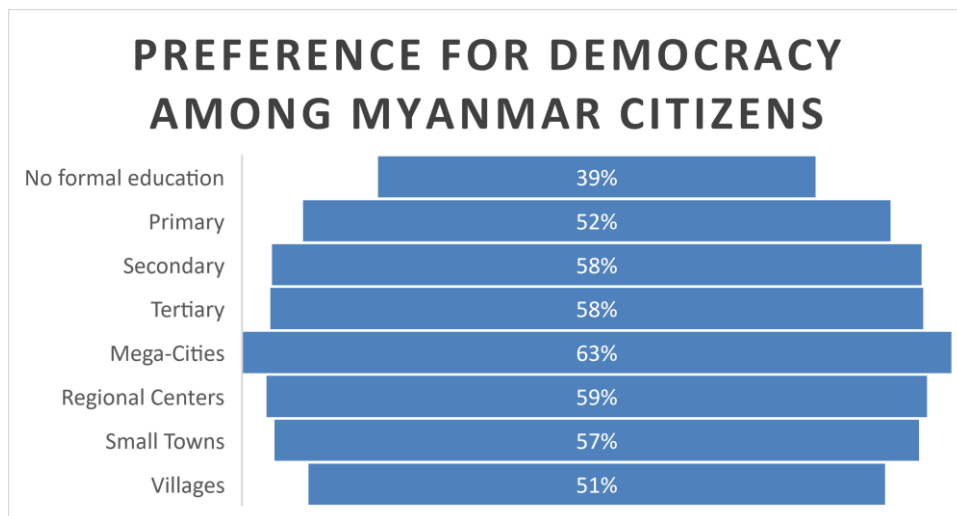
While the meaning of democracy may have changed for many citizens, a majority continue to prefer democracy (66%) over other alternatives. This is a decline (of 8%) compared to 2015, with a small share of citizens (9%) now favoring an authoritarian alternative. A quarter (26%) continue to believe that the type of political system does not matter to them, as shown in Figure 36.

Figure 36 Preference for Democracy, 2015 vs 2019



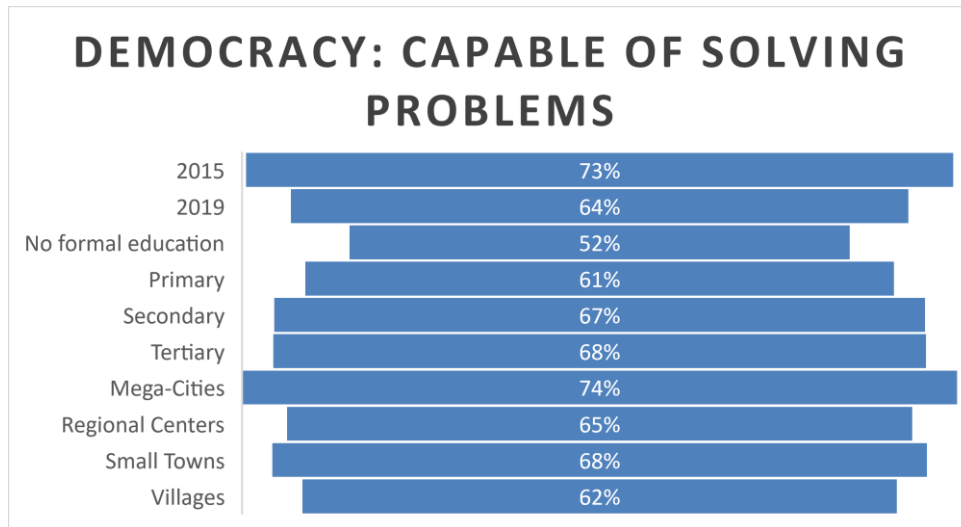
The preference for democracy is highest among the more educated and those living in the capital, as shown in Figure 37.

Figure 37 Variation in Preference for Democracy, 2019



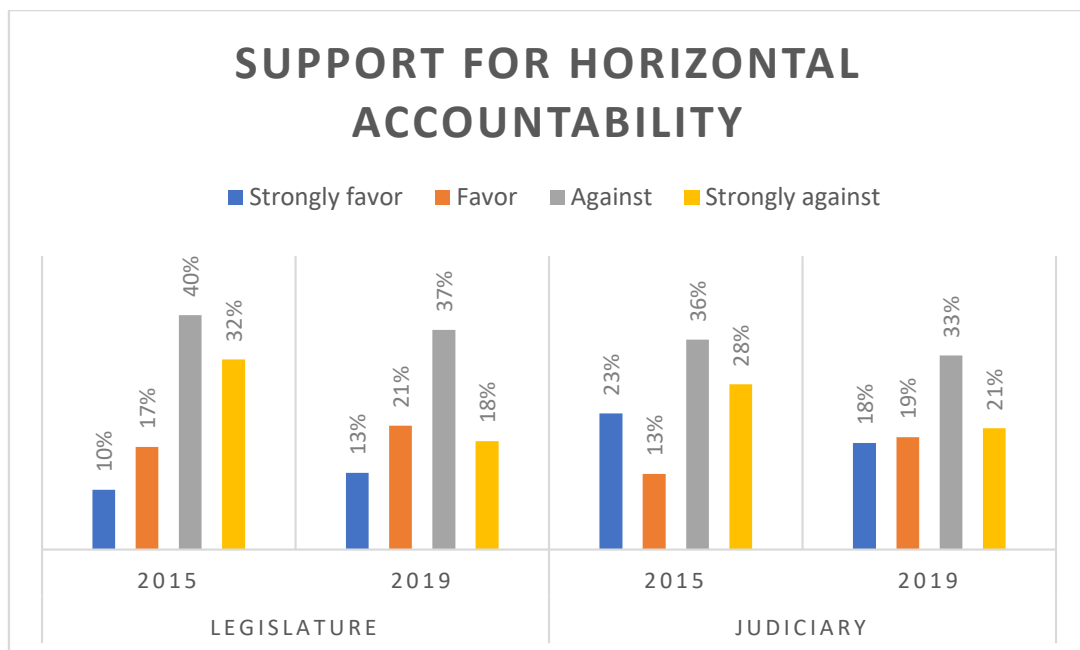
These differences are also evident in the views on whether democracy is capable of solving the problems facing Myanmar. While a majority (64%) continue to have faith in democracy, this is less than in 2015 (74%). The higher confidence in democracy continues to reside in the mega-cities of Yangon and Mandalay and among those more educated, as shown in Figure 38.

Figure 38 Variation in Democracy Capable Solving Problems, 2019



A closer look at specific views of how democracy should work shows considerably less support. Myanmar citizens were asked about their support for horizontal accountability, whether the legislature or judiciary should check the powers of the executive. Only slightly over a third (34% for legislature and 38% for judiciary) favored horizontal accountability, as shown in Figure 39. There was however a notable increase in support for a more powerful legislature, with a drop in those who ‘strongly opposed’ a powerful legislature (from 32% in 2015 to 18% in 2019). As will be shown later in the report, this corresponds to growing appreciation for the role of the parliament. The overall finding is low support for a system of checks and balances.

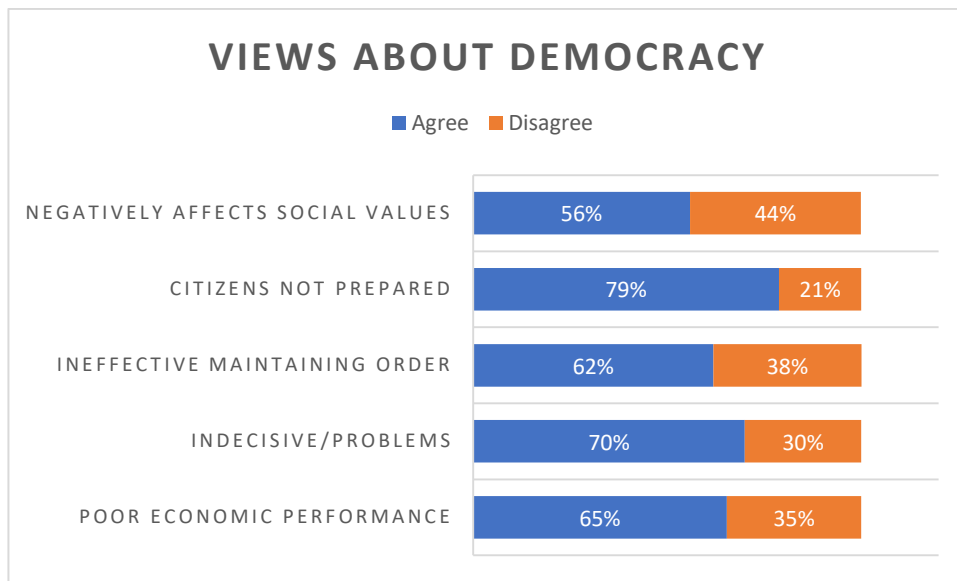
Figure 39 Support for Horizontal Accountability, 2015 vs. 2019



The weak underlying support for a well-functioning democracy stands out when Myanmar citizens were asked about their views about democracy’s relationship with society and

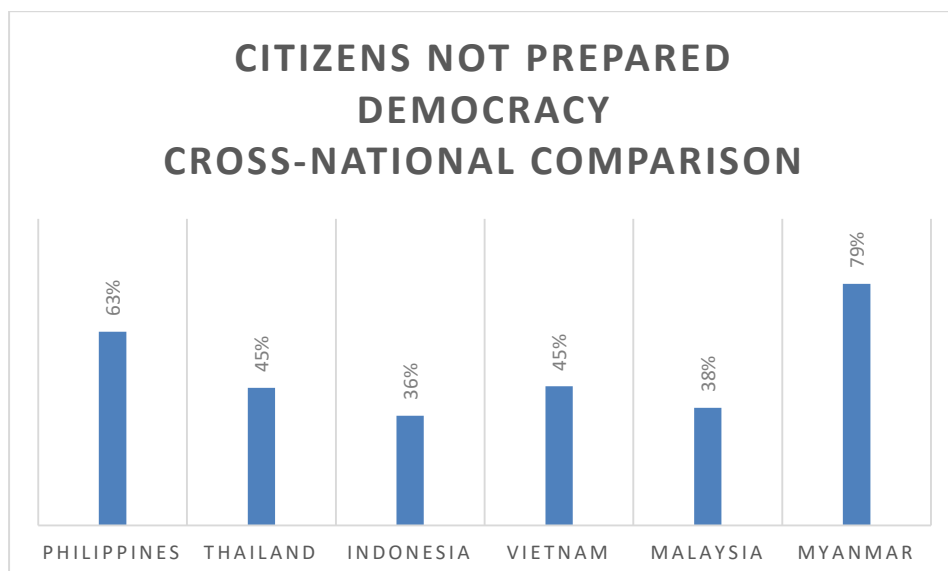
perceived outcomes of democracy. Across a range of issues, the majority held negative views about how democracy is (or is not) working in Myanmar. Figure 40 shows that most felt citizens were not prepared for democracy (79%), that democracy creates indecision/problems (70%) and was ineffective in promoting strong economic performance (65%) and maintaining order (62%). The most positive response involved the impact of democracy on social values, although, here too, a majority (56%) held that the impact was negative. This shows minimally conflicting attitudes toward democracy, and shallow underlying sentiment about democracy in Myanmar society.

Figure 40 Views about Democracy, 2019



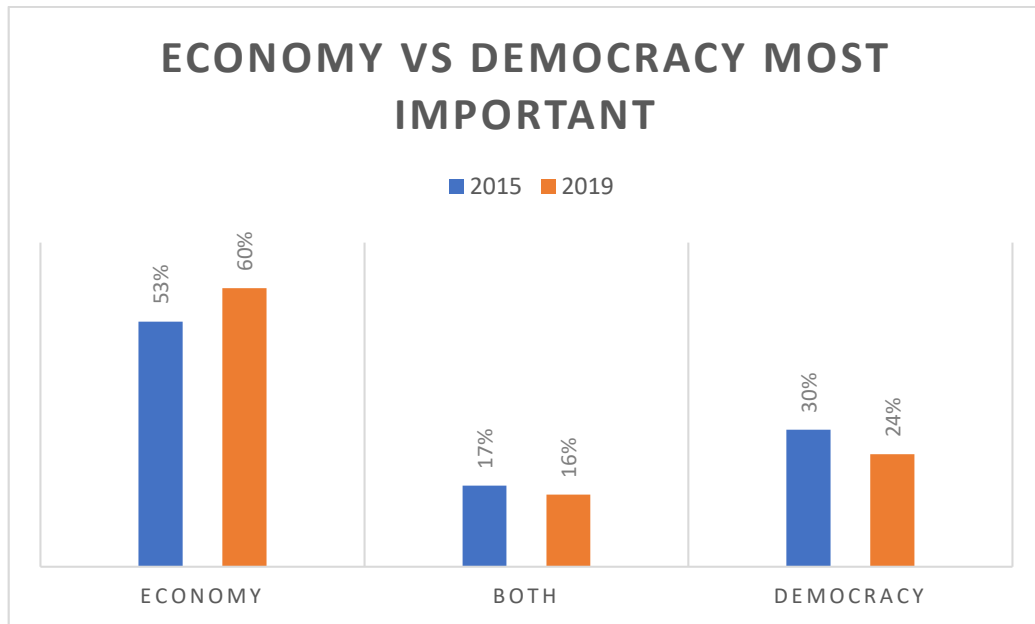
The cross-national comparison, detailed in Figure 41, shows that Myanmar has the highest share of respondents who believe their society is not ready for democracy.

Figure 41 Citizens Not Prepared for Democracy Cross-National Comparison, ABS Wave 5



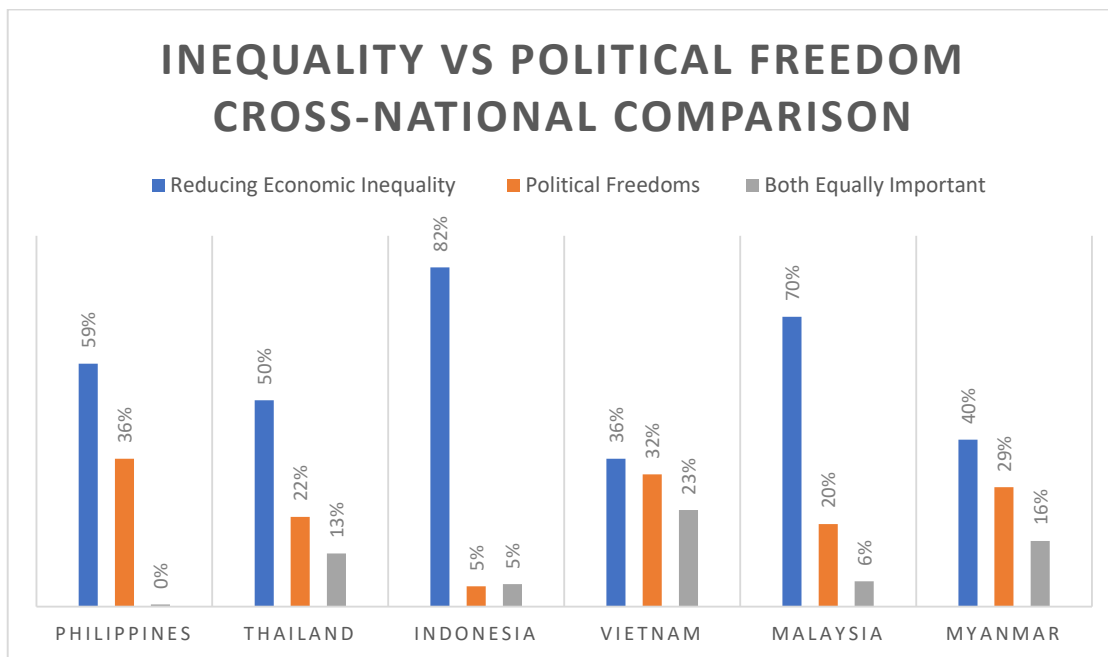
To further examine the strength of support for democracy, the ABS presented respondents with different alternatives. When pressed to choose between democracy or the economy, the majority (60%) opted for the latter, a share higher than in 2015 (53%). Figure 42 shows that now only a quarter of citizens (24%) prioritize democracy over the economy – reinforcing the broader points of weak social support for democracy and attention to the outcomes of democracy and economic performance.

Figure 42 Economy vs. Democracy. 2015 vs 2019



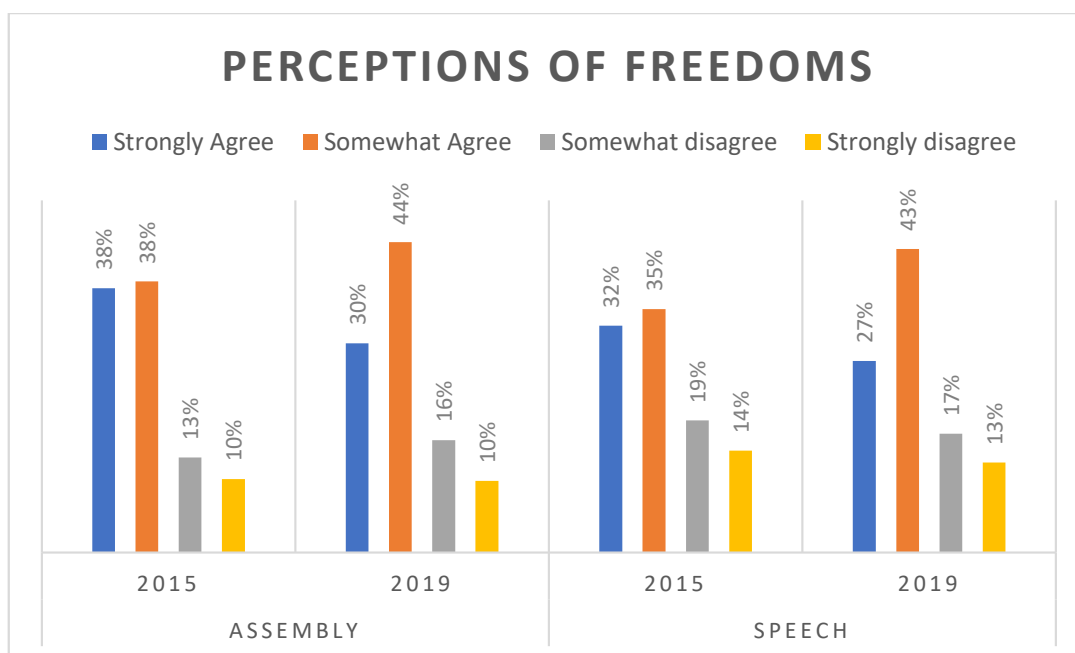
Given the challenges facing the economy, the focus on the economy is understandable. Myanmar citizens make different choices when asked to choose between prioritizing addressing inequality over political freedoms or vice versa. The results, detailed in Figure 43, show more diversity, with a plurality (40%) favoring attention to inequality over guaranteeing political freedoms (29%). This split in views among Myanmar citizens compares sharply with other countries in the region, as majorities in all countries but Vietnam favor addressing inequality, notably Indonesia (83%) and Malaysia (70%). Comparatively Myanmar citizens do not see addressing inequality as significantly as its regional neighbors.

Figure 43 Inequality vs Democracy Cross-National Comparison, ABS Wave 5



The ABS asked citizens to assess whether freedom of assembly and speech was present. Majorities believed they were, (74% and 70% respectively). Figure 44 shows that the biggest shift over time was more felt that these rights were 'somewhat' provided for, as less 'strongly agreed' they were present (a drop of 8% with regard to freedom of assembly and 5% for freedom of speech.)

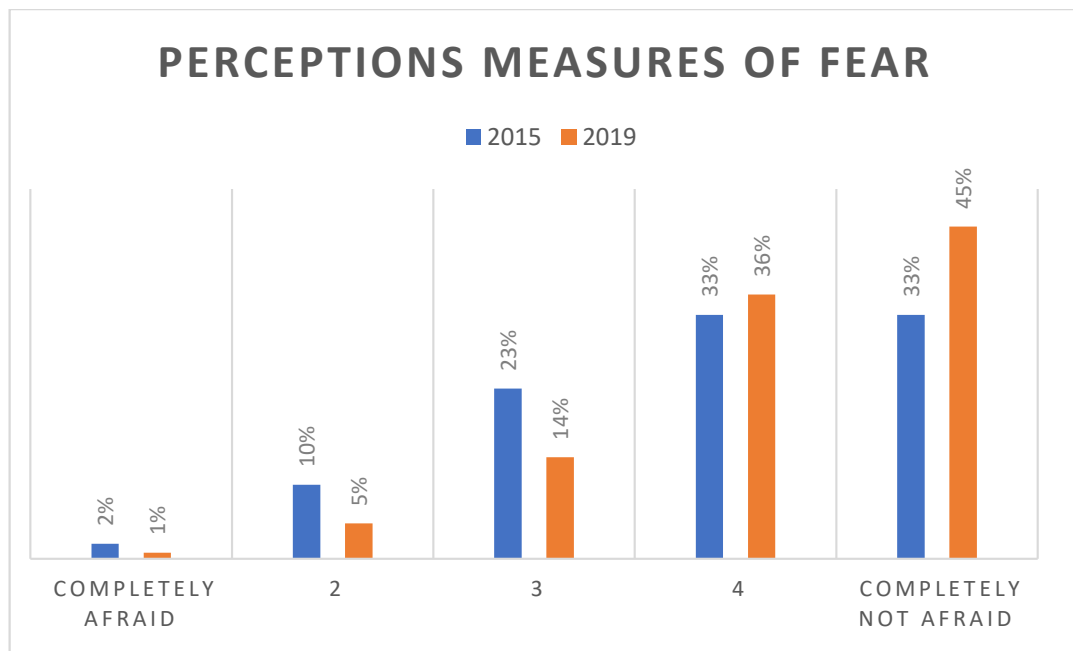
Figure 44 Perceptions of Freedoms, 2015 vs 2019



While most citizens qualify the shift in political freedoms, the findings also show a dissipation of fear in society. This was measured by the perceptions of the interviewer

during the interviews. Figure 45 details that a large majority (91%) were not afraid in answering questions in the survey, with almost half (45%) completely unafraid. This reduction in fear from 2015 is clear.

Figure 45 Perception Measures of Fear, 2015 vs 2019



There are a series of conflicting trends with regard to views toward democracy. Myanmar citizens support and prefer democracy in large numbers, especially in the urban areas and among the more educated. They see the expansion of democratic space compared to the past, and simultaneously many recognize that the freedoms and practices of democracy are not as strong as some want. There are different understandings of democracy and these understandings are changing, moving toward more substantive issues such as good governance and away from procedural dimensions such as elections, and greater attention to the outcome of economic performance and, to a lesser extent, ameliorating inequality. At the same time, when pressed on issues about democracy and the working of democracy, there is less support for democratic practices and norms, with a high majority believing that Myanmar citizens are not ready for democracy. This suggests that the depth of support for democracy in Myanmar is not as strong as it would seem to be on the surface.

Much of the scholarship about Myanmar's democracy has focused on the elite level – the role of the military and political leaders – as well as civil and political liberties, especially political freedoms and inclusion.²² Increasingly scholars and practitioners have showcased the limits of Myanmar's democratization, with more attention given to how the country has

22 See, for example, Min Zin. (2016). 'Burma Votes for Change: The New Configuration of Power'. *Journal of Democracy*, 27(2), 116-131; Roger Lee Huang, 'Myanmar's Way to Democracy and the Limits of the 2015 Elections.' *Asian Journal of Political Science* 25, no. 1 (2017): 25-44; Roman David, & Ian Holliday. (2018). *Liberalism and democracy in Myanmar*. Oxford University Press; Kristian Stokke, and Soe Myint Aung. 'Transition to democracy or hybrid regime? The dynamics and outcomes of democratization in Myanmar.' *The European Journal of Development Research* (2019): 1-20; Morten Pedersen, (2019). 'Myanmar in 2018: New Democracy Hangs in the Balance'. *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2019(1): 224-241.

experienced a contraction of democratic practices. The situation in Rakhine, in particular, has seriously damaged Myanmar's international reputation and derailed ongoing political liberalization. Criticism has further extended to the crackdown on journalists, treatment of ethnic minorities and curtailment of other civil liberties.²³ Some point to democratic backsliding in Myanmar.²⁴

Most Myanmar citizens disagree with these more critical sentiments, perceiving the state of democracy more positively and recognizing changes from the past. This could be in part, however, explained by a lack of understanding of what democracy is. At the same time, the findings show different democratic aspirations among Myanmar citizens. There is less confidence in how democracy is working and support for practices in a strong democracy. Greater horizontal accountability, for example, is weak. The ABS's attention to the views of the public about democracy reveals that one of the weaknesses in strengthening democracy lies within society and its negative views as to how democracy is functioning. As shown elsewhere, after decisive political transitions democracy's future in Myanmar is tied to whether democracy works, and investment in making it work.



23 See, for example, Human Rights Watch, (2020) 'Myanmar' New York. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/myanmar-burma>

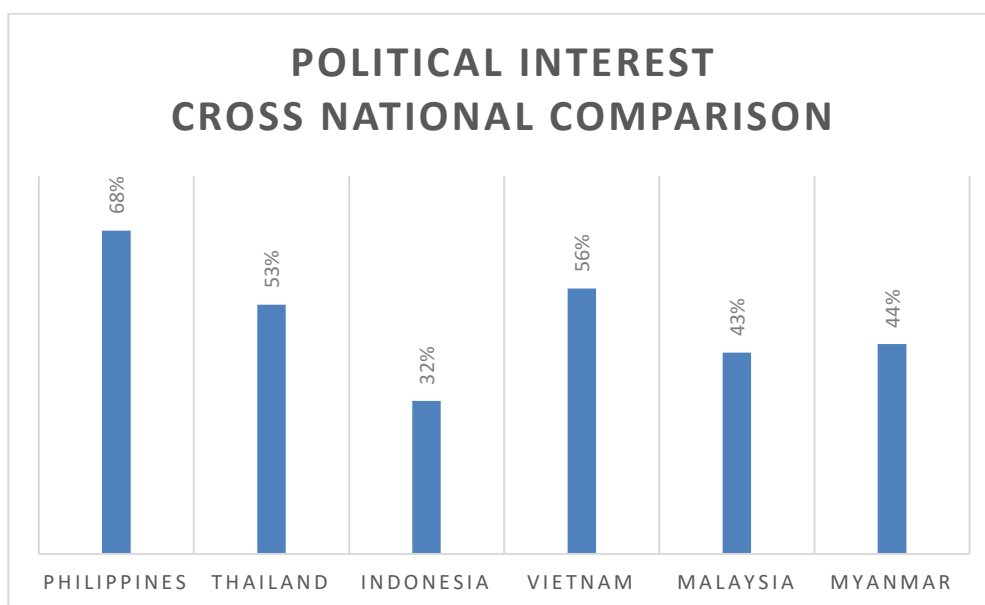
24 See, for example, <http://www.theasanforum.org/myanmars-democratic-backsliding-in-the-struggle-for-national-identity-and-independence/>

Psychological Involvement in Politics

To better understand how Myanmar citizens are (or are not) embracing democracy over time, it is valuable to look at their reported behavior: how they are engaging in politics. New political and social conditions have made an impact on the political behavior of citizens. What stands out however is that Myanmar's political opening has not encouraged greater engagement with politics.

Figure 46 details those interested in politics cross-nationally across Southeast Asia. Less than half of citizens (44%) are interested in politics, fewer than that in the Philippines (66%), Vietnam (56%) and Thailand (53%, but on par with Malaysia (43%). Indonesia, the region's largest democracy, has the least interest in politics (32%).

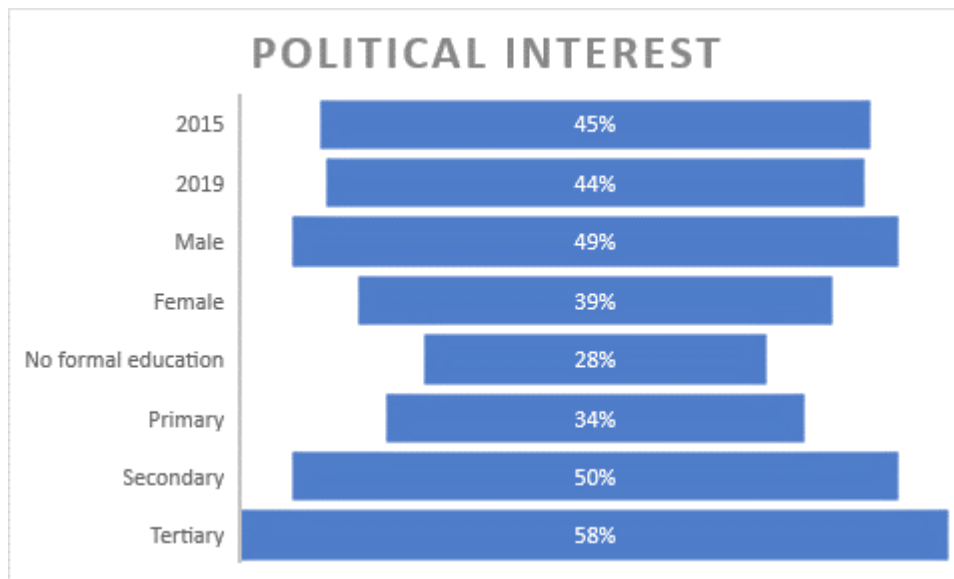
Figure 46 Political Interest Cross-National Comparison, ABS Wave 5



There is little change in political interest in Myanmar over time, with essentially the same share expressing political interest in the two waves of the ABS, as shown in Figure 47. The divisions are within Myanmar society, as there is a gender difference in political interest with men (10%) more likely to be interested in politics than women, and more educated citizens considerably more interested in politics than those with no formal education (30%).

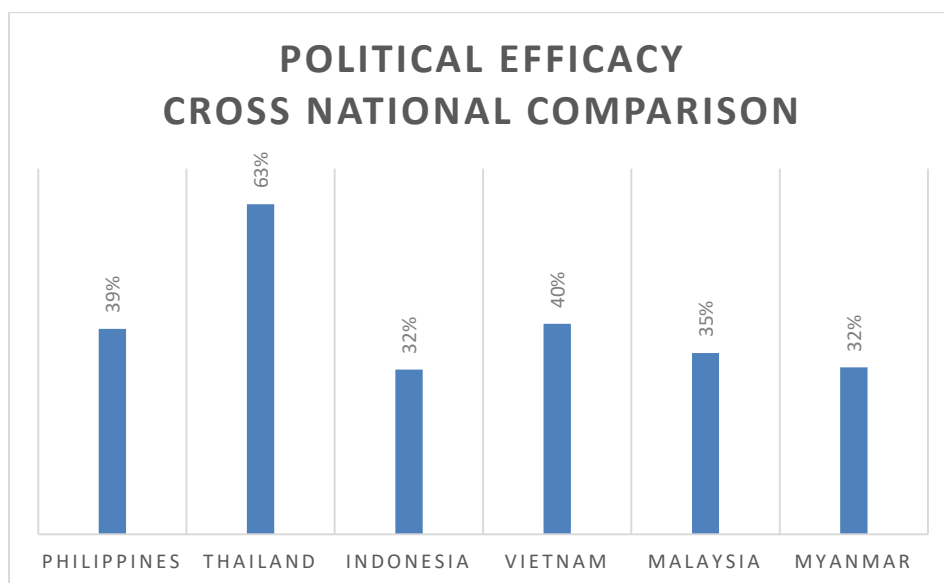
Generally and in Myanmar, gender differences are more pronounced in political behavior than in values, as will be seen below.

Figure 47 Political Interest Variation, 2019



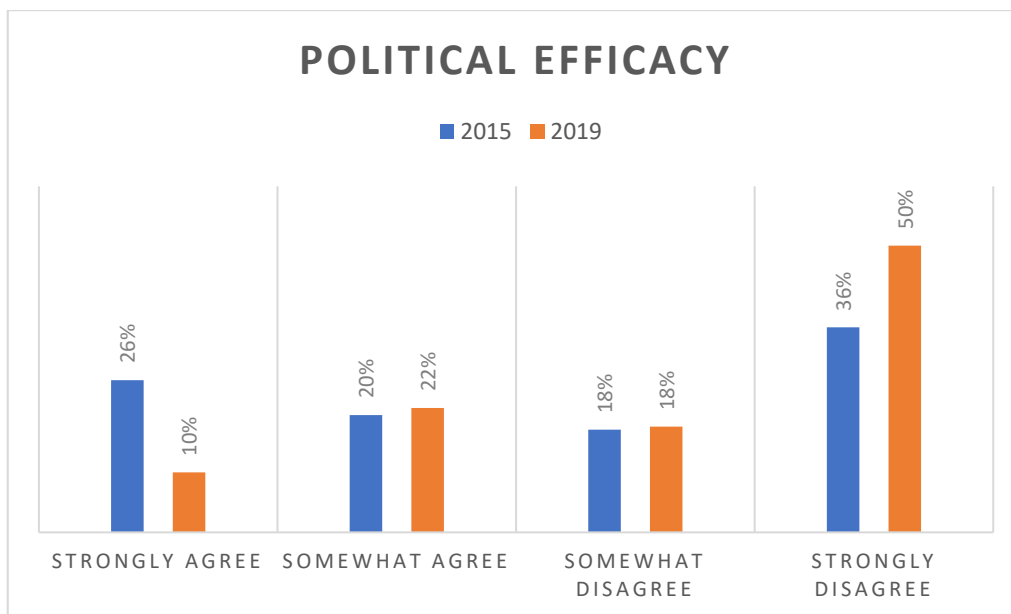
While interest in politics remained the same over the two ABS waves, political efficacy did not. Cross-nationally, as shown in Figure 48, Myanmar has among the lowest political efficacy in the region (along with Indonesia 32%). This means that less than a third of citizens feel they have the ability to participate in politics.

Figure 48 Political Efficacy Cross-National Comparison, ABS Wave 5



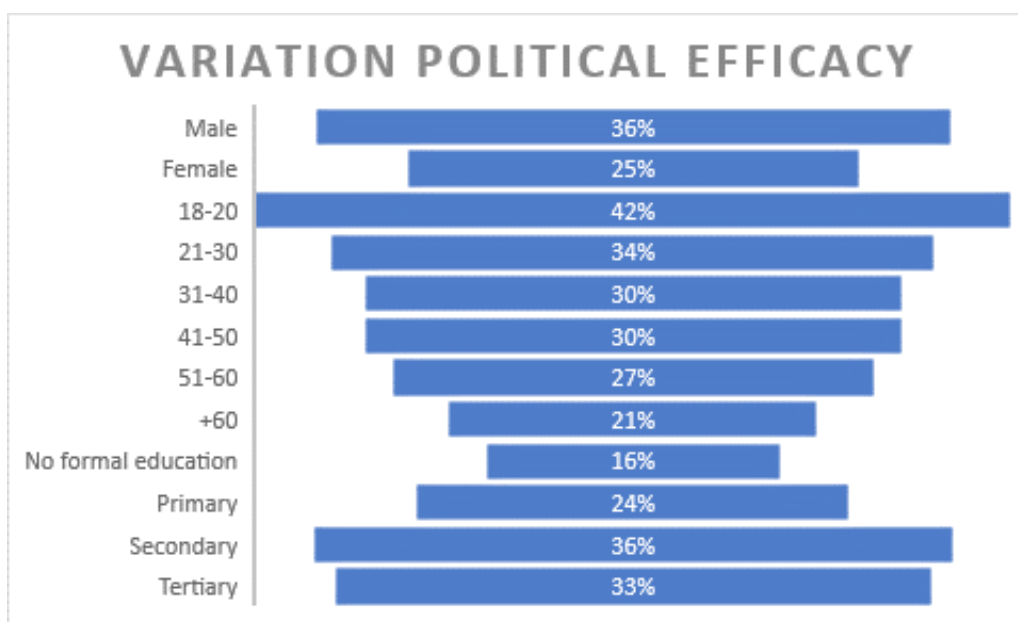
The usual expectation is that expansions of democracy increase political efficacy, giving citizens more opportunities to engage in politics. This is not the case in Myanmar, as there was a drop (14%) in efficacy from 2015 to 2019. Figure 19 shows that half of Myanmar citizens have strong views that they cannot participate in politics, suggesting that the avenues for political engagement, notably political parties, have not been inclusive of ordinary citizens and Myanmar's political transition has not promoted more political engagement on the part of ordinary citizens, remaining largely an elite process.

Figure 49 Political Efficacy, 2015 vs 2019



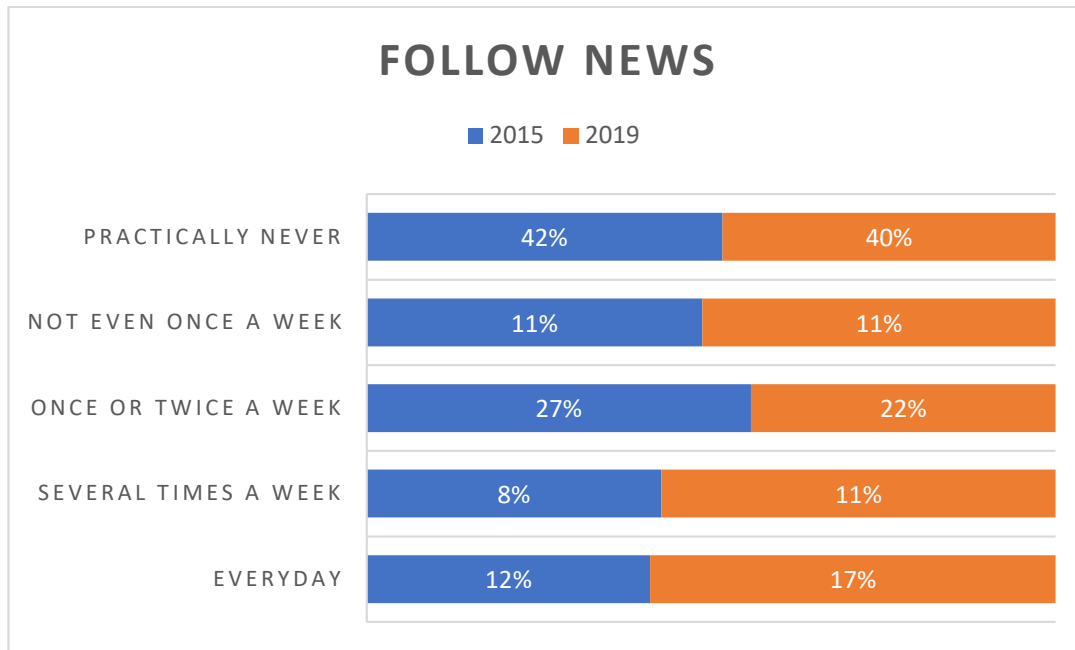
Among citizens, there are three important differences, as shown in Figure 50. Gender matters – with women recording considerably lower political efficacy compared to men (25% compared to 36%). Only a quarter of women believe they can participate in politics, reinforcing the sense of female exclusion in politics. Despite more of an embrace with gender equality, there remains a gap in how women engage in politics. A second important cleavage is education, with those with higher education reporting more political efficacy than those with less education (33% with tertiary education compared to 16% with no formal education). This area is also a place where generational differences were found. Younger citizens, under 20, have more reported political efficacy (42%) than older citizens.

Figure 50 Political Efficacy Variation, 2019



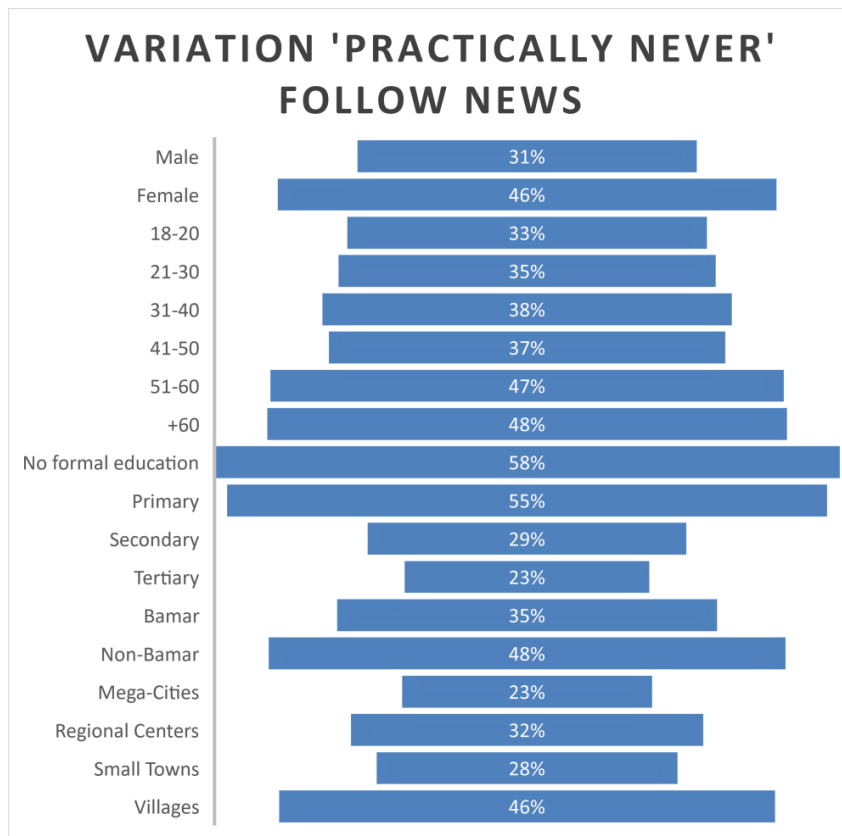
The political opening up of Myanmar has only led to a small increase in those following the news, with more reporting they follow the news daily (17% compared to 12%) than they did four years ago. Figure 51 shows that the plurality of citizens (40% in 2019, 42% in 2015) continue to 'practically never' follow the news. This highlights that many Myanmar citizens remain uninformed about political events.

Figure 51 Follow the News, 2015 vs. 2019



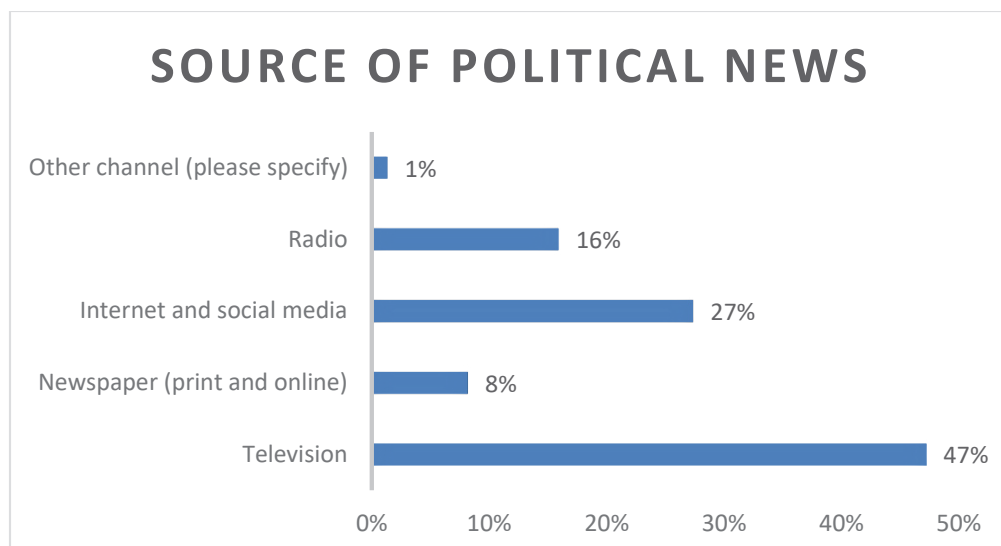
There are quite a few social cleavages in who follows the news, as shown in Figure 52. Looking at those who responded 'practically never' it is clear that there is a gender difference (15%), with men once again participating more. Similar differences were found along generational and education lines, with younger and more educated citizens following the news more. The ABS found a difference along urban-rural lines as well, with rural citizens twice as likely never to follow the news compared to urbanites (46% compared to 23%). There was also a gap between Bamar and non-Bamar citizens, as ethnic minorities were more likely (13%) not to follow the news.

Figure 52 Variation 'Practically Never' Follow the News, 2019



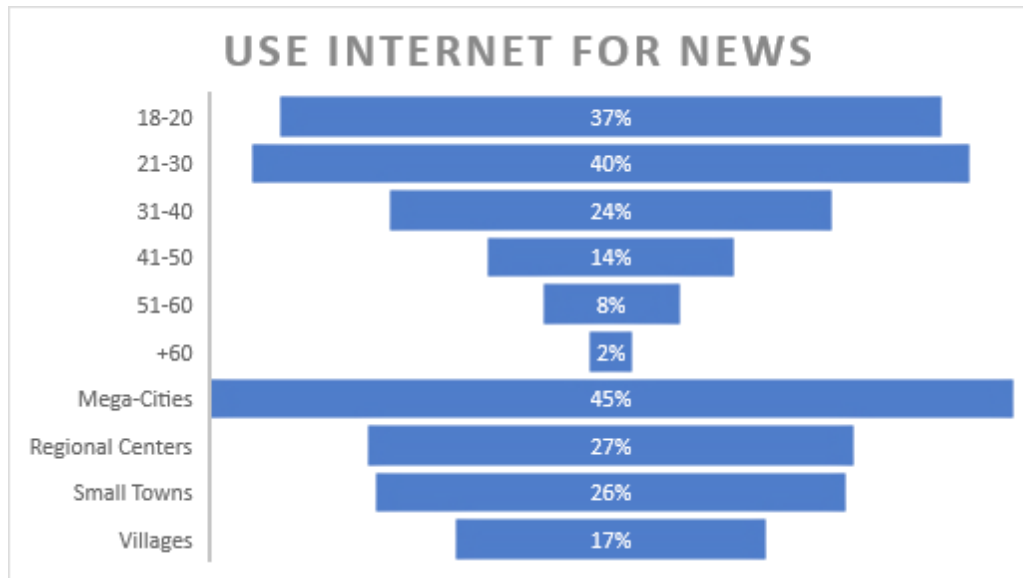
We noted above, the large majority of citizens that use the Internet and social media, pointing out that this did not necessarily translate into political engagement. In looking at how the how Myanmar citizens get their news, there is a realignment, with over a quarter (27%) reporting that their primary source is either the Internet or social media. Figure 53 also shows that television remains the dominant information source with almost half using this medium. (49%). Newspapers, despite their increase in number in recent years, are the primary source for only a small share of citizens (8%).

Figure 53 Source of Political News, 2019



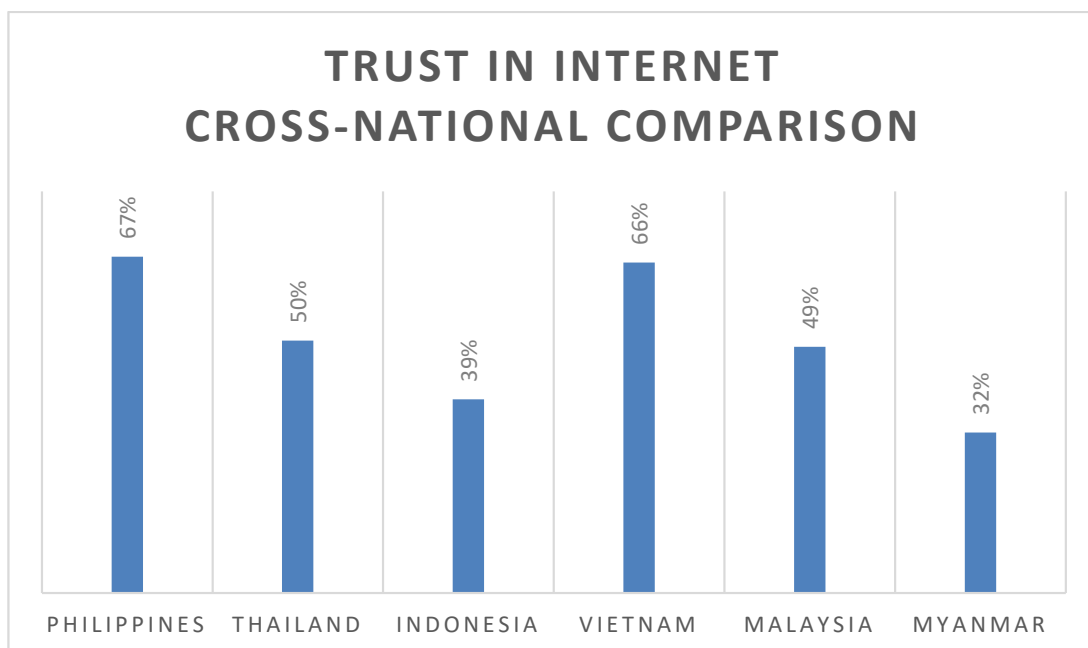
The use of the Internet/social media as the primary source of news varies in unsurprising ways. Younger and more urban citizens engage predominantly through this medium, a majority of those in the mega-cities (60%) and a plurality (40%) of those between 21 and 30 years old.

Figure 54 Internet Use for Political News Variation, 2019



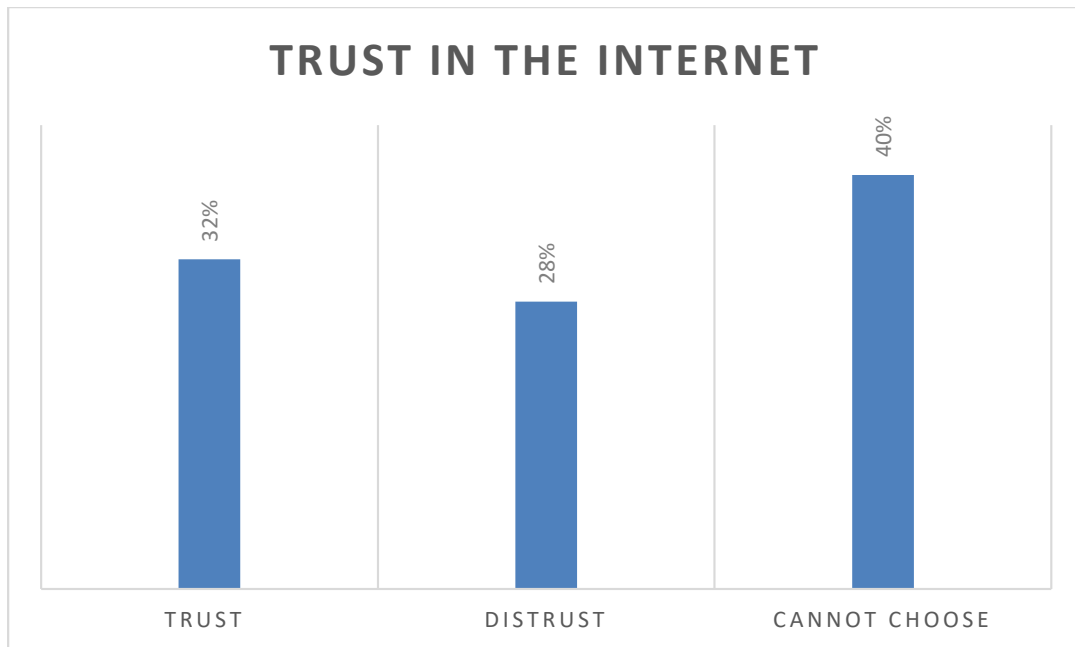
The rapid expansion of the Internet/social media has changed how Myanmar citizens get their news about politics, but it has not necessarily translated into more trust of this news, as shown in Figure 55. Slightly less than a third (32%) of Myanmar citizens trust the Internet/social media, the lowest in the region. In the Philippines (67%) and Vietnam (66%) more than double that of Myanmar citizens have trust in the Internet/social media.

Figure 55 Trust in the Internet Cross-National Comparison, ABS Wave 5



A closer look, however, shows that most citizens opt not to answer this question, as shown in Figure 56. The level of trust (32%) and distrust (28%) is about the same, with the plurality opting not to answer this question (40%).

Figure 56 Trust in the Internet, 2019



Myanmar's post-2015 political environment has not necessarily increased the quality of democratic political engagement. Political interest has remained the same, but political efficacy has dropped. Large numbers 'practically never' follow the news, remaining uninformed about politics. More are using the Internet and social media as their primary source of news, but over half distrust this medium. There are particular groups that are more engaged – young, urban dwellers and men – which raises the question of the unevenness of the ongoing patterns of political engagement. Scholars have pointed to the challenge of political literacy, often with a concentration on youth.²⁵ The ABS results point to the need to deepen political literacy more widely, especially in rural areas and among women.

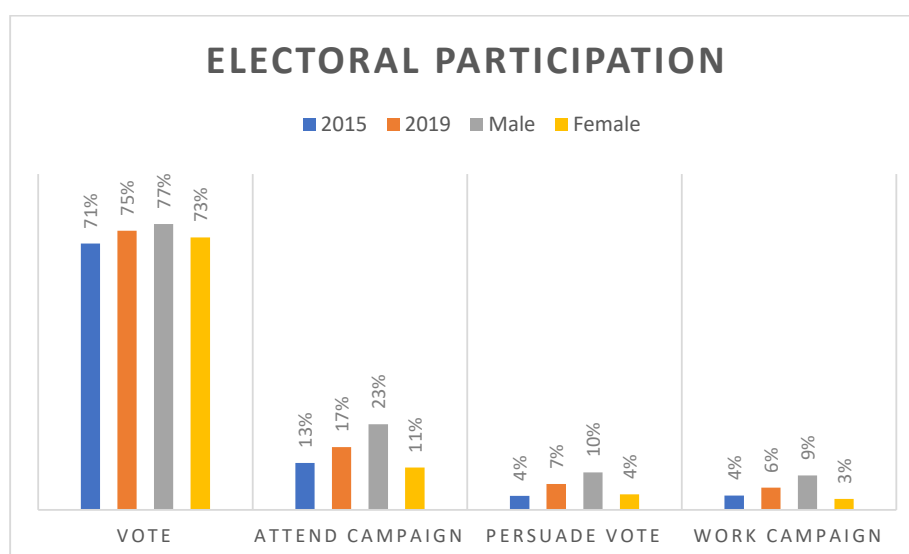
25 Marie Lall, (2017) 'Myanmar's Youth and the Question of Citizenship,' In Ashley South & Marie Lall, (eds.). *Citizenship in Myanmar: Ways of Being in and from Burma*. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, pp. 145-160.

Political Participation

To further explore the significance of this unevenness of political engagement among Myanmar citizens and the quality of participation, the ABS asks questions about how citizens participate during and outside of elections as well as their alignments to political parties.

Figure 57 lays out the findings on electoral participation and shows the share of those voting increased marginally (from 71% to 75%). This number is comparatively high globally, with three quarters of citizens reporting that they participate in elections.

Figure 57 Electoral Participation, 2015 vs 2019 by Gender



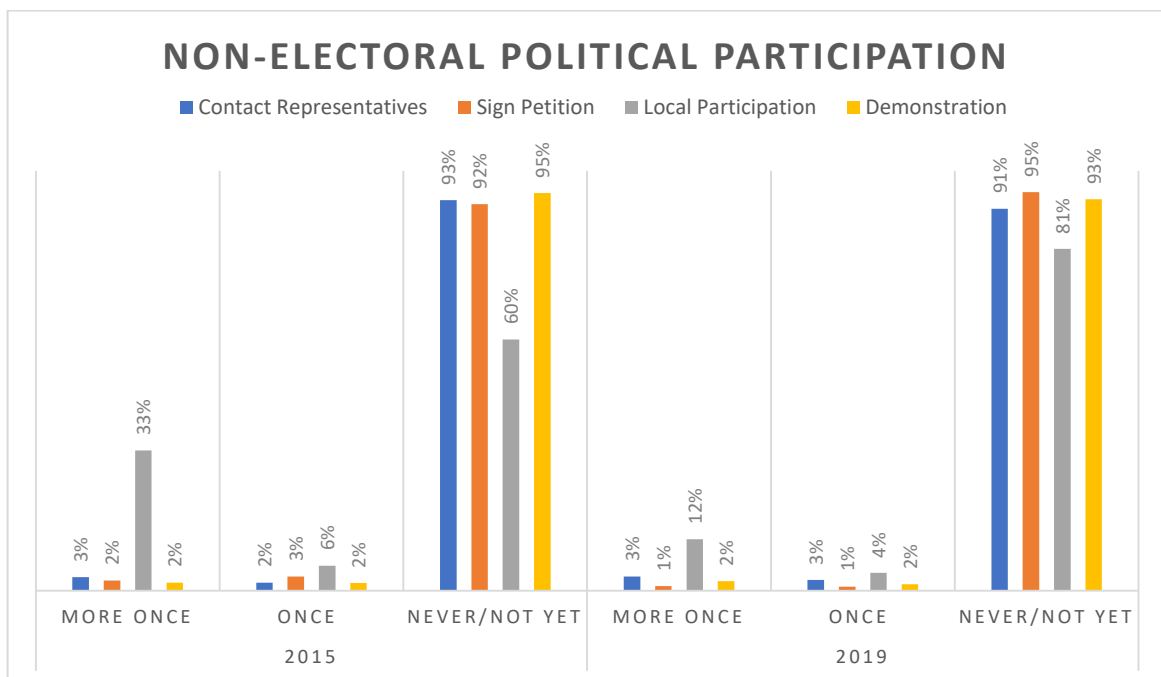
The male rate of voting is marginally higher than that of women (77% compared to 73%), but the gender difference widens with regard to other forms of electoral participation – attending a campaign (12%), persuading someone to vote (6%) and working in a campaign (6%). Despite the gender gap, the share of citizens engaged in these activities increased over the two waves of surveys, reinforcing a stronger commitment to participating in the electoral process.

Political participation outside of elections, however, remains low, as shown in Figure 58. An overwhelming majority of Myanmar citizens have not contacted their representatives (91%), signed a petition (95%) nor attended a demonstration (93%). These numbers

have not changed significantly over time. This reinforces the findings above on political engagement and political efficacy, showing limited political activity by ordinary citizens outside of elections.

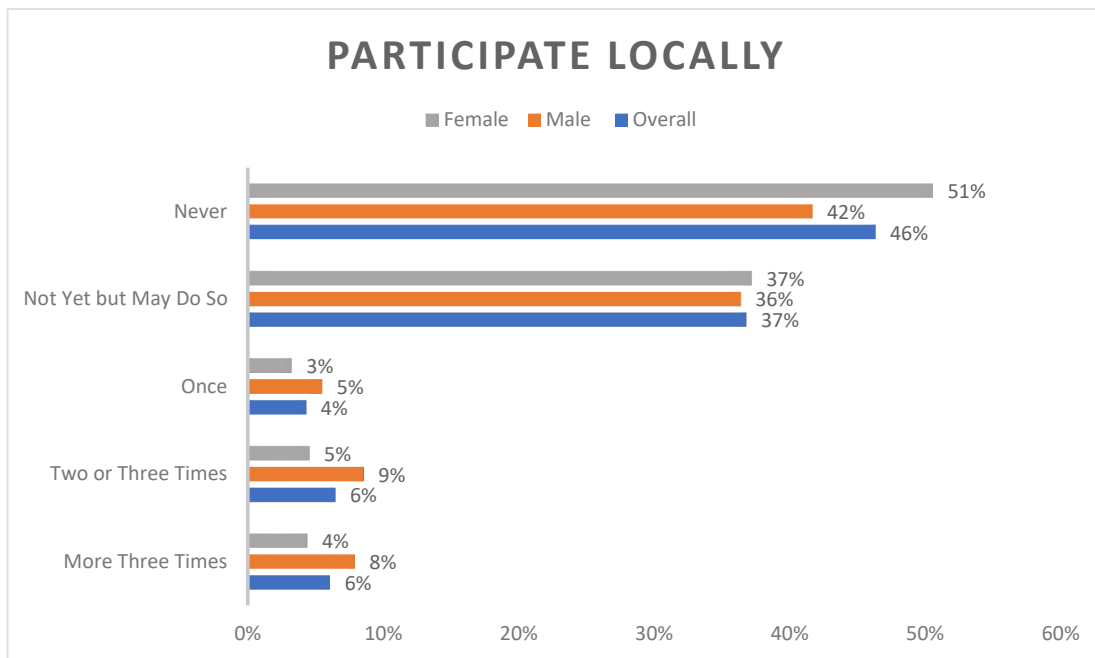
In fact, the trend is that non-electoral political participation is declining – quite the opposite of what would be expected in a period of increased democratic openness. The ABS found that among those reporting that they have participated to address local problems, the number dropped (from 33% doing this more than once to 12%, with those reporting never doing this rising to 81% from 60%). The weaknesses of local parties/institutions, developed below, as well as the decreasing social capital and low social trust may have contributed to this marked decline.

Figure 58 Non-Electoral Participation, 2019



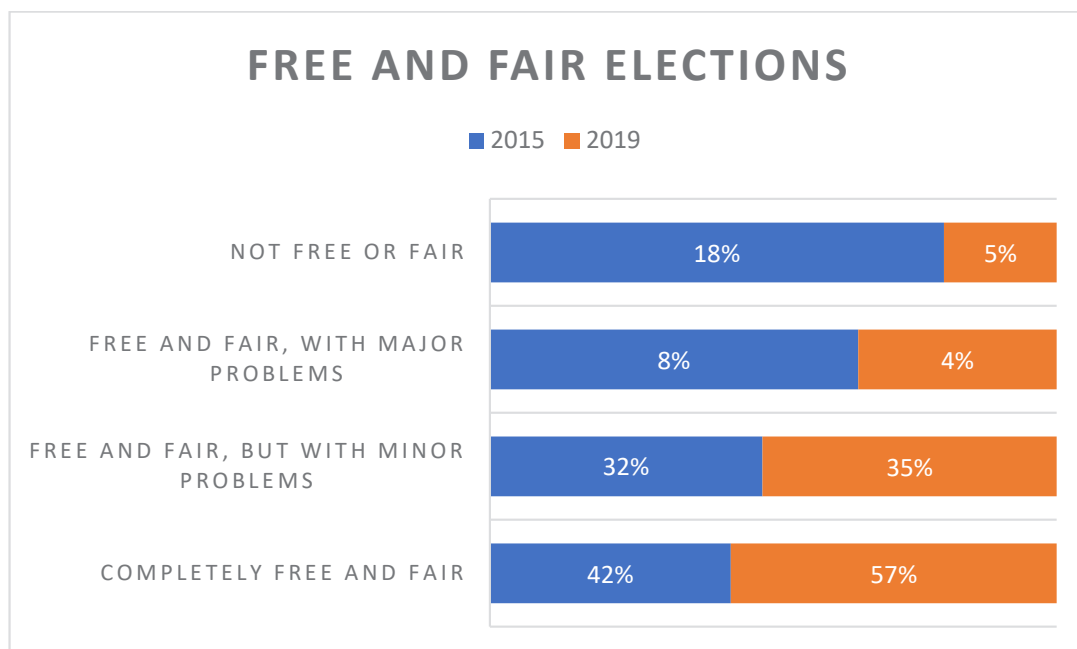
The gender differences in participation outside of elections are even wider. Figure 59 shows that slightly more than half (51%) of women have never participated in politics at the local level, compared to men (42%).

Figure 59 Local Participation, 2019 by Gender



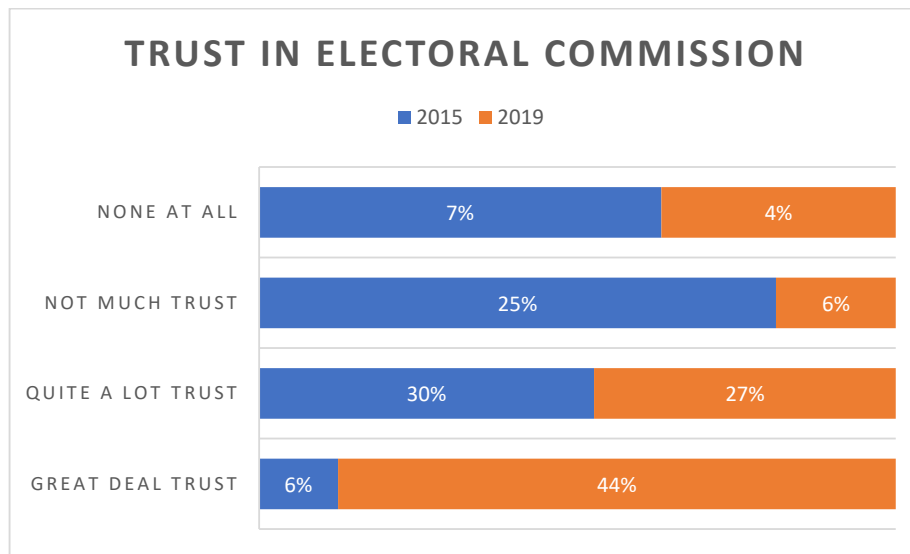
On a positive note, the ABS found that most citizens (57%) see the electoral process as ‘completely free and fair’, up from 2015 (42%). Figure 60 shows the increased confidence in the electoral process over time.

Figure 60 Free and Fair Election, 2015 vs 2019



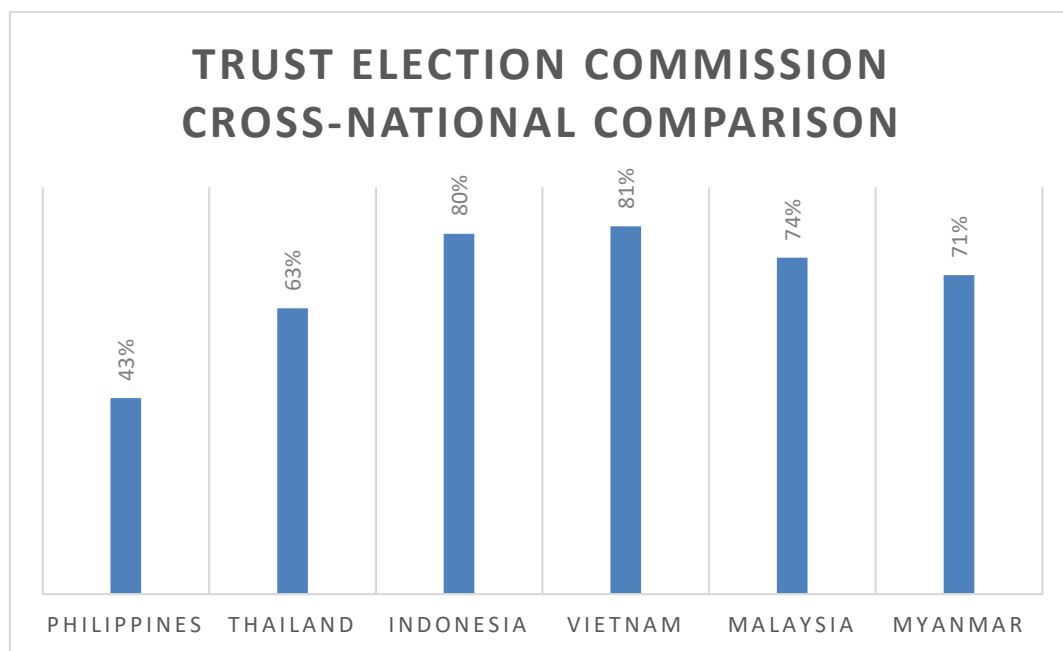
This has also coincided with a significant increase in trust in the electoral commission, the Union Electoral Commission (UEC). The largest share (44%), as shown in Figure 61, report a ‘great deal of trust’ – up sharply from 2015 (6%) (surveyed before the 2015 polls).

Figure 61 Trust in Electoral Commission, 2015 vs 2019



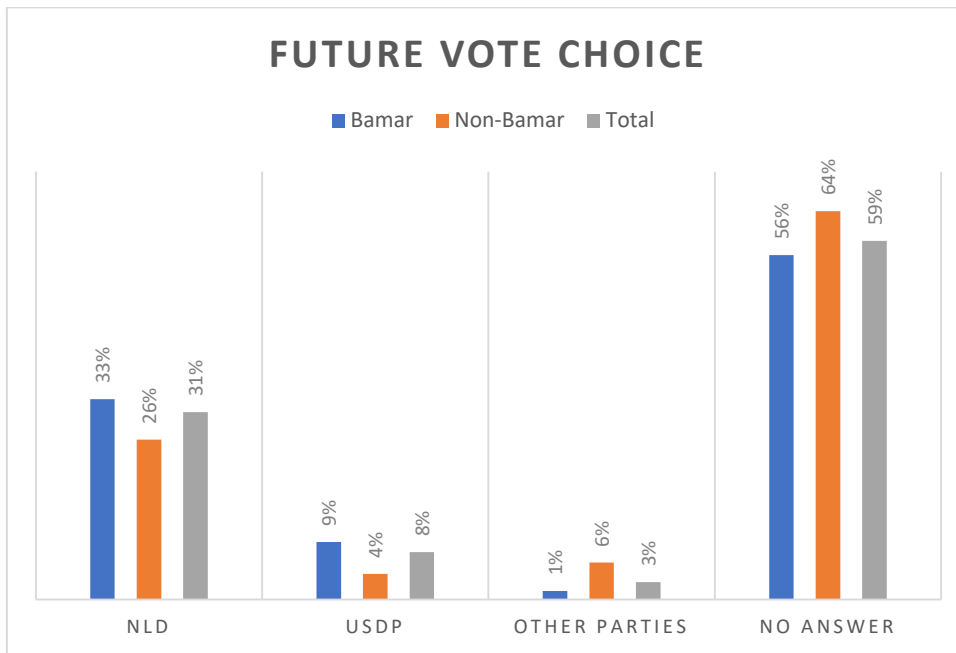
Myanmar has joined the ranks of having an electoral commission with public confidence. Figure 62 shows that Myanmar compares favorably with other countries in the region (at 72%), below Indonesia (80%) and Vietnam (81% – which only carries out uncompetitive local elections).

Figure 62 Trust in Electoral Commission Cross-National Comparison, ABS Wave 5



The ABS asked Myanmar citizens who they would vote for in the next national election, currently scheduled for 2020 and detailed in Figure 63. The majority (56%) opted not to answer this question, indicating both reserve and indecision. Of those that did answer, the plurality (31%) chose the NLD. The USDP, on its part, only received a small share of support (8%), although this was larger than that of other parties (6%).

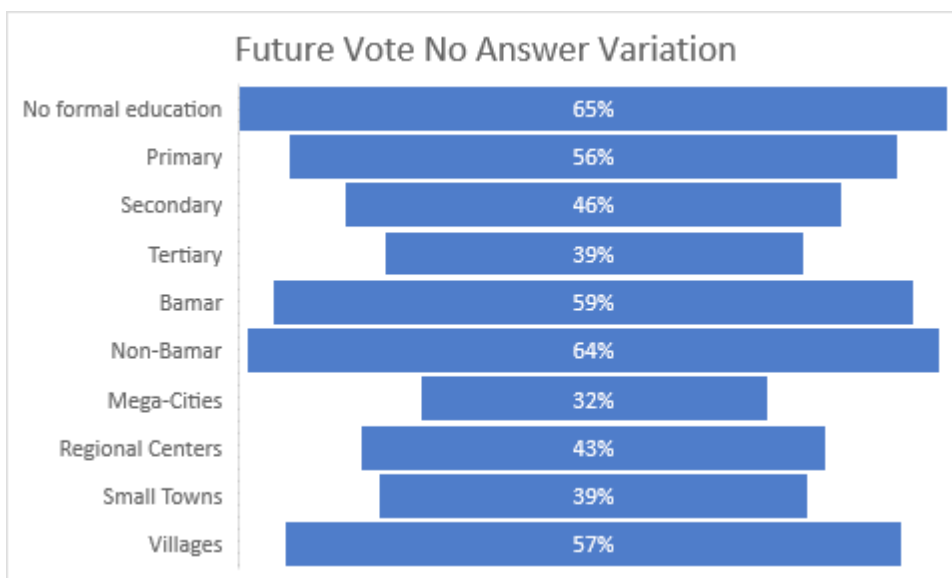
Figure 63 Future Vote by Ethnicity, 2019



The findings also show a difference in the support of different parties along ethnic lines. Non-Bamar were more likely to support other parties and less likely to support the NLD (5%) and USDP (4%). They were also more likely (5%) not to answer the question compared to Bamar citizens.

Figure 64 shows other variations among Myanmar citizens with regard to those who opted not to answer how they would vote. Disproportionately those with less education and in rural areas were less willing to answer.

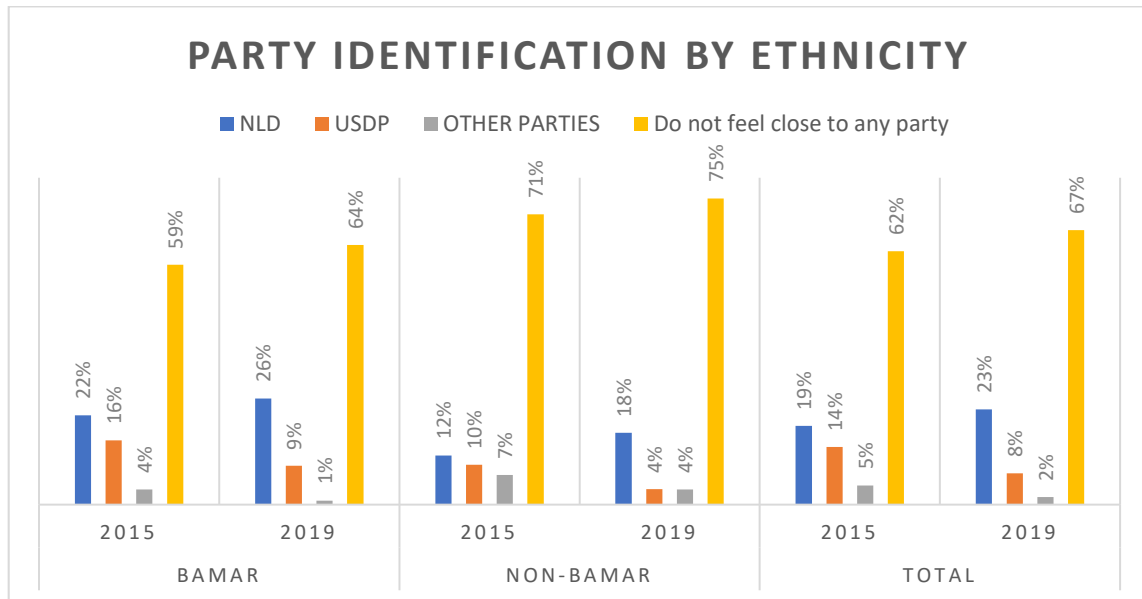
Figure 64 No Answer Future Voting Variation, 2019



Most Myanmar citizens (67%) report that they are not close to any political party, up from 2015 (62%), as shown in Figure 65. The lack of party identification is stronger among non-

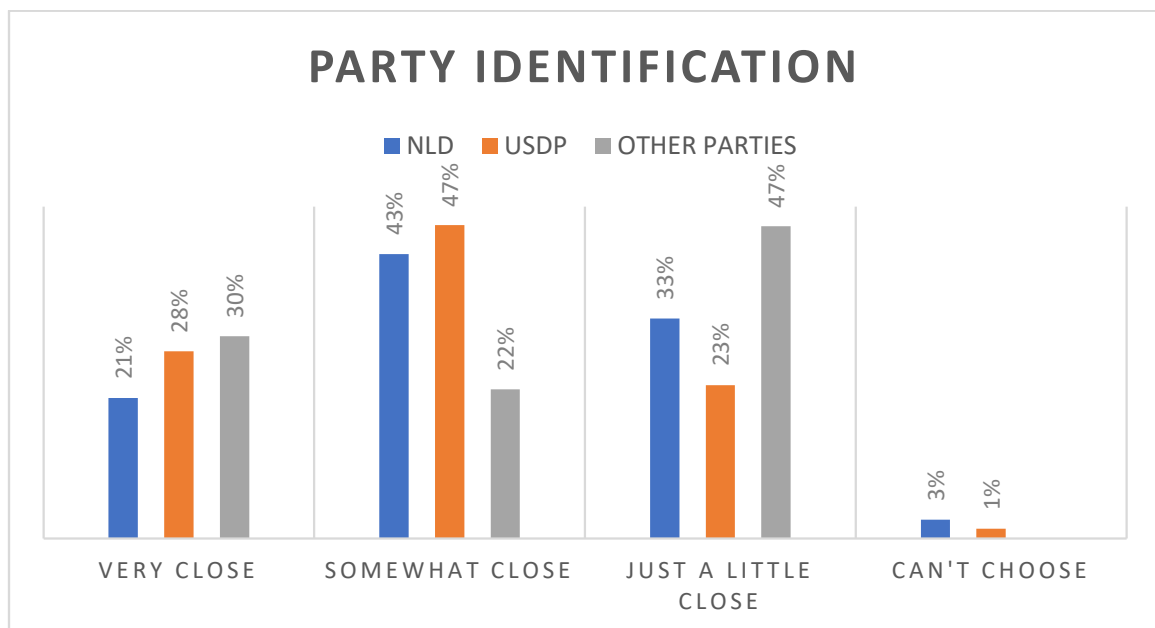
Bamar citizens (75%). This shows that Myanmar's political opening has not translated into greater party loyalties.

Figure 65 Party Identification by Ethnicity, 2015 vs 2019



Of the citizens who recorded being close to a political party (23% for NLD, 8% for USDP and 2% for other parties), most reported only being 'somewhat close' to that party, as shown in Figure 66. This reinforces the underlying finding that the connections to political parties are relatively weak.

Figure 66 Degree of Party Identification, 2019



Political participation remains strongest around elections, with large numbers of citizens voting. There is confidence in the electoral process and its administration. Outside of

elections, however, political participation is low, and even contracting where there was relatively high local non-electoral participation four years ago. Ties to political parties are weak. Of the political parties the NLD has the most public support and the most projected voter support by nearly four times that of its leading competitor the USDP.

Among Myanmar citizens gender and ethnicity are the most pronounced social cleavages with regard to political participation. Women participate less across the range of forms of participation. The engagement with political parties varies along ethnic lines, with different alignments. Non-Bamar are less inclined to answer how they will vote and less aligned to political parties.

While there is increasing confidence and participation in elections, Myanmar citizens are not broadly participating in politics. Women less so. Attention to female participation has primarily focused on women in parliament, not ordinary women.²⁶ The ABS highlights the gap in political participation among ordinary women. The survey also shows that low political participation is connected to how political parties are (and are not) engaging the electorate. Parties are not being institutionalized²⁷ – they are not building local organizations and strengthening public engagement across the society. Both the quality of political participation and strength of political institutions channeling participation can be strengthened to expand democracy in Myanmar.

26 See, for example, Nicole Loring, (2018) 'Overcoming barriers: Myanmar's recent elections and women's political participation.' *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 59, no. 1: 74-86.

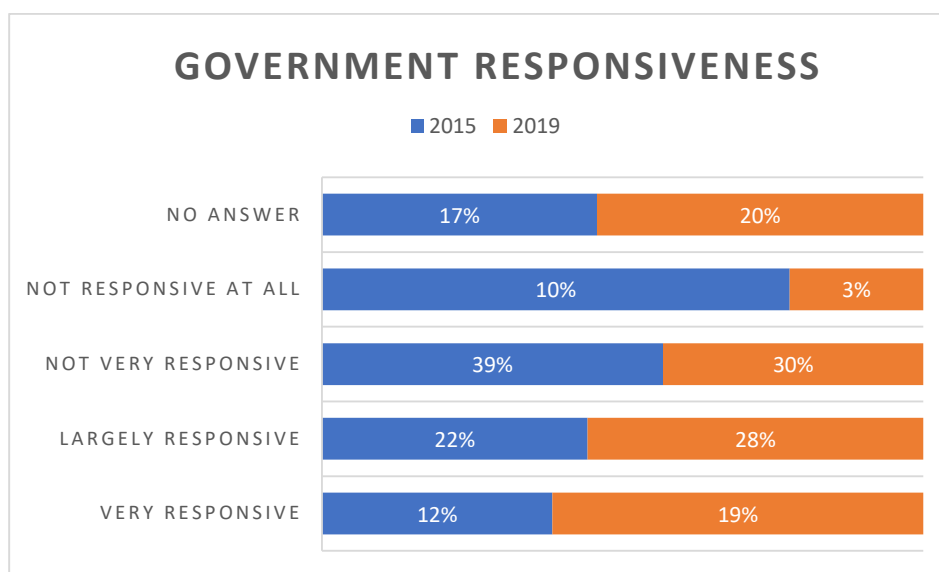
27 This point was stressed early on surrounding the 2015 elections. Kristian Stokke, Khine Win, and Soe Myint Aung (2015), 'Political Parties and Popular Representation in Myanmar's Democratisation Process', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 34, no. 3: 3–35.

Government Support, Services and Governance

Increasingly Myanmar citizens are understanding democracy as governance. The ABS asks a range of questions about how the government responds, access to services and quality of governance. The findings highlight considerable improvements over time in these areas, although challenges remain.

Figure 67 shows that almost half (47%) believe the government to be responsive, up significantly from 2015 (32%). The share of those who perceive the government as not responsive has also dropped.

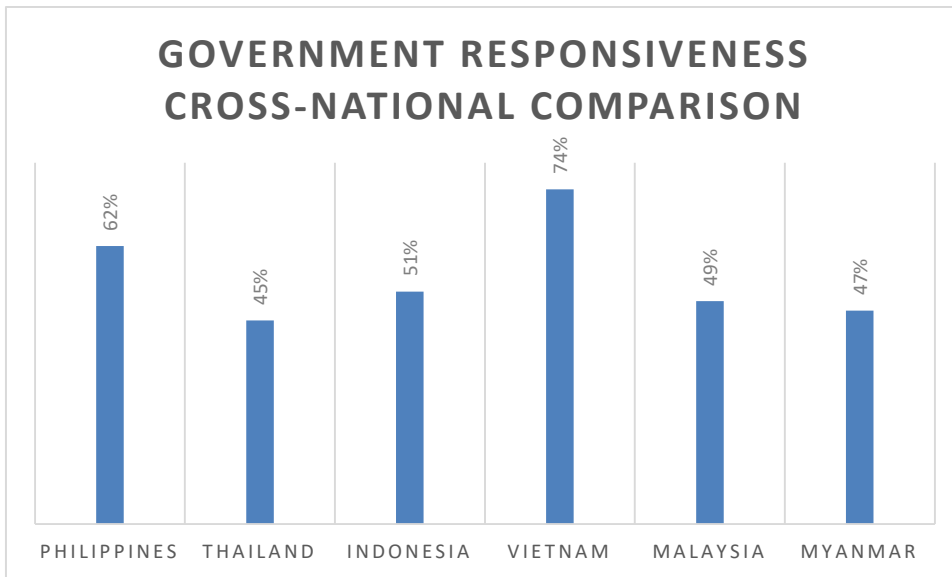
Figure 67 Government Responsiveness, 2015 vs. 2019



Myanmar's responsiveness is on par with that of other countries in the region, as shown in Figure 68. It is below that of Vietnam and the Philippines, but essentially the same as the other countries surveyed.

In 2015 there was an urban-rural gap in perceptions of responsiveness. Now there is no longer this difference, with similar perceptions of responsiveness across the range of social cleavages among Myanmar citizens.

Figure 68 Government Responsiveness Cross-National Comparison, ABS Wave 5



The ABS asked about perceptions of whether the government is capable to implement policies, as shown in Figure 69. Nearly half (49) believed it was capable. Yet, the results show more confidence in the government among men (62% compared to 51% women) and among those in the mega-cities (69%) compared to the small towns (46%) and villages (47%).

Figure 69 Government Capable of Implementation Variation, 2019

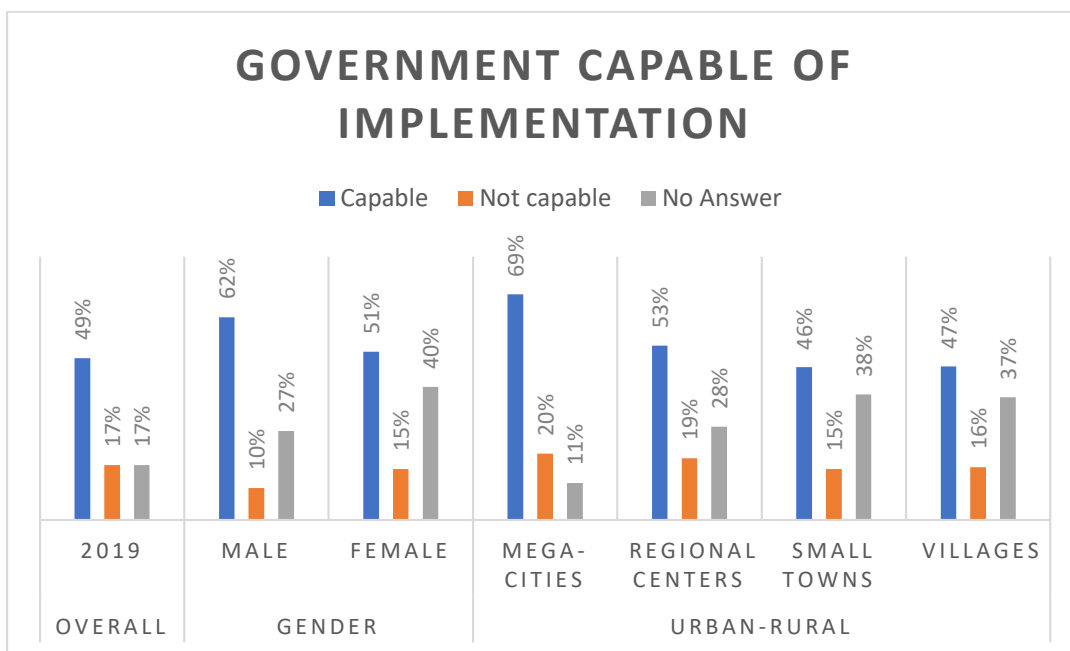
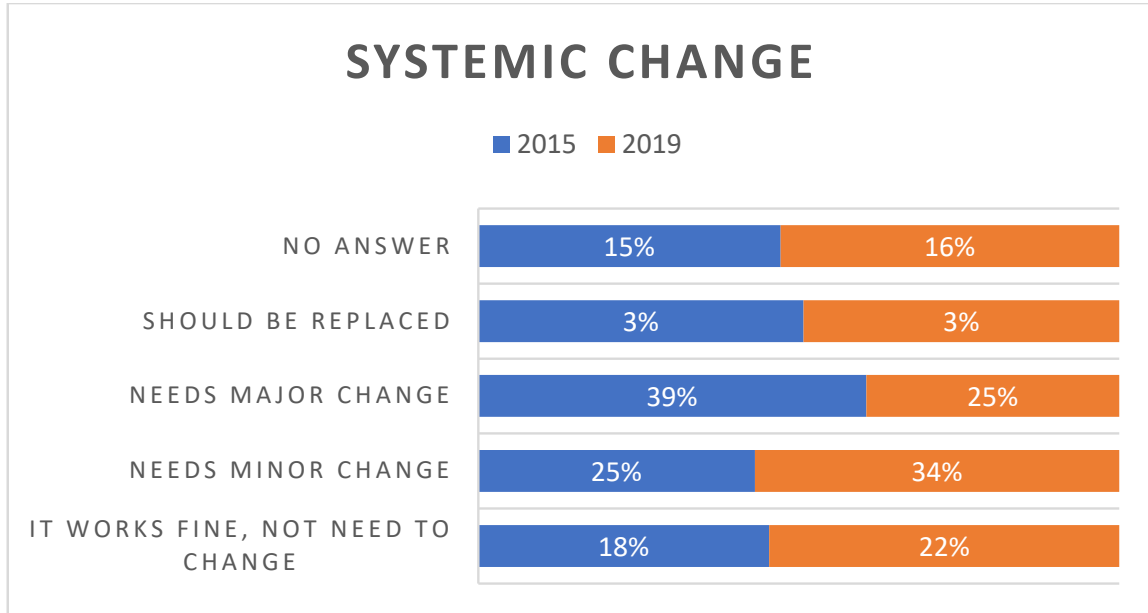


Figure 70 details views on reform. The largest shift has been among citizens who believe the political system needs major change (declining from 39% to 25% over the two surveys), with the increase moving to those who believe the system needs minor change (increasing

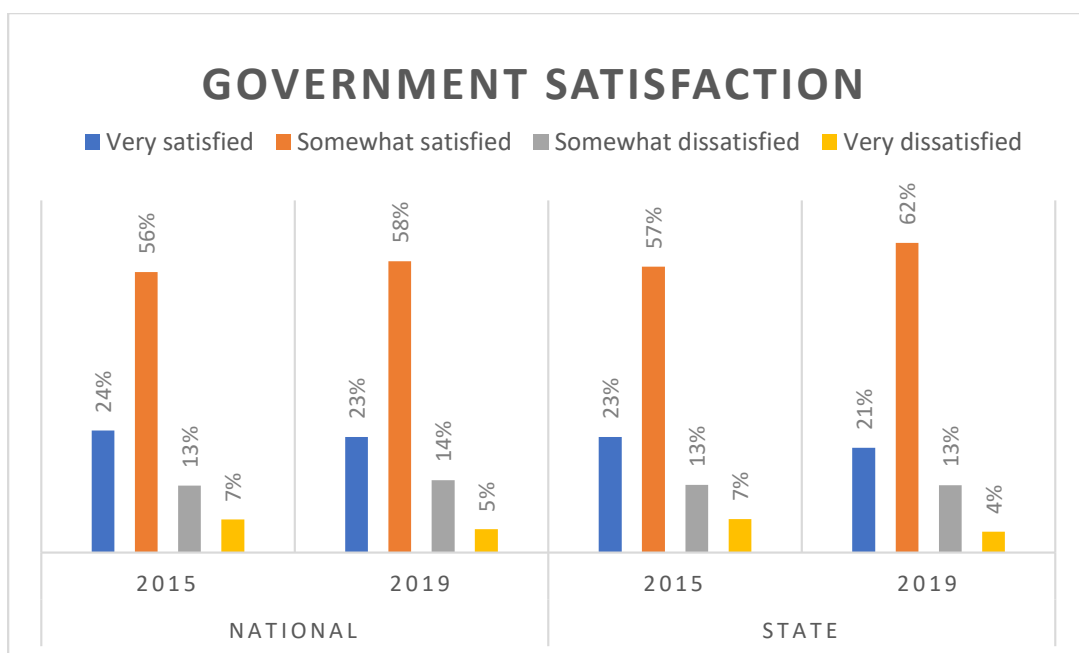
from 24% to 34%). This indicates that citizens recognize changes in governance across the period of the two surveys and view the changes positively. Myanmar citizens nevertheless continue to call for reforms – a majority of 62% want some sort of systemic change.

Figure 70 Systemic Change, 2015 vs. 2019



When asked how satisfied citizens were with their national and state governments, the responses over time were similar. The NLD has not earned higher levels of satisfaction among the electorate, although a high majority are satisfied with both the national (80%) and state (83%) governments – as shown in Figure 71.

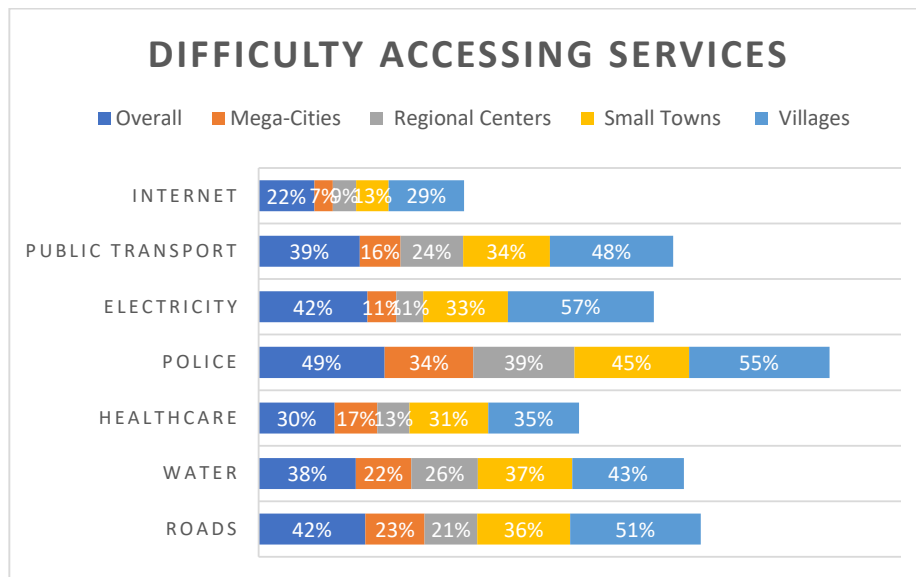
Figure 71 Government Satisfaction National and State Governments, 2015 vs 2019



One of the most important governance challenges has been the provision of services. The ABS found that nearly half of citizens (49%) had difficulty accessing the police, followed by key infrastructural needs – electricity (42%) and roads (42%). Over a third reported difficulty accessing public transport (39%) and water (38%), while less than a third (30%) reported difficulties in accessing healthcare. Ironically, the service least difficult to access, the Internet, has seen the most rapid change in the past few years, with less than a quarter (22%) reporting access difficulties – all shown in Figure 72.

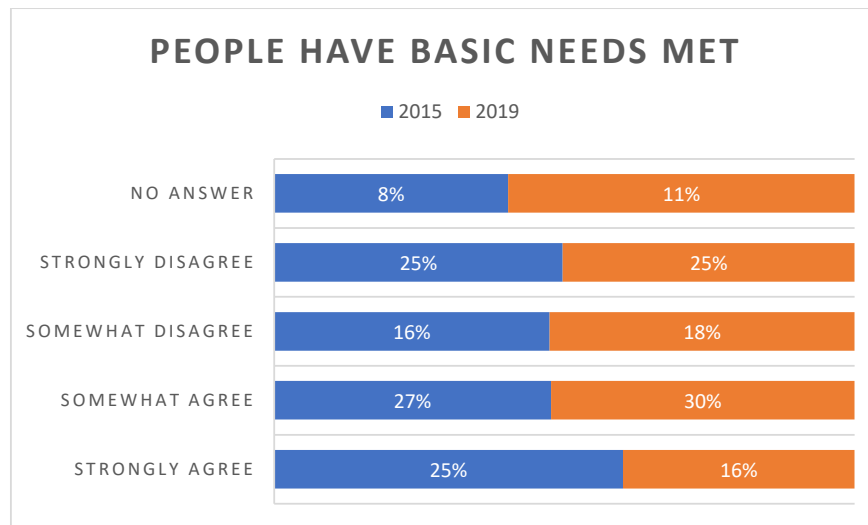
The most persistent social difference in the provision of services remains the urban-rural division. In many cases villages reported more than double the difficulty in accessing services – public transport, healthcare, water and roads. The biggest gap was in electricity, with a majority (57%) of villagers saying there was difficulty in access compared to others in more urban areas. More than half of villagers (55%) also reported problems accessing the police.

Figure 72 Access to Services by Urban-Rural, 2019



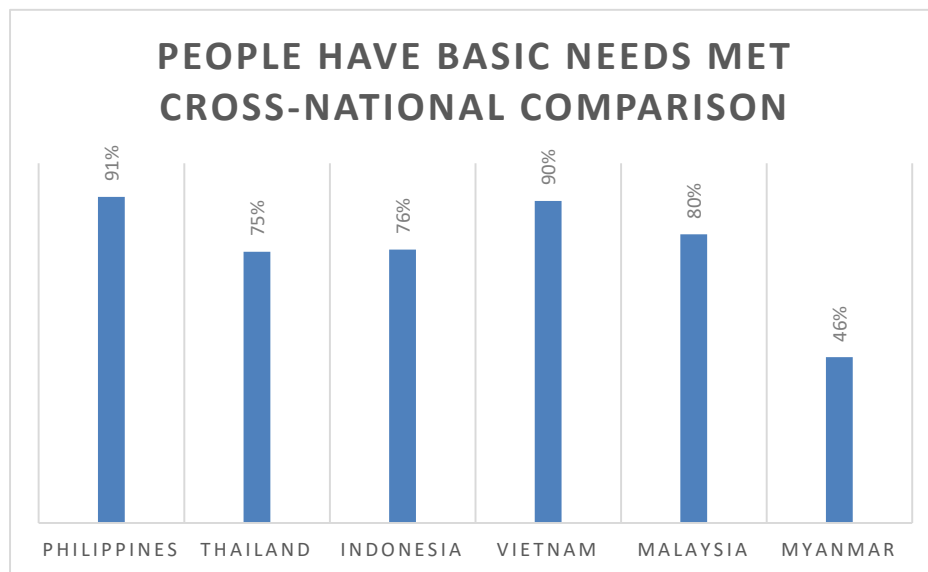
The ABS found that fewer Myanmar citizens believed that they had their basic needs met (from 52% to 46%). The biggest shift was in those who ‘strongly’ felt needs were met, as shown in Figure 73. This difference could be the product of changing perceptions of what basic needs are and rising expectations. Nevertheless, this speaks to a gap between the government and service delivery.

Figure 73 People Have Basic Needs Met, 2015 vs 2019



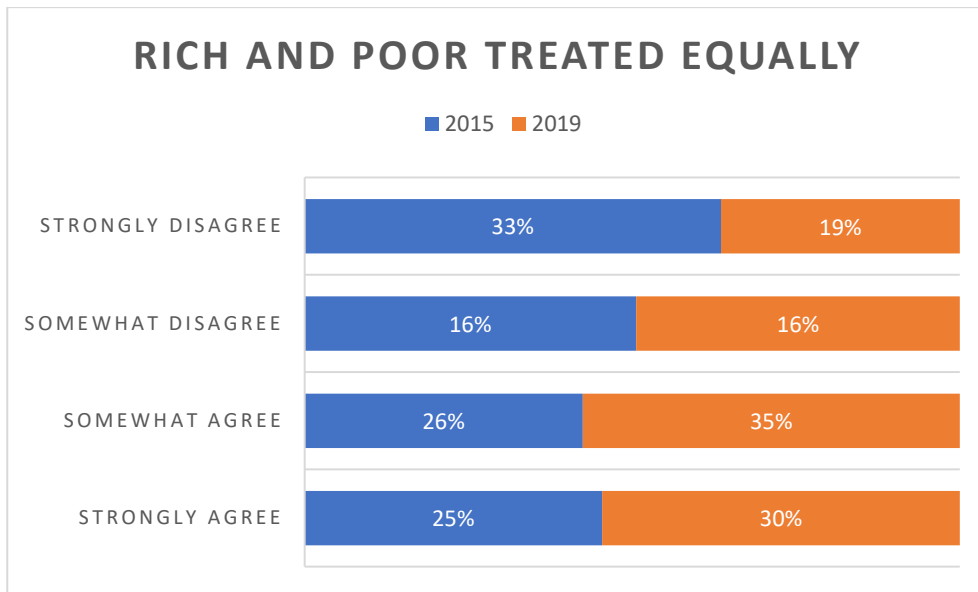
Across the region, Myanmar has the least public confidence in basic needs being met (46%). Figure 74 shows this is a stark difference from other countries surveyed in Southeast Asia.

Figure 74 People Have Basic Needs Met Cross-National Comparison, ABS Wave 5



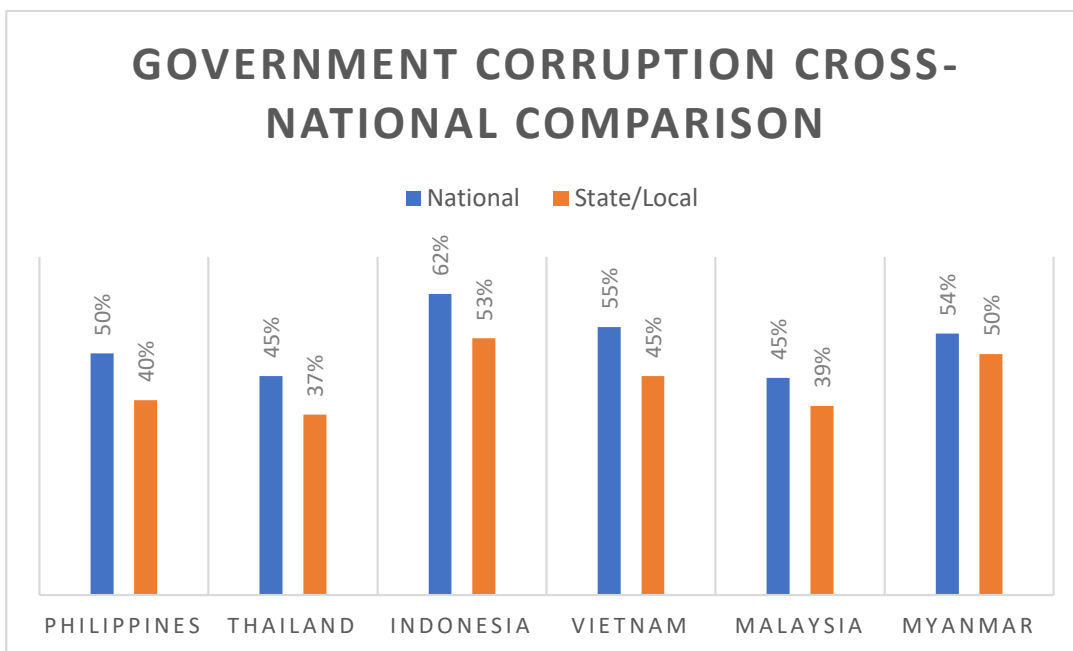
Despite the gap perceived in basic needs, Myanmar citizens see improvements in addressing inequality, with a larger share believing the government treats the rich and poor equally (to 65% from 51% in 2015), as shown in Figure 75.

Figure 75 Rich and Poor Treated Equally, 2015 vs 2019



In looking at governance, the ABS asked citizens about corruption. Figure 76 shows that more than half (54%) believe the government is corrupt at the national level, while half believe this is the case at the state level (50%). This is among the highest in the region, after Indonesia and Vietnam. This indicates that corruption is perceived as a serious problem in Myanmar and helps us, along with the service difficulties, understand why more citizens prioritize governance issues.

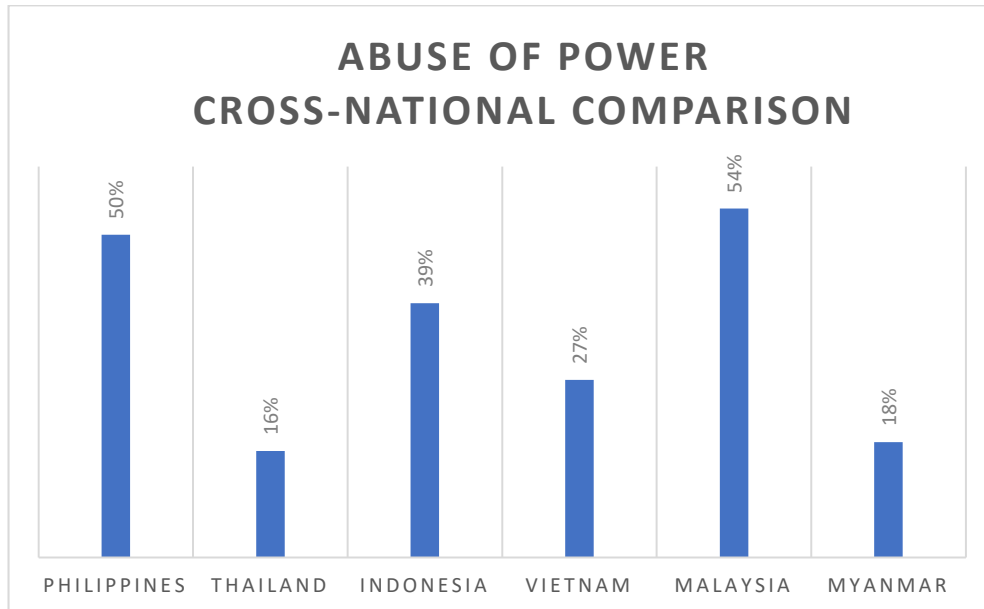
Figure 76 Government Corruption National and State Cross-National Comparison, ABS Wave 5



By comparison, Myanmar citizens do not see their leaders as abusing power, with among the lowest share in the region (18%) along with Thailand (16%) registering concern on this issue. Figure 77 shows the regional variation, with Malaysia recording the highest perceived

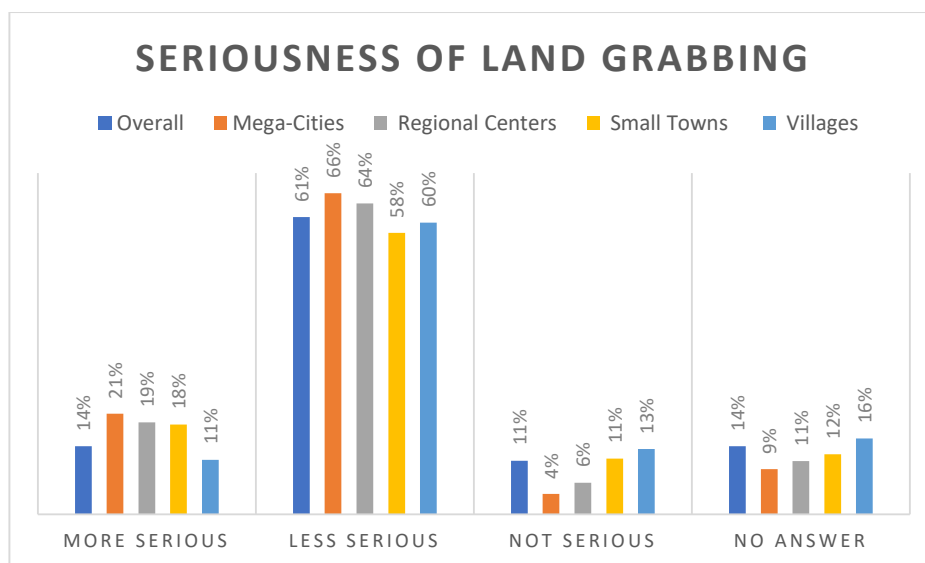
abuse of power. The fact that citizens do not see their leaders as abusing power also allows us to appreciate that corruption is seen as within the system, not at the top.

Figure 77 Abuse of Power Cross-National Comparison, ABS Wave 5



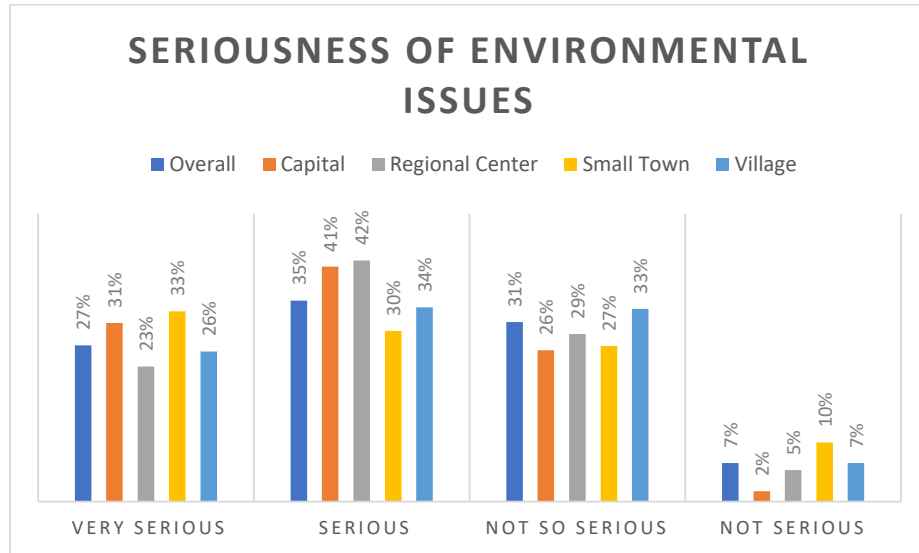
The Myanmar ABS asked specifically about land grabbing, which was seen in the first survey to be serious. As shown in Figure 78a, most (61%) see land grabbing as becoming less serious than before. What is striking, however, is the regional variation on this issue. More citizens in the mega-cities of Yangon and Mandalay (7%) see this issue as more serious. The rise of concerns about land development in the urban areas feeds into these sentiments.

Figure 78a Seriousness of Land Grabbing Urban vs. Rural, 2019



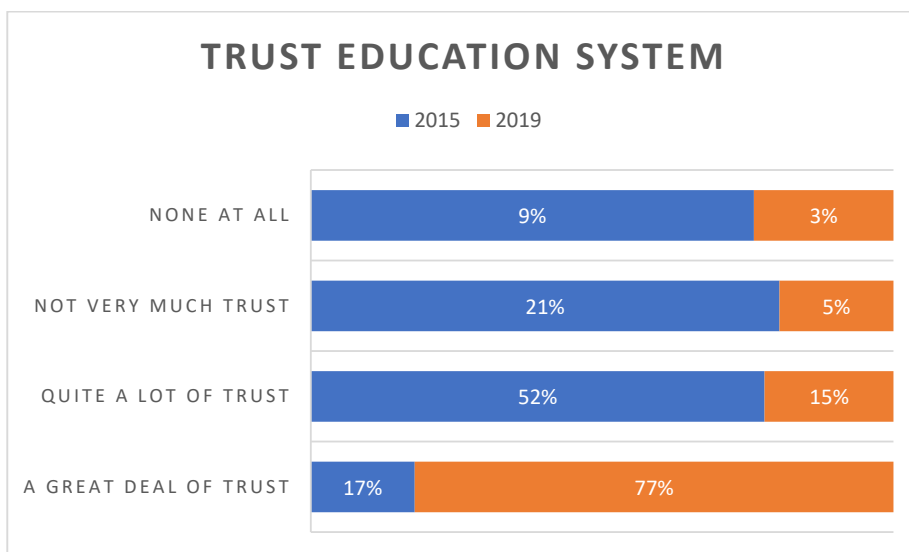
The ABS added a question to the Wave 5 survey on environmental issues with the results detailed in Figure 78b. A majority of Myanmar citizens (62%) see caring for the environment as a serious issue. This concern is particularly high in the urban areas (76%) but persists in rural areas as well, with a majority of villagers (60%) noting serious concern.

Figure 78b Seriousness of Environmental Issues Urban vs. Rural, 2019



While land grabbing and the environment may remain serious issues, citizens recorded more positive views about confidence in the education system. Figure 79 outlines these results, showing a large increase in those having ‘a great deal of trust’ in the education system (from 17% in 2015 to 77% in 2019).

Figure 79 Trust in Education System, 2015 vs 2019



Overall government responsiveness and satisfaction are high. Myanmar citizens recognize important service difficulties and do not hesitate to speak up about their concerns, notably

corruption and the environment. At the same time, they recognize improvements in education, health care and land grabbing.

The Myanmar government however faces an expectation-delivery gap, as many Myanmar citizens report that their basic needs are not being met. Before the onset of the 2015 elections there was considerable discussion of public sector reform and service provision, with attention on decentralization.²⁸ The ABS survey indicates greater attention needs to be placed on improving service delivery and governance.

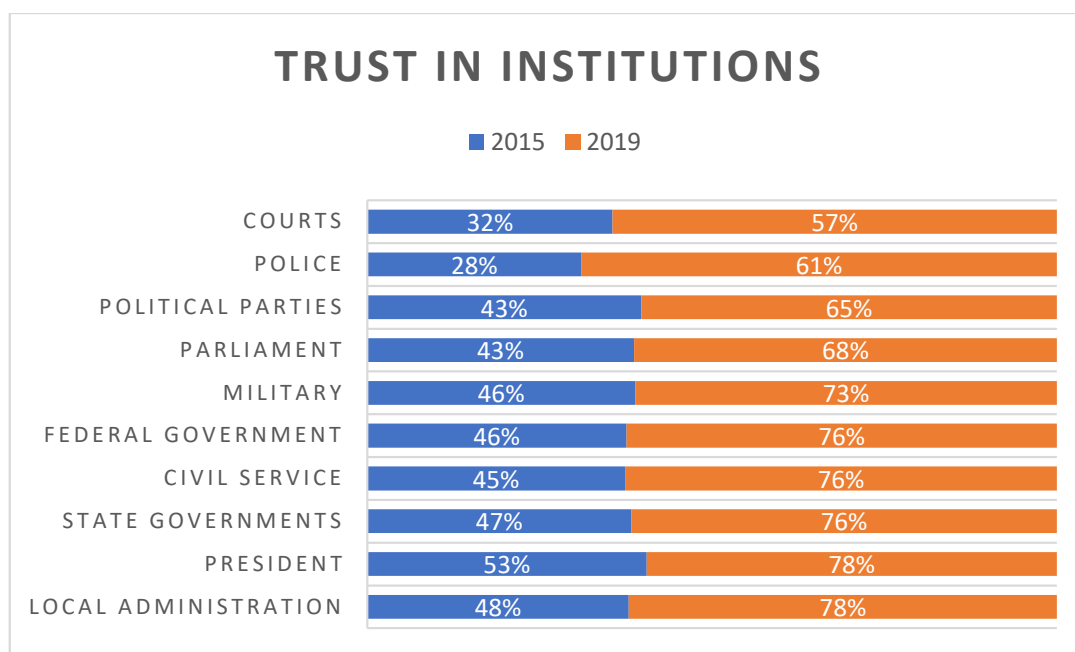
28 See, for example, Hamish Nixon, Cindy Joelene, Kyi Pyar Chit Saw, Thet Aung Lynn, and Matthew Arnold. (2013) *State and region governments in Myanmar*. MDRI-CESD. http://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/State-Region-Government_Policy-Brief_ENG.pdf

Trust in Political Institutions

The area where the ABS found the most improvement in public perceptions is trust in political institutions. Public trust levels increased for every institution – from the courts and the police to the civil service and the presidency.

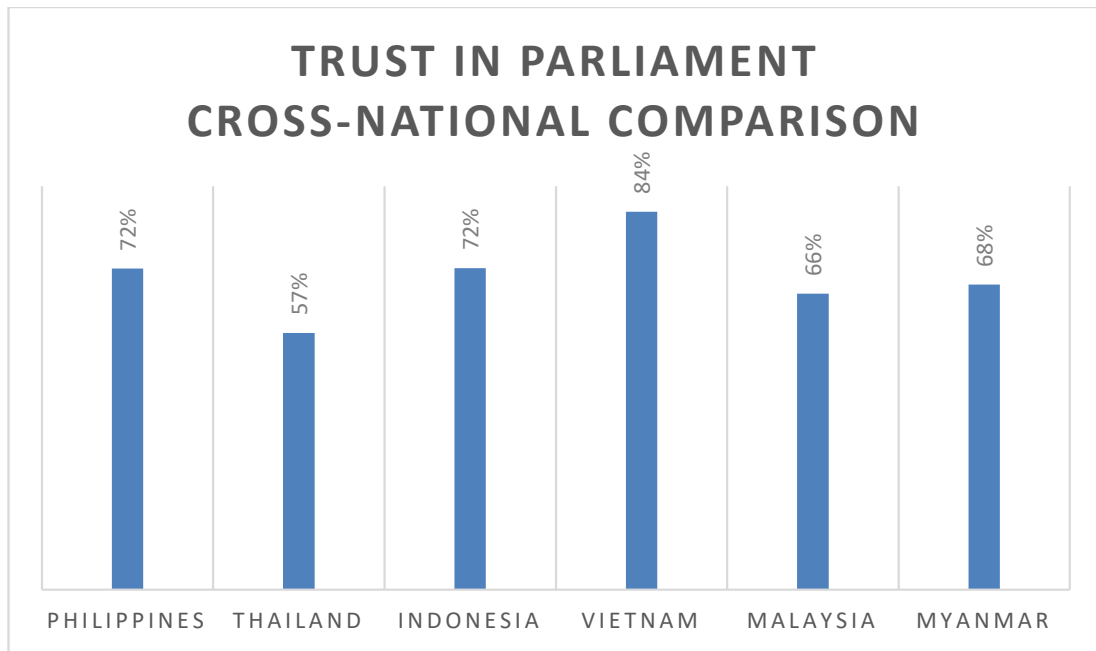
Figure 80 details the shifts in trust in political institutions from 2015 to 2019. The police recorded the highest increase (from 28% to 61%), but similar results were found for local administration (from 48% to 78%) and state governments (from 47% to 76%). These positive shifts indicate confidence in the country's ongoing political transition – Myanmar citizens have greater trust in their political institutions.

Figure 80 Trust in Political Institutions, 2015 vs 2019



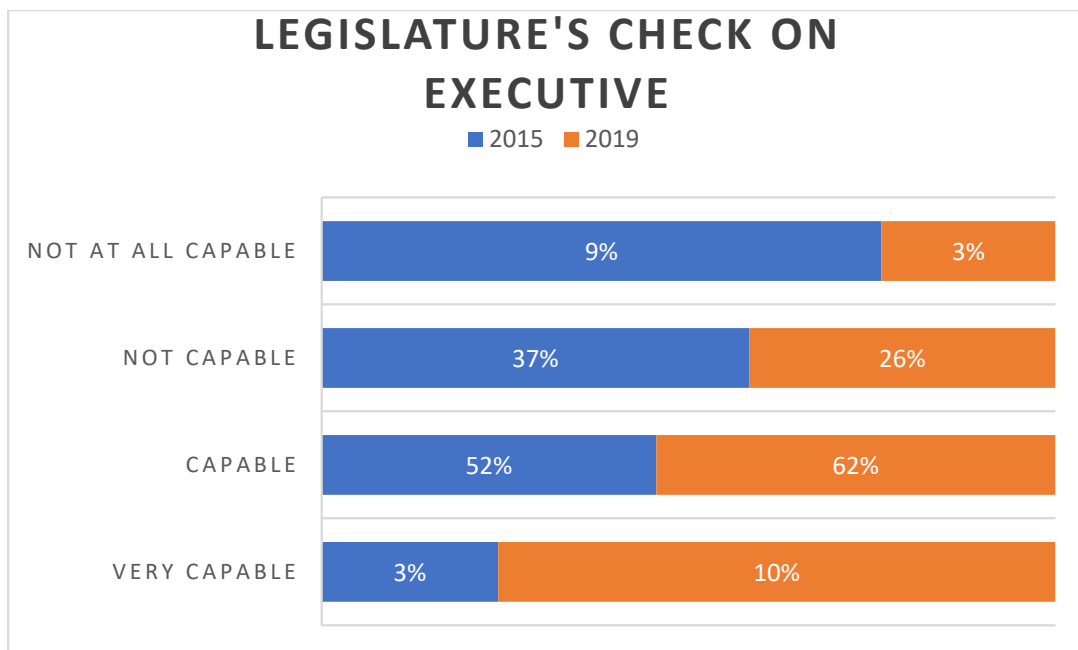
We look at how trust in Myanmar compares to other countries. Figure 81 examining trust in parliament cross-nationally over Southeast Asia shows that Myanmar has among the lowest levels of trust in the legislature (68%), but higher than that of Malaysia (66%) and Thailand. (57%). This reinforces the point made earlier regarding the more positive view of the legislatures in Myanmar.

Figure 81 Trust in Parliament Cross-National Comparison, ABS Wave 5



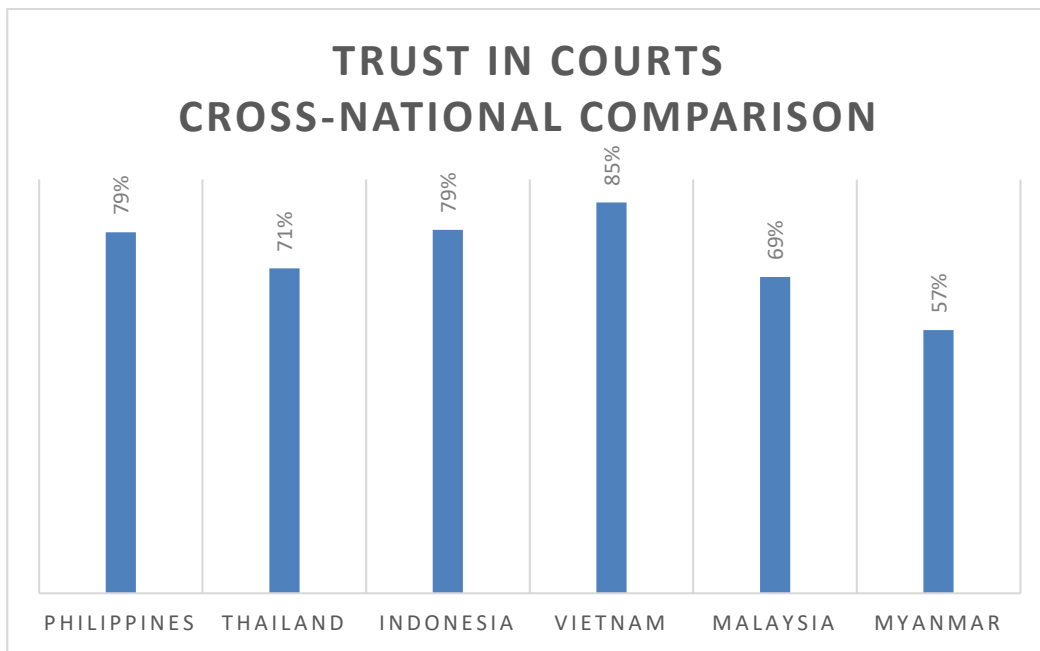
The positive upswing in public confidence was also evident when citizens were asked to assess whether the parliament was a capable check on the executive. Figure 82 shows that a majority (72%) believe it is, a sizeable increase (17%) compared to 2015.

Figure 82 Legislature's Check on Executive, 2015 vs 2019



The Myanmar judiciary was poorly assessed in the 2015 ABS. Public confidence in the courts has increased (25%) as well, but as Figure 83 shows, Myanmar's judiciary continues to rank the lowest among the countries surveyed in the region with regard to trust. Compared to the parliament, trust levels are not as positive.

Figure 83 Trust in Courts Cross-National Comparison, ABS Wave 5



One of the most interesting findings of the ABS involves the increased levels of trust in the military, which gained the trust of over a quarter (27%) more of the population. Given the involvement of the military in conflict and concerns about human rights abuses, these numbers show very different perceptions among Myanmar citizens about the military than is being assessed outside of the country. The next section of the report examines changing support levels for the military in depth, but it is worth highlighting that the increased trust in the military is sizeable and reinforced in a number of questions in the ABS.

Figure 84 Trust in Military Cross-National Comparison, ABS Wave 5

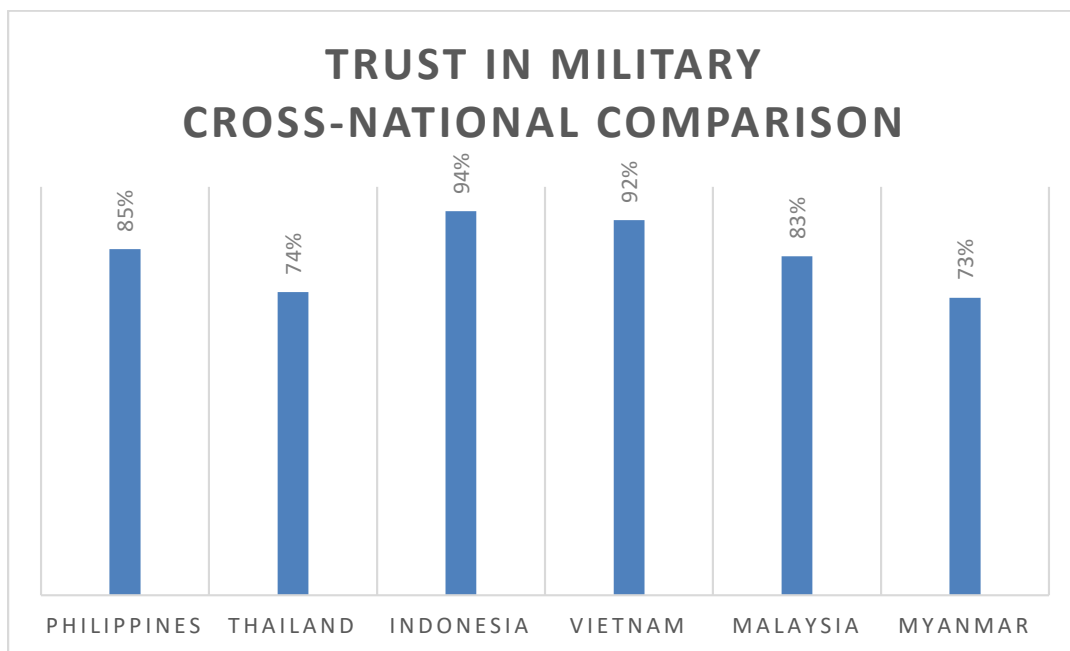


Figure 84 shows that despite these gains, Myanmar's military is the least trusted among the Southeast Asian countries surveyed. It echoes assessments of Thailand, where the military plays a prominent political role.

Given the large rise in trust levels, it is valuable to assess differences among Myanmar citizens. Generation and gender differences, for example, were not that significant with regard to trust in political institutions. Figure 85, detailing trust in the institutions associated with the rule of law, the courts, police and military, show that there is greater trust in the rural areas. Figure 85 shows only those who trust 'fully' or 'a lot' – excluding 'somewhat' included above. The urban-rural difference is starkest with regard to the military.

Figure 85 Variation Rule of Law Institutional Trust Urban vs. Rural, 2019

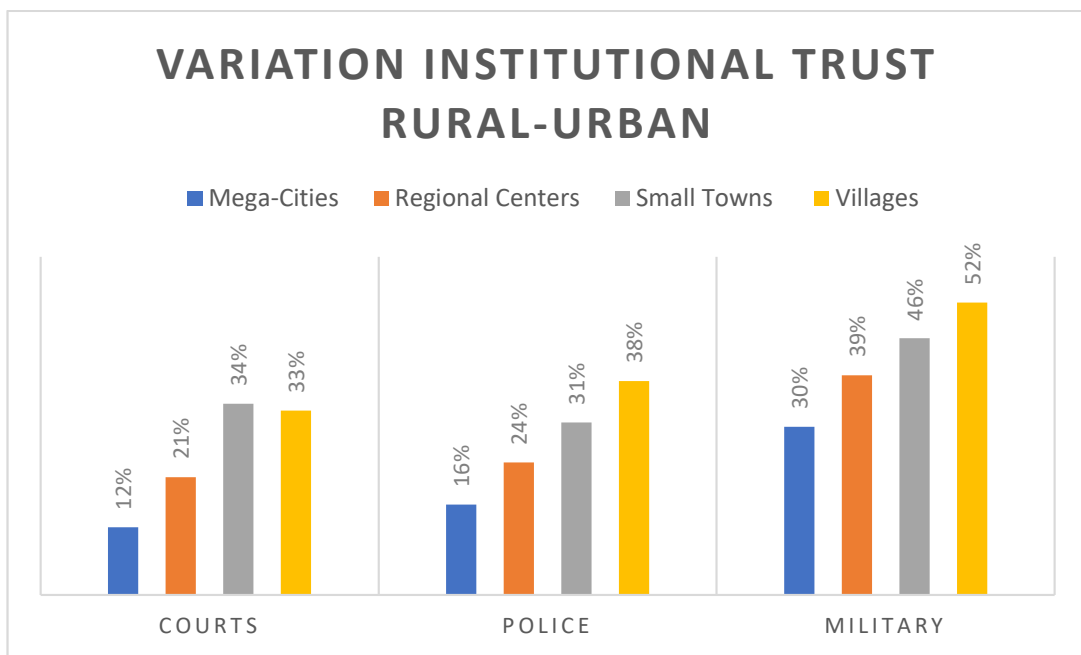


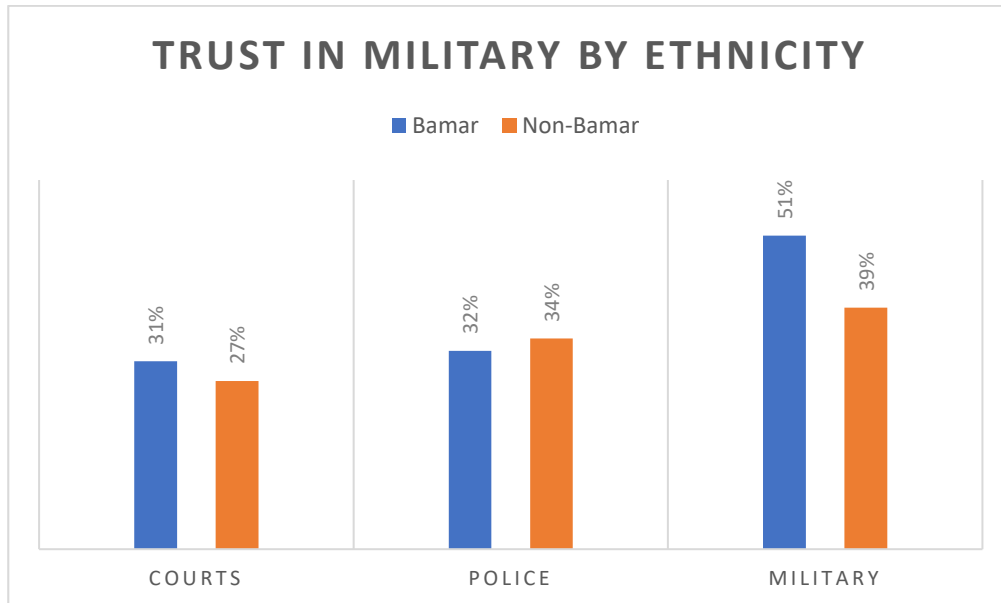
Figure 86 looks at the same responses – trust 'fully' and 'a lot' – by ethnicity. The ethnic difference in trust assessments is marginal with regard to the courts and police, but large (12%) with regard to the military. Ethnic minorities continue to distrust the military more than Bamar, which is in keeping with historic patterns of military intervention in ethnic minority areas. These findings are also echoed in further analysis of support for the military in politics, developed in the section below.

Increasingly scholarship has focused on how institutions function in Myanmar and their relationship with each other.²⁹ Overall, a significant thread has been ongoing democratization in institutions, with discussion of reforms or the need for further reforms – an important, sometimes overlooked, dimension in understanding the changes taking place

29 Nick Cheesman, (2015) *Opposing the Rule of Law: How Myanmar's Courts Make Law and Order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Melissa Crouch, (2018) 'Judiciary', In Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly and Ian Holliday, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 273-81; Roman Egretreau, (2017). *Parliamentary Development in Myanmar: An Overview of the Union Parliament, 2011-2016*. https://www.think-asia.org/bitstream/handle/11540/7316/Parliamentary-Development-in-Myanmar_English.pdf?sequence=1; Marco Bunte, (2018) 'Perilous presidentialism or precarious power-sharing? Hybrid regime dynamics in Myanmar.' *Contemporary Politics* 24, no. 3: 346-360.

in Myanmar's political institutions with the public at large. For now, the ABS results suggest that the reforms taking place have been positively received by the public.

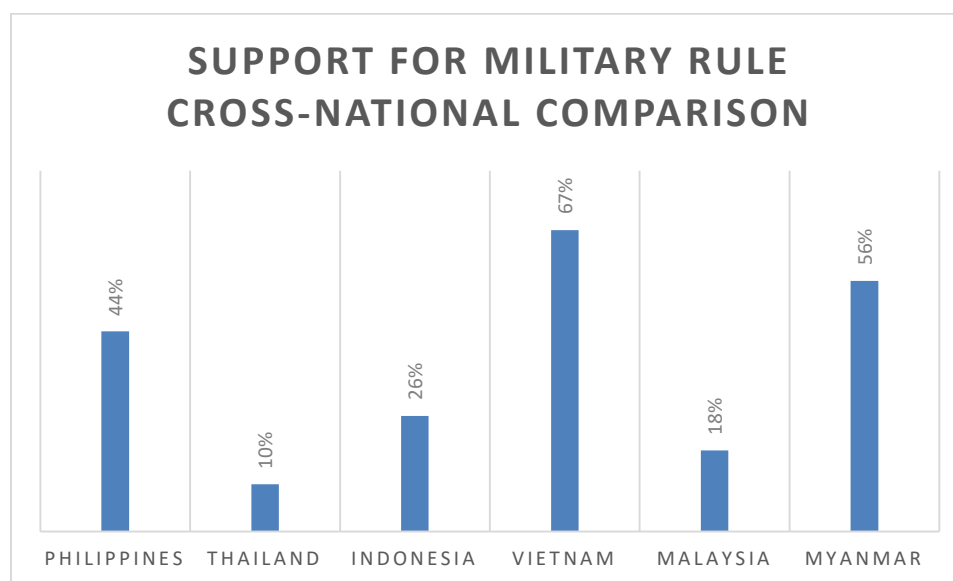
Figure 86 Trust in Military by Ethnicity, 2019



The Military's Political Role and Constitutional Reform

Having governed Myanmar for 62 years and the focal point of political change in 2015, the increase in trust in the military or *Tatmadaw* found in the ABS raises questions about its role in the ongoing political transition. The military continues to wield considerable power in Myanmar and, as scholars have argued, sets the parameters of democratization in the country.³⁰ The Myanmar ABS asks a series of questions about the military's role in politics and issues related to constitutional change, the legal document that allows the military to continue to play a major role in domestic politics despite holding a competitive election.³¹

Figure 87 Support for Military Rule Cross-National Comparison, ABS Wave 5



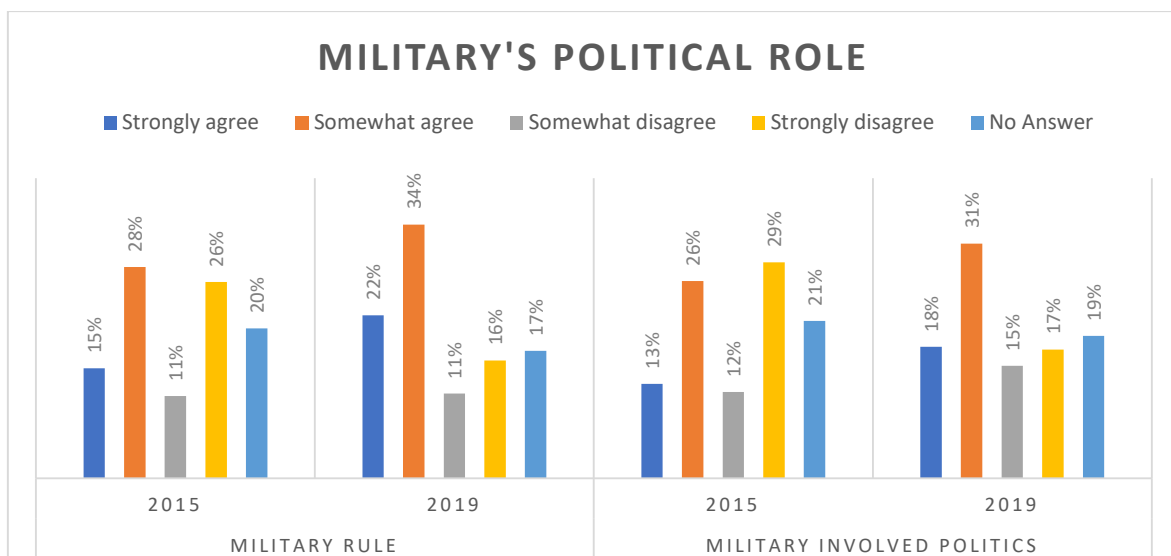
30 See, for example, Andrew Selth, (2018) 'The defence services.' In Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly and Ian Holliday, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 50-59; Roman Egreteau, (2016). *Caretaking democratization: The military and political change in Myanmar*. Hurst & Co.; Myoe, Maung Aung. (2018) 'Partnership in Politics: The Tatmadaw and the NLD in Myanmar since 2016.' In *Myanmar Transformed? People, Places and Politics*, Yusof Ishak – ISEAS, pp. 201-230; Andrew Selth, (2018) 'All Going According to Plan? The Armed Forces and Government in Myanmar.' *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 40, no. 1: 1-26; Marco Bunte, (2019) 'Policing politics: Myanmar's military regime and protest spaces in transition.' In Eva Hansson and Meredith L. Weiss (eds.) *Political Participation in Asia*, Routledge, pp. 188-205; Darin Christensen, Mai Nguyen, and Renard Sexton. (2019) 'Strategic violence during democratization: Evidence from Myanmar.' *World Politics* 71, no. 2: 332-366

31 For an excellent discussion of the 2008 Constitution see Melissa Crouch, (2019), *The Constitution of Myanmar: A Contextual Analysis*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Respondents were asked whether the 'military should come in and govern the country.' Figure 87 shows Myanmar has the second largest majority (56%) favoring military rule in the Southeast Asian countries surveyed, after Vietnam (which has not had military rule in the past although the military is closely aligned with the governing party). Myanmar's majority is much higher than that of Indonesia (26%), which has a similar long history of military rule, and Thailand (10%), where the military was holding power at the time of the survey conducted there.

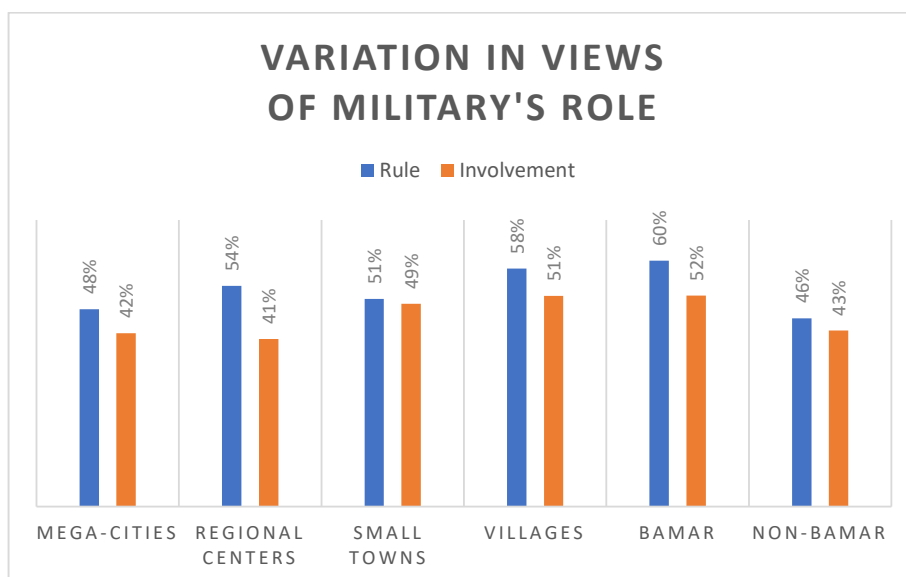
The high number of citizens supporting military rule is an increase from that in 2015 (up to 56% from 48%), as shown in Figure 88. The ABS also asked whether the military should be involved in politics. Here too there is an increase in favor of a military political role (from 39% to 49%). This shift in views towards the military has negative implications for support for democracy in Myanmar. While nearly one fifth (17% and 19%) refused to answer these questions, this does not take away from the increased support for the military in politics.

Figure 88 Military's Involvement in Politics, 2015 vs 2019



As shown in Figure 89 below, we find similar variation among Myanmar citizens with regard to trust in the military and the military's political role. Bamar are more likely to support a role for the military compared to non-Bamar. Those in rural areas are also considerably more supportive of a military role than those in urban areas.

Figure 89 Variation in Views of Military by Urban-Rural and Ethnicity, 2019



Given the importance of the military to democracy in Myanmar, we delved further into analyzing what might help us understand this shift toward more support for a greater role for the military. Using an OLS (ordinary least squares) regression that allows us to test the relationships between different explanations we examine three sets of factors that can explain the shift – demographic factors such as ethnicity, age, gender, urban-rural and education, behavior such as use of social media, whether you work in the public sector and religiosity, as well as views individuals have over the seriousness of ethnic conflict, economic performance, nationalism, traditional values and corruption. In identifying possible explanations, we isolated potential factors that have been associated with shaping views of the military, e.g. their role in ethnic conflict, their role in the economy, protecting the nation, connection to more traditional values and allegations of military involvement in corruption. We assessed which of the factors were relevant and more important in understanding this shift. While related, we looked at both support for military rule and military involvement in politics separately, to disaggregate patterns of underlying support.

The findings summarized in Table 1 suggest that support for the military is a product of a combination of factors.³² Across both military rule and military involvement, three factors stand out – age, the urban-rural divide and traditional values. Younger, rural citizens with traditional values have more support for the military. Less evenly significant are gender, ethnicity, religiosity, social media use and those that have less democratic values, opting for economic performance over democracy. Women, Bamar, highly self-reported religious, those who report low levels of social media use and who prioritize the economy support the military in political life to a greater degree. These factors vary somewhat with regard to military rule or involvement, with ethnicity, gender, religiosity, and prioritizing the economy more important for those opting for military rule. We see a divergence over factors explaining military involvement, with less educated, those that assess economic performance highly, and who, importantly, see ethnic conflict as a serious

32 The details of the statistical analysis are available on the ABS website, ABS Myanmar Report Appendix A. Please note that the original report had an error. It should have been female not male support for the military.

factor supporting military involvement in politics. The factors that were not significant at all were nationalism, working in the public sector and perceptions of corruption. These findings collectively show that the military has retained a part of its traditional base – those in rural areas, religious with traditional values, Bamar and women – but at the same time has been reaching out to a new base – the young, those concerned with the seriousness of ethnic conflict and those less satisfied with the NLD's economic performance.

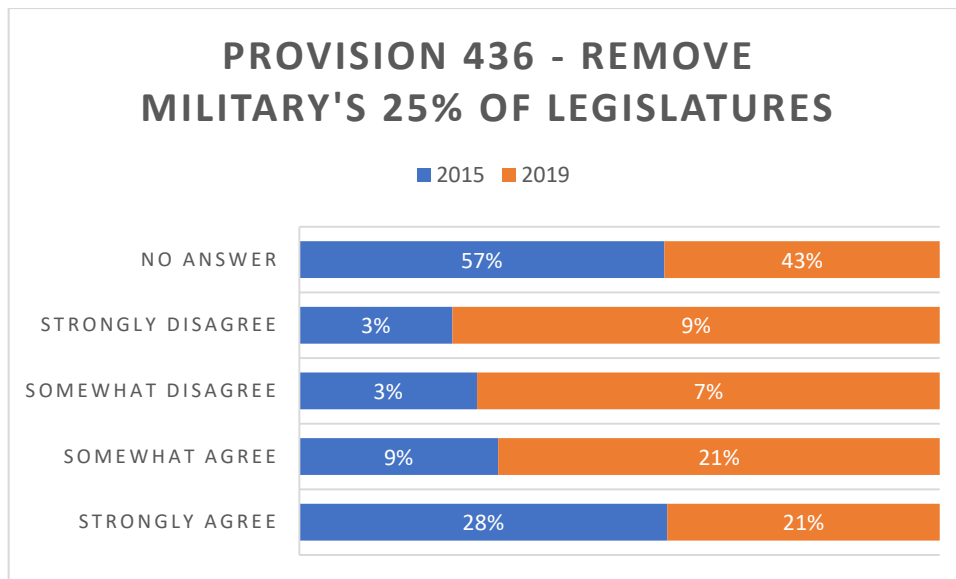
Table 1 Summary of Statistically Significant Factors Explaining Support for Military

Explanatory Factors	Military Rule	Military Involvement
Gender	Female**	Female*
Age	Younger***	Younger***
Urban-Rural	Rural***	Rural***
Ethnicity	Bamar***	Bamar*
Religiosity	High***	High**
Education	Not Significant	Low **
Social Media	Low Use**	Low Use**
Traditional Values	High***	High***
Prioritize Economy Over Democracy	Economy***	Economy**
Economic Performance	Not Significant	Good**
Ethnic Conflict	Not Significant	Serious ***

* refer to different levels of statistical significance, higher levels = more asterixes.

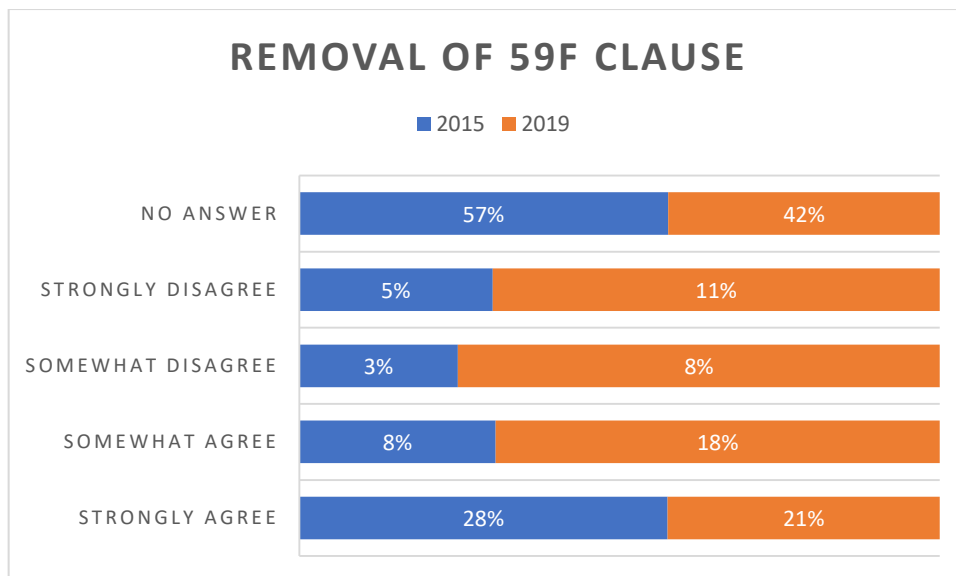
The divisions over military rule extend to views about amending the 2008 Constitution. The issue of amending the constitution was debated and voted on in the parliament in March 2020, after the ABS survey but before this report was published. One of the most contentious issues involves the removal of the *Tatmadaw's* reserved 25% share in the legislatures. Figure 90 shows that most Myanmar citizens (43%) refuse to answer this question, and those that do generally favor this constitutional change (42%) compared to those who disagree (16%). There has been a modest shift toward opposing the measure as well. It is important to keep in mind that many citizens do not understand the specifics of the constitutional changes, which accounts in part for the large share of respondents not answering this question.

Figure 90 Removal of Military Constitutional Threshold, 2015 vs 2019



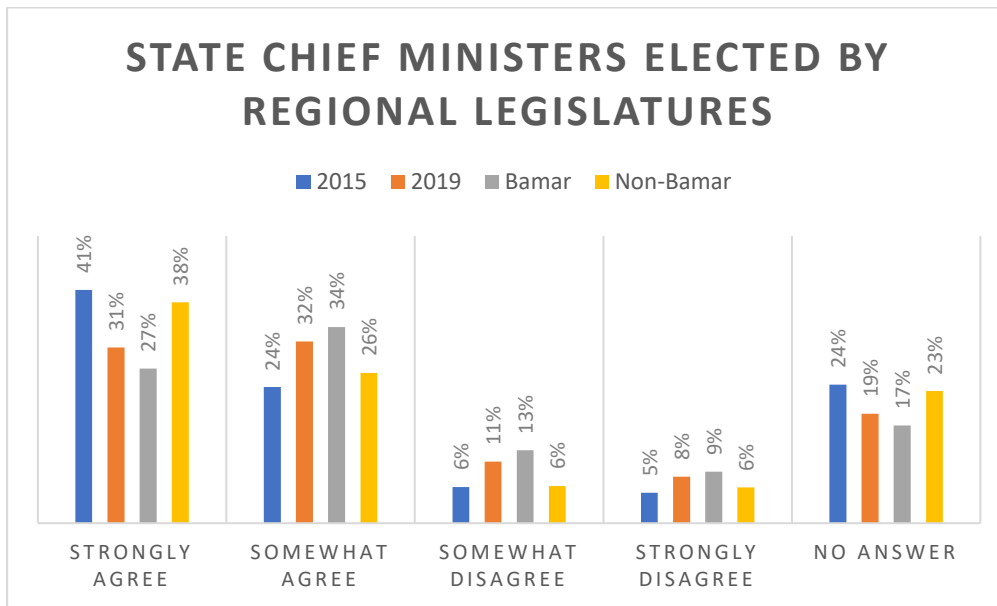
The same pattern was found with regard to the removal of clause 59F, which prohibits NLD leader and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi from assuming the presidency. The majority similarly did not answer the question (42%), with the plurality of those that did favoring the measure (39%). The share against the measure increased (10%) over time, as shown in Figure 91.

Figure 91 Removal 59F Clause, 2015 vs 2019



The last question on constitutional reform the ABS asked was about the ability of the regional legislatures to select their own chief minister, as opposed to the appointment of chief ministers from the center by the national government. The 'no answers' (24%) are considerably lower than the other amendments, and the answers to the question are more divided. Figure 92 shows that a third 'strongly' favor (31%), another third 'favor' (32%) and nearly a fifth (18%) oppose the measure. Overall, there is broad support for this reform.

Figure 92 Regional Legislatures Electing State Chief Ministers, 2015 vs 2019 by Ethnicity



As many of the states are dominated by ethnic minorities, we disaggregated the responses by ethnicity. Non-Bamar favor the measure (64%) more than Bamar (61%), but this is largely a matter of intensity as more Non-Bamar 'strongly' agree with the measure (38% compared to 27%). Bamar also oppose this measure more than non-Bamar (22% compared to 12%). Implementing this reform would not only have broad public support but address the concerns of exclusion of the ethnic minorities in governance.

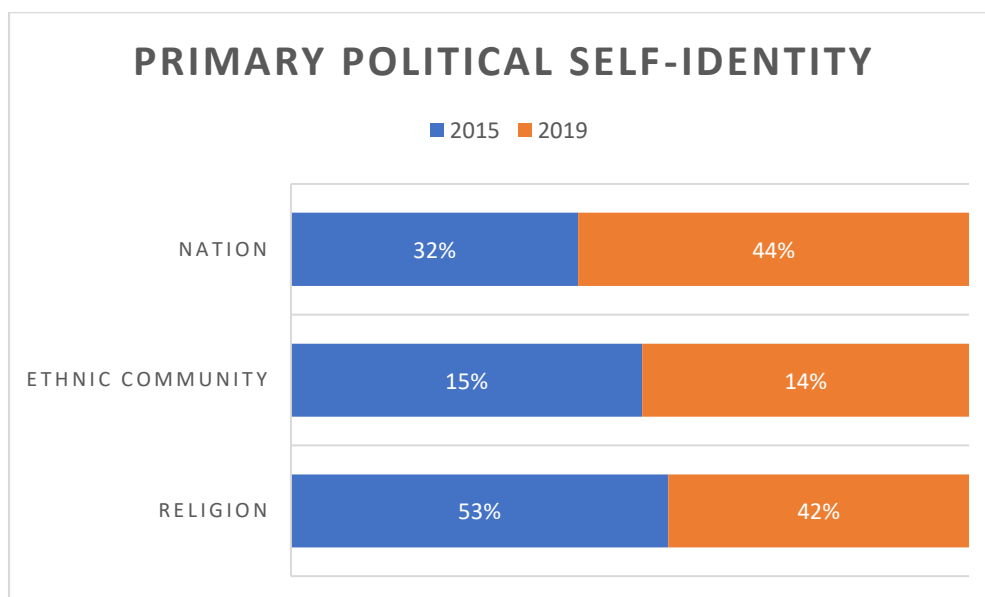
The ABS findings suggest two conflicting trends. On the one hand, more Myanmar citizens support military rule and the military being involved in politics. On the other, there is public support for amending the constitutional provisions that are intertwined with their power and legacy. The findings do suggest that the military is developing a new base of political support which strengthens their support in Myanmar society.

Political Identity and Conflict

The issue of political identity and conflict continue to be major challenges as Myanmar undergoes political transition. The rights of different communities, issues of inclusion and conflict have marred Myanmar's democratization, as the country has witnessed more open conflict and heightened concerns about discrimination than was the case four years ago. The current government inherited serious legacy issues involving conflicts that remain unresolved. The ABS asked a series of questions that shed light on these issues and finds interesting trends that point to a mixed picture for conflict reduction.

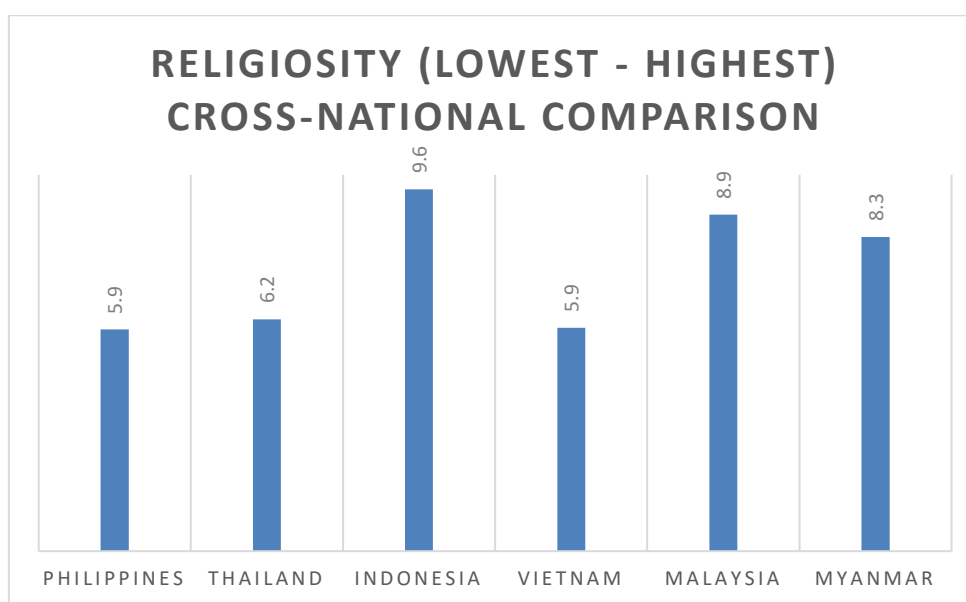
Myanmar citizens were asked how they identified themselves, which of the following they prioritized – their nation (being a Myanmar citizen), their ethnic community (e.g. Bamar, Shan, Chin, Kachin, Rakhine, Karen, Mon or one of the other ethnic communities) or their faith (e.g. Buddhist, Christian, Hindu or Muslim). The results in Figure 93 show that more Myanmar citizens opt for their national identity (44%) over their religion (42%) or their ethnic community (14%). Despite the continued mobilization of religion in politics, increasingly more citizens are opting for their national identity (12% more) over their faith (11% drop). This suggests that a crucial part of the ongoing political transition has been building national cohesion, with modest success.

Figure 93 Primary Political Self-Identity



Studies have shown that religion, namely Buddhism, plays a major role in political life in the country.³³ The 2015 ABS found religious identity to be a divisive force.³⁴ The current data shows that the influence of religion on political identity has reduced, even as religion continues to be an important source of political identity in everyday life. The central role that religion plays in Myanmar is evident in the data when self-reported levels of religiosity are compared across the region, as shown in Figure 94. Myanmar has the third highest level of religiosity, after that of Indonesia and Malaysia. The difference with Thailand – also a Buddhist country – is striking.

Figure 94 Religiosity Cross-National Comparison, ABS Wave 5



Even as religion plays a large role in daily life, the ABS found that there is a move away from the approval of religious authorities playing a role in politics. A slim majority (51%) believe that leaders should consult the religious authorities when making laws, as shown in Figure 95. This is sharply down from what was the case four years ago (69%), as more disagree with this measure (from 14% to 30%). This measure has been a proxy for secularism and suggests increasing secularism in Myanmar.

33 Matthew J. Walton, (2016). *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar*. Cambridge University Press.

34 Bridget Welsh and Kai-Ping Huang, (2016), 'Public Perceptions of a Divided Myanmar: Findings from the 2015 Asian Barometer Survey.' In Nick Cheeseman and Nicholas Farrelly (eds.) *Conflict in Myanmar: War, Politics, Religion*. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, pp. 261-284.

Figure 95 Consult Religious Authorities, 2015 vs 2019

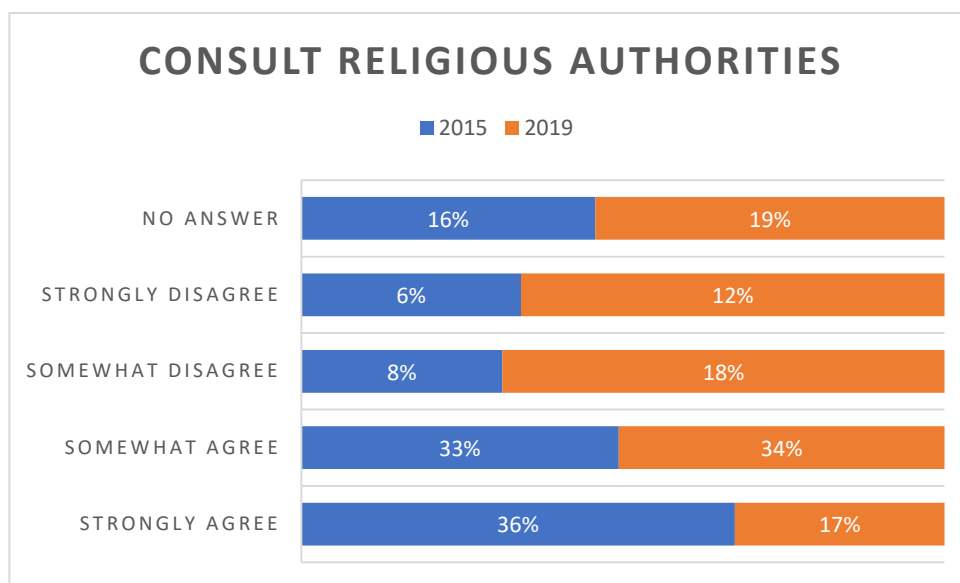
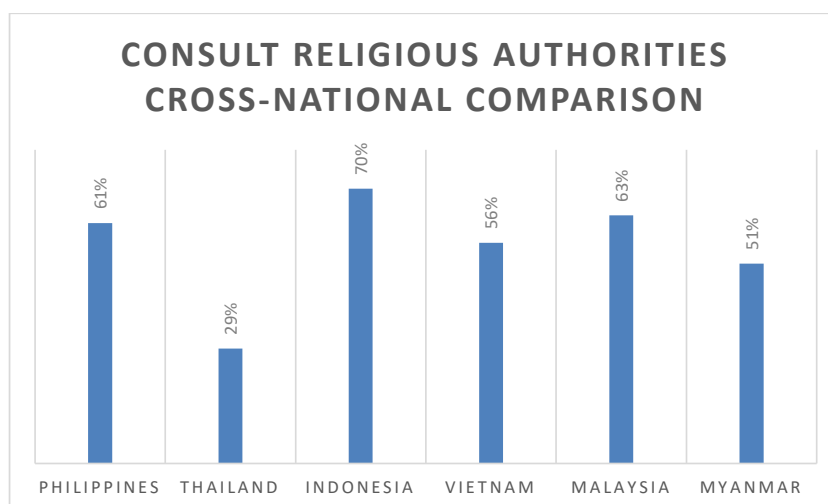


Figure 96 shows that when Myanmar is compared to other countries surveyed, it is among the lowest in the region supporting consultation with religious authorities. Indonesia (70%), Malaysia (63%) and the Philippines (61%) have the highest majorities on this issue. Only Thailand – a fellow Buddhist-majority country – has lower results (29%).

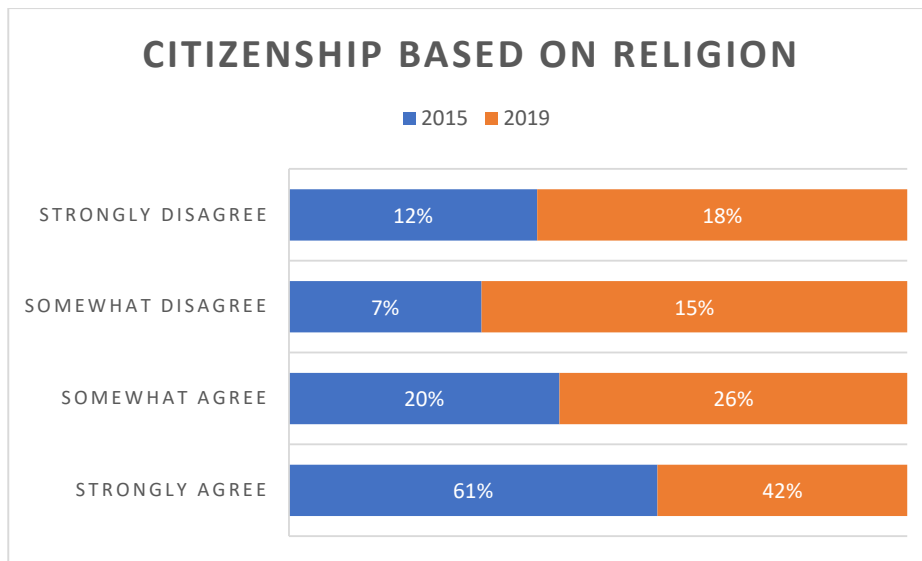
Figure 96 Consult Religious Authorities Cross-National Comparison, ABS Wave 5



The declining saliency of religion in political life is also evident when citizens were asked whether citizenship should be based on religion, as shown in Figure 97. Studies have shown that citizenship is highly contested in Myanmar, an issue that the Rohingya conflict has brought to international attention.³⁵ While over two-thirds agree with this statement (68%), this is a considerable decline from four years ago (81%). There is also a reduction in the intensity of these views held, as those ‘strongly agreeing’ reduced (from 61% to 42%). A third reject the notion of citizenship being tied to religion (33%).

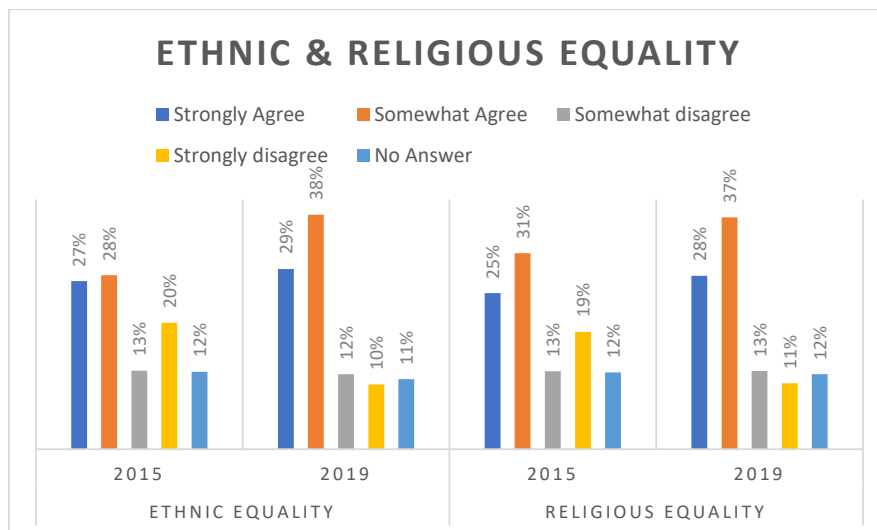
35 Ashley South, and Marie Lall, (eds.) (2017) *Citizenship in Myanmar: Ways of Being in and from Burma*. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

Figure 97 Citizenship Based on Religion, 2015 vs 2019



The ABS survey asked about perceptions of ethnic and religious equality – whether different ethnic and religious communities were treated equally by the government. Figure 98 shows the findings, with two-thirds believing they are (66% for ethnic equality and 65% for religious equality). These results are higher than in 2015 (55% and 56% respectively). The plurality of views is ‘somewhat agree’.

Figure 98 Ethnic and Religious Equality, 2015 vs 2019



Citizens were also asked about how they perceived changes in ethnic and religious conflict, as shown in Figure 99. A majority (50%) believes that ethnic conflict has become more serious, with a small share of these believing it is much more serious (8%). Less than a third (30%) believe ethnic conflict has become less serious. With regard to religious conflict, the majority believe it has become less serious (50%), with less than a quarter (24%) believing it has become more serious. In fact, some citizens (14%) believe it is not serious at all. For Myanmar ethnic conflict is more pronounced than religious conflict, in sharp contrast to how issues are being perceived outside of Myanmar.

Figure 99 Ethnic and Religious Conflict, 2015 vs 2019

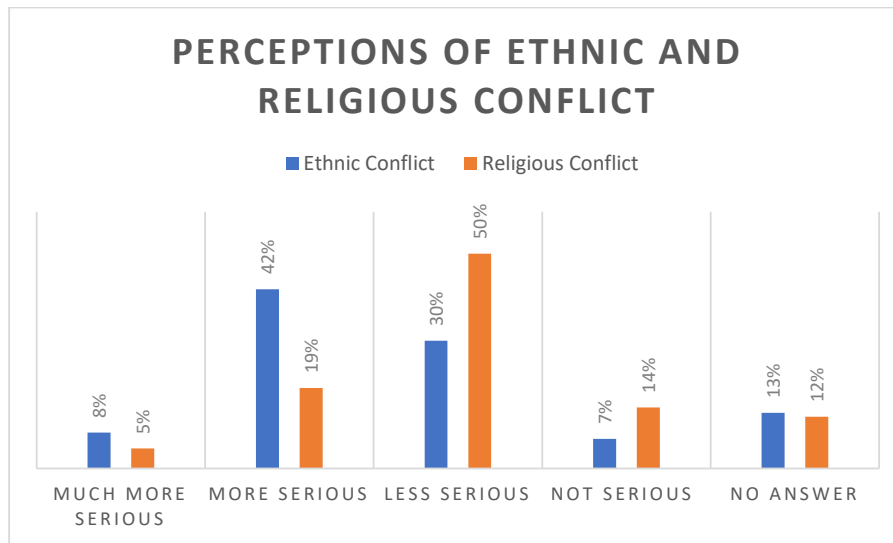
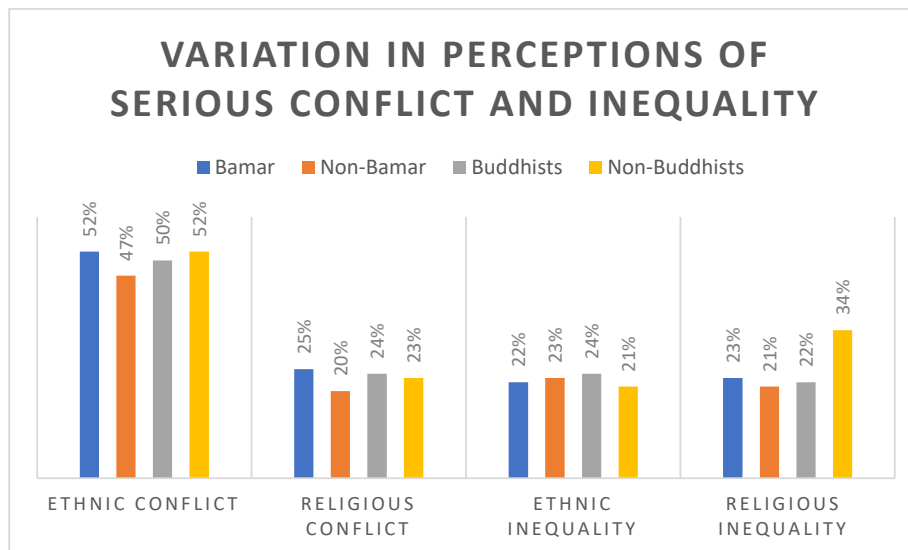


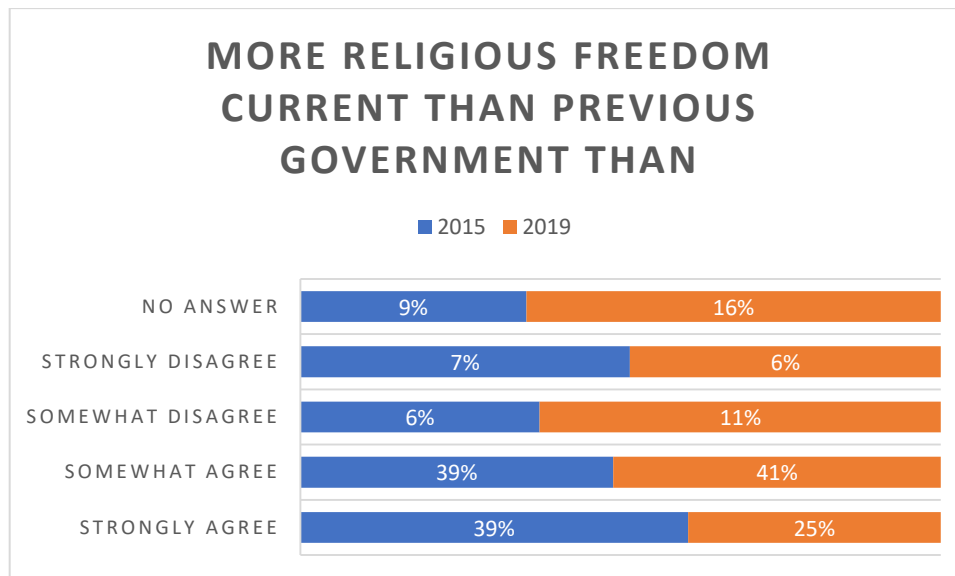
Figure 100 looks at the differences across the major ethnic groups and religions with regard to ethnic conflict and inequality. What stands out is the similarity across views on the issues, rather than the differences. It is only with regard to religious inequality where there is a difference, with religious minorities believing there is more inequality (34%) than Buddhists (22%).

Figure 100 Variation Ethnic and Religious Equality and Conflict Serious, 2019



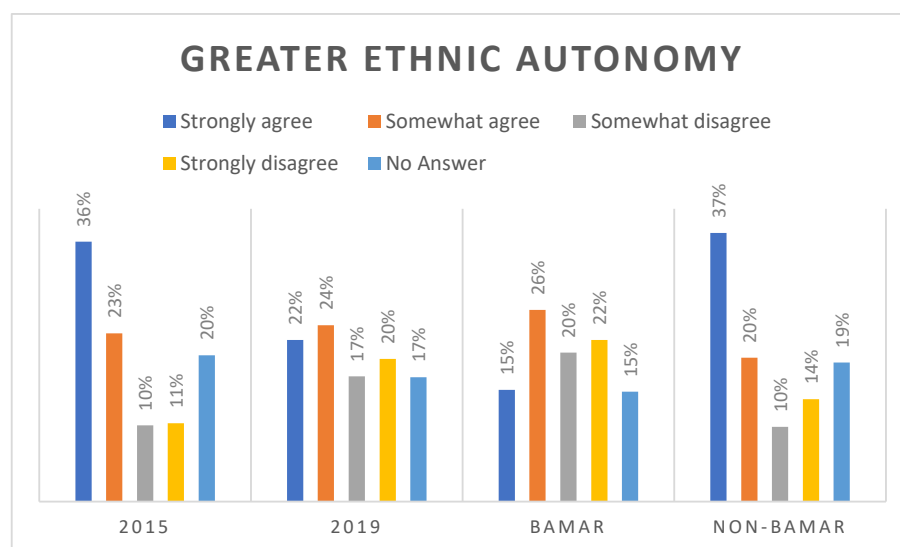
The ABS asked citizens about how they perceived changes in religious freedom, whether there was more religious freedom in the NLD government than in the previous (Thein Sein) USDP government. Figure 101 shows that a two-thirds majority (66%) agrees with this sentiment, although most 'somewhat agree'. More opted not to answer this question (16%) this time round, with a small increase in those believing there is less freedom in the current government (17% in 2019 compared to 13% in 2015).

Figure 101 Religious Freedom Current vs Previous Government, 2015 vs 2019



Citizens were asked whether ethnic nationalities should have autonomy in their states and regions. Studies have repeatedly shown the thorny issue of autonomy is intertwined with ethnic conflict in Myanmar and an obstacle to the peace process, which has not fared well with increasing democratization.³⁶ There was an overall drop in the support for ethnic autonomy over the two waves (from 59% in 2015 to 46% in 2019), as shown in Figure 102. More opposed autonomy, (up from 21% in 2015 to 37% in 2019), with a large share strongly opposing ethnic autonomy (20%). This contrasts with the views on the constitutional reform empowering state legislatures to elect their Chief Ministers.

Figure 102 Ethnic Autonomy, 2015 vs 2019 by Ethnicity

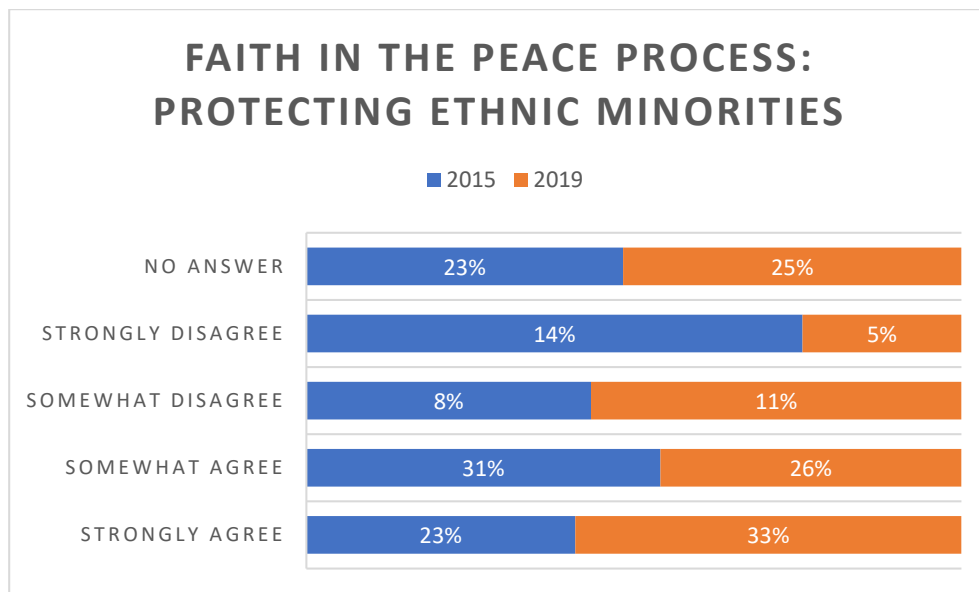


36 See, for example, Ashley South, (2008) *Ethnic politics in Burma: States of conflict*. Routledge; Nick Cheesman, and Nicholas Farrelly, (eds.) (2016) *Conflict in Myanmar: war, politics, religion*. ISEAS-Yusuf Ishak Institute; Narayanan Ganesan, (2017) 'Democratization and its implications for the resolution of ethnic conflict in Myanmar.' *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 5, no. 1: 111-129; Ashley South. (2018) "'Hybrid Governance" and the Politics of Legitimacy in the Myanmar Peace Process.' *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 48, no. 1: 50-66.

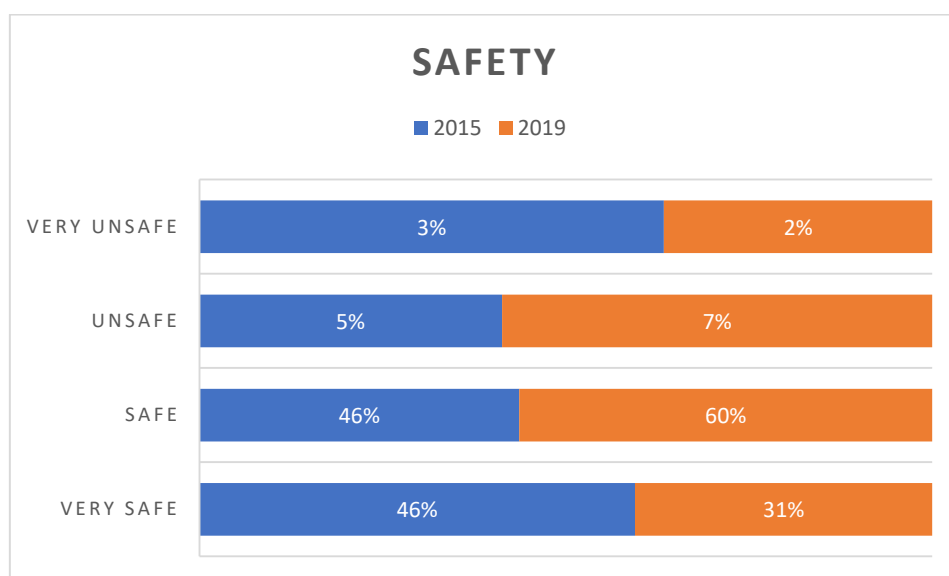
The views on this issue vary sharply between Bamar and non-Bamar. There is much more (and stronger) support on the part of ethnic minorities for ethnic autonomy (57% non-Bamar compared to 41%, with 37% non-Bamar ‘strongly’ agreeing with idea). More Bamar oppose ethnic autonomy (42% compared to 24% non-Bamar). The issue of ethnic autonomy divides communities.

Despite differences on the issue of autonomy, all communities continue to have high levels of faith that the peace process will protect minorities. Figure 103 shows that there is a marginal increase in the majority having faith in the peace process over the two waves of the survey (from 54% to 59%). The intensity of faith has shifted with more confidence in the peace process compared to the past (‘strongly agree’ 33% in 2019 compared to 23% in 2015). A look at differences across ethnicity shows few differences. Non-Bamar distrust the peace process slightly more than Bamar (17% as compared to 15%), showing that faith in the peace process remains high across communities despite the process itself being bogged down in recent years. This points to an urgency to move the peace process meaningfully forward.

Figure 103 Faith in Peace Process, 2015 vs 2019



Finally, the ABS asked about perceptions of safety. Figure 104 shows that essentially the same share of people feel safe in 2019 (91%) as in 2015 (92%), although the number reporting ‘very safe’ has dropped (from 46% to 31%). Ethnic communities reported similar views (91% for Bamar, 90% for non-Bamar), but religious minorities felt slightly less safe (86%) than Buddhists (92%).

Figure 104 Safety, 2015 vs 2019

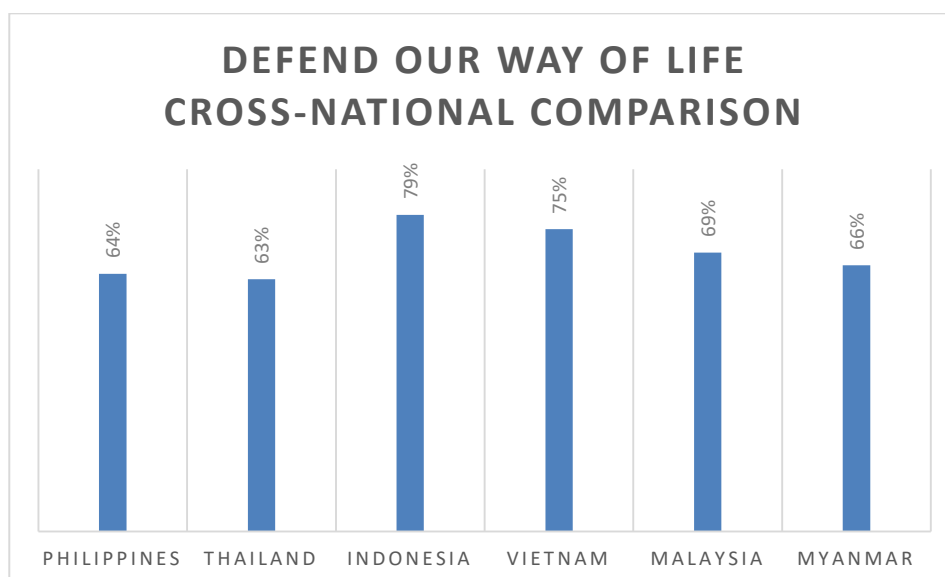
The ABS findings offer optimism in the underlying drivers of conflict. Tensions over religion are perceived to have declined, with more Myanmar citizens taking on a national identity. There remains confidence in the government's treatment of religious and ethnic communities, even among these communities. Faith in the peace process persists among a majority of Myanmar citizens. There are differences over ethnic autonomy, however, which shows that despite efforts to reduce religious tensions, there are considerable challenges ahead in reducing conflict.

Globalization and Global Affairs

The final section of the ABS looks at how Myanmar citizens perceive the international environment – their engagement/relations with other countries and changes in the regional context. As Myanmar has opened up, faced increased international attention and criticism, and adjusted to new global developments, the Myanmar public has adopted new attitudes toward the international community.

Myanmar is often portrayed as highly nationalistic.³⁷ While a two-thirds majority (66%) do agree that more should be done to defend their way of life as opposed to learning from other countries, the cross-national comparison, shown in Figure 105, shows that Myanmar citizens' views are in line with other countries in the region. In fact, Indonesia (79%) and Vietnam (75%) express more defensiveness towards nationalism. The current figure (66%) is a sizeable drop from that reported in 2015 (79%).

Figure 105 Defend our Way of Life Cross-National Comparison, ABS Wave 5



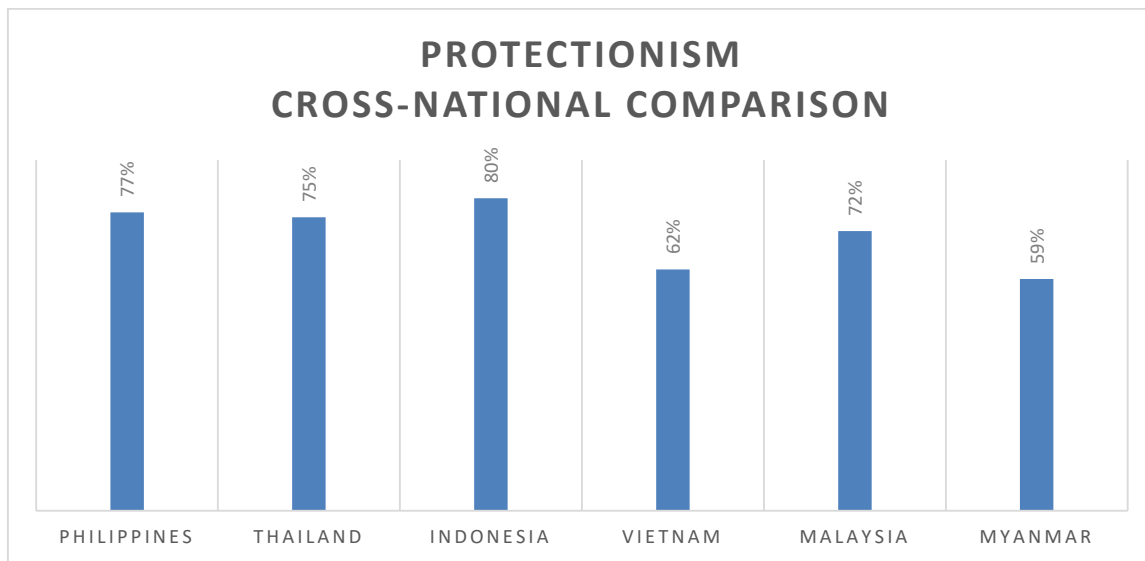
A majority (59%) also adopted more protectionist views, with a third (33%) opting for 'strong' views. Citizens were asked to choose which of the following statements they agreed with: 'Our country should limit the imports of foreign goods to protect our farmers

37 See, for example, Matthew J. Walton and Susan Hayward. (2014) *Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, nationalism, and communal violence in Myanmar*. Honolulu, HI: East-West Center.

and workers' or 'Our country should do more trade with other countries even if the rise of imports might harm our workers and farmers.' The former statement reflects more protectionism.

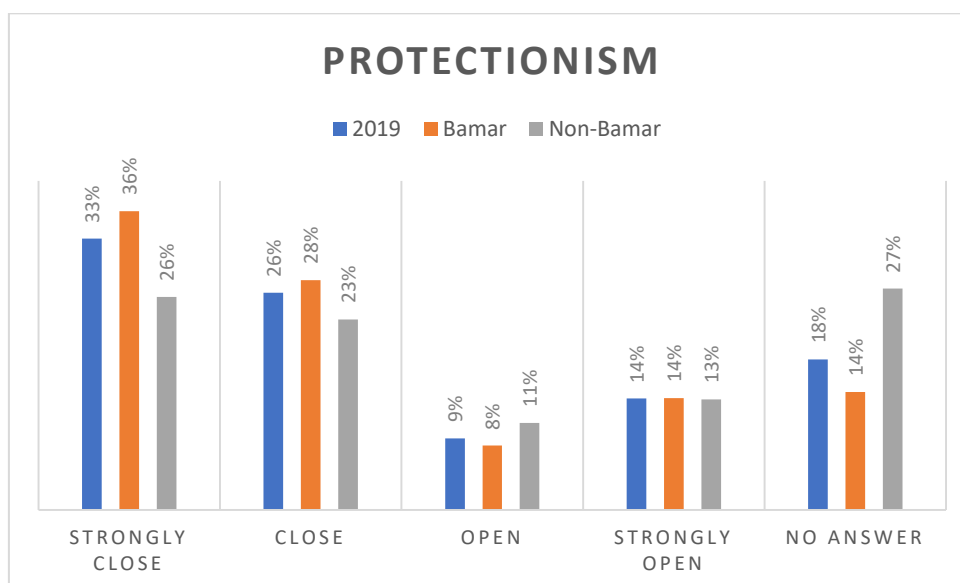
Figure 106a looks at how Myanmar compares with the region with regard to protectionism. The findings show that Myanmar (59%) has the lowest reported protectionist views among the countries surveyed in Wave 5. Vietnam follows (at 62%). The rest of the countries surveyed have considerably higher protectionist views, notably Indonesia (at 80%). This finding calls into question the view that Myanmar is a highly protectionist country.

Figure 106a Protectionism Cross-National Comparison, ABS Wave 5



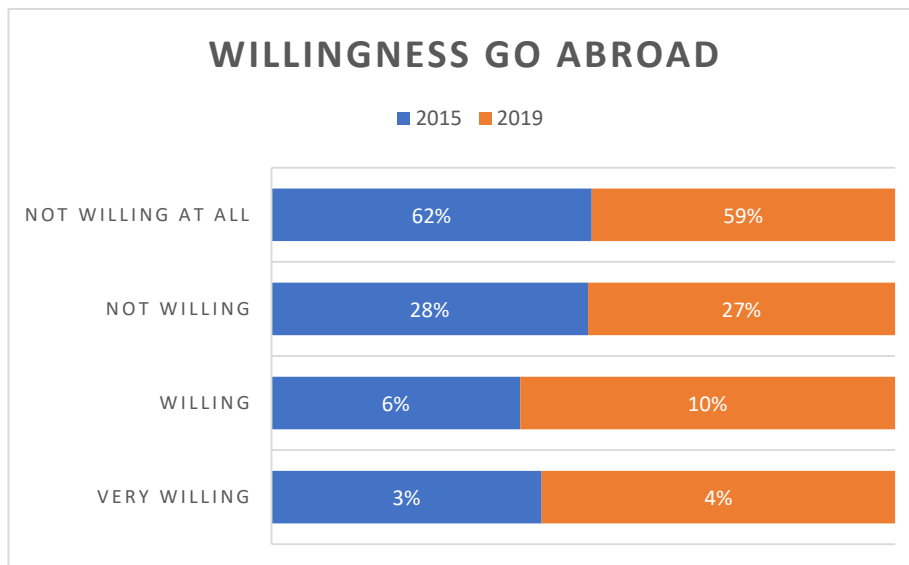
Views across Myanmar society vary little. We find, as shown in 106b, that non-Bamar, for example, are less inclined to answer the question, resulting in more Bamar adopting protectionist views (64% compared to 49% of non-Bamar).

Figure 106b Protectionism, 2019



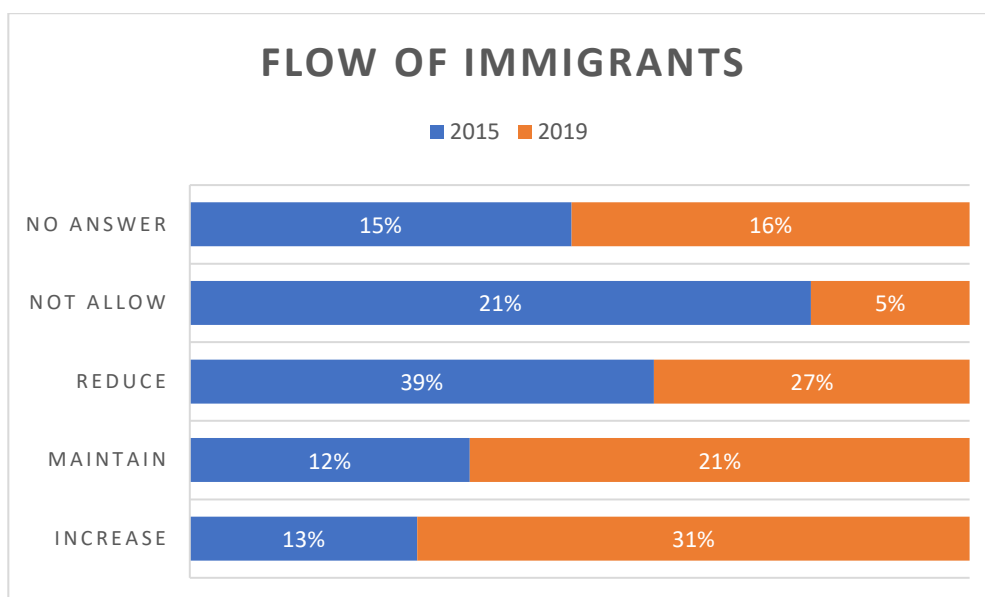
The ABS also asked citizens if they were willing to go abroad. Figure 107 shows that views have changed very little as the country has opened up. A majority (59%) are not willing at all to go abroad.

Figure 107 Willingness to Go Abroad, 2015 vs 2019



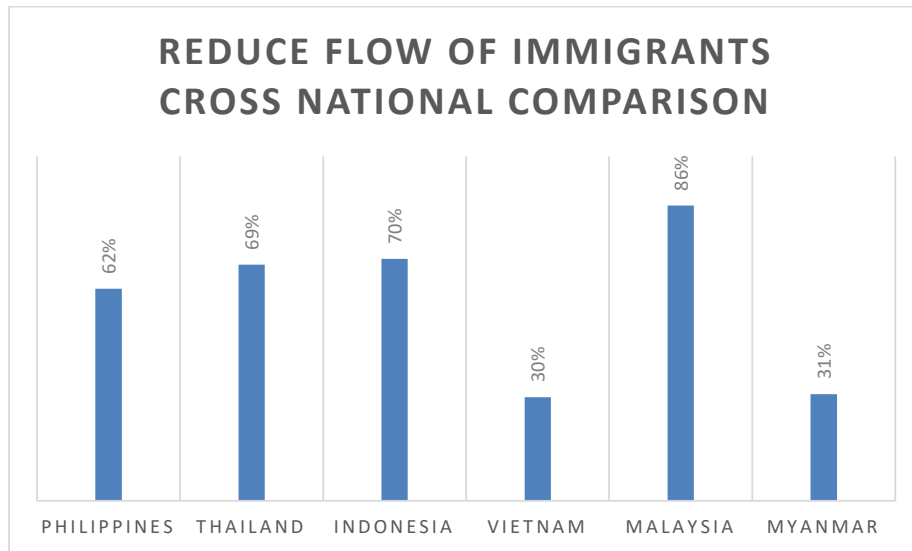
The ABS asked about perceptions of migration, as shown in Figure 108. In the Myanmar context this question was interpreted in 2015 as a proxy for the sensitive issue of the Rohingya. The results show significant changes after the 2017 forced exodus of Rohingya. A majority of Myanmar citizens (52%) believe the level of migrants should be maintained (21%) or increased (31%). The level of support for reducing migrants has dropped (from 39% in 2015 to 27% in 2019). This indicates some support for increased migration into Myanmar, including support for the return of the Rohingya or other migrants. Minimally, the results suggest differences among Myanmar citizens on migration.

Figure 108 Flow of Migrants, 2015 vs 2019



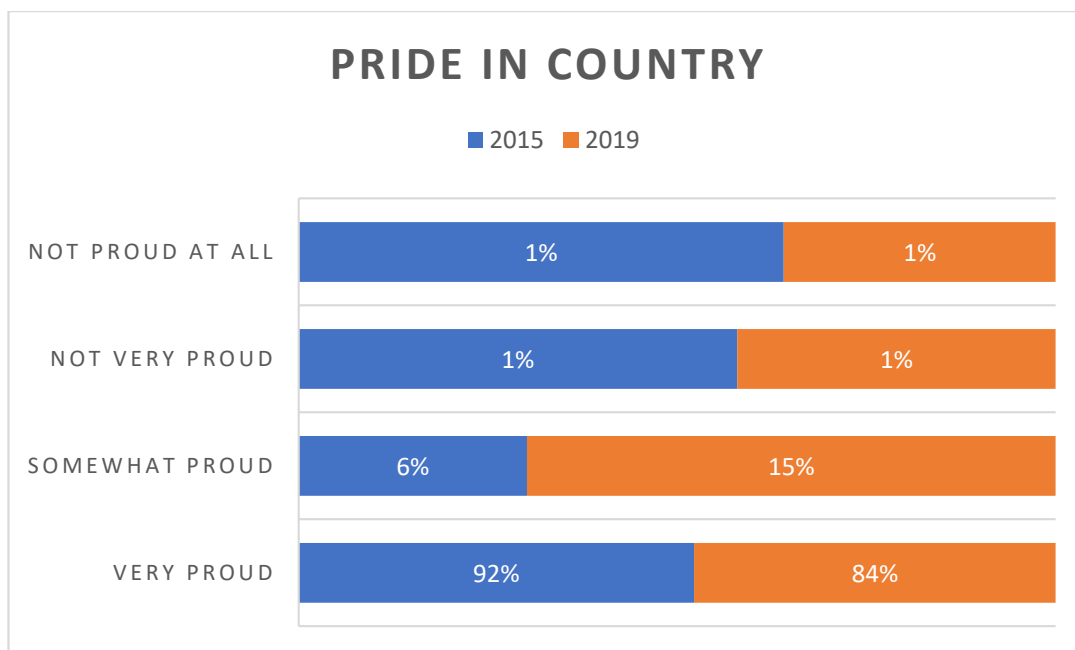
When compared to other countries in the region, Figure 109 shows that Myanmar citizens have among the lowest support for reducing immigration (31%), along with Vietnam (30%). This compares with much higher calls for reducing immigrants in Malaysia (86%), Indonesia (70%) and Thailand (69%).

Figure 109 Reduce Flow of Immigrants Cross-National Comparison, ABS Wave 5



Myanmar citizens were asked how proud they were to be citizens, as shown in Figure 110. The results show continued high levels of pride (96%), but a shift in intensity (9%) toward 'somewhat proud'.

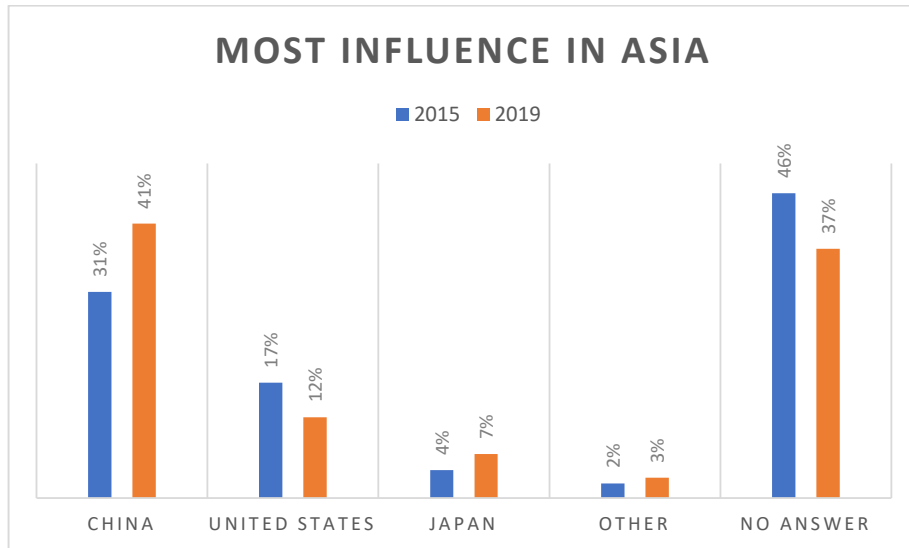
Figure 110 Pride in Country, 2015 vs 2019



Looking outside of Myanmar, citizens point to China as having the most influence in Asia, an increase in influence over the two waves of the survey (from 31% to 41%). Figure 111

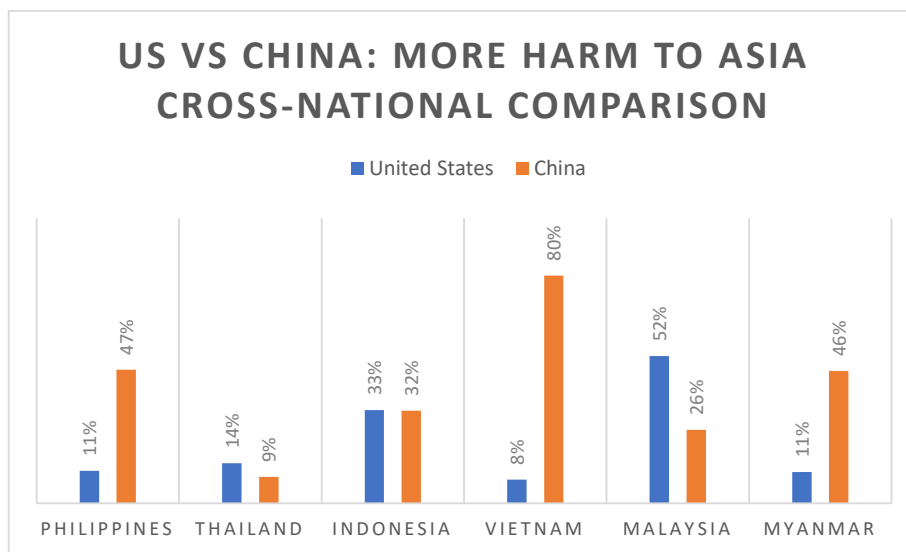
also shows that the US has had a slight decline in influence (17% to 12%), with an even smaller increase influence perceived for Japan (from 4% to 7%). Most citizens do not answer this question, reflecting a lack of familiarity with international affairs among the general population.

Figure 111 Most Influence in Asia, 2015 vs 2019



The ABS asked citizens to assess whether the US and China 'do more harm than good' or vice versa. Figure 112 detail the results. Myanmar joins Vietnam and the Philippines as having negative views of China compared to the United States, by sizeable margins (46% perceiving China as harmful, compared to 11% for the United States). Myanmar citizens' views are less than those of Vietnam, on par with results in the Philippines.

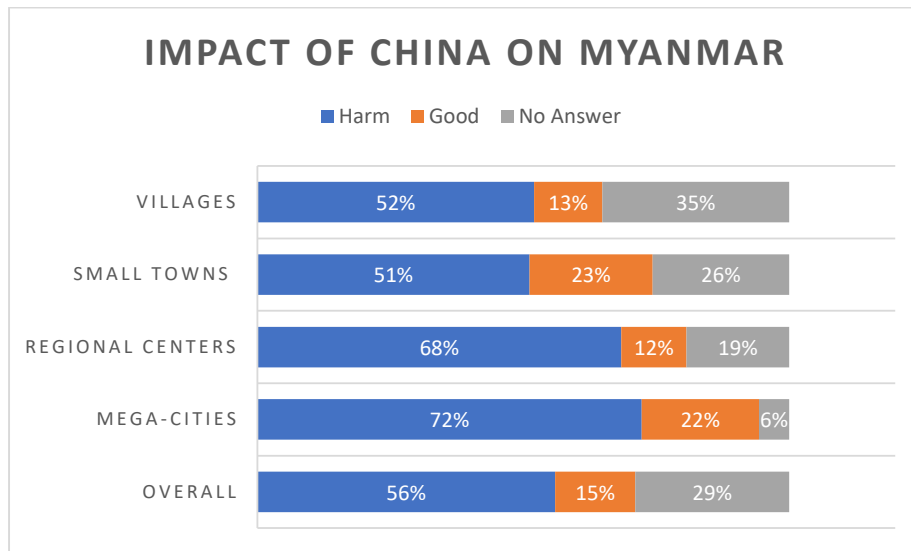
Figure 112 US vs China Harm to Asia Cross-National Comparison, ABS Wave 5



The ABS also asked a specific question about perceptions of the impact of China on Myanmar, which is timely given China's increased investments in the country. More citizens perceive China as doing harm (56%) than in the region as a whole. Nearly a third (29%) did not answer this question, however. Negative views of China were concentrated

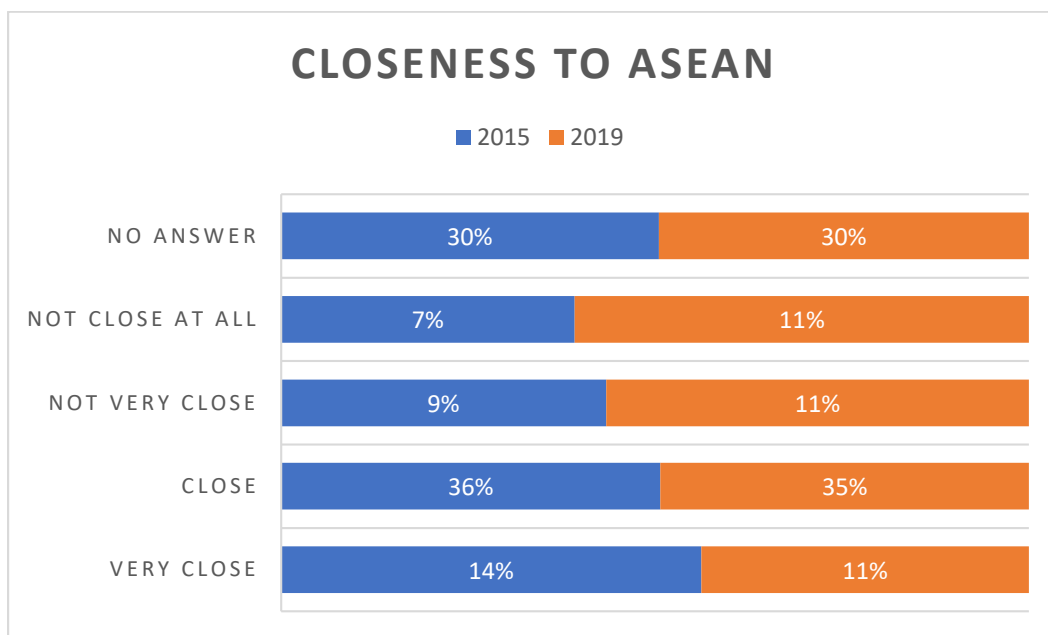
in urban areas – nearly three-quarters perceived China as doing harm (72%) in the mega-cities of Yangon and Mandalay, but at the same time the urban areas recorded more positive views of China as doing good as well (22%).

Figure 113 Impact of China on Myanmar, 2019



Myanmar has been in ASEAN for over ten years, joining in 1997. Yet the relationship to ASEAN among the public has not changed significantly over the two surveys. The plurality (46%) feel a closeness to ASEAN, as shown in Figure 114.

Figure 114 Closeness to ASEAN, 2015 vs. 2019



Conclusion

The broad range of issues and findings pose a challenge for a concise summary. In framing the interpretation of the data as 'Grappling with Transition' the aim is to capture ongoing changes in attitudes within Myanmar's society. In this regard, three issues stand out.

Myanmar citizens are struggling with changes in the economy. Even as the economy expands, perceptions remain negative and vulnerabilities are high. There is *persistent precarity* in Myanmar as more citizens point to their basic needs not being met, even as individuals believe in their own resilience to respond to greater economic insecurities. With the improvements in the economy the major concern of citizens, prioritized by a majority over democracy, the need to connect economic growth with the conditions and aspirations of citizens is pressing. It is a telling development that four years of impressive economic growth is not translating into positive public sentiments.

Within Myanmar society, the past four years have brought about greater exposure to goods and each other through improvements in connectivity. The ABS data shows that Myanmar citizens see themselves as part of an expanding middle class and increasingly part of a nation, as more take on a national, as opposed to ethnic, political identity. They are no longer afraid as they were in the authoritarian era. There is a noticeable move away from embracing religion in politics, with greater secularism. At the same time, Myanmar citizens do not trust each other and are less engaged with each other through organizations and networks. The *social fabric for building democracy remains frayed*. While there has been a decline in traditional values with greater modernity, Myanmar remains the most traditionally conservative country in the ABS surveyed countries in Southeast Asia. It is thus not surprising that a majority of citizens do not believe they are ready for democracy.

The post-2015 hybrid political evolution of the regime, the blend of democracy and non-democratic elements, is echoed in the survey findings related to political conditions, especially democracy. There is a *hybrid situation of conflicting political attitudes and behavior*. On the one hand, Myanmar citizens strongly support and prefer democracy. While they acknowledge improvements in increased political liberalization and trust their political institutions and political system as a whole with greater intensity, many continue to aspire to further improvements in governance and reform. They do not hesitate to call for greater access to public services and call out the government on corruption and concerns around land grabbing and the environment. There is also public support for constitutional reform. On the other hand, there are negative views about how democracy works and less support for measures promoting accountability and engagement that can make democracy stronger. More Myanmar citizens support authoritarian alternatives as compared to in the

past, notably with greater trust in and support for the *Tatmadaw*, the military. Our analysis of the data shows that the *Tatmadaw* retains support from its traditional base but is gaining support among a new base. Large numbers of Myanmar citizens are choosing to be politically uninformed and increasingly do not participate in politics outside of elections. Even local political participation is contracting as more Myanmar citizens perceive they cannot impact politics. This is in spite of widespread use of the Internet/social media. The ties to political parties remain weak, and the society is divided over the contentious issues of ethnic autonomy and immigration. There is little appreciation of the religious and ethnic tensions in the society, as most believe there is religious and ethnic equality. These contradictory trends both reflect the ongoing hybrid character of current political conditions and reinforce it. They suggest that building democracy in Myanmar continues to require greater engagement in society, not least through the strengthening of political parties and through broader civic education and civil society engagement.

The ABS report points to three interrelated areas where Myanmar society is growing more polarized. The first involves reform – the scope of reform. The second involves the role of the military in politics. The third involves views of ethnic autonomy. In all three areas views have become more fragmented, with sharp divides as to who favors and opposes. These trends are noticeably different than was the case four years ago where there was more unanimity. The level of polarization is not as sharp as that in other countries in the region, but the ABS points to divisions that will be obstacles for democratization ahead.



The ABS also finds that different social cleavages within Myanmar society resonate in different areas of the country's political life. The urban-rural divide, long seen as a marker of division in the economy, is arguably the most prevalent division shaping differences in political attitudes, and to a lesser extent political behavior. From views about democracy generally and the prominence of traditional values, to the military's political role and perceptions of political efficacy, rural communities are less informed, more conservative and less engaged in political life. Urbanites on their part may be stronger advocates for democracy but they also show greater dissatisfaction in how the system is functioning and are similarly conflicted in how they engage democracy. Ethnicity is an even more powerful cleavage when the issue involves the rights and inclusion of ethnic communities. Yet, what the ABS shows is that on most issues, ethnic minorities and the Bamar majority have similar views. Gender matters on issues of gender equality, political behavior, shaping differences in political engagement and political participation. Ordinary women are not only more excluded from political life, they perceive themselves as excluded. Generational differences, however, should stand out, given the large share of young people and decisive imprint of changing conditions on the young age cohort. There are noticeable differences with regard to values and aspirations, but on issues of political behavior and attitudes about democracy the generational divide is less salient – as least so far. The only exception to this is increasing youth support for the military. More research, however, will need to be undertaken to explore the impact of these social cleavages. What the 2019 ABS report has done, however, is to showcase that Myanmar society is not a monolith – it contains much of the diversity and contradictions noted above with regard to the ongoing transitions.

When the ABS was first introduced for Myanmar the aim was to provide a point of comparison with the rest of the region. Myanmar has long been understood to be unique, an outlier due to its relative isolation and the long tenure of military rule. The special attention Myanmar received after the hope of the November 2015 election has extended into intensive international focus on its treatment of the Rohingya minority. While the ABS data frequently finds that Myanmar is indeed the outlier in views on particular issues – the lowest or the highest in one measure or another – increasingly the responses of Myanmar citizens are on par with the rest of Southeast Asia. Myanmar's suspicions of China are echoed elsewhere, for example, and despite perceptions of high levels of nationalism, Myanmar is actually among the least protectionist and most favorable to immigration. The cross-regional comparison on issues allows for a richer interpretation of the results.

We closed the 2015 report pointing to the challenges ahead for Myanmar. The 2019 ABS findings only reinforce the persistence of challenges ahead – the precarity, frayed social fabric, hybrid contradictory political values and political behavior related to democracy, emerging polarization of views on critical issues of democracy and the management of different outlooks within Myanmar's diverse society. There is a pressing need to engage Myanmar's public and to strengthen inclusion, deepen political literacy, foster greater political and social trust and rejuvenate stalled political reforms. We hope this document provides insights to develop new ideas to address Myanmar's challenges ahead.

Profile of Respondents

The ABS Survey used the 2014 census to assure the national representativeness of the sample, drawing from the latest population data made available by the Department of Statistics of the Government of Myanmar. The data was further weighted (by age and urbanization) to conform to the census. Below are the profiles of the respondents in the survey.

Figure 115 shows that the majority of respondents were female (53%), with the remainder men (47%).

Figure 115 Gender Distribution

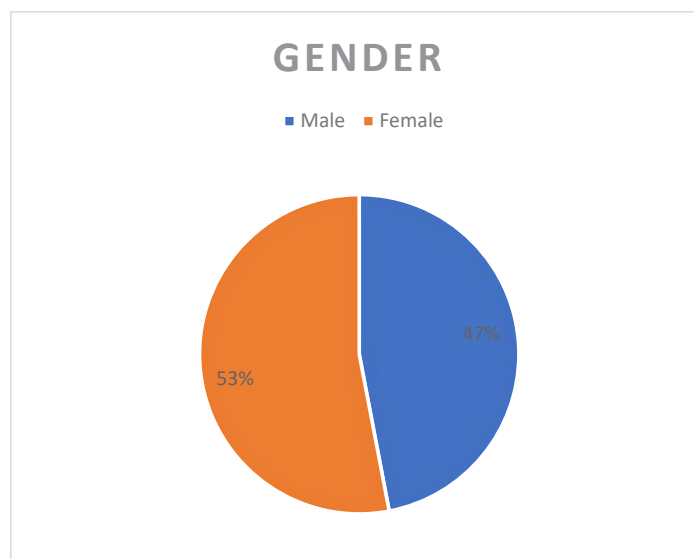


Figure 116 shows the distribution by age cohort. Nearly a third of those surveyed were under the age of 30 (31%).

Figure 116 Age Cohort Distribution

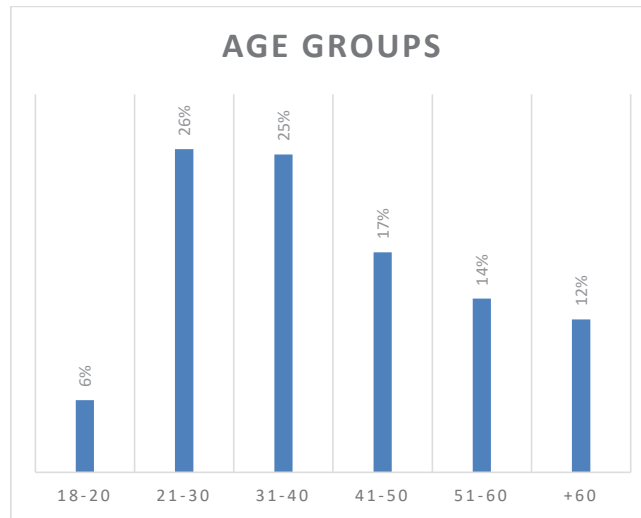
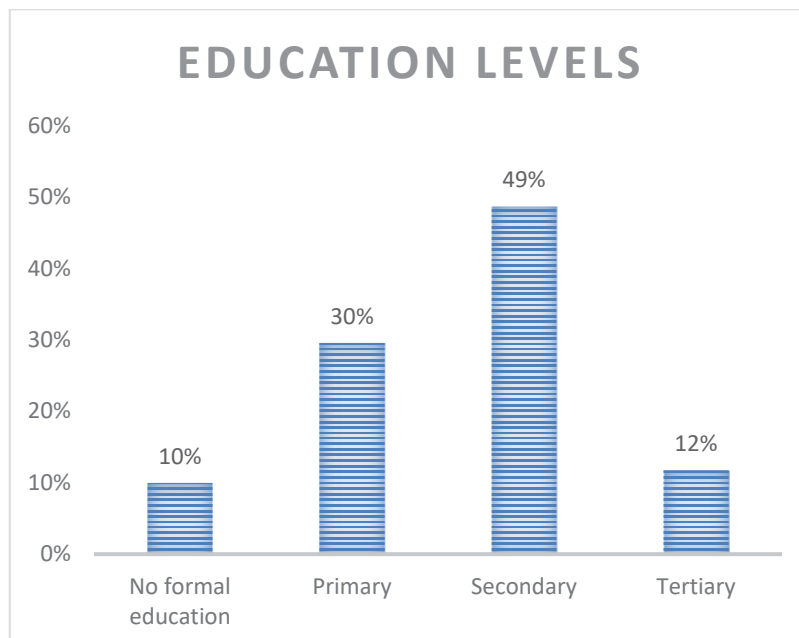


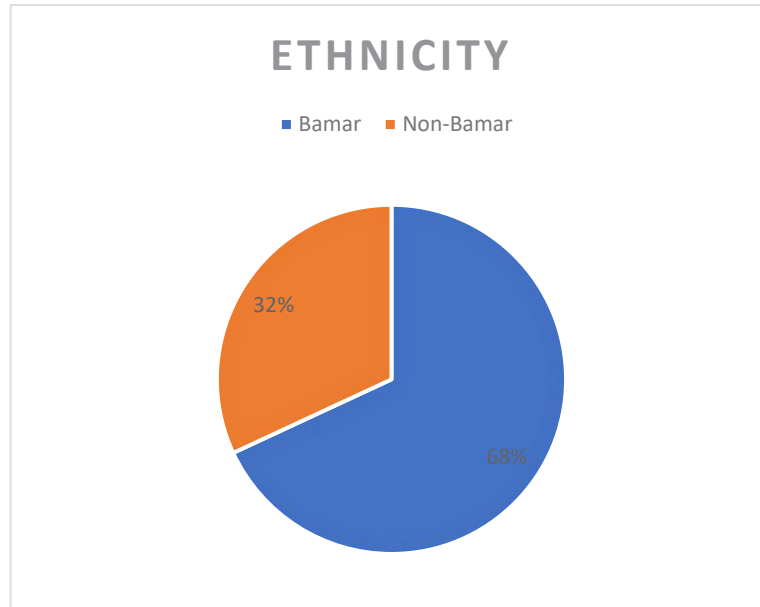
Figure 117 shows the distribution of the reported education levels. Nearly a majority reported finishing secondary education (49%), with only a small share having no formal education (10%) and tertiary education (12%).

Figure 117 Reported Education Levels



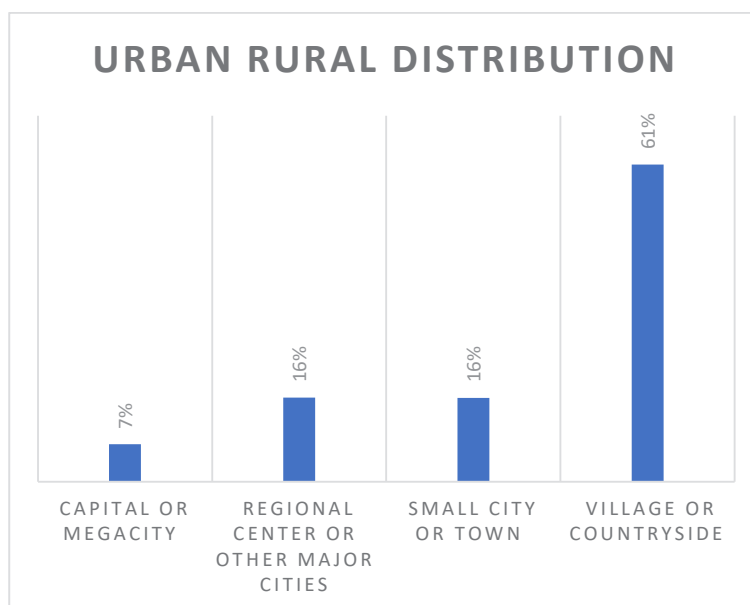
Sensitive to the need to include, the ABS made sure to survey in all the states and regions. The survey was comprised of 32% non-Bamar, and 68% Bamar, as shown in Figure 118.

Figure 118 Distribution of Bamar vs Non-Bamar Ethnic Groups



Given that Myanmar is primarily a rural society (estimated at 70%), the majority of the survey was rural. Figure 119 shows the geographic distribution, with 61% surveyed in villages and only 7% in the capital or mega-cities.

Figure 119 Urban-Rural Distribution



About the Authors

Bridget Welsh is currently an Honorary Research Associate with the University of Nottingham Asia Research Institute Malaysia (UoNARI-M) based in Kuala Lumpur. She is also a Senior Research Associate of the Hu Fu Center for East Asia Democratic Studies of National Taiwan University, a Senior Associate Fellow of The Habibie Center and a University Fellow of Charles Darwin University. She specializes in Southeast Asian politics, with a focus on Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore and Indonesia. An author and editor of numerous books and articles, her latest book is entitled *The End of UMNO?: Essays on Malaysia's Former Dominant Party*. Her forthcoming book *A Divided Malaysia: GE14 and Beyond* examines Malaysia's 2018 elections and the transformation of national politics. She taught at John Cabot University, Ipek University, Singapore Management University, SAIS (JHU) and Hofstra University. She received her Ph.D in political science from Columbia University, language training at Cornell University (FALCON) and a B.A. from Colgate University. She is a Senior Advisor for Freedom House, a member of the International Research Council of the National Endowment for Democracy and a core member of the Asian Barometer Survey covering fifteen countries in East Asia.

Chong Hua Kueh has eight years of experience as an analyst of survey data with Malaysia's leading polling company Merdeka Center. He specializes in mathematical and statistical modelling and analysis. His background is in Petroleum Chemistry and Decision Science. He completed his undergraduate degree at University Putra Malaysia in the sciences and will complete his masters in statistical sciences from University Utara Malaysia this year.

Myat Thu was born in 1976 in Bago, Myanmar. He attended Yangon Institute of Technology in 1995 and graduated from it in 2004. He took part in student democratic movements and led a student protest for democracy, human rights and educational reform in 2000 and was arrested and sentenced to seven years in prison. He was released in 2002 and resumed his studies in civil engineering and received a Bachelor of Engineering degree. He was continuously involved in democratic movements and was arrested again for his involvement in the 2008 Saffron Revolution and sentenced to three years in prison. In 2011, he founded Yangon School of Political Science together with other colleagues. He received a Chevening Scholarship in 2012 and graduated from the London School of Economics and Political Science with an MSc in Political Theory in 2013. He was a visiting scholar at St Antony's College, University of Oxford in 2018. Now he serves as Chairperson of YSPS.

Arkar Soe is currently working in the Yangon School of Political Science's research department. He graduated from Bago Degree College and is a PhD candidate at Yangon University. He was involved in the 2014-15 Myanmar Asian Barometer Survey as a research assistant. He managed several social science surveys in Myanmar. In the 2019 Asian Barometer Survey, he served as the Myanmar National Survey Director.