

Development and Dilemmas of Mass Democratic Identity Construction in the Context of the Myanmar Coup: An Analysis of Political Narratives

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Abstract. This study examines the process of mass democratic identity construction in Myanmar and delineates the distinct characteristics of the government's political narratives during the period of Myanmar's democratic reform. The research finds that Myanmar managed to establish a democratic identity that continues to exhibit resilience in the aftermath of the coup. This resilience, observed at the level of political narratives, can be attributed to the transcultural features of ideological construction and the prominent influence of Buddhism, both well-suited to Myanmar's deep-seated social and religious foundations. However, following the coup, the loss of agency by the original narrative source, combined with the long-standing issues within Burmese society, has resulted in several political dilemmas hampering the development of democratic consciousness. These dilemmas are characterized by an immature democratic political culture, underdeveloped civil society, and frequent ethnic conflicts. The underlying reasons for these challenges can be traced back to the limitations of democratic political culture during Myanmar's democratic reform period and the absence of historical and cultural foundations in the country's democratic political system, which may constrain the long-term development of democratic consciousness following changes in the power structure.

Keywords: Myanmar coup; political narratives; political identity.

1. Introduction

In political narratives, a change in the subject often implies a redistribution of power and a redefinition of different political interests. Previous research has focused on how political narratives influence a nation's image and international political relationships. However, in recent years, scholars have increasingly focused on how political events, such as coups, trigger the construction of individual and collective identity on the domestic level. Yet, there remains a gap in the detailed analysis of how the Myanmar coup has impacted the identity of its people. This study aims to provide fresh insights into the intricate interaction between political narratives and social identity by examining the forms and characteristics of Myanmar's democracy-centered political narratives before and after the coup, and how they have influenced political identity among the populace in various ways.

2. Construction and Inertia of Democratic Identity in Myanmar

During the period of democratic transition, the establishment of various democratic institutions provided a framework and means for the internalization of democratic norms. Through extensive democratic practices, democracy gained legitimacy and a sense of recognition among citizens. Even in non-democratic environments, this recognition continues and manifests in various ways, demonstrating persistence and stability, thereby exerting a path-dependent effect on Myanmar's subsequent political developments. This section systematically outlines the process through which Myanmar formed democratic identity during the period of democratic transition, its mechanisms for

obtaining path dependence, and the factors contributing to the persistent inertia of democratic identity among the populace after the coup.

2.1. Construction and Improvement of Democratic Identification

During the period of democratic reform in Myanmar, the government and all sectors of society made important efforts to build and improve the people's democratic identity. The government created a good environment for democratic identification by taking measures such as deregulation, education reform, and media opening [1]. For example, during the Thein Sein government, the people were given basic citizenship rights in the form of laws, which eased restrictions on all sectors of society. In his public speeches, Thein Sein repeatedly stated that they would reform national laws, achieve national reconciliation, and promote social stability and national economic development. With the efforts of many parties, 14 ethnic armed groups signed ceasefire agreements with the government at the end of 2011 alone, providing a relatively stable internal social environment for Myanmar's democratic reform [2]. In terms of education, the NLD government formulated the National Strategic Plan (2016-2021). In addition, "Moral and Civic Education" was set up as a compulsory subject in basic education, covering primary school to high school. At the same time, to raise human rights awareness, the National Human Rights Commission of Myanmar held several lectures in many places and completed nearly 1,000 human rights reports in 2018 alone [2]. In terms of media publicity, the relaxation of restrictions on all sectors of society and the abolition of press censorship have given Burmese people more opportunities to express their views. The democratization reform has been supported and recognized by the Burmese people. According to the 2015 Asia Barometer survey, 90% of Burmese people support democracy. In the 2020 Myanmar parliamentary elections, the Federal Election Commission announced that the National League for Democracy won 396 out of 498 directly elected seats in both houses of parliament, winning an overwhelming victory. The NLD led by Aung San Suu Kyi has played a significant role in the peace process and democratization reform in Myanmar [3].

2.2. Manifestations of the Inertia of Democratic Identity

In 2021, a military coup took place in Myanmar, leading to an attempt by the military to reshape the political ideology of the populace, intending to alter their political values and identity. However, during the preceding decade of democratic transition, the people of Myanmar had already internalized concepts such as democracy, freedom, and human rights to a certain extent. This internalization resulted in a noticeable path-dependent inertia of democratic identity. As a consequence, the population displayed preconceived biases making it psychologically and behaviorally challenging for them to adapt to the military's regressive ideological agenda. This, to a certain extent, led to resistance against the military's attempt to reconstruct the discourse system, which was prominently demonstrated during collective protests following the coup.

2.2.1. Civil Society Groups

Since the military coup in 2021, various segments of Myanmar's society have continuously expressed their political demands through collective actions such as rallies and demonstrations. Their actions reflect a path-dependent effect of democratic identity. Protesters encompass a wide array of people, with students, laborers, and farmers being among the most active participants. These groups called for the deepening of democratic transition, vigilance against the risks of institutional regression, the release of political prisoners, and the representation of collective will in advancing democracy.

2.2.2. Ethnic Minority Groups

Strong opposition to the Myanmar armed forces has led individuals to unite across urban, rural, religious, and ethnic lines. Support from insurgent organizations was not unanimous, with the Kachin Independence Army, Karen National Liberation Army, and Karen National Union providing the most significant support to defectors involved in armed resistance [4]. Some communities and ethnic minority groups are advocating for autonomy and opposing the government's assimilation policies.

They insist that their culture, language, and traditions should be respected and protected. They seek to preserve their ethnic rights acquired during the democratic transition and resist the oppressive and coercive policies of the military government. Their stance reflects their rejection of the dominant Bamar nationalism and their adherence to principles of pluralism, inclusivity, and equal rights. While there were inclinations towards Burman nationalism within the National League for Democracy, the outbreak of post-coup resistance and conflict emphasized the success of a more moderate narrative.

2.2.3. Religious Groups

Since the 2021 military coup, Buddhists and some Muslims, among other religious leaders, have frequently held peaceful demonstrations. They demand an end to religious persecution, and the safeguarding of religious freedom, reflecting their internalized acceptance of democratic values [5]. The participation of religious leaders and monks underscores the interaction between democratic identity and religious and cultural values. Followers demand that the government ensures religious freedom, opposes religious persecution, and supports the separation of religion and politics to ensure peaceful coexistence among various religious communities.

Collective actions by the aforementioned groups illustrate that, despite changes in the external political environment, democratic values have been widely disseminated and internalized within society, forming a durable structure of political attitudes. This has led to resistance against the military's attempt to reconfigure its ideological discourse, revealing the path-dependent nature of democratic identity. The extent of this widespread identification increases the challenge for the military to reverse the democratic process. Democratic aspirations, released through ongoing collective actions, have become a significant political force following the coup.

2.3. Causes of the Inertia of Democratic Identity

Myanmar's population continues to exhibit sustained support for the democratic government even after the coup. This section will analyze the causes of identity inertia by combining the characteristics of political narratives in Myanmar during the democratic reform period and the societal environment.

2.3.1. Supra-National Ideological Construction

During the democratic reform period, Myanmar's government consistently prioritized national unity and state cohesion as central objectives in governance. This commitment marked the beginning of an inclusive political process aimed at promoting national reconciliation through the construction of a supra-national ideology, thereby strengthening public political identity [2]. Over time, Myanmar's governments confronted the enduring challenge of achieving true national reconciliation. While governments made continuous efforts to sign ceasefire agreements and engage in political negotiations to achieve comprehensive peace, full ceasefire, and national reconciliation also required progress in other areas, including the economy and education. During the democratic reform period, Myanmar's educational curriculum encompassed content related to patriotism, national identity, and democratic values, and included additional elements of modern social ethics [6]. This focus on education was essential because the quality of citizens directly impacts a country's democratic transition and plays a crucial role in Myanmar's national reconciliation and state unity efforts. The construction of a supra-national ideology, featuring patriotism education, civic education, and modern social ethics, became a crucial component of Myanmar's ideological and political education during the democratic reform period. It is the shaping of collective consciousness that transcended ethnic boundaries during the democratic reform period that enabled Myanmar to continue exhibiting persistent support for and adherence to the democratic system after the coup, rather than merely yielding to the interests or rule of a minority group.

2.3.2. Strong Buddhist Undertones

The existence and influence of Buddhism are an important part of Myanmar's political narrative, which bears the function and role of political narrative norms and education. Historically, Buddhism has had a great influence on Myanmar's political narrative, and it once became the state religion of

Myanmar during the U Nu government. The doctrines and principles of Myanmar Buddhism have a profound impact on the content and methods of ideological and moral education in Myanmar. Many forms and contents of Buddhism are also embedded in the communities where Myanmar people live, and the political inclination of many community members is also deeply influenced by community Buddhism. For example, if the monk in the community supports the NLD, he will mix some remarks supporting the NLD and opposing the USDP when teaching the Buddhist scriptures to the villagers, and these words and deeds will directly affect the political inclination of the villagers. Moreover, the political thoughts of the NLD are a combination of Buddhist concepts and Western thoughts, explaining modern concepts with Buddhism and proposing "spiritual revolution" and "participatory Buddhism" on this basis to transform Myanmar society and the public [7]. During the democratic transition period, the narrative mode of the political subject has a distinct religious color, and due to the high coupling with the collective traditional consciousness of the local society, it has a high degree of spread and acceptance. At the same time, this widespread social consciousness will not change with the change of the political subject, so the democratic identity consciousness profoundly established in the mass consciousness during the democratic transition will show a lasting characteristic after the coup [8].

2.3.3. Profound Mass Base and Religious Foundation

Religion serves as a lens through which society views democracy and justice [9]. With a relatively high proportion of Buddhists in Myanmar, the ethical ideas of Buddhism have, to some extent, become the moral foundation for the people. Numerous Buddhist texts, sermons, and activities play a vital role in the moral and ethical education of the public. Therefore, the influence of Buddhist culture on the ideological and moral education of the Burmese people, including its role in Myanmar's political narrative during the democratic reform period, cannot be underestimated. This democratic identity derived from the religious community is founded not only on universal democratic values but is also intertwined with Myanmar's religious traditions. Buddhism has traditionally emphasized values like compassion and equality, aligning with democratic aspirations. This democratic identity is rooted both in indigenous religious traditions and the harm caused by the coup to religious autonomy [5]. Myanmar's rich religious and cultural foundation, profound religious consciousness, and the significant role of religion in Burmese society have significantly magnified the impact of the democratic narrative in the internalization of norms. This has led to strong societal support and a collective memory of democratic identity. The robust mass base and religious foundation have endowed democratic identity with inertia.

3. Political Dilemmas Faced by the Development of Democratic Consciousness under Political Reform

Following the coup in Myanmar, the democratic political narrative lost its dominant position. Given the relatively short duration of Myanmar's democratic transition and the enduring social issues that the country has faced, the long-term development of democratic consciousness in Myanmar may encounter challenges arising from the discourse reconstruction brought about by the political upheaval. This section, taking into account the political and societal realities in Myanmar, analyzes the dilemmas and their underlying causes in the development of democratic consciousness amidst the backdrop of political change.

3.1. Manifestations of Political Dilemmas in the Development of Democratic Consciousness in Myanmar

The development of democratic consciousness among the masses in Myanmar, influenced by the political narratives during the period of democratic transition, has yielded certain results. However, this process confronts complex and significant political dilemmas. This section delves into the challenges facing the development of democratic consciousness in Myanmar, examining them in the context of Myanmar's political culture and societal issues.

3.1.1. Immature Democratic Political Culture in Myanmar

Myanmar's transition towards a democratic system based on principles of fairness, freedom, equality, and neutrality necessitates the collective effort to cultivate democracy, as envisioned in the national anthem. The factors shaping the emergence of a multi-party political structure in the course of the nation's political transformation have been diverse, including historical sequences, socio-economic systems, social orders, inequality, culture, patterns of division, the role of government, the convictions of political activists, and foreign influences [10]. These factors serve as significant variables for building a democratic political culture. However, Myanmar's democratic political culture remains underdeveloped at the present stage [10]. According to the Freedom House's surveys on freedom in Myanmar over the past decade, Myanmar has only achieved a partial level of freedom between 2016 and 2018. Although there has been progress in the political rights of citizens and civil liberties, Myanmar still lags significantly behind other democratic nations in terms of the level of freedom, which is a crucial indicator of successful democratic transition. This deficiency reflects a core aspect of Myanmar's immature democratic political culture [11].

3.1.2. Underdeveloped Civil Society and Frequent Ethnic Conflicts

Myanmar's intricate ethnic issues and recurring ethnic conflicts pose constraints on the development and refinement of democratic political culture. Domestically, political leadership in Myanmar is primarily held by the Bamar ethnic group, leaving many minority ethnic groups in a disadvantaged position during their participation in democratic politics. Owing to prevailing tensions and animosities between these ethnic groups, such as the Bamar and the Rohingya, multiple instances of religious, economic, and political conflicts have arisen. These ethnic divisions hinder the attainment of a fundamental consensus on democratic principles among these groups, thereby impeding the progress of democratic political culture [12]. Taking the Karen ethnic group as an illustrative example, the core focus of Karen education centers on upholding Karen identity over Myanmar citizenship. Additionally, certain ethnic groups have been denied citizenship rights. The 1982 Myanmar Citizenship Law excluded the Rohingya from the 135 officially recognized ethnic groups, subsequently depriving them of political rights. However, despite the democratic reforms in 2011, the citizenship rights of the Rohingya population remain largely unresolved. Thus, the fundamental immaturity of civil society in Myanmar has resulted in a lack of unified support for the development of democratic politics among the populace. The ethnic issues and conflicts within Myanmar serve as another manifestation of the challenges facing the collective democratic aspirations.

3.2. Causes of the Political Dilemma in Collective Democratic Memory

The existence of political dilemmas in Myanmar is not a random outcome but rather intricately tied to the complex factors of Myanmar's history, culture, and political environment. This section will delve into the pivotal factors driving these political dilemmas, offering a deeper understanding of the challenges facing the development of democratic consciousness in Myanmar.

3.2.1. Constraints on Myanmar's Democratic Political Culture

In the evolution of Myanmar's democratic politics, the National League for Democracy (NLD) has not been able to fundamentally control the process of Myanmar's democratic transformation. Given that the military remains a powerful political force in Myanmar, the NLD faces challenges in constraining its political authority and advancing national identity construction unilaterally. Simultaneously, the NLD must cooperate with the military to realize its vision for Myanmar's politics and national development. Furthermore, Myanmar's democratic transition granted power and expectations primarily to the NLD under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, rather than bestowing authority upon the people or establishing principles and mechanisms for democratic implementation by civil society. Some perspectives indicate a gendered narrative, shifting the responsibility for the Rohingya ethnic cleansing and Rohingya refugee well-being onto Aung San Suu Kyi rather than adopting coordinated international diplomacy or military actions. Myanmar's constitution, drafted by the military, significantly constrains the NLD's legal authority, making it challenging for the party to

function effectively in the democratic transition and impeding progress in building the democratic political system.

As Myanmar's democratic transition progressively embraces openness and freedom, external influences have begun to play a more significant role, encompassing the introduction of values and international criticism. How these external impacts are assessed and absorbed is crucial for promoting transformative development and democratic institutionalization. Nevertheless, Myanmar's progress in building a democratic political system has been slow, with political narrative patterns lagging behind the times. This has left Myanmar's population with an insufficient basis for evaluating and responding to external shocks and influences, which, in turn, has affected the level of citizen participation and agency in the functional development of democratic political culture.

3.2.2. Lack of Democratic Foundations in Myanmar's Political System

Myanmar's history and culture have lacked democratic foundations, and the country has predominantly experienced autocratic rule throughout most of its historical periods. From ancient times to modern history, Myanmar was ruled by feudal dynasties with a monarchical autocracy. The monarch possessed absolute authority, with the power to arbitrarily dismiss ministers and execute subjects. Under this autocratic rule, the population had no political rights and was bound to absolute obedience to the monarch's rule. John Harris, in his book "Myanmar: History and Culture," pointed out that Myanmar's traditional culture emphasized the divine right of the monarch, leaving the populace with no political rights. This cultural tradition of autocracy has resulted in a lower level of understanding and awareness of democratic politics among Myanmar's population. In the 18th century, British colonialism imposed autocratic rule on Myanmar, stripping the people of all rights and heavily suppressing democratic political consciousness. After gaining independence in 1948, Myanmar went through a military rule. The military regime implemented military dictatorship, depriving the people of their political rights. Additionally, Myanmar's legal system remains underdeveloped due to the legacy of authoritarian rule spanning thousands of years, leading to limited citizen awareness of the democratic rule of law and significant obstacles to the functioning of democratic institutions. Myanmar's democratic political culture is characterized by a lack of cultural and historical foundations as well as an incomplete development in its later stages. The history and cultural tradition of autocratic rule present a significant constraint on Myanmar's democratic political development.

4. Conclusions

This paper examines the evolution of collective democratic identity construction among the masses in Myanmar. It traces the development process of democratic identity from the pre-coup era of democratic reforms, characterized by the distinct religious features of political narratives, to the coupling of Myanmar's religious culture and the characteristics of civil society. This successful development of democratic consciousness among the masses was evident both before and after the coup, demonstrating its sustainability. The study concludes that this can be attributed to the transnational ideological construction features and the strong Buddhist influence present in the political narratives during this period, as well as the deep-rooted religious context in Myanmar society.

On the other hand, during the political transformation, Myanmar finds itself in a complex situation where the idealism of the masses' needs and aspirations clashes with the oppressive political realities. The development of democratic consciousness in Myanmar faces numerous challenges. These challenges primarily manifest as the immaturity of democratic political culture, inadequate development of civil society, and frequent ethnic conflicts. The root causes of these challenges can be traced back to the limitations of democratic political culture during Myanmar's democratic reform period and the historical and cultural fragility of the democratic political system, with its later development proving to be weak.

In summary, through the analysis of the development of democratic identity in Myanmar, this paper elucidates the inherent features and their origins, revealing the deep-seated developmental challenges exposed during the transition, and providing references for further understanding of Myanmar's political environment and development.

Authors Contribution

Qinyun Shi mainly contributed to the causes of the political dilemma in collective democratic memory in the article. Like Wang mainly responsible for writing the background introduction and current situation description of Myanmar, the construction and improvement of democratic identity, etc. Yipeng Zhao contributed to the topic, and the Inertia of Democratic Identity, manifestations of the political dilemma sections, revised the entire paper for improved logical flow. All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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