

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 23 October 2020

Political Parties and Urban and Regional Planning in Myanmar

*Mael Raynaud and Hsu Lai Yee**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY¹

- The people of Myanmar are deeply concerned with urban and regional planning issues. Yet political parties do not see them as a priority in their 2020 general election campaigns.
- The lines separating urban and regional planning roles played by elected representatives and civil servants, and between the national, subnational and local or municipal levels of authority remain unclear and contested, and are constantly evolving.
- Myanmar greatly needs a political vision that transcends what is immediately efficient, and that rethinks national development and urban and regional planning with reference to the needs and aspirations of all sections of society.
- Urban and regional planning should not be reduced to a top-down exercise in which the state dictates the future of a city, a town or a region. On the contrary, strategic planning should accompany processes that remain largely organic, grounded in individual choices made freely by all members of society.
- Political parties and their elected representatives are best placed to play a central role in the context of reinforced local democracy, decentralization and emerging local political eco-systems.

**Mael Raynaud is Head of Research at Urbanize: Policy Institute for Urban and Regional Planning in Yangon. Hsu Lai Yee is an architect and urban planner, and a researcher with Urbanize.*

INTRODUCTION

It is not always easy, under the hybrid political system that has characterized Myanmar since 2011,² to distinguish how power and responsibilities are distributed among the military, the civil service, political parties represented in parliament and the government. In particular, the division of power between elected representatives and high level civil servants³ in the design and implementation of policies more often resembles a work in progress than the operation of the established hierarchy defined by the 2008 Constitution and of the political system that started its journey towards democratization only a few years ago.⁴

There are arguably few fields in which this is as true as in urban and regional planning.⁵ This paper understands such planning with reference to the idea that the development of any city or town cannot be based only on planning for that city or town alone, but must also include planning for their respective sub-regions.

Taken in its broadest sense, urban and regional planning covers a wide range of issues that matter tremendously to the people of Myanmar. In urban areas, besides the obvious road repair work, electricity, running water, waste management and various sets of regulations,⁶ these issues include the creation and maintenance of public parks, and public spaces more generally. They further include progress toward greener cities, something that is essential to the development of a happier, healthier society, and to the development of public life, and even public debate — in other words, to the development of a more open society.

Regional planning in a society as ethnically diverse as Myanmar's is also essential to relations between different communities. In many places across the country, the urban/rural divide reflects the gap between the Bamar majority and the ethnic nationalities, an issue that is well exemplified by tensions around land rights.⁷

Urban planning also reflects the divide between rich and poor.⁸ In industrial zones on the outskirts of Yangon such as Hlaing Tharyar or Shwepyithar, migrants from the countryside find work in garment factories⁹ and often live in slums. The development of these zones, and the frequent euphemistic characterization of them as “informal settlements”, illustrates this point.

Last but not least, decisions on the construction and maintenance of infrastructure are a fundamental aspect in the development of Myanmar. They highlight the need to clarify the division of power, not only between elected representatives and civil servants but also between authority at the Union level, the State and Region level and the municipal level.¹⁰

DEMOCRACY AND URBAN AND REGIONAL PLANNING

These considerations notwithstanding, Myanmar's political parties do not seem to view urban and regional planning as a priority. The party manifestos for the November 2020 polls that began to appear in September either barely mention issues of urban planning or completely neglect them. Beyond the issue of the general quality of and level of detail in these manifestos, it is also understandable that political parties are not entirely clear what responsibilities in the area of urban and regional planning would be theirs following victory

at the polls, and what would largely remain under the control of civil servants. This applies to a range of ministries and departments,¹¹ and is not specific to Myanmar.

The lines separating the roles of elected representatives and civil servants, and the lines between the national, subnational and local or municipal level, in the area of urban and regional planning are in any democratic system often unclear, contested and constantly evolving.

One line that is supposed to help divide responsibilities is that between the political and the technical. The political falls notionally under the purview of elected representatives, and the technical under that of civil servants.

In Myanmar, technical aspects of urban and regional planning are fairly well understood,¹² and the past decade has brought significant progress.¹³ However, the military's quest to control the national territory has long defined the political vision that frames urban and regional planning. Such a vision, almost by its very nature, leads to very practical — that is, technical — solutions.

In the context of internal and international migration, rapid urbanization, economic development, climate change, democratization, decentralization, and an ongoing peace process, Myanmar is in great need of a political vision that moves beyond the immediately efficient. It must be a vision focused on rethinking development and urban and regional planning. It must also give special attention to the needs and aspirations of all sections of society, including the poor, the young, ethnic nationalities and women, and in both rural and urban areas. And this vision must be environmentally sustainable. Better yet, any overarching vision at the Union level needs to aggregate a multitude of local visions — at the village level, the municipal level, the township level, and the subnational level in the states and regions.

In that sense, thinking through issues of urban and regional planning is an exercise in constantly zooming in and zooming out on the national map, from a global and regional view that takes in neighbouring countries, to the micro-level of an individual street or an individual plot of land. It is impossible to understand urban and regional planning in the town of Lashio, Shan State, for instance, without taking into consideration markets, vendors and their customers and the vegetables produced by farmers in nearby villages. It requires taking into consideration the conflict in areas surrounding the town, in every township of northern Shan State, too. This conflict has given rise to temporary displacement or permanent migration—two further realities that planning processes cannot overlook. And those processes must also take into consideration the strategic position of Lashio in the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) on the road between Muse and Mandalay.

LOCAL DEMOCRACY AND LOCAL POLITICAL ECO-SYSTEMS

In Mandalay, most actors involved in urban and regional planning are well aware of the central position of their city in the “upside down Y shaped” CMEC and of its site on the Irrawaddy River. They are proud of its important historical, cultural and political heritage. Those actors are also conscious of the potential for the city to bank on its position as a

tourism hub, strategically located between Pyin Oo Lwin, Bagan and the Inle lake. And they often see the need to consider all these aspects of Mandalay at the same time in planning for the future of their city.

What seems to be missing, however, is an overarching vision for the future of Mandalay and its region—or for the future of northern Shan State, or the Inle lake region. Critically, too, institutions in which stakeholders could discuss and agree on those visions also appear to be lacking.

Urban and regional planning must not, though, be merely a top-down exercise in which the state dictates the future of a city, a town or a region. On the contrary, strategic planning should accompany and reinforce processes that remain largely organic, resulting from individual choices made freely by all members of society.

Balancing the powers and the responsibilities of the state with respect for the freedom of all citizens, as well as the powers of each level of decision-making; designing a vision for the future based on the demands of constituencies at the Union, state or region, township, municipal or village level; setting a political framework in which civil servants are tasked with finding technical answers; and creating institutions in which discussions and debates on planning can take place and decisions taken, are the role of elected representatives in a democratic system.

Beyond democratization, the need for public debate at the local level, and for institutions that make it possible both for members of the public at large, civil society organizations and the private sector and for civil servants, with their expertise, to be taken into account in decision-making processes calls for decentralization and the fostering of local political ecosystems.¹⁴

In Kalaw, southern Shan State, an influential member of the ruling National League for Democracy and representative of Kalaw Township in the Union parliament's lower house or the Pyithu Hluttaw, Daw Pyone Kathy Naing, has managed to rally an array of government bodies to her vision for the town. These bodies include the Union Ministry of Construction and its Department of Urban and Housing Development for Shan State, the Kalaw Township Development Committee and the newly created Kalaw Tourism Organization. She has also secured the support of international development agencies, all to advance an agenda of building on the town's many heritage houses and buildings and its tourism industry for what she calls "the long-term sustainable development of Kalaw town".¹⁵

Decentralization remains limited in Myanmar, and it often takes the form of administrative deconcentration rather than that of meaningful devolution of power. Nevertheless, subnational governments have taken a central role in the coordination among various agencies and stakeholders in the implementation of reforms, and power is being transferred to the local level, although only gradually.¹⁶ The 2020 general elections, especially if they lead to greater diversity in subnational parliaments, could pave the way for them to play a more significant role in local politics.

In Yangon and Mandalay, the Yangon City Development Council and Mandalay City Development Council, respectively, have become key institutions in urban planning. The latter body oversees 14 departments. Among them are the departments of playgrounds, parks and gardens; of city planning and administration; of markets and slaughter houses; of roads and bridges; of water and sanitation; and of agriculture and livestock. Interestingly, the chairman of the Mandalay City Development Council and mayor of Mandalay, Dr Ye Lwin, doubles as the Minister of Municipal Affairs for the Mandalay Region.¹⁷

Municipal democracy in Myanmar remains, however, in its infancy, and the other cities are only slowly following the examples of Mandalay and Yangon. Mawlamyine, in Mon State, is an example. As in the case of education, health, or natural resources management, the Union government in Naypyidaw seems to be both deliberate and cautious in gradually granting authority and responsibilities to governments at the subnational and municipal levels, in the field of urban and regional planning. In a country that has been centralized to the high degree that Myanmar has been since 1962, and that only initiated a process of decentralization less than a decade ago, concerns about local capacity on the part of both elected representatives and civil servants are not entirely unwarranted.

Still, examples exist of municipal democracy functioning well, allowing for community engagement, and permitting local demands to be heard.

While central to the democratic process, this position of elected representatives as interfaces, mediators, and ultimate arbiters among the military, the central government and its agencies, subnational governments, and local authorities in the General Administration Department¹⁸ is not an easy one. An elected representative in the town of Nyaungshwe, southern Shan State, told the authors about having to deal with three sets of actors—all presenting their own, often contradictory demands—in the exercise of his duties. First were his counterparts at the township, subnational and Union levels. Second was the local population, whom he is first and foremost supposed to serve. And third were the competing representatives of various nationalities, in an Intha majority township within a Pa-O majority district, a Shan majority State and a Bamar majority country.¹⁹

The difficulty of dealing with these Russian dolls of ethnicity was most visible in the efforts made, in the last few years, to develop an Inle Lake Management Authority. Similarly, while the development of a roadmap to develop Kalaw has seen some success, other towns in the same township, such as Aung Ban with its local economy that relies on trade, or Heho with its airport and strong agriculture sector, may see other priorities as crucial to their own development.

CONCLUSION

This diversity, not only among different townships but also within individual townships and within each city, town, or village tract, imposes important limitations on the promise of the top-down vision of urban and regional planning behind the township plans designed by the Ministry of Construction in Naypyidaw. The development of these plans has benefited from no real consultation with either local communities or their elected representatives at the local level.

Urban and regional planning calls for the involvement of various levels of government, for line ministries and government agencies to communicate and cooperate with one another and for elected representatives and civil servants to define and respect one another's prerogatives. It also calls for the promotion of local democracy, and of subnational- and municipal-level democracy in particular, and for community engagement on the part of the various levels of government, to become the norm. Finally, successful planning requires that local political eco-systems develop, so that stakeholders have the opportunity to debate different visions for the future.

It remains necessary for the central government in Naypyidaw to maintain a bird's eye view of strategic planning at the national and international level and for the civil servants in charge of territorial administration in Myanmar's General Administration Department to set clear rules governing urban and regional planning. But in the process of democratization, and of decentralization, it is vital to allow democratic institutions at the subnational, township and municipal levels to make decisions in response to the demands of their respective constituents; that is, the local population.

The conceptualization and governance of urban and regional planning in Myanmar are undergoing an evolution at different levels:

- From responding to the needs of the military to responding to those of the population.
- From being designed at the centre to being debated locally.
- From civil servants' leadership to that of democratically elected representatives.
- From putting technical solutions front and centre to subordinating them to, and putting them at the service of, political decisions.
- From a concentration of expertise at the centre to its development at the subnational and local levels.

While these multiple and parallel processes involve a great number and variety of institutions, organizations, and communities, as well as a great range of fields of professional expertise and of democratic practices, elected representatives at all levels of government will increasingly take the lead in them. Political parties, then, are in a position not only to frame and sometimes to design the institutions for debate and discussion of, and decisions on, visions for the future of a town, a village or a region, but also to champion a particular vision of that future; in other words, the life of the city, i.e. the very meaning of politics.

In that sense, the 2020 general elections in Myanmar are a missed opportunity. But in shedding light on the failure of political parties to listen to their constituents, to understand political institutions, the role of elected representatives relative to that of civil servants, to campaign on the basis of clear manifestos, and to put an emphasis on issues of urban and regional planning, those elections could serve as a valuable indicator of the gaps to be filled in the country's democratization and decentralization processes.

¹ The authors wish to thank the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) for its support of this project, as well as Alex Aung Khant, the executive director of Urbanize. May Zin Thaw and Sumdu Jasengroi, researchers with Urbanize and members of the Researcher's Republic, contributed research to this project.

² Mael Raynaud, "Educating for Peace, the Rule of Law and Development in a New Myanmar", *Journal of Human Rights and Peace Studies* 2 (2016): 36-74, p. 48.

³ For instance, permanent secretaries in various line ministries, directors general and deputy directors general in the ministries and officials in their departments at the subnational level, such as the Department of Urban Housing Development, the General Administration Department, the Township Development Committees, the Yangon and Mandalay City Development Committees, and the various Region and State Development Committees.

⁴ Mael Raynaud, "The Pros and Cons of Electing Chief Ministers", *Tea Circle*, 30 September 2019 (<https://teacircleoxford.com/2019/09/30/the-pros-and-cons-of-electing-chief-ministers/>, downloaded 28 September 2020).

⁵ A report on urban and regional planning in Myanmar prepared by the same authors will be published by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in 2021. This paper and the upcoming report draw on more than 80 conducted in the course of more than 15 field visits to Yangon, Mawlamyine, Mandalay, Pyin Oo Lwin, Lashio, Nay Pyi Taw, Kalaw, Taunggyi and Nyaungshwe between February 2019 and March 2020.

⁶ Alex Aung Khant, "Dazed and Confused: The Future of Yangon's Urban Direction", *Tea Circle*, 20 March 2017 (<https://teacircleoxford.com/2017/03/20/dazed-and-confused-the-future-of-yangons-urban-direction/>, downloaded 30 September 2020).

⁷ May Zin Thaw, "Peace and Prosperity in Myanmar Hinges on Land and 2020 Candidates are Avoiding It", *ISEAS Perspective*, 9 October 2020 (https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_113.pdf, downloaded 11 October 2020).

⁸ Alex Aung Khant, "Pandemic Lays Bare Yangon's Governance Shortcomings", *Frontier Myanmar*, 16 June 2020 (<https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/pandemic-lays-bare-yangons-governance-shortcomings>, downloaded 30 September 2020).

⁹ Ye Yint Khant Maung, "Factory Workers Suffer Blame and Pain in Myanmar's COVID-19 Response", *Tea Circle*, 3 June 2020 (<https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/factory-workers-suffer-blame-and-pain-in-myanmars-covid-19-response>, downloaded 30 September 2020).

¹⁰ Alex Aung Khant, "Comparing Approaches to Financing and Managing Mega-Development Projects between the National Government and Urban Authorities: A Case-Study of Yangon's MRT Implementation", *Tea Circle*, 5 February 2020. (<https://teacircleoxford.com/2020/02/05/comparing-approaches-to-financing-and-managing-mega-development-projects-between-the-national-government-and-urban-authorities-a-case-study-of-yangons-mrt-implementation/>, downloaded 30 September 2020).

¹¹ Alex Aung Khant, "Yangon and the 2020 Elections: Strategic Planning for Myanmar's Commercial Capital", *Myanmar Times*, 23 September 2020. (<https://www.mmtimes.com/news/yangon-and-2020-elections-strategic-planning-myanmars-commercial-capital.html>, downloaded 30 September 2020).

¹² It is mostly civil servants who have this understanding; the elected representatives supposed to oversee their work have significantly less understanding.

¹³ Notably in the cities of Mandalay and Yangon, with improved municipal services, streets and roads renovation, or the creation or renovation of public parks, among others.

¹⁴ Nicolas Salem-Gervais and Mael Raynaud, "Teaching Ethnic Minority Languages in Government Schools and Developing the Local Curriculum: Elements of Decentralization in Language-in-Education Policy" (Yangon: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2020).

¹⁵ "Kalaw in Style: Ideas, Values and Guidelines to Preserve Kalaw's Uniqueness as Myanmar's Premier Resort Destination", a brochure produced in 2018 by the Kalaw Tourism Organization.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ The same applies to the mayor of Yangon.

¹⁸ The GAD is the institution in charge of territorial administration in Myanmar, equivalent to the Prefecture system in France, for instance.

¹⁹ Interview with a member of the municipal council, Nyaungshwe, November 2019.

To read earlier issues of ISEAS Perspective please click here:

<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective>

Preceding three issues of ISEAS Perspective:

2020/123 “Sino-US Rivalry: Non-Negotiables for US Approaches to Southeast Asia” by William Choong

https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_122.pdf

2020/122 “Mergers May Not be Enough for Myanmar’s Single-ethnic Parties to Gain Seats in the 2020 Elections” by Su-Ann Oh

https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_121.pdf

2020/120 “COVID-19, Decentralization and the 2020 Elections in Myanmar” by Nilar Khaing and Mael Raynaud

https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_120.pdf

<p>ISEAS Perspective is published electronically by: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute</p> <p>30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614 Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p> <p>Get Involved with ISEAS. Please click here: https://www.iseas.edu.sg/support</p>	<p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed.</p> <p>Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Choi Shing Kwok</p> <p>Editorial Advisor: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: Malcolm Cook, Lee Poh Onn, Benjamin Loh and Ng Kah Meng</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p>
--	---	--