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# **Norway's Constructive Engagement in Myanmar.**

**A small state as norm entrepreneur.**

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Master of Science in International Relations

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# Declaration

I, Birgitte Moe Olsen, declare that this thesis is a result of my research investigations and findings. Sources of information other than my own have been acknowledged and a reference list has been appended. This work has not been previously submitted to any other university for award of any type of academic degree.

Signature.....

Date.....

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# Abstract

2011 marked a significant change in Myanmar politics. After nearly 50 years of military rule, a civilian government came to power through multi-party elections and embarked on a series of economic and political reforms. However, members of the democratic opposition saw the transition as nothing more than a façade, as the same generals who had ruled the country in uniforms simply traded them for civilian clothes. It therefore came as a surprise to many that Norway, previously a dedicated supporter of the democratic opposition, became an international frontrunner in engaging with the regime. To understand the tangent taken by Norwegian politicians, critics started accusing Norway of having vested business interests in the national reform process. Many believed that Norway placed too much faith in the reform agenda and contributed to the strengthening of an illegitimate and authoritarian regime.

This study frames Norway's policy of constructive engagement in Myanmar as norm entrepreneurship. The aim of the thesis is to show how and why Norway assumed this role. I will discuss how constructive engagement became a legitimate option for Norwegian decision makers by looking at discourse. Norwegian politicians aligned its rhetoric within a discourse that challenged the dominant norms on democratic change in Myanmar. By defending alternative strategies, and benchmarking in constructive engagement with the regime, Norway acted as a norm entrepreneur for other Western governments. Norway searched for alternative political solutions in Myanmar, and constructive engagement must therefore be seen as a continuation of the established foreign policy practice of involvement.

Moreover, the case study illuminates how small states are able to exercise influence on the international stage by assuming roles as norm entrepreneurs. Norway used soft power tactics in order to influence the reform agenda in Myanmar, and gather support in the international community. As a small state, Norway has comparative advantages over great powers for assuming the role as norm entrepreneur. Because it is able to fill a role great powers are unable to take, Norway's norm entrepreneurship is a constant source of status in the international community. Norway's endeavors in Myanmar must therefore be seen as a continuation over a prevailing trend in Norwegian foreign policy, where Norway uses its moral capital for the sake of status.

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## Acronyms

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASSK	Aung San Suu Kyi
CDNH	Center for Diversity and National Harmony
CESC	Center for Economic and Social Development
DVB	Democratic Voice of Burma
EAO	Ethnic Armed Organization
EEA	European Economic Area
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act
GoM	Government of Myanmar
ICC	International Criminal Court
INGO	International non-governmental organization
JPF	Joint Peace Fund
KNU	Karen National Union
MDRI	Myanmar Development Resource Institute
MFA	(Norwegian) Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MPC	Myanmar Peace Center
MPSI	Myanmar Peace Support Initiative
MoECAF	Ministry of Environmental Conservation and Forestry
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NBC	Norwegian Burma Committee
NCA	National Ceasefire Agreement
NCCT	Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team
NCGUB	National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma
NLD	National League for Democracy
NPA	Norwegian People's Aid
NVE	Norwegian Water Resources and Energy Directorate
ODA	Official Development Assistance
PDSG	Peace Donor Support Group
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNSG	United Nations Secretary-General
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party

# Introduction

2011 marked a significant change in Myanmar politics. After nearly 50 years of military rule, a civilian government came to power through multi-party elections and embarked on a series of economic and political reforms. However, members of the democratic opposition saw the transition as nothing more than a façade, as the same generals who had ruled the country in uniforms simply traded them for civilian clothes. It therefore came as a surprise to many that Norway, previously a dedicated supporter of the democratic opposition, became an international frontrunner in engaging with the regime. To understand the tangent taken by Norwegian politicians, critics started accusing Norway of having vested business interests in the national reform process. Many believed that Norway placed too much faith in the reform agenda and contributed to the strengthening of an illegitimate and authoritarian regime.

This paper challenges the view portrayed in media. Instead of suggesting that Norway's policy change was driven by economic motives, I argue that constructive engagement policies were a continuation of the policy of involvement (*engasjementspolitikk*) historically found in Norwegian foreign policy. By engaging with the military regime before other Western governments was willing to do the same, Norway actively challenged the mainstream discourse and norms prevalent in the international community. I suggest that Norway took the role of norm entrepreneur in support of constructive engagement policies. By taking a lead role in international support to Myanmar's transition, Norway – a relatively small state – was able to provide conducive support and exercise influence early in the reform process. In this respect, Norway helped strengthen a process that in 2016 allowed opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi to assume *de facto* leadership of the country.

I think this case is interesting because it illustrates how Norway used its small state status as a comparative advantage in order to support change. This stands in contrast to much IR literature where small states are usually neglected due to their lack of resources. It was Norway's flexibility (relative to great powers) and perceived neutrality that enabled it to challenge the norms dominant in the international community, and take a frontrunner role for constructive engagement. Moreover, the success of constructive engagement policies came by using soft power tactics which is characteristic of small state foreign policy. By using Norway's constructive engagement in Myanmar as a case, the thesis aims to showcase how

small states can exercise power in the international community by taking the role as norm entrepreneur.

## 1.1 Research questions

The people of Myanmar has suffered under military rule for decades. Since British independence in 1948, the country has been afflicted by civil conflict, public opposition has been violently suppressed, and public revenue from natural resource extraction been used to build up national defense services instead of being invested in health and education. A “Burmese Way to Socialism” from the time of a military coup in 1962 until 1988 distorted the national economy by effectively isolating Myanmar from international markets in favor of industrial nationalization programs. Economic mismanagement was an important factor that triggered the largest public unrest in Myanmar’s history. 8<sup>th</sup> August 1988, hundreds of thousands took to the streets to protest against an unfair regime, and demand democracy. The uprising resulted in multiparty elections, but instead of honoring the will of the people, the military introduced a rule by decree under a new administration, the State Law Order and Restoration Council (SLORC). The democratic movement that developed through the 8888 uprising continued to fight against the military regime through the 1990’s and 2000’s. An important strategy that was used to pressure the military was to encourage international boycott. In solidarity of the democratic movement, Western governments in Europe, the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand chose to isolate the military government both politically and economically for over 20 years.

Norway was a dedicated supporter of the democratic movement, and subject to the European Common Position on Burma which included economic sanctions, asset freezes and travel bans on junta members. It therefore came as a surprise to domestic and international observers when this approach was publically challenged from 2009. The Norwegian government sought to establish dialogue with the military regime, and talked about the harm caused by sanctions. After the transition to a civilian government in 2011, Norway was quick to issue concessions and initiate cooperation with Myanmar’s government. Norway’s policy change did not come from pressure in Norwegian civil society, instead civil society actors and members of the Norwegian Parliament criticized the approach which was starkly different to that of Western allies. With this puzzle in mind, research question 1 aims to answer:

RQ1: Why did Norway change its Myanmar policy from one of isolation to one of constructive engagement?

I've chosen to answer this question by looking at discourse. After some research, it became clear that multiple narratives exist when it comes to political change in Myanmar, and the international community's role in it. What I will refer to as the mainstream democratic discourse was constructed by the democratic movement, and spearheaded by Aung San Suu Kyi's (ASSK) political party the National League for Democracy (NLD). The discourse analysis will show how the democratic movement used its moral capital to construct norms that were adopted by Western government. The so-called alternative discourse on democratic change was led by a small group of exile Burmese and foreign scholars, and rose in direct opposition to the mainstream discourse. By comparing the representations and practices within the two camps, I explain how constructive engagement became a legitimate choice for Norwegian decisions makers. I argue that Norwegian politicians aligned themselves with the alternative discourse, and that this provided the basis of a constructive engagement policy.

The second research question deals with influence, and in that respect challenges the view of small states dominant in realist theory that power and influence is the result of material strength (Jackson and Sørensen 2012). Research question 2 asks:

RQ2: How did Norway try to influence Myanmar's reform agenda, and to what extent did it succeed?

Building on the concept of soft power that influence does not come from coercion but from norms and ideas (Nye 1990), I argue that Norway has been influential, precisely because of its small state status and not in spite of it. Norway utilized soft power tactics such as networking, diplomacy, economic support/catalytic funding, capacity building and mediation in order to (i) support and influence Myanmar's reform agenda, and (ii) mobilize international support. The constructive engagement approach successfully gave momentum to the reform process, provided it with a sense of international legitimacy, and paved the way for larger Western actors. However, it also created distance between Norway and ethnic groups and the democratic movement they had supported for years.

Finally, I seek to identify the factors that contributed to Norway's success by asking:

RQ3: How did Norway's small state status enable it take a lead in engagement efforts in Myanmar?

The main argument throughout the chapter is that Norway's small state status was advantageous in order to assume a role other actors would not or could not take. These comparative advantages combined with political will, a historic link to Myanmar, and a tradition of involving itself in matters where it does not have direct interest explain Norwegian leadership in Myanmar. Thus, I argue that contrary to popular views, Norwegian policy of constructive engagement must be interpreted as a continuation of a policy of involvement.

To summarize; in order to understand Norway's policy change, the thesis asks three questions divided into respective chapters:

**RQ1: Why did Norway change its Myanmar policy from one of isolation to one of constructive engagement?**

**RQ2: How did Norway try to influence Myanmar's reform agenda, and to what extent did it succeed?**

**RQ3: How did Norway's small state status enable it take a lead in engagement efforts in Myanmar?**

Ultimately, this thesis aims to show how and why Norway became a norm entrepreneur for constructive engagement in Myanmar. I use discourse analysis to illuminate how Norway's goal of political change in Myanmar was a constant. Norway's policy change in Myanmar must therefore be seen as a continuation of the established foreign policy practice of involvement. Norway's comparative advantages in its constructive engagement approach was its small state capabilities and strong political will, which it frequently uses in international advocacy work for the sake of influence and status. This case study illustrates how small states can use its capabilities to exercise influence in the international arena.

### **1.1.1 Structure of paper**

The paper is divided into five chapters. The first chapter lays out the conceptual and methodological framework for the study, and provides a brief overview of Myanmar's political history. The objective of chapter 2 is to present how constructive engagement policies became a legitimate option for Norwegian decision-makers through discourse. The chapter contrasts the mainstream discourse prevalent among Western governments from 1988 with an alternative discourse on political change (constructed by the Third Force movement), and argues how Norway aligned itself with the latter. Chapter 3 shows that Norway had the

will and diplomatic tools available to make a difference in Myanmar's democratic transition. The chapter shows that Norway used networking, diplomacy, economic support/catalytic funding, capacity building and mediation in order to support and strengthen the reform process. By challenging prevalent norms through discourse and raising benchmarks, Norway acted as a norm entrepreneur for other Western governments. Chapter 4 discusses Norway's comparative advantages as a small state. The objective of the chapter is to see the case study in a larger context by claiming that Norway frequently assumes the role as norm entrepreneur in the international community for the sake of status. The concluding chapter provides a summary of main findings.

## 1.2 Conceptual framework

A conceptual framework is meant to provide a broad overview of the theoretical assumptions that contributed to shape this study. In the following, I will address the concepts of small states, norms, and discourse – how they relate to IR, and how these concepts will be applied to my study.

### 1.2.1 Studying small states

Small states is a category relative to great powers or middle powers. Although there is no empirical cut off point to determine which category a given state might fall under, small states are defined based on their lack of traditional hard power resources; military strength, economic strength, territorial size and population. Small states were long neglected in IR, and did not gain much attention as a separate area of study until the 1990's (de Carvalho and Neumann 2015). Neorealism and neoliberalism that had long dominated the discipline were mainly concerned with great power rivalry and the structural make-up of the international system. Their positivist approach to science focused on material power, which effectively ruled out small states. Constructionism's entry into the discipline thus opened a door for new approaches to small state studies (de Carvalho and Neumann 2015). The conception of power was broadened to include ideational factors such as ideas, norms, and identities. According to this perspective, small states were able to exercise influence through soft power, because "Proof of power lies not in resources but in the ability to change the behavior of states" (Nye 1990:155).

Scholars like Jan Egeland (1988) claimed that small states were in some cases in a better position to exercise influence than great powers. In his book *Impotent Superpower, Potent*

*Small State* Egeland (1988) asserts that Norway, as a small state, in many cases is better suited to pursue an international human rights agenda than the United States. His main argument is that great powers will have more foreign policy concerns, and are therefore more likely to sacrifice human rights promotion on behalf of national interest. In Egeland's opinion, a small state like Norway is in a better position to promote human rights due to its lack of direct interests (he uses South Africa and Sri Lanka to exemplify), its institutional flexibility, and its perceived neutrality country with moral integrity. Hence, these small state capabilities provide an advantage in order to exercise influence. This line of reasoning concerning small states' comparative advantages have been continued through an increasing literature on small state norm entrepreneurship. Scholars like Ingebritsen (2002), Tryggestad (2014), Björkdahl (2008) and Trolle Smed and Wivel (2015) claim that small states with moral authority (and money) – usually a West European country– are able to influence policy making and shape international agendas precisely because of their smallness. By utilizing small state advantages such as perceived neutrality, financial wealth/flexibility, competence etc., small states are able to act as mediators, lobbyists and norm entrepreneurs on the international stage (Grøn and Wivel 2011). States' norm entrepreneurship is likely to be motivated based both on idealistic and self-beneficial factors. Idealistic because norm entrepreneurship is driven by the desire to motivate others to change a certain behavior, policy or attitude for the better. Self-beneficial because norm entrepreneurship allows small states to assume positions and roles they otherwise would be excluded from. Norm entrepreneurship can be a stepping stone for influence in other areas, and give access to closed clubs. Therefore, small states' moral authority may be utilized to elevate its international status (de Carvalho and Neumann 2015).

This study builds on the norm entrepreneurship scholarship. By using primary and secondary data, I will demonstrate how Norway has acted as a norm entrepreneur for constructive engagement policies in Myanmar. I argue that Norway's small state status became a comparative advantage in Myanmar because it enabled Norway to take a role other governments could not or would not take. Norway's soft power tactics was moreover conducive in order to reach its goals of (i) supporting and influencing Thein Sein's reform agenda, and (ii) gather support for constructive engagement in the international community.

### **1.2.2 The role of norms in IR**

The concept of norms is an integral part of social constructivist theory within International Relations (IR). Social constructivism emerged as a meta-theory within IR by the end of the Cold War, in response to the strong positivist trends within neorealism and neoliberalism



which had long dominated the discipline. Constructivists rejected the idea of an objective reality that exists independently of human understanding (Jackson and Sørensen 2012). Instead of interpreting social reality through the material, constructivist proposed an interpretation based on social constructions of ideas, meanings and norms. This interpretation - or meaning, in the shape of norms, interests and identities - is produced and reproduced through social interaction at individual, group or state level. Thus, to understand reality one must deconstruct the production of meaning.

A norm is “a standard of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998:891). An action is normative when morality is connected to it, thus a norm is a set of behavior that “ought” to be followed. In terms of states, norms are followed because “that is what good states do”. By adhering to a certain behavior, states are placed within a certain group of states with whom they can identify. In this way, norms produce and reproduce identity in the international community. In order to understand the dynamics between norms and political change in the international community, Martha Finnemore and Katherine Sikkink (1998) developed a model called “the norm life cycle”. The authors identify three stages of norm emergence, norm cascading (the proliferation of norms), and norm internalization. The first stage involves agents that frame a new norm. After a critical number of states have accepted it, it reaches a tipping point where the norm is widely accepted. In the second stage the norm cascades through socialization and increasingly more states adhere to the norm in order to “fit in”. In the third stage, the norm is so accepted it becomes institutionalized.

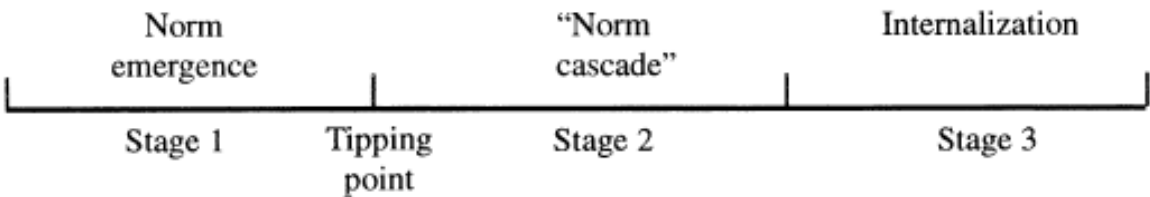


Figure 1 The Norm Life Cycle, as found in Finnemore and Sikkink (1998).

This paper addresses “norm emergence”, in reference to the first stage of the process. In the norm emergence stage, agents – or norm entrepreneurs – actively frame an issue in order to persuade a national or international audience of its legitimacy. “In constructing their frames, norm entrepreneurs face firmly embedded alternative norms and frames that create alternative

perceptions of both appropriateness and interest” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998:897). Because norm emergence effectively means a dismissal of preexisting norms and conceptions of appropriate behavior, norm entrepreneurs may need to use “inappropriate” tactics (such as social disobedience) in order to make their case heard. Norm entrepreneurs are usually motivated by empathy, altruism or ideational commitment.

Norway has been an active norm entrepreneur on the international stage for a long time, although initiatives may not always be recognized as such. In an external evaluation rapport ordered by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), the authors compared four cases of what they referred to as “policy advocacy” initiated by the Norwegian government between 2005-2014 (Tilley et. al. 2016.). The rapport says that advocacy initiatives are meant to influence other actors into policy or behavioral change by acting as a catalyst. It further assesses the tactics, successes and limitations of these initiatives. Norway’s motivation for pursuing policy advocacy were said to be a balance between ideational commitment, and self-interest. “Ideational commitment is the main motivation when entrepreneurs promote norms or ideas because they believe in the ideals and values embodied in the norms, even though the pursuit of the norms may have no effect on their well-being “(Finnemore and Sikkink 1998:897). On the other hand, advocacy initiatives seemed to be beneficial in order to make Norway more visible internationally, and give politicians access to exclusive political circles (Tilley et. al 2016). De Carvalho and Neumann (2015) argues how small states sometimes assume the role as norm entrepreneur in order to gain international status. Status comes when small states increase their moral authority vis-à-vis others in the international community (de Carvalho and Neumann 2015). This point is directly relatable to the case I will present in this paper. By using the framework of norm entrepreneur, I will explain how a new norm of constructive engagement in Myanmar was constructed through discourse, and how Norway was one of the driving forces to promote this norm internationally. Norway acted as a norm entrepreneur defined by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998), in that it tried to persuade other actors of its legitimacy. The last chapter will address how this was both based on an ideational foundation, but also served Norwegian self-interest by sustaining its level of international status.

### **1.2.3 Discourse analysis**

A central way to produce meaning is through language. Language is not neutral, but contains values, identities and power structures that shape the world around us (Hansen 2012). A discourse is not something that exists “out there”, but is an analytical concept. Thus, the aim

of discourse analysis is to “expose”, or deconstruct, meaning. Post-structural scholars will reject the narrow positivist understanding of causality, but imply a humbler understanding of the causal links between discourse and practice as discourse maps out possible outcomes (Neumann 2008). Discourse analysis can be applied to foreign policy in order to understand the meanings that sustain them, and how foreign policy representations construct identity. Therefore, foreign policy discourse analysis will not be concerned with the processes of decision making, or bureaucratic politics, but rather on the result of these. “Discourse analysis makes an assumption that foreign policies rely upon representations and that such representations are articulated in language” (Hansen 2012). By identifying and analyzing key representations, we can understand how foreign policies are made to appear legitimate, necessary and realistic to their relevant audiences. However, just because they are represented as such does not mean that they in fact are legitimate, necessary or realistic. A discourse analysis does not aim to assess the validity of a certain foreign policy, but to analyze the values, norms and identities that it produces.

In chapter 2 of this paper, I apply discourse analysis in order to understand how a policy of constructive engagement in Myanmar was made possible. The discourse analysis point to the “norm emergence” stage within the norm life cycle, and points out key agents for change, or so-called norm entrepreneurs. I show how Norway became one of them by aligning its rhetoric with the “Third Force”. The “Third Force” discourse rose in direct opposition to the mainstream democratic discourse on political change in Myanmar. I will therefore present both, in order to compare the norms and practices that underpin them. The tension between the two discourses explain much of the controversy around the policy of constructive engagement in general, and Norway in particular.

### 1.3 Research design

The choice of research method depends on ontological and epistemological assumptions, that is, the researcher’s understanding of reality, and how one can study it. An objectivist ontological understanding equates social reality with physical reality – as something that exists independently of human interpretation. Reality can therefore be measured, and explained through cause-effect linkages (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006). A positivist epistemology aims to confirm or challenge theory by testing a set of hypotheses, using quantitative methods. The ontology underlying this study, on the other hand, is social

constructivism which sees reality as inherently entwined with human behavior and its perceptions of such behavior. According to constructivists, reality is not static or tangible, but constructed through social interaction. Meaning, identities and norms are constantly reproduced in relation to others. Reality is therefore in flux, and a relative entity. Social constructivists will try to understand social reality through an interpretive epistemological framework (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006). Knowledge is produced by interpreting others' sense of meaning through the lens of theory and literature. The starting point of this inductive reasoning is observation, which found the basis for theory construction. An interpretivist epistemology is implicitly linked to qualitative research. Only through qualitative methods can one really understand the meaning, identities and norms that shape social phenomena. This leads me to this study. As already outlined, the intention of this study is to understand behavior, more specifically to understand policy change. By asking questions that require interpretation (what-why-how), I've already situated myself within the realm of interpretivist epistemology. I will use a combination of case study analysis and discourse analysis as qualitative methods in order to understand the reasoning behind a certain policy change, what enabled this behavior, and how it has been perceived.

### **1.3.1 Case selection**

The point of departure for this master's thesis was my interest in one particular case. Thus instead of scoping out a number of possible cases and selecting the one best suited to illustrate a given theory (Klotz 2008), I started with the empirics to later find a theory that could explain the phenomena. What initially drew my attention to Norway's role in Myanmar was that the case appeared to differ from Norway's traditional approach due to the controversy surrounding it. However, as I began collecting data and linked it up to relevant literature, I interpreted this case as a continuation of Norway's usual pattern in foreign policy. This brings me to transferability. Case studies include the risk of becoming too descriptive and hard to generalize. Researchers must remember that "cases are cases of something" (Klotz 2008:43). By interpreting Norway's change in Myanmar policy as norm entrepreneurship, I argue that this case can be used to illustrate a general trend in Norwegian foreign policy (Tilley et. al 2016; Tryggestad 2014; Ingebritsen 2002; Egeland 1988). Not only does this case study say something about Norway's motivation and ability to assume such roles, but it says something about what type of state is likely to do the same. By placing my case study within a growing literature of small state norm entrepreneurship (1.2.1 studying small states), this thesis

illustrates a more general trend of what characterizes a norm entrepreneur in international relations.

This case study addresses change in Norway's Myanmar policy, from a policy of isolation of Myanmar's military regime, to a policy of constructive engagement. This change is difficult to place within a timeframe, because the decision making process developed over many years. But 2008 can be said to be a turning point, because the humanitarian devastation caused by Cyclone Nargis legitimized the distribution of development aid inside the country, and opened up for collaboration with the military regime (which was previously contested during the policy of isolation). It was also during this time that Norwegian officials started to make visits to the country, in attempts to open dialogue with the regime. The concept of constructive engagement is usually used in relation to authoritarian governments. Although transition from military to civilian rule was a major outcome of Myanmar's 2010 election, U Thein Sein's government was by many regarded as an extension of existing power structures. Many of the ministers selected as part of the civilian government were previous generals in the old junta. The USDP were considered a proxy of the military and was moreover accused of serious election fraud. Additionally, many voters chose to abstain in the election as an act of sympathy toward the NLD. Because the USDP government for these reasons have been labeled semi-authoritarian or illegitimate (Stokke 2012), I will include the time period of Thein Sein's administration when I refer to constructive engagement policies. The case study of Norway's constructive engagement with Myanmar is therefore defined as the period between 2007 until 2015.

Macmillian Dictionary (2016, 11.12) defines constructive engagement as "a policy of having political and business relationships with a country, while at the same time supporting political and social change within that country". Thus, by labeling Norway's policy toward Myanmar as constructive engagement, I've already implied that the support of political and social change has been a constant. But whereas the Norwegian government (and other Western governments) previously placed faith in economic and political isolation as a strategy to push for change, this strategy was later replaced with one of economic and political interaction. I've chosen to label this change as a norm, based on the definition of Finnemore and Sikkink (1998:891) "a norm is a standard of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity". Firstly, policy decisions in themselves reflect a preferred, or right way to do things, and secondly, international interaction with Myanmar's military regime had a moral element. As later chapters will show, international policy decisions were linked with the perception of

right and wrong, good and evil, and people's physical welfare. The change in policy therefore brought about a change in perception of "oughtness" in the context of how the international community should interact with Myanmar, and of its concept of right and wrong.

### **1.3.2 Evaluation and bias**

How can we assess the accuracy of new knowledge? The concept of reliability indicate that observations are replicable to other researchers, while the concept of validity endures that we measure what is supposed to be measured (Jones 1996). This is a challenging undertaking, as "interpretive methods will never meet the [evaluation] criteria established for quantitative methods" (Yanow and Schwatz-Shea 2006). Qualitative studies can rather aim to make their findings auditable to others, by keeping records of data (Bryman 2012), and be cautious of potential biases. I specifically want to address potential personal bias and confirmation bias.

Findings are interpreted through the researcher's prior experiences and theoretical assumptions (Yanow and Schawtz-Shea 2006), and thus this case study entails a risk of bias. It is not given that another researcher will end up with the same analysis as me. From January to August 2015, I worked at the Norwegian Embassy in Yangon as an intern, and later as a local employee. The stay was valuable for the thesis as it taught me a lot about Myanmar culture and politics, it allowed me to map important stakeholders, get an understanding of donor dynamics within the diplomatic community in Yangon, and also gain an insight to the procedures within the MFA. Thus, the stay at the embassy enabled me to conduct the data collection and analysis that constitutes this thesis. It gave me an insider's view which has been helpful. On the other hand, although the material of interest in this study was placed some years back in time (the "height" of Norwegian leadership was around 2011-2012), there is a good chance that I am too close to the material. My time at the embassy has inevitably shaped my interpretation of Norway's efforts in Myanmar, and can influence the level of objectivity one should strive for as a researcher. After all, as you learn to trust people, it is more likely to trust their analysis. However, the whole first chapter is dedicated to an in-depth understanding of two opposing views. In analysis sections, I have tried to include alternative views when applicable, and not tried to hide Norway's limitations in any way.

Qualitative interviews are vulnerable to confirmation biases, and perhaps even more so in cases of advocacy initiatives (Tilley et. al. 2016). Informants may have an interest in presenting an initiative as more successful than what was necessary the case, and to exaggerate their own role in the process. This is a challenge because in order to get accurate

information, I rely on actors who were central to the process, but these very actors have at the same time invested most prestige in its success. Moreover, information can be distorted when informants are asked to recall events that happened a long time ago. I have tried to mitigate this risk by cross-checking information across multiple informant and information sources, a method which is by some referred to as triangulation (O'Donoghue, T., Punch K. 2003). The website of the Norwegian government (regjeringen.no) entails an archive of the undertakings of previous governments, and has been useful in this respect. Moreover, if I came across a statement that did not represent a view of a wider group, I make sure to refer to the individual that made it.

### **1.3.3 Data collection**

Throughout this study I've used a mix of primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources include relevant literature, news articles and web pages. Primary sources are data collected through interviews with government officials, Norwegian partners and observers. Because my case study investigates a government process, access to government officials and documents was critical in order to undertake an informed analysis. Fortunately, I was able to interview Norwegian officials central to Norway's policy change, but official documents turned out to be more difficult to gain access to. Political reports written by diplomatic staff were potential valuable sources, as these typically include analysis and recommendations to senior leadership within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). These reports could thus give factual information, but also reveal much of the reasoning at different stages of constructive engagement. The Norwegian Freedom of Information Act (offentlighetsloven) declares the public's right to insight into public documents at municipal and state level. However, the law also contains a number of exceptions which can exclude access. The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs frequently uses such exceptions in order to safeguard sensitive material. I requested insight into 75 public documents mainly from the MFA, but only 14 of these requests were granted. The rest were rejected either because they contained some sensitive information (paragraph 12 A of the FOIA), because they concerned a policy decision (paragraph 14 A of the FIOA), or because of foreign policy interest concerns (paragraph 20 A in the FIOA). Information about Norwegian development assistance was easier to get hold of, as the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), gives free access to Norwegian Aid Statistics at their website. I systematically used this data in order to understand where Norway invested economic (and also political) capital. Although there is a

risk that this database includes flaws, these are unlikely to be large enough to alter the foundation of my analysis.

### **1.3.4 Interviews**

A total of 22 interviews were conducted between February and April 2016 (with one exception). While some took place in Oslo, most interviews happened during a four-week field trip to Yangon, Myanmar and Chiang Mai, Thailand (see annex 1 for a full overview). The sampling approach was purposive, in that I targeted key informants with information and/or experience of the issue at hand. A purposive sampling approach is usually contrasted to random sampling approaches which draws out a representative selection within a population in order to make generalizations (Metzler 2014). Purposive sampling is typical for case studies, where contrary to quantitative studies, the aim is not to generalize within the population, but make the case itself generalizable. To encompass various perspectives, I sampled informants that had different levels of proximity to the Norwegian government, and represented different discursive camps (what I refer to as the mainstream democratic movement and the Third Force). Informants included Norwegian and foreign government officials, Norwegian partners – such as advisers or NGO's, and informed observers. I think the informants I have interviewed are credible in that a handful of them were active implementers of Norway's constructive engagement policy, or close to the process. I could have expanded the list of informants (to include for instance former Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre, ASSK supporter Kjell Magne Bondevik), but I felt that I had enough data and the answers I received were consistent. I also had to think about time and financial constraints.

Only two interviews were conducted in confidentiality. Although I am not able to refer to these informants comments or opinions, I have treated the data from these interviews equal during the analytical phase. Interviews were conducted in either Norwegian or English, dependent on the informant. It would perhaps be easier to do them all in English in regards to the transcription process (plus direct quotes need to be translated), but I think the opportunity to articulate oneself in a mother tongue makes for easier conversation, and also creates a sense of identification between interviewer and interviewee which perhaps opens up for more honest speaking. Two interviews were conducted with an interpreter between English and Burmese. In both cases, the interviewee brought his own interpreter, and I therefore had no opportunity to quality check the respective interpreter's level of English. There was also little opportunity to brief the interpreter of key concepts that would be discussed through the



interview. In one of the cases, the level of language fluency was a direct obstacle to the translation of meaning from the informant to myself.

#### **1.3.4.1 Access to informants**

The biggest challenges to purposive sampling is to identify key informants, and get access to them. Due to my time at the embassy, I had a good idea of which stakeholders would be useful to include in my study. But sampling needed to be flexible in order to adjust to cancellation of appointments or new information that pointed to relevant informants. In Yangon, my connection to the embassy is likely to have given me access to informants who would otherwise be too busy for interviews. It was a sort of reassurance that I had enough previous knowledge that the interview wouldn't be a waste of time. Some researchers use gatekeepers (like NGO's or people or institutions with a wide network) in order to get access to a field. Although the embassy did not assist me during my field work, my connection to the embassy functioned almost like a gatekeeper to some informants in Yangon. In addition to the embassy, I used the Norwegian Burma Committee (NBC) as gatekeeper in order to get access to informants within the democratic movement. The NBC has a wide network of partners developed over many years of effort for democracy in Myanmar. By referring to the NBC, it is likely that informants were more receptive for an enquiry by a foreign master student. Interviews were conducted in offices or cafes and lasted on average one hour (the shortest was 30 min over telephone, the longest 100 min).

#### **1.3.4.2 Structure and language**

Interviews range from the qualitative, loosely structured interview to standardized interviews that resembles surveys (Jones 1996). The point of conducting interviews was for me to get an understanding of the interpretations and descriptions of the informants, and it was therefore not conducive to have a very standardized design. I mostly asked open-ended questions without difficult language which allowed the respondent to speak freely and elaborate. I took the freedom to ask follow-up questions (so-called probing) and adapt question ordering according to responses. This flexible approach is good in order to get in-depth information, but can also be challenging as it requires the researcher's continued assessment of whether the answer is satisfactory or not, and it entails a risk of leading respondents' answers in a certain direction (Jones 1996). It can also be a challenge to generalize in the analytical stage, if respondents have not answered the same questions. Personally, I enjoyed this conversational interview style and think it is important in order to create trust with the interviewee yet I will not claim to have mastered it.

Although the flexible structure of the interview allowed interviewees to “wander off”, I made sure to steer the conversation in line with interview objectives. The interview is always planned ahead through the creation of an interview guide. The researcher’s prior knowledge lays a foundation for concrete questions and the topics which will be discussed (Jones 1996). I created four templates for interviews, dependent on which type of group the respondent fell in under, but adjusted each interview guide according to the informant’s position or relation to the issue. For some interviews, it was necessary to do a lot of research in order to ask the right questions (and to be taken seriously), while others did not require as much preparation.

#### **1.3.4.3 Researcher’s role**

One factor that might influence informants’ responses is the role of me, the researcher. It is likely to assume that a certain level of trust and comfort needs to be established between researcher and informant in order to get frank, elaborative answers. As a young, Norwegian female I sometimes embodied an identity polar opposite to that of an elderly, Burmese man - which might have created obstacles (however I did not find this to be an issue). My relation to the embassy was another possible limitation as I would meet people who were potentially very critical of Norway and the constructive engagement approach. Sometimes, I deliberately avoided to mention my link to the embassy, in order to come across as more balanced.

#### **1.3.5 Empirical analysis**

The analytical component of this study is a combination of discourse analysis and thematic analysis based on interviews. In an inductive research approach, analysis is carried out in parallel to the development of research design, data collection and literature review. It is a circular process, where interpretation along the way alters the result (Meztler 2014). For me, this has meant that research questions, methods and theoretical concepts have been altered from what they initially were in my research proposal.

The text used in the discourse analysis is mostly drawn from secondary sources, but the understanding of this bipolar divide within the democratic opposition, and some of the main representations they entail, came from interviews. While discourse analysis ideally should be drawn from primary sources, time restraint was an issue I needed to take into consideration. My presentation of the two discourses is therefore not a complete description of all meanings, but paints broad strokes within the two discursive camps. The main job has been to identify representations within the separate discourses, and contrast the norms they embody against each other. This is done to understand how a policy of engagement developed to become a legitimate option to Norwegian decision makers. The contrasting of norms is done to clarify

respective ideological standpoints, and illustrate the level of polarization, which again explains the criticism directed at Norway.

In order to interpret data collected from interviews, I needed to categorize the large amount of text. More or less all interviews were recorded, and I took notes as well. This made interviews easy (but time consuming) to transcribe, which is “essential” when conducting qualitative interviews (Jones 1996). Recordings are useful to keep as a back-up if the transcription is incomplete, or a direct quote is needed. Transcription is useful because arguments or the level of detail may change throughout the study (cf. an inductive framework). While one topic might seem important at the time of data collection, it might turn out to be tossed later, and likewise important information might go unnoticed because new topics appear at a later time in the process.

To categorize the data, I read through all interviews and color coded paragraphs that suited a given topic. Based on my prior knowledge, I had an idea of how data should be divided into categories. At the beginning, I had a plan to incorporate six chapters in the thesis, and thus divided data in headlines such as “reform process”, “democratic discourse” and “national interest”. These main chapters were then divided into subdivisions. For example, based on an evaluation rapport of Norwegian advocacy initiatives, I used headlines such as “drivers”, “timing” and “tactics” to sub-categorize chapter 3. Secondary literature contributed to conceptualize the empirics I had collected. As the writing process unfolded, new headlines were created and old ones were discarded. All data within the same color code ended up in the same document, and informants’ statements were often summarized to include only main arguments. Sometimes I needed to get a more systematic overview of which actors argued for what, and made a table in order to compare answers. This way of analyzing was a sort of trial-and-error method as I’ve never dealt with that volume of data before. The inductive research approach was in my experience very demanding and time consuming as I constantly needed to reevaluate the core structure of the thesis. Although I had some core topics in mind before I began my field work, I did not know how to conceptualize my findings. Because I didn’t know exactly what would be relevant and not, some questions were never asked, some questions were only asked to some informant but not all which made it difficult to compare afterwards, and some topics which I gathered much information on turned out not to be used at all. Because my informants were so far away, this was difficult to do something about it.

One area that I did not have the opportunity to explore properly was other Western governments' actions compared to Norway's. As my study focuses only on Norway, it may appear as if Norway did all the work by itself in isolation to others and I am exaggerating Norwegian successes. While it is uncontroversial to say that Norway pursued government dialogue and collaboration ahead of others, it would have been interesting to know a little more about what was going on in other countries. For instance, Australia long took a more compromising line than its Western allies (Pedersen 2008), and the US was quick to honor progress through high-level visits by State Secretary Hillary Clinton and President Barack Obama.

## 1.4 Background: from military regime to semi-civilian government

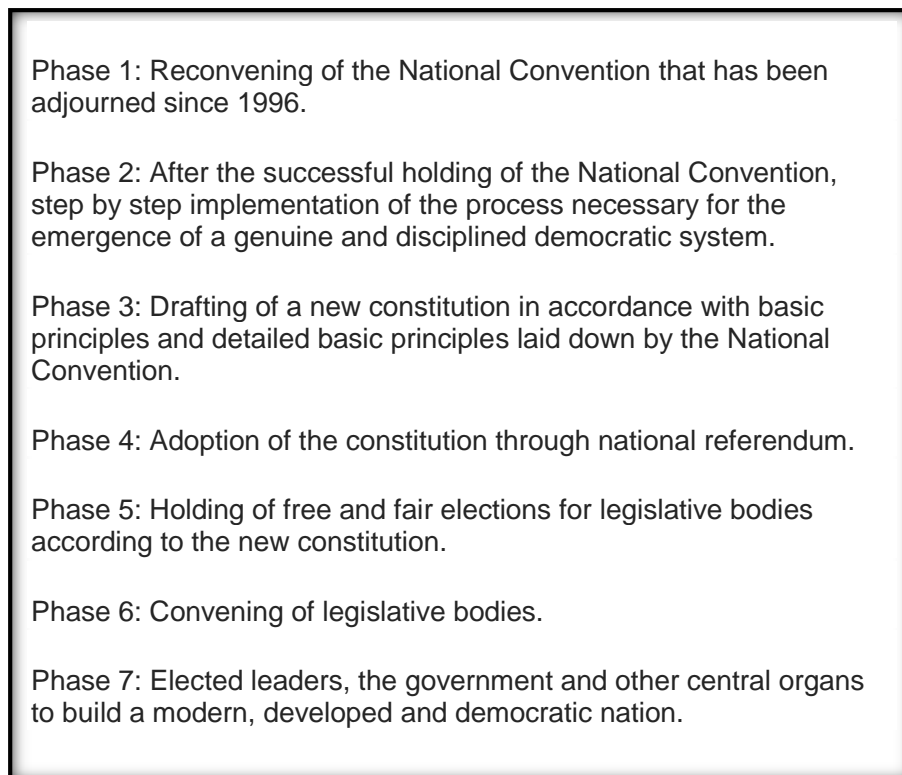
Since colonial independence from the British, the military has played a crucial role in Myanmar's politics. Immediately after independence in January 1948, the country was thrown into civil war. Ethnic Karen raised demands for more autonomy and equal rights with the Bamar, and groups like the Arakan, Shan, Kachin and Mon soon followed, all establishing respective militias. While ethnic armed groups (EAO's) fought the Myanmar military in border areas, communist insurgency dominated the center of the country. In this chaotic environment, the civil government relied on military force in order to hinder disintegration (Holiday 2011). The armed forces were eventually seen as part of the state-building process, as the threat of power dissolution was a constant. The military constructed a narrative that physical sovereignty was the solution, and "everything that threatened integration was a threat to national security" (Dittmer 2010). The concern for national security spread into political, economic and social spheres as well. The military's increasing influence over internal affairs was legitimized based on a constructed self-image as protector of the state (Pedersen 2008). Civilian politics before the military coup in 1962 was characterized by political factionalism and infighting between communist and socialist wings, making civilian politicians appear self-serving, incompetent and incapable of pursuing the national interest (International Crisis Group 2014). This created a distrust of civilian politics within the military, who saw politicians as in constant opposition to the national-building project (the same was true for ethnic nationalists, foreigners or the people at large) (Pedersen 2008). The military, on the other hand, was allegedly "above" politics, a "neutral" entity that was driven by its duty to ensure stability (Pedersen 2008).

The concern for internal stability characterized political and social life during the socialist era between 1962-1988. Political opposition was systematically quelled, as «any form of criticism [was] viewed as confrontation» (Pedersen 2008:109). By suppressing opposition that could be potentially destabilizing, the military acted according to duty. Put in another way, attacks on ethnic minorities and imprisonment of dissidents like Aung San Suu Kyi was done in order to safeguard national interest (Holiday 2011). The concern of sovereignty transferred to the economic realm as well, as trade and industry was nationalized. Incompetence and corruption led to grave mismanagement of the economy, which resulted falling exports, black markets and a lack of international revenue (Holiday 2011). “The system became harshly authoritarian, highly centralized and deeply dysfunctional form of state capitalism” (Holiday 2011:51). By 1988, the country was in a stalemate, and President Ne Win’s unannounced demonetization policy sent people over the edge. “That was the beginning of the 1988 uprising, because people completely lost trust in the government. Student anger was uncontrollable” (Rogers 2015:19).

The 8888 uprising was suppressed like previous opposition, but pressured the regime into holding multiparty elections for the first time in 30 years. Although the National League for Democracy (NLD) won by a landslide, the military regime refused to honor the results, and introduced a rule by decree. The military’s State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) claimed a temporary government that would stabilize the political and security situation, then return power to civilian hands (at least partially). However, the 1990’s and 2000’s was characterized by a military that sought to protect the state through control and oppression (Pedersen 2008). It was therefore unexpected when a peaceful transfer of power to a civilian government followed the 2010 elections. Under the leadership of President Thein Sein, Myanmar embarked on a series of political and economic reforms. Press censorship was relaxed, political prisoners released, laws improving human rights were passed in Parliament, and ceasefires were signed with ethnic armed group (Utenriksdepartementet 2012, 15.04). Additionally, Aung San Suu Kyi which had been barred from political life over 20 years was elected to Parliament during the 2012 by-election.

To explain the turnaround, the International Crisis Group (2014) suggests that the transition was driven by the military by a desire to attract Western investments. Western boycott of Myanmar following the 8888 uprising drove the military into the arms of China, both economically and politically. Additionally, Myanmar’s lack of development compared to

countries in the region was so severe, it presented a challenge to the maintenance of national sovereignty (International Crisis Group 2014). International Crisis Group (2014) argues how Myanmar's generals were deeply concerned about its faltering economy and increasing dependence on China. "They understood that rebooting the economy and building strategic relationships to balance China required engagement with the West that would only be possible if there were fundamental political reforms, as well as internal peace" (International Crisis Group 2014). A different view on the democratic transition exists within the so-called Third Force discourse. Scholars like Ian Holiday (2011) explain how the military started to plan the transition to a civilian government following the 8888 uprising. In 2003, a so-called Roadmap to Discipline Flourishing Democracy was introduced by the military leadership. The roadmap outlined seven distinct stages of a transition process from military to civilian rule.



*Figure 2 The Seven Step Roadmap to Discipline-Flourishing Democracy*

The roadmap endorsed a very literal meaning of political sequencing, as all stages in the process were followed without exception. In 1993, the national convention convened to design the principles of the new constitution. The constitution was finally drafted and ratified in 2008. The constitution ensured a transfer of political power from the military to elected

civilians, divided the hitherto unicameral legislative and executive powers at national and regional levels, and introduced checks and balances among major branches of government (Holiday 2011). However, the constitution also enshrined military political power. 25 % of seats in Parliament were reserved for military representatives, giving them veto power over constitutional changes. It gained influence over amnesties, appointment of commander-in-chief and states of emergency through placement in the National Defense and Security Council (International Crisis Group 2014). And three key ministries controlling the security situation is controlled by appointed military officers (International Crisis Group 2014). By controlling the transition process from above, the military hence were in a position of safeguarding its long-term interests (Holiday 2011). Today, there exists a lot of controversy around the Roadmap and the military's true intentions. Different views on the democratic transition is manifested in different discourses. This influences perceptions of how the international community should relate to Myanmar. Norway is not unaffected by this, and the brief overview presented here is therefore useful context for interpreting Norway's efforts in Myanmar.

# Two discourses on democratic change in Myanmar

August 8<sup>th</sup> 1988 marks an important event in Myanmar's history. It was the day when hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets to claim their right of self-determination, only to be suppressed by military forces. Later to be democratic icon Aung San Suu Kyi came to the fore to continue what her father, independence hero Aung San, had started when he tried to create a unified and democratic Burma for all ethnicities. A multiparty election was arranged for the first time in 30 years, but although Aung San Suu Kyi's (ASSK) party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), won by a landslide, the results of the 1990 poll was never honored. Instead, the military introduced a rule by decree, banning political opposition and imprisoning political leaders including Aung San Suu Kyi. The fight for democracy nevertheless continued from inside the country, from border areas, and eventually developed to be a global movement. In support of the democratic movement, Western governments introduced political and economic boycott of the military regime in Myanmar.

Norway aligned itself with Western policy throughout the 1990's and 2000's, including the EU's sanctions regime. However, by 2009, Norwegian politicians started to publically opt for constructive engagement. This chapter answers research question 1: "Why did Norway change its Myanmar policy from one of isolation to one of constructive engagement?" by looking at discourse. I will explore two parallel discourses on democratic change in Myanmar, which I will refer to as the mainstream democratic discourse and the alternative democratic discourse, respectively. I identify key representations and norms within the two, in order to highlight how the alternative discourse developed in direct opposition to the mainstream discourse, and to explain how alternative policies came to be seen as a legitimate option to Norwegian decision-makers. The main argument is that Norway was willing to challenge prevailing norms by aligning its rhetoric with the so-called Third Force in search for political solutions in Myanmar.

The chapter is divided into two main parts. The first half looks at the mainstream democratic discourse and the international practices that followed it, including Norway's. The data that underlies this part of the analysis is mainly drawn from secondary sources. The second half of the chapter addresses the alternative discourse, its main representations and the following



practices of constructive engagement efforts at national, bilateral and multilateral levels. This analysis is founded on data from both primary and secondary sources.

## 2.1 Mainstream pro-democratic discourse

After the 8888 uprising developed what we know as the democratic movement in Myanmar. While some activists remained inside the country, the violence and persecution of dissidents between 1988-1990 forced thousands to flee. An estimated 10 000 students and dissidents escaped to ethnic controlled border areas or to neighboring countries like Thailand and India (Rogers 2015). Many later obtained political asylum in Europe, America or Australia. They nevertheless remained positive that the regime could be pressured into compromise (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007). Researchers like Beatty (2010) talk about three sites of opposition, namely from inside the country, on the Thai border, and in diaspora.

The democratic movement was fragmented (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007) and swore to different strategies in their struggle. Some pro-democrats engaged in military operations by joining ethnic armed groups or the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF) (Holiday 2011). However, neither ABSDF or ethnic militias could ever pose a threat to the military apparatus. Groups like the NLD (or parts of it) remained within the country, but the narrow political space during SLORC rule made it impossible to fulfil its goals (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007). Dissidents were systematically harassed by the military and lacked sufficient resources. In diaspora, numerous of advocacy groups and democracy and human rights organizations were established, and sustained by foreign funding. From this site of opposition, the democratic movement had access to international media outlets and could influence Western policy makers to exercise pressure on Myanmar's regime. Activists believed that in order for SLORC to give up power, the regime had to be weakened and disabled. "We therefore tried to weaken its position both in the country and in the international community" (activist in Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007:11). The logic was that the regime would be pressured into surrendering bits and pieces of power at a time, further widening the political space (Rogers 2015). While military operations and political opposition inside the country failed, the democratic movement succeeded in mobilizing international support for their cause.

This first part of the chapter presents some representations within the mainstream democratic discourse. Because the political environment was very polarized, Western governments had to

“choose sides” in Myanmar. The chapter explains how the democratic movement’s moral capital was instrumental in order to gain support from Western governments. The mainstream discourse constructed norms which were difficult to publically challenge. The chapter ends by addressing Western governments’ Myanmar policies (including Norway’s), as there is a clear link between the mainstream democratic discourse and Western governments’ practice.

### **Lacking popular mandate**

Although the democratic movement was fragmented and lacked a coherent strategy against the regime (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007), the different groups’ demands and rhetoric was quite similar. The democratic movement generally used confrontational approaches by framing the military government as illegitimate and demanding a radical takeover of power. The illegitimacy of the military government was relatively easy to accept for Burmese and foreigners alike considering the result of the 1990 election (Holiday 2011). Because the military refused to accept NLD’s landslide victory, it turned into an enduring source of moral capital for activists throughout the 90’s (Kane 2001). Kane (2001:160) writes: “The junta had inadvertently handed the NLD the moral and political legitimacy of a sweeping popular mandate, and then aroused worldwide outrage by preventing the party from fulfilling it”. As a response to the exclusion from office, the NLD decided to form a government in exile called National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB). The NCGUB was seated in Washington, and claimed international legitimacy as the popular elected government of Myanmar (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007).

### **Name changes**

A way for the democratic movement to denounce the legitimacy of the military government was to refuse the name changes introduced in 1989 (Littmer 2010). The SLORC changed the name of the country seemingly overnight, from “Burma” which was closer to the spoken term in Burmese, to “Myanmar”, a literary form used for the country. In addition, the name of larger cities like Rangoon and Moulmein were changed to more closely resemble its Burmese pronunciation. Although Burma and Myanmar contained the same literal meaning (referring to the Bamar majority of the country), the usage of the names became politicized to represent two different political trajectories. The result was a principled semantic stance between supporters of the democratic movement who rejected the regime’s authority to rename the country, and those who saw the name change as a matter of convenience (Littmer 2010).

Western countries like the United States, Canada, Australia, and European countries including Norway continued to officially use “Burma” after 1989 as an act of sympathy to the democratic movement. However, most (excluding the US, UK and Sweden) changed to “Myanmar” with the introduction of a civilian government in 2011.

### **Good vs. Evil**

In Myanmar, the cause of the democratic movement was consistently presented as just, noble and good in contrast to an evil and oppressive military government (National League for Democracy (2000); Democracy for Burma 2010), as is generally the case in dissident politics (Kane 2001).

The NLD tried to legitimize itself by way of delegitimizing opponents of the movement. The discourse between the two groups effectively constituted that of the virtuous self versus the stereotypical other. This polarization of the discourse has since laid the groundwork in turn for a very bifurcated political discourse that has in turn had a spillover effect on the broader political landscape, making reconciliation much more difficult. At present the situation is viewed by both parties in zero-sum terms (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007:13).

Even monks, who according to Buddhist teaching are to abstain from political activity, have denounced the “evil regime”. In a statement released in correlation with the Saffron Uprising in 2007, All Burma Monks Alliance proclaimed: “We pronounce the evil military despotism, which is impoverishing and pauperizing our people of all walks, including the clergy, as the common enemy of all our citizens” (Mydans 2007). Benedict Rogers, a London-based writer and Myanmar advocate, notes in “Burma – a Nation at the Crossroads “(2015):

It is my profound belief that the balance of evil does indeed weigh heavily on the regime’s side of the equation. Their record of brutality, corruption and inhumanity far outstrips that of anyone else in Burma. Whereas the people struggling for democracy and human rights, from all ethnicities, have in my experience shown truly extraordinary courage, dignity, sacrifice and goodness. The values for which they struggle are good, and in that sense it is indeed a struggle between right and wrong.

The military regime’s malice seemed to be illustrated through stories of human rights abuses. Local journalists and activists have documented such violations through numerous reports (see publications from EarthRights, Burma Campaign UK, Human Rights Watch etc.), international news stories (for a visual documentation, see the documentary “Burma VJ” recorded under the Saffron revolution in 2007) and UN resolutions (Res. 60/233 (2005); Res. A/C.3/61/L.38/Rev.1 (2006); Res. 64/238 (2009); Res. A/C.3/65/L.48/Rev.1 (2010) etc.). The regime has furthermore been blamed for most of the country’s social, economic and political problems (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007).

### **2.1.1 A polarized political landscape**

The democratic movement's polemic rhetoric combined with confrontational approaches, particularly by the NLD, did not pressure the military regime into compromise and dialogue like initially hoped for. Although Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK) was committed to reaching political goals through non-violent means, her continued calls for dialogue and cooperation were systematically declined by the military junta. In response to this, NLD's strategies set out by "the intelligentsia group" have in practice appeared to be confrontational and uncompromising (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007). A strategy of shaming and criticizing the military government's human rights abuses, corruption and mistakes started in the run-up to the 1990 election, and continued under the SLORC regime (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007; NLD Statement 138/00; NLD Statement 135/00). The NLD further used boycott and non-cooperation as political means as a way to signal their resistance to the regime. They systematically rejected to collaborate with the military, thus missing opportunities to influence the political institutional framework<sup>1</sup>. ASSK have publically encouraged international boycott of the regime firstly when denouncing the so-called Visit Myanmar Year in 1996 intended to attract millions of tourists (Rogers 2015), but more famously when urging foreign governments to impose economic sanctions.

Within the perspective of the democratic movement, a principled and confrontational stance against the military government became a "doxa". A more conciliatory approach would normally be interpreted as sympathetic to the regime, and those who advocated a softer stance publically be considered traitorous (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007). From the military's side, on the other hand, political campaigns were regarded as attacks. When activists issued political statements, held speeches or in other ways tried to mobilize support, the regime became equally confrontational by imprisoning or spying on activists. Scholars will say activist strategies were counter effective, leading to political and economic impasse (Derichs 2006; Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007; Kane 2001). Instead of bringing the parties closer to dialogue, the movement's confrontational strategies contributed to a polarization in the political landscape.

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<sup>1</sup> The NLD chose to boycott the National Convention in 1996 and 2003. The National Convention was organized by the military regime to develop a framework for a new constitution (Rogers 2015). According to SLORC, a new constitution needed to be drafted before the 1990 victors could take power. The NLD also boycotted the 2010 elections – the first national election since 1990.

### **2.1.2 Moral capital of Aung San Suu Kyi**

Advocacy groups used the democratic movement's moral superiority to the military regime, and in particular ASSK's moral capital, to frame the plight of Myanmar (Kane 2001). Indeed, the legitimacy of the NLD, and the democratic movement as such, was to a large extent a reflection of the moral capital of Aung San Suu Kyi. She became a spokesperson for the whole movement, a symbol of justice, and *the* face of democratic "Burma" (Kane 2001:166). This section explains the elements of her moral capital, and how this made her a democracy icon both internally in the democratic movement and beyond.

#### **Inherited capital**

Aung San Suu Kyi's first source of moral capital was given by birth. Simply being "her father's daughter" made her a natural candidate when masses of people needed a leader during those chaotic months of 1988. Indeed, inherited authority from fathers or husbands have traditionally been the hallmark of female political leaders throughout Asia (Derichs, Fleschenberg and Hustebeck 2006). The legacy of General Aung San is unprecedented in Myanmar. His fight for independence, his efforts to reconcile with the ethnic minorities and his early death gave him an iconic status in the public memory. As the impending leader pre-independence, he became a symbol of what "Burma" could have been, had he been allowed to play his part (Kane 2001). His memory is honored annually on Martyr's Day. When Aung San Suu Kyi joined the democratic movement, she thus became a symbolic representative of her father and his legacy- "an incarnation of people's hope and aspirations" (Kane 2001:150). She deliberately used this symbolism when entering into politics, and particularly on issues regarding national reconciliation. Aung San was famous for initiating the Panglong Conference in 1948, where he tried to accommodate all the ethnic nationalities of Myanmar within a unified democratic state. When released from house arrest, ASSK spent a lot of time travelling around the country, ostensibly to incorporate ethnic concerns like her father (Derichs, Fleschenberg and Hustebeck 2006). Additionally, after taking office in 2016, ASSK renamed the national peace process "the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Panglong Conference", which symbolizes how she intends to fulfil her father's mission of a unified and democratic nation.

#### **Capital in Buddhist values and "right" conduct**

Aung San Suu Kyi's second source of moral capital has been the very values she personified and incorporated into politics. Inspired by the teachings of Gandhi, her political platform was a fusion of religion, moral and material values, resonating with people from all walks of life

(Kane 2001). Nonviolence, democracy, discipline, morality, and self-sacrifice were some core principles brought into the political realm also found in the Buddhist concept of dhamma. Indeed, the linkage to Buddhist teaching has in many ways legitimized her political stance (Derichs, Fleschenberg and Hustebeck 2006). With a large majority of the Burmese population adhering to Buddhism, her teachings have been perceived as just, good and pure (in contrast to dirty politics). As has her persona by practicing self-sacrifice, non-violence and discipline. For some, her conduct was so exemplary she was perceived as a Buddhist saint or angel (Derichs et. al 2006; Houtman 1999). Furthermore, her saint-like behavior was reflected in her physical appearance. Sleek and feminine, well-dressed in traditional Burmese attire always with flowers in her hair, “the Lady” became a delicate polar opposite to the male dominated, impersonal and rigid military government;

She was the delicate but indomitable Beauty to SLORC’s clumsy Beast, the heroic underdog confronting a powerful and ruthless opponent whose long-time acronym (SLORC) seemed deliberately chosen to emphasize its stupidity and beastliness. Suu Kyi’s physical appearance, enhanced by the trademark flowers in the hair, projected a persona of combined strength and fragility that had charm not just for Burmese people but for the wider world (Kane 2001:167).

### **Capital through persecution**

Lastly, the military government’s oppression of Aung San Suu Kyi, NLD members and other pro-democrats increased the movement’s credibility both domestically and abroad (Kane 2001; Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007). According to Kane (2001:115), “a common and important means for the accumulation of moral capital in dissident causes is a period of persecution”. In Myanmar, the military government strategically targeted the democratic movement, and Aung San Suu Kyi in particular, both verbally and physically. During the election campaign in 1989, SLORC started a “propaganda war” against NLD, in order to discredit ASSK and her party (Rogers 2015). They targeted all sources of her legitimacy, claiming she used her father’s good name for the sake of own ambition, that she insulted Buddha, or that she was a communist (Rogers 2015). Because she was married to a foreigner and had lived most of her life abroad, the military claimed she was not a true Burmese, but a corrupted Westerner (Kane 2001). Just as her supporters used supernatural characterizations in a legitimizing manner, opponents referred to her as the “spirit of the Mother of the West” (Houtman 1999). These characteristics do not only show how the military tried to taint ASSK’s credibility within her own constituency, but also illuminates the level of polarization. The idolization of ASSK in one discourse, and the demonization of her within another shows how there was little room for compromise.

Furthermore, in addition to verbal abuse Aung San Suu Kyi was physically targeted by SLORC on a number of occasions. The military tried to prevent her from holding public rallies around the country, and in 2000, a military blockade forced her (along with other NLD members) to spend nine days inside a car outside of Yangon (New York Times 2000). In 2003, her entourage was attacked in Depayin in Sagaing region by a mob of government-sponsored thugs. 70 NLD supporters were killed while ASSK was sentenced to her third period of house arrest (Holiday 2011; Allchin 2010). “The Lady” spent a total of 15 years under detention in her family house by Inya Lake, over three separate periods lasting from 1989-1995, 2000-2002 and 2003-2010, respectively. ASSK’s incarceration became a constant source of international criticism and pressure on the junta.

Instead of hurting the legitimacy of ASSK, or destroying her support among the public, the actions of the military only made her more popular. In fact, by attacking pro-democrats, the regime exposed its brutality and hurt their own image, more than it hurt the opposition (Derichs et.al. 2006). Their unfair treatment of activists amplified the polarized representation between good and evil, and helped the democratic movement win sympathies both domestically and abroad. Pro-democrats who had been detained by the military government earned a higher degree of respect and often became leaders within the movement (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007:34). ASSK’s sacrifice earned the attention of foreign governments and raised her moral capital to new heights.

### **Aung San Suu Kyi glorified**

Aung San Suu Kyi’s sacrifice and moral capital gave her a martyr-like, semi-divine status in the democracy movement. Her leadership and policies were undisputed within her constituency, and guided the whole movement as such with her remarks being frequently reproduced on all sites of opposition (Holiday 2011:106). Activists used her name and image as a potent symbol to raise awareness of the situation in Myanmar. As her face became the image of the entire movement, campaigns were centered around her. Renowned politicians and celebrities such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, former Czech President Vaclav Havel, Bono/U2 and former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton became her personal champions (Rogers 2015). She was declared a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International and awarded a series of human rights prizes in absentia, including the Nobel Peace Prize of 1991. The Nobel Peace Prize undeniably gave her a higher international standing and helped put her cause on the international agenda (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007:166).

A cultural practice of compliance developed within the movement, where criticism of ASSK became a sacrilege (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007:41; Fleschenberg 2013:221). Those who challenged her policies were considered traitorous and regarded as sympathizers with the military. A political activist noted:

Criticizing Daw Suu or doing things she would not approve of is a taboo for pro-democracy activists. If you did it, your political career would be over. I do not agree with her all the time, but I am not going to talk about it publicly. People worship her, so you cannot do anything that people think she will not approve of. If you did it, your enemies would be happy as this would give them necessary ammunition to assassinate your character (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007:41).

Even if people disagreed with her in private, the public portrayal would be positive in order not to weaken her political agency and bargaining position. A journalist with the Irrawaddy said: “Aung San Suu Kyi is portrayed as a saint. She is people’s only hope, only enemy to the military and if she would die then there would be no hope left so people protect and do not criticize her” (Fleschenberg 2013:222).

### **2.1.3 International support to the democratic movement**

The democratic movement succeeded in constructing norms that would shape Myanmar policies of Western governments. In a polarized environment, the democratic opposition had the moral upper hand, and therefore political weight when advising the West to exercise pressure on the regime. Moreover, that Western governments had no direct strategic or economic interests in Myanmar made it easier to support normative policies (Pedersen 2008). I will now turn to how the democratic movement’s framing of the plight of Myanmar translated into foreign policy practice. This was most evident through the practice of economic sanctions, which were also adhered to by Norway.

For years, the situation in Myanmar did not gain much attention by the international community. No international media was present to document the atrocities during the 8888 uprising, in stark contrast to the uprising on Tiananmen Square in Beijing a year later. Lobby efforts by advocacy groups was therefore important to bring attention to the situation in Myanmar. Diaspora and international advocacy groups based on the Thai border and in America, Europe and Australia, including the NLD exile government and some international NGO’s, systematically approached international media and Western governments in order to further political change. Coordination between them became easier with the introduction of the Internet. A network site called BurmaNet was established in Thailand in 1993 and allowed a hitherto fragmented diaspora to receive the same information about what was going on inside the country, and furthermore build a network of activists to coordinate activities and



advocacy stunts (Danitz and Strobel 1999). Although the situation in Myanmar never made the same headlines as Nelson Mandela's victory over apartheid or a dissolved Soviet Union (Kane 2001; Holiday 2011), pro-democracy activists, and ASSK in particular, nevertheless had an enormous impact on Western government's understanding of the situation on the ground (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007).

A foreign diplomat confirmed "exile pro-democracy organizations have tremendous impact on Western governments' policies towards Burma. Even the US state department's reports relies on the NCUB, the NCGUB, the ENC-affiliated ethnic organizations and other organizations as sources of information. These organizations are very critical of the military junta. Our Burma reports often echoed what these organizations thought of the government" (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007:21).

In line with the mainstream democratic discourse, Western government came to see all problems within Myanmar (lack of human rights, peace building, and poverty alleviation) as a consequence of withheld democratic reform (Pedersen 2008). Thus, political change through the introduction of a democratic government (explicitly the NLD which had already won the mandate) was deemed a necessary building block for social development such as the respect for human rights (Pedersen 2008). For Western governments, democracy promotion would be its main concern in Myanmar. The idea was that the withholding of international legitimacy, and withholding of international investment would pressure the regime into collapse. A former military officer put it this way:

When there is effective pressure from everyone, including the UN and the international community, all at the same time, his [Senior General Than Shwe] trump card will be to release Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and a few political prisoners for show. As soon as they are released, the international pressure will be reduced. As for Burmese politics, the generals know very well that nothing can be done without Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. So when Aung San Suu Kyi is free, if there is systematic support from inside and outside, they will eventually have to hold dialogue (Rogers 2015:145).

While neighboring countries such as China, India and ASEAN members chose to continue business as usual with the military government, Western countries like the United States, Canada, Australia and EU countries chose political and economic isolation. Over the years, numerous UN resolutions have been passed condemning the military government. Western governments ceased diplomatic connections, but more importantly prohibited further trade or investment in Myanmar through a strict sanctions regime.

### **2.1.3.1 Sanctions**

Boycott of the regime and economic sanctions were encouraged by the Lady herself (Kane 2001; Bangkok Post 1989, 04.06). In an address in 1996 to American and Canadian student activists in the Free Burma Campaign, ASSK said:

We are not anti-business, but we oppose investment in Burma today because our real malady is not economic but political. What we are really suffering from is not lack of investment or infrastructure, but misgovernance. Until we have a system that guarantees rule of law and basic democratic institutions, no amount of aid or investment will benefit our people. Profits from business enterprises will merely go towards enriching a small, already very privileged elite. Companies such as UNOCAL and Pepsi, ARCO, and Texaco only serve to prolong the agony of my country by encouraging the present military regime to persevere in its intransigence (Burma Net 1996, 09.)

Economic sanctions were meant as a political tool to pressure the regime into reconciliation with the opposition. Formal sanctions and visa bans were not implemented directly after the 1990 elections, but Western governments immediately suspended all military and non-humanitarian financial assistance to Myanmar. Due to pressure from advocacy groups such as the Free Burma movement in the US and Burma Campaign UK, corporations such as Levi Strauss, Heineken, Apple Computers, Disney and PepsiCo pulled out voluntarily in the early 1990's (Holiday 2011:118).

The US became a frontrunner when it came to isolation measures. In 1996, visa bans on senior military personnel and their family members were issued. In 1997, all new investments in Myanmar was prohibited by law. Later came import bans and restrictions on financial and technical assistance. The EU had similar policies including an arms embargo, visa restrictions and asset freezes for named individuals, a ban on exports to businesses operating in wood and mining sectors, an import ban on timber products, metals and precious stones, a prohibition in investments in state-owned enterprises, and restrictions on diplomatic contact (Holiday 2011:116).

### **2.1.3.2 Norwegian support to the democratic movement**

Like the US and other European countries, Norway was a loyal supporter of the democratic movement throughout the 90's and 2000's. By 2009, Norway had adhered to EU's sanctions regime by prohibiting importation of timber, minerals and precious stones, implementing exports bans, asset freezes, travel restrictions and investment prohibitions in certain businesses (Utenriksdepartementet 2009, 18.02). Upon the request of the NLD, development assistance was mainly channeled outside the country to the Thai border; to refugee communities, human rights organizations, the exile government and media. However, Norwegian assistance stood out compared to other donors for two reasons. The Norwegian government established the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), a media outlet providing uncensored news about what was going on inside the country, and it awarded Aung San Suu

Kyi with the Nobel Peace Prize<sup>2</sup>. The significance of these two efforts to the democratic movement gave Norway a reputation as a particularly strong supporter.

The support of dedicated individuals contributed to strengthen this reputation. Norwegian Hallvard Kuløy was a personal friend of Aung San Suu Kyi and her British husband Michael Aris. They had stayed with him for a longer period while Kuløy was Director of UNICEF in Katmandu, Nepal (Bryne 2000). Their friendship was central for Aung San Suu Kyi's nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. The NLD exile government came up with the idea of nominating their leader for the prestigious award as a way to bring attention to the plight of Burma (Su Thet Mon 2012). Their idea was to have heavy weight democratic leader Václav Havel nominate ASSK in order to strengthen her candidacy. Together with founder of the Rafto Foundation for Human Rights, Jan Ramstad, Hanne Sophie Greve and Tom Kleppestø, Mr. Kuløy did intense research to finalize the nomination ahead of the deadline (Su Thet Mon 2012). In 1991, Aung San Suu Kyi was declared as winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, but was not able to officially accept it until 2012.

Following the Peace Prize, Norwegian authorities wanted to give impetus to the democratic struggle and encouraged Kuløy to establish a Burma Council (Samarbeidsutvalget for Burma) which later became the Norwegian Burma Committee (NBC). With funding from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), NBC allocated money to the exile government, civil society organizations and established the short-wave radio Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB). The DVB was run from Oslo by Burmese refugees who broadcasted news stories that had been smuggled out from inside Myanmar by undercover journalists. The DVB became one of the biggest oppositional media outlets during military rule alongside Irrawaddy and Mizzima located in Chiang Mai. DVB received funding from several foreign governments, but always had a clear Norwegian affiliation, even to ordinary Burmese. The reform process in Myanmar allowed DVB to move its operations to Yangon in 2013 and is now one of the largest media houses in the country.

Another Norwegian champion of Aung San Suu Kyi is former Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik. Bondevik developed a personal relationship with the party leader through visits

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<sup>2</sup> The Norwegian government is technically separated from decisions relating to the Nobel Peace Prize, but the government has an interest in being associated with the prize because of the status it provides in the international community (Johnsen 2015).

and telephone calls, and published a children's book about her in 2009. He established an international network of parliamentarians – PD Burma - in support of the democratic movement. Drawing on support from fellow parliamentarians, Bondevik advocated for ASSK's release from house arrest (Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights 2007). After his time in Parliament, Mr. Bondevik established the Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights in which he continued to advocate and work for democratic development in Myanmar.

## 2.2 Alternative democratic discourse

Despite years of effort to pressure the military regime into honoring the 1990 election results, including strong support from the (Western) international community, the democratic movement seemed unable to waver the regime. Pro-democratic groups inside the country faced great restraints and was harassed by the military (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007). Public displays of protests were clamped down, the military sent security police to spy on suspected dissidents and imprisonment was common. By 2009, the number of political prisoners had reached 2211 (Rogers 2015:167). Violent opposition groups did not have any success in the battle field. By the mid-2000's the country was in a stalemate.

This chapter addresses the discourse that rose in response to the failed strategies of the democratic movement. Contrary to the mainstream discourse, the alternative discourse did not have a strong foothold among the masses, but was constructed mainly by academics and activists that had branched out from the NLD. The group became visible in Myanmar politics when several pro-democratic parties contested in the 2010 election. They were called the Third Force, to illustrate the middle ground between the military and mainstream opposition. The alternative discourse constructed norms which challenged the dominant discourse. Instead of isolation of pressure, the alternative discourse emphasized collaboration and compromise. The main argument presented here is that Norway aligned its rhetoric with the alternative discourse in search for political solutions in Myanmar. This lays the foundation for Norway's policy of constructive engagement and norm entrepreneurship in the international community. In the following, I will address main representations within the alternative discourse, Norway's rationale for constructive engagement policies, and how constructive engagement efforts were attempted at national, bilateral and multilateral levels.

### **Sanctions are not working**

Criticism of Western sanctions started around the millennium, but became more vocal around 2006-2008. It was particularly signs of a worsening economic situation and reports of increased human rights abuses that raised questions about isolation measures. Instead of pulling the military regime closer to dialogue and compromise, it seemed as if the regime was relatively unaffected by sanctions (Pedersen 2008). Observers started arguing that economic sanctions were inadequate because they were not adhered to unanimously (Farrelly 2009; Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007). While Western governments tried to weaken the military regime, neighboring states such as China, India and ASEAN member states continued business as usual with Myanmar, which lessened the impact of Western isolation.

### **The people need development aid**

Meanwhile, rather than weakening the economy of the regime, the argument goes, sanctions instead hurt ordinary people. As it became increasingly important for the military regime to carry off inside and outside threats, national spending was channeled towards security measures rather than invested in measures to benefit the wider population. Business concessions were granted to personal clients of the generals, which strengthened the elite economy, but also meant that the only way to be successful was via the regime (Farrelly 2009; Raun 2010). The regime's economic policies coupled with international boycotts caused unemployment, inflation and a reduction in educational and health services (Pedersen 2008). Poverty abounded, and yet international aid flows remained at a minimum. Official development assistance (ODA) declined steadily from 1988 reaching a low of \$50 million a year by the end of the decade (Pedersen 2008). In 2006, Myanmar received only \$2,88 in official development assistance per capita (Holiday 2011). This was considerably less than its neighboring countries and the lowest figure among any of the world's 50 poorest countries (Thant Myint-U 2008).

The low aid flows were not a direct consequence of sanctions as humanitarian assistance was exempted from Western sanctions policies. However, the strong politicization of ODA limited the humanitarian space in Myanmar. Pro-democrats, including Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, were reluctant to welcome aid that could possibly benefit the regime (Pedersen 2008). On the other hand, the regime was uncooperative and skeptical that aid programs were part of a conspiracy designed to unseat them (Pedersen 2008; Thant Myint-U 2008; International

Crisis Group 2006). Hence, foreign governments preferred to channel development assistance mainly to refugees and organizations on the Thai border.

### **The military part of the solution**

For pro-democrats looking for alternative strategies, it was clear that isolation measures entrenched differences between the opposition and the junta. In addition to the humanitarian incentive for removal of sanctions, it could also have a psychological effect on the generals. Historian and political advisor Thant Myint-U argued how the removal of sanctions could encourage the generals to make changes. By exposing them to more developed countries, the generals would be confronted with the country's backwardness. If the isolation measures were gone, the generals would be forced to reflect on their own failing policies. Hence, instead of regarding the military as an arch enemy of the state, the military, in a position of power, had to be seen as part of the solution (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007; Holiday 2011; Pedersen 2008; Alvin and Xiaolin 2007). Academics and policymakers alike started to talk about entering into dialogue with the regime. Australian Human Rights Commissioner Chris Sidoti said (already) in 1999:

Whether the NLD likes it or not, the simple fact is that it is not presently in a position to do very much at all about protecting the human rights of the people of Burma. The government on the other hand, however illegitimate the process by which it assumed power may be, is... If the government has expressed a wish to do something about human rights, we should be willing to enter into dialogue to see whether that is possible (Pedersen 2008:41).

### **Criticism must be replaced with compromise**

Third Force elements criticized the democratic movement for placing too much emphasis on regime change as final product, rather than democratization as a process (Zarni & May Oo 2004). It was a common held belief that in order to gain results and recover from political impasse in Myanmar, the military and the opposition had to compromise on their demands. While the democratic movement and Western governments had a tendency to criticize the wrong-doings of the regime, it became increasingly clear that condemnation from afar through so-called "megaphone diplomacy" did not produce results (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007). Contrarily, it was in times when the international community chose a softer line that the regime chose to concede (Pedersen 2008). This behavior of the military is closely related to its political trajectory and feeling of threat. Its whole identity as an institution is built on its duty to protect state sovereignty, and all type of criticism has been seen as a direct attack on state security and on the military as an institution (Pedersen 2008). Additionally, Western

countries presented a military threat, as their outspoken goal had been regime change in Myanmar. The military regime hence feared that Western countries planned a military invasion to unseat them, in cooperation with the democratic movement. Consequently, a part of the new strategy was to meet the military with encouragement and support instead of criticism.

Proponents of the alternative approach believed the democratic movement's strategies had failed to bring about change, instead creating polarization by entrenching differences between the military and the opposition. To overcome political deadlock, they wanted to explore more pragmatic approaches through constructive engagement with the regime. Calls for more nuanced approaches directly contrasted with the norms of the mainstream democratic movement. While the mainstream democratic movement stuck to its principles in relation to the regime, the Third Force was more concerned with results using pragmatic means. In other words, both camps had the same vision of a democratic government with respect for human rights, but had differing views on the means used to get there. The mainstream used its normative superiority to mobilize international support, while the Third Force was more concerned with building bridges between the military and the international community. In contrast to the NLD's and diaspora's aggressive approaches, the Third Force placed less emphasis on critique, and more on negotiation. It favored dialogue over isolation. This is closely related to their respective views on democratic change. Whereas the mainstream camp wanted a radical regime change led by civil society from below, alternatives pointed to this as an unlikely scenario. Rather, they wanted to encourage the changes the regime had promised to introduce since 1990 and believed in political sequencing by strengthening certain institutions before opening up for popular control (Pedersen 2008). The two different perspectives were manifested in the 2010 election. While the NLD chose to boycott the election because of an unfair election framework, several pro-democracy and ethnic parties participated in spite of the odds weighing heavily in favor of the military party. Their prevalent attitude was that democracy would not come over night, but they wanted to seize the opportunities introduced in the 2008 constitution such as the possibility to contest in elections and being represented in parliament.

The Third Force movement was heavily criticized by the democratic movement, who saw them purely as regime sympathizers. Hence, instead of working together as a united opposition, the norms and strategies of the two camps seemed irreconcilable. This caused

Third Force elements to keep a low profile in public, rather using political lobbying and academia as main tools. Their undertakings have thus not been documented as thoroughly as the mainstream democrats.

### **2.2.1 Norway's rationale**

Norwegian diplomats and politicians use many of the same arguments as presented in the alternative discourse for explaining Norway's constructive engagement approach. Norway had loyally supported the democratic movement since 1988 and was dedicated to the goals of greater freedoms, democracy, development and peace in Myanmar. At the same time, there was a recognition that the strategies pursued since 1988 simply did not succeed in bringing the country closer to democracy. Around 2004-2005, Western isolation measures were questioned in political circles by those who believed more in the process of democratization rather than democracy as final product. Some saw it as unlikely that civil society could overthrow a military regime in a country dominated by peasants mostly concerned with self-sustenance (Solheim and Bromark 2013). In the words of former deputy Foreign Minister Ms. Gry Larsen "The international community cannot refrain from engaging directly with those who are essential for the development of the country" (Utenriksdepartementet 2010, 06.04).

Like in the Third Force discourse, the concept of dialogue was a core foreign policy principle to many of the left-wing politicians in position under Jens Stoltenberg's second term in office. In contrast to the mantra in American foreign policy that "we do not negotiate with terrorists", Norwegian politicians have often been willing to talk to "everyone" (illustrated in Foreign Minister's Jonas Gahr Støre's speech in Utenriksdepartementet 2007, 01.03). In his book "Politikk er å ville" (Solheim and Bromark 2013), Norwegian Minister of International Development and Environment from 2005-2012 Mr. Erik Solheim underlines the importance of using dialogue as a mean of collaboration, even with strongly authoritarian states or organizations. He asserts that in order to gain results, Norway must maintain a close relationship with powerful actors though without compromising on core principles and values.

I think refusing to talk to leaders you don't like is a failed policy in almost every case. Additionally, it is double standard. If we can talk to the North-Korean regime or the royal family of Saudi Arabia, why can we not talk to Mugabe? [...] Many politicians believe that one should not talk to dictators, mass murderers and terrorists. One should then ask the question; If your daughter was taken by terrorists or a mafia group, would you deny the police to talk to them? I have still not met anyone who says no. People believe in dialogue when it gets personal. Why is it then wrong on a government level? (Freely translated from Solheim and Bromark 2013:80).



Solheim had been engaged in the Burma issue ever since 1988 and became, according to himself, a prime mover for the Norwegian shift to constructive engagement at the end of the 90's (Solheim and Bromark 2013). In 2009 after his first visit to the country, Solheim called for a reevaluation of the isolation approach through a feature article:

Unfortunately, there is little hope for a democratic overthrow in the nearest future. We must adopt a longer-term perspective. In the long term, openness and dialogue is sure to be more efficient than isolation.

Dialogue is not an end in itself. The goal is to contribute to reduce conflict and spare lives. We always have to be clear when it comes to our core values, respect for the individual, human rights and democracy. In dialogue with parties in conflict we are clear on our positions (Solheim 2009, free translation).

By calling for dialogue with the regime, Solheim distanced himself from the principled approach of the democratic movement and aligned his rhetoric with the pragmatic, results-based discourse of the Third Force. Using a national newspaper to share his opinions was a way to open public debate about the sanctions, and at the same time signal a shift in Norwegian Myanmar policy to the Norwegian parliament. Although he did not mention sanctions explicitly, he indirectly said that sanctions were an obstacle to democratization as they hindered economic growth and the development of a middle class (Solheim 2009). In line with scholars such as Lipset (1960) and Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1992), Solheim believed democratization was closely connected to a middle class who could claim their rights to influence policy making, increase the freedom of speech and flow of information (Solheim 2009; Solheim and Bromark 2013). The Norwegian government's eagerness to facilitate business development must be seen in light of this understanding. Moreover, Solheim argued how isolation caused civilians to suffer more under the regime's excessive use of force and lack of reform. Clearly influenced by Thant Myint-U, Solheim writes "if Burma's military leaders were given the chance to go abroad, there is a higher probability that some of them will say as Gorbachev; We can't go on living like this" (Solheim 2009).

### **2.2.2 Pursuing engagement strategies: Key actors and events**

Constructive engagement with the military regime was attempted at civil national, bilateral and multilateral levels, but the political space for engagement was limited by the amounts of pressure coming from the democratic movement on one side, and the unwillingness for collaboration from the regime on the other. Discussions about the effectiveness of sanctions took place in senior circles behind closed doors and is therefore difficult to document, but

former Minister Erik Solheim who participated in these claim that there was a consensus among Western politicians about the failure of sanctions. However, due to an unchanged political environment, Western politicians did not have the will to pursue constructive engagement beyond an increase in development aid, as this would mean an active bypassing of Aung San Suu Kyi. Additionally, with an isolated and hostile military regime, such efforts would most likely be unproductive. In the following section, I will address some of the efforts made to engage with the military regime in order to widen the political space, as well as efforts made to influence the international agenda.

### **2.2.2.1 Myanmar civil society: Myanmar Egress**

Founded by Myanmar businessmen and political activists in 2006, Norwegian funded Myanmar Egress became an NGO central to the Third Force movement. It was one of few political actors working inside the country, focusing on building coalitions and capacity in civic matters among youth, media and ethnic groups. Myanmar Egress was “committed to state building through positive change in a progressive yet constructive collaboration and working relationship with the government and all interest groups, both local and foreign” (Myanmar Egress 2016). They believed in gradual change by using existing opportunities to widen the political space. One such opportunity came through the new constitution in 2008. Although the constitution had serious democratic limitations, Myanmar Egress recognized how the institutional changes could be taken advantage of. A bicameral parliament of elected representatives was introduced for the first time, legislative and executive powers were separated, and regions and states of the country gained respective governments. Ahead of the 2010 election, Myanmar Egress received international funding to train 34 000 change agents in voter education, the constitution, matters relating to the economy and so forth as part of a strategy to build democratic awareness in the population. They supported ethnic parties to enable them to participate in the election.

Moreover, Myanmar Egress influenced national and international policies through advocacy efforts. The military regime was historically very isolated to outsiders and appeared as a monolith with executive decisions taken directly by senior leadership (Pedersen 2008). However, the new framework opened up decision making power and made it possible to collaborate with reform minded actors inside the system. One of the founders of Myanmar Egress, Tinn Maung Tann, explained in conversation how he and his colleagues managed to build relationships with generals who would become instrumental to the reform process. With

this direct access, Myanmar Egress were able to directly influence policy making early in the reform process, and they later became Minister U Aung Min's trusted advisers in the peace process. Egress furthermore acted as a door opener to Thein Sein's government for several foreign stakeholders, including Norway (this will be discussed further in section 3.2.2.1). Advocacy efforts were also directed towards foreign governments looking for political alternatives. Myanmar Egress' founder, the late Nay Win Maung, used Burma seminars in Europe as an arena to lobby Western governments and network with policymakers. Democratic activists working inside the country did generally not take the risk of travelling abroad, as the regime were likely to deny them re-entry and spy on them. However, Tin Maung Tann thinks that Egress' non-confrontational approaches kept them relatively "under the [military] radar" which allowed them to travel more frequently than other activists. Additionally, Myanmar Egress initiated the so-called Bangkok Process in 2008, bringing together key "Third Force" players from inside and outside Myanmar, many of whom would later be involved in the reforms. The two-three-year long process built an understanding between civil society actors like the Egress and moderate Burmese scholars from Harvard University (dubbed the "Harvard Mafia"), and foreign governments. Norway was a keen supporter of the process from the beginning, and – according to Tin Maung Tann – its diplomats more personally invested than representatives from the other eight countries involved in the Process.

#### **2.2.2.2 The United Nations**

Given Western governments' policy of isolation, including retention of development assistance on request from the democratic movement, the activities of UN agencies inside the country were limited. In spite of grave humanitarian needs, UN agencies in Myanmar had trouble raising funds and in 2001, only UNDP and UNICEF had annual budgets over \$10 million (Pedersen 2008). Moreover, due to pressure from Western governments, the mandate of the UNDP was restricted to address humanitarian needs instead of focusing on policy dialogue and capacity building as was part of its normal responsibilities. The USA imposed stronger measures than most countries, limiting and imposing conditions on its UNDP funding. The U.S. Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 2008 demanded that UNDP activities were carried out independently from the military regime, in close consultation with the NLD (Pedersen 2008). "Since [1995], all UNDP programs have been carefully scrutinized by Washington, thus forcing UNDP officials to balance their

responsibility to the people of Burma against the risk of upsetting the U.S. government” (Pedersen 2008:45).

In response to the strong politicization of development assistance, branches within the UN started challenging isolation policies. The heads of the eight UN agencies operating inside Myanmar wrote a letter to their respective head offices in 2001, urging budget allocations to be overhauled as “the nature and magnitude of the humanitarian situation does not permit delaying until the political situation evolves” (Pedersen 2008:59). UN Resident Coordinator in Myanmar from 2003-2007, Charles Petrie, played a leading role in advocating for a widened humanitarian space and constructive engagement with the authorities. In 2007, UNDP published the first quantitative Poverty Profile report on Myanmar in collaboration with government bodies such as the Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development and the Ministry of Labor (IDEA International Institute et.al. 2007). Not only was such cooperation with the authorities unprecedented, but the results of the report highlighted to international donors the needs inside the country which led to policy discussions on sanctions and development aid. After advocacy efforts from the UN, the regime accepted Mr. Petrie as the UN’s first Humanitarian Coordinator in Myanmar in 2006. The position was a win considering the regime’s previous unwillingness to cooperate with international actors. Norwegian People’s Aid’s Country Director Ingeborg Moa thinks the acceptance of a humanitarian coordinator also signaled the regime’s recognition of political cum humanitarian crisis in the country. Despite dialogue efforts, Mr. Petrie was expelled from the country after he showed support to protestors during the Saffron Revolution in 2007. He would not be permitted to enter the country again until lobby efforts enabled him to take the lead of Norway initiated Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (MPSI). Another UN advocate for increased development aid was Thant Myint-U who lobbied the government for international access. Thant (grandson of former Burmese UN Secretary-General U Thant) was one of several scholars in favor of the Third Force-approach, and both him and Charles Petrie became important partners for Norway in support of the reforms.

The UN’s more interactive approach on the ground marked the beginning of a divided approach to promotion of human rights in Myanmar within the UN system. Western countries continued to condemn human rights abuses through resolutions, withheld in-country funding and considered punitive measures through the Security Council. At the same time, UN actors on the ground believed in a de-politicization of humanitarian aid and constructive

engagement. Today, the division is most evident in the issue of how to protect the neglected Rohingya population (Dinmore 2015, 11.06). While UN agencies promoting human rights (special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar and high commissioner of human rights) swear to condemnation of the GoM, UN agencies within the humanitarian wing (UN OCHA, UNHCR et. al.) believes more in economic development and cooperation with local authorities. The tension within the UN reflects the divide between the mainstream and alternative democratic discourse addressed earlier. The question of which strategies to choose in order to further change is in both cases a normative issue of whether sticking to principles is more important than creating traction on the ground.

### **2.2.2.3 Western governments**

#### **Development assistance**

UN calls for increased funding for humanitarian activities inside the country was followed up by European countries, but not the USA. In 2003, the EU declared that its humanitarian assistance was not conditioned on the political situation (Pedersen 2008:59). It subsequently scaled up funding commitments, and intended “to launch a serious dialogue with the Myanmar government aimed at accomplishing longer-term policy change, while also strengthening efforts to build social capital and civil society” (Holiday 2011:). The UK, Netherlands and Scandinavian countries followed suit, and together with Australia, they launched the 3 Diseases Fund in 2006 to tackle HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. The 3D Fund, which was later renamed 3MDG, was a replacement of the Global Fund launched in 2004-5. The Global Fund terminated activities in Myanmar in 2005 due to pressure from the United States, its largest donor (Pedersen 2008). Hence, the launch of an independent fund for Myanmar allowed Western donors who believed humanitarian assistance should not be politicized, to bypass the American policy restrictions. As part of an effort to widen the humanitarian space after Cyclone Nargis in 2008, Western countries launched a second multi-donor trust fund. Worth \$100 dollar the Livelihoods and Food Security Trust Fund (LIFT) was launched in 2009 through the UN (Holiday 2011).

#### **Diplomatic engagement**

In terms of bilateral diplomatic engagement, almost no interest was shown either by neighboring countries like China, India and Thailand, nor Western countries – until after the

2010 election. A few political visits were made in 1994-1995 and 1999-2002 by the USA, UK, EU and Australia, though not at senior level of government, and instead of establishing real dialogue, the visits generally reproduced old demands on both sides (Pedersen 2008). The UN tried to establish dialogue by sending a series of Special Rapporteurs on the situation of human rights and Special Envoys of the Secretary-General. However, the envoys generally faced great restraints and were in many cases unable to fulfil their responsibilities (Holiday 2011; Pedersen 2008). Many of the envoys were not allowed even to enter the country, and the pressure from democratic lobby groups and Western governments were high. In 2008, Pedersen (2008:56) writes:

There is no will in the international community to elevate the dialogue with the Burmese regime to the level seen in places like North Korea or the Middle East. Moreover, the continuing demands for governments, advocacy groups, and the media alike for immediate political results make it impossible for the envoys to engage in the kind of long-term trust building and give-and-take discussions which are minimally required to make progress with a deeply insular and intransigent regime.

### **Sanctions**

The only Western country that long deviated from isolation policies was Australia. Its government sought to establish dialogue on minister level when Foreign Minister Alexander Downer visited in 2002, and collaborated with the authorities in delivering development aid.

We haven't always entirely agreed with the approach taken by the US or for that matter from time to time by the British government. Obviously we don't want to embrace the SPDC... but at the same time we take the view that some sort of engagement with them is better than none. We doubt very much whether much will be achieved by stamping our feet and having nothing to do with them, and putting out angry press releases all the time (Foreign Minister Alexander Downer in Pedersen 2008:40).

Australia introduced some sanctions in response to the 1990 election, but these were substantially tightened after the Saffron Revolution in 2007 when monks and ordinary people were harassed by police and imprisoned after mass protest against the regime (Holiday 2011). The regime's response to the Saffron Revolution created outrage in the international community. Myanmar's human rights situation was criticized in the UN General Assembly and several countries tightened sanctions. In this political climate, engagement strategies with the regime were increasingly difficult to defend. Even though there was a growing awareness among policymakers that sanctions were not working as intended, the issue of removing sanctions remained indisputable as long as there were no signs of concession from the regime and Aung San Suu Kyi still endorsed the policy (Pedersen 2008). Indeed, Western countries' allegiance to the democratic movement and ASSK in particular trumped the will to explore alternatives (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007; Kane 2001). During an address on one of several EU

Burma/Myanmar Days (organized in 2003, 2005 and 2008 to discuss EU policies on Myanmar), Deputy Director General of the European Commission Mr Hervé Jouanjean acknowledged that sanctions were worsening the economic situation for ordinary Burmese people to the benefit of a small elite. However, as it were, “the situation does not justify that we abandon our critical views vis-à-vis the military regime. On the contrary, we have to further strengthen the sanctions part of our Common Position” (Jouanjean, Hervé 2005). Hence, because the unchanged political situation did not justify the removal of sanctions, the EU would increase development assistance as a way to balance the hardship placed on the population at large by sanctions.

## 2.3 Conclusion

The 8888 uprising stirred hope in the Burmese population that a brutal military regime would one day be replaced with a popular elected government. The democratic movement headed by Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy chose non-violent pressure and mobilization from below as main strategies to overthrow the regime. However, the regime’s military and financial strength proved them superior, even to economic isolation from the West. Instead of pressuring the regime into compromise, the tactics of the democratic opposition contributed to a polarized political environment. Pro-democrats (some of them known as the Third Force) started searching for alternative strategies for political change in Myanmar. While the mainstream discourse focused on delegitimizing the military regime through criticism, the alternative discourse focused on compromise and collaboration with the regime. A constructive engagement approach was attempted at civil society and multilateral levels, however Western governments generally stuck to isolation policies until Thein Sein’s reforms showed signs of improvement.

The two discourses outlined in this chapter illustrate how Norway could change its Myanmar policy from utter support of the democratic movement to constructive engagement. In search for political solutions in Myanmar, Norway was willing to replace firm principles with pragmatism — and thus challenge the norms and strategies dominant in public opinion. The answer to research question 1: “Why did Norway change its Myanmar policy from one of isolation to one of constructive engagement? “is that Norway lost faith in isolation and

grassroots mobilization as main strategies to overthrow the military regime. Instead of “shouting from far away”, Norway emphasized dialogue and collaboration with the regime.

Because the political environment was so polarized, a constructive engagement approach included a risk of alienating the democratic opposition, which it to a certain degree also did (see 3.3.2 Shortcoming: alienating the opposition). By changing its Myanmar policy, Norway took a risk few other Western governments were willing to take. There was a growing awareness among policymakers particularly in Europe that sanctions were inadequate to weaken the regime. However, the unchanged political situation and a continued demand for isolation from the NLD and advocacy groups gave politicians little leeway. Lobby groups of the democratic movement had great influence on public opinion in Europe and the USA through international media (Pedersen 2008). The legacy of years of condemnation and confrontational policies was moreover difficult to nuance. In terms of engagement policies, Western governments were unwilling to spend political capital on efforts with a high risk of failure while also damaging their reputation vis-à-vis the democratic movement.



# Norway's constructive engagement in Myanmar

This chapter is a case study of Norway's engagement strategies pursued roughly from 2007. Data is largely based on key informant interviews, unless other sources are cited. An overview of informants can be found in annex 1. Norway's constructive engagement entailed a twofold approach aimed at (i) supporting and influencing Thein Sein's reform agenda, and (ii) gather support in the international community. The chapter looks at diplomatic tactics in order to answer research question 2: "How did Norway try to influence Myanmar's reform agenda, and to what extent did it succeed?". The main argument presented here is that Norway used soft power tactics like networking, diplomacy, catalytic funding, and brokering as means of influence. This shows that small states are able to exercise power in spite of limited resources. Their small state capabilities and moral authority enables them to act as norm entrepreneurs on the international stage. Moreover, based on primary data I assess the accomplishments and shortcomings of Norway's constructive engagement approach.

## 3.1 Timing

Although Norwegian politicians had discussed constructive engagement since the mid-2000's, Western attitudes toward Myanmar (particularly after the Saffron revolution), combined with a skeptical and isolated military regime in Myanmar made engagement efforts difficult. In this respect, two events were key in opening the door for dialogue between Norway and Myanmar namely cyclone Nargis in 2008 and a change in American foreign policy.

The first opportunity to engage in dialogue with the regime came after cyclone Nargis raged the country in May 2008. The worst cyclone in Myanmar's recorded history killed approximately 140 000 people (Utenriksdepartementet 2010) and left survivors in need of shelter, water and other necessities local authorities had trouble providing. International donors mobilized assistance, but were frustratingly denied access to disaster ridden areas. Due to the West's confrontational approaches in the past, the military regime feared that American ships outside Myanmar's coastline carrying humanitarian assistance were actually part of a military invasion designed to overthrow the regime (Rønneberg 2015). Weeks passed by without aid from external actors, but by the end of May, diplomatic efforts by the UN and

ASEAN had convinced the regime to open up to the international community (Rønneberg 2015). Asian and European countries like Norway donated millions of dollars in order to rebuild the areas affected by the cyclone. From a modest annual budget of 64 million kroner in 2007, Norwegian development assistance in response to cyclone Nargis rose to 320 million kroner (app. 40 million USD) (Utenriksdepartementet 2010).

The Nargis disaster was significant for the international community because it allowed new development actors to enter the country on a larger and permanent scale, and it legitimized assistance inside the country. Furthermore, this was the first time the international community cooperated with national authorities. According to diplomatic sources, the interaction created a mutual understanding and modified the regime's perception of international actors as enemies of the state. For Norway, Nargis was the gateway to a series of political visits starting with Deputy Foreign Minister Raymond Johansen in May 2008. Minister of Environment and International Development Erik Solheim visited in January 2009 and June 2010 to follow up on aid effectiveness. A meeting with the government allowed Mr. Solheim to advocate for a widened humanitarian space across the country and discuss other political issues like the plan to hold elections.

Another green light for Norway to continue engagement approaches came when President Barack Obama in 2009 signaled a more pragmatic foreign policy approach toward authoritarian regimes. In contrast to the approach taken by his predecessor George W. Bush, Obama replaced interventionism and isolation with diplomacy and dialogue (Indyk, Lieberthal and O'Hanlon 2012). While "we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist" was perhaps primarily a message to strategic partners such as Iran and Cuba, it also triggered policy change towards Myanmar's military regime (Phillips 2009, 21.01). An internal review in the State Department resulted in constructive engagement in the areas of humanitarian aid and dialogue, while at the same time prolonging sanctions (Holiday 2011). The redirection in American foreign policy was important for Norway as the USA traditionally sets the tone within the Western block on several foreign policy issues. The USA is Norway's most important ally. Although Norway's small state status can be an advantage in the international community for instance by acting as a norm entrepreneur or honest broker between other actors (as the chapter later will show), Norway as a small state also lacks the resources to offer huge investments or force its will upon a third country through punitive means. Therefore, although Norway's capabilities were essential for establishing contact with

the regime, they would be insufficient for supporting potential changes. It was therefore in Norwegian interest that a potential venture in Myanmar would receive the backing of larger actors like the USA and the EU.

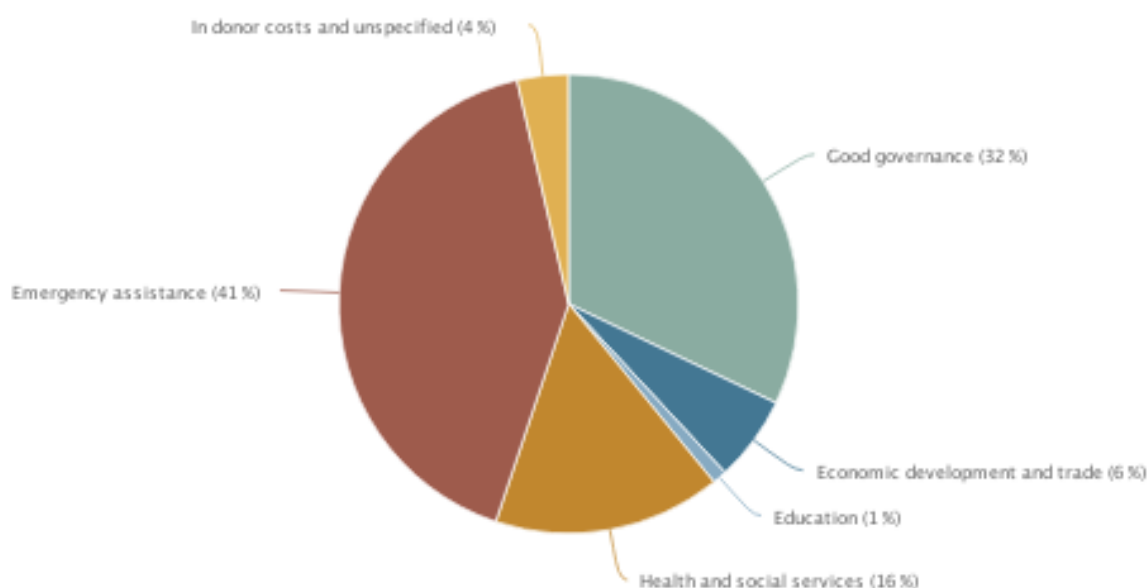
## 3.2 Diplomatic tactics

This section will address the diplomatic tools used by the Norwegian government to influence the reform agenda. Norwegian efforts have been twofold; not only was diplomatic effort directed towards the regime itself, but also invested in advocacy efforts to gather support in the international community. Soft power initiatives such as networking, advocacy, bridge building and concessions allowed the Norwegian government to gain access to a previously isolated regime, gain its trust which in turn paved the way for cooperation and influence. The section explains how Norway invested political and economic capital in civil society support, political visits, concessions and international advocacy.

### 3.2.1 Support to civil society organizations

In a time when providing development assistance inside the country was still controversial and Western donors mainly channeled funds through UN agencies or INGO's providing humanitarian relief (Pedersen 2008), Norway was one of few actors that deviated from the common strategy. Despite a narrow humanitarian space inside the country (due to pressure from lobby groups on the one side and skepticism from the regime on the other), Norway explored possibilities to support civil society directly from the 2000's in order to further national reconciliation. The notion that international NGO's were absent and civil society dead before 2008, as some observers would have it, was a myth (Stallworthy 2005; Holiday 2011). National NGO's were few in the mid 2000's, but gained a boost in the aftermath of cyclone Nargis in 2008, when the government failed to respond to the crisis and ordinary people were left to address the most pressing needs. As far as international NGO's were concerned, many kept a low profile before Nargis, but after 2008 work inside the country was in many ways legitimized and opened up for more organizations. Norway had by then supported a handful of organizations that offered capacity building and dialogue programs for years. Although Norwegian funds were modest in size, civil society support became important to Norway for two reasons. First of all, civil society support enabled Norwegian diplomats to network with actors who would shape their political analyses. Secondly, some of the

Norwegian funded organizations would become salient actors in the reform and peace process, and give Norwegian officials direct access to the generals.

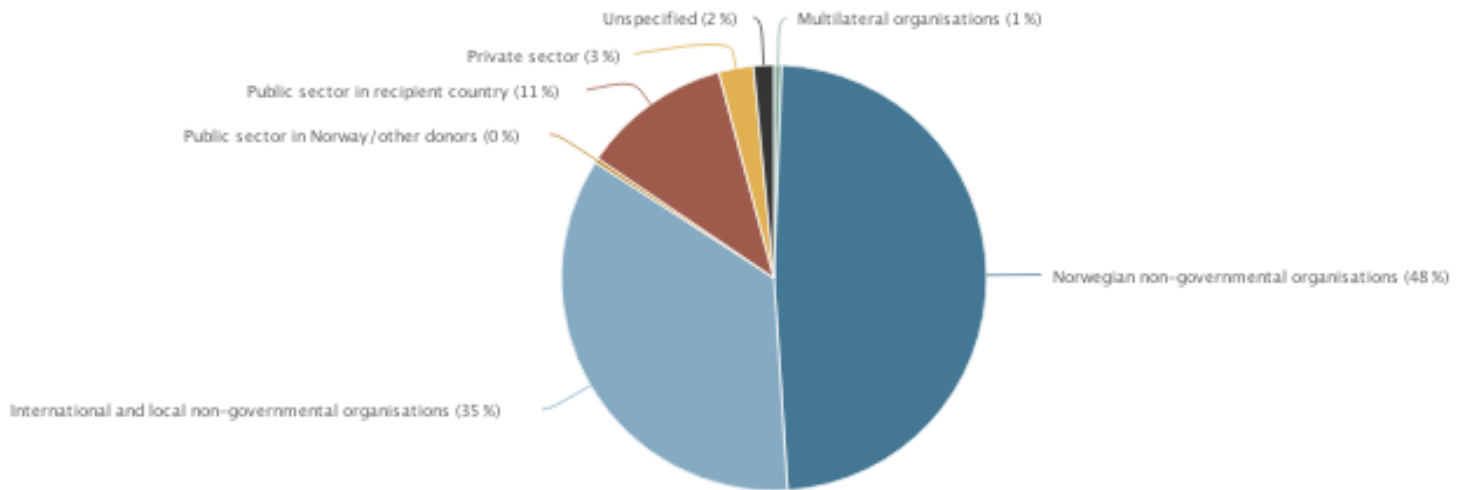


Figur 3 Norwegian development assistance to Myanmar from 2000-2007 by sector. Source: Norad's Norwegian Aid Statistics.

Statistics from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad 2016) show that between the years 2000-2007<sup>3</sup>, 32 % of 319 million kroner went to good governance programs. Almost half the funds were distributed through Norwegian NGO's like Norwegian Church Aid, Norwegian Red Cross, Norwegian People's Aid, and Strømme Foundation, while the remaining portion largely went to international and local NGO's, or the public sector. The MFA's most important Norwegian partner was the Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) who started activities inside the country in 2004 based on an analysis that civil society would benefit more if NPA worked inside the country rather than from the border areas like most other international organizations. NPA's Country Director Ingeborg Moa explained how the organization started working on issues like human rights and democracy, participation and distribution of resources from 2006-2007, and challenged the Norwegian government to get on board with constructive engagement approaches. Many of NPA's partner organizations were formed in light of the Saffron revolution and cyclone Nargis where they opted for political change, and these insights and perspectives from the ground became valuable to Norwegian MFA, particularly ahead of the 2010 elections. NPA's peacebuilding efforts in

<sup>3</sup> I've chosen this timeframe to show Norway's endeavors before reforms in 2011, but stopped at year 2007 because Norwegian funds in 2008-2009 was largely influenced by cyclone Nargis, and fund distribution would hence be skewed to favor humanitarian relief. Allocation of funds rose significantly in 2008 due to the cyclone (64 million NOK in 2007 vs. 320 million in 2008-09 to relief efforts (Utenriksdepartementet 2010)).

civil society later became pivotal for Norway’s peacebuilding efforts, as NPA developed pilot projects for Norway’s pioneering peacebuilding program the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (MPSI).



Figur 4 Good governance projects from 2000-2007 (a total of 102, 5 million NOK) divided by partner organization. Source: Norad’s Aid Statistics.

From the 2000’s, Norway also supported dialogue initiatives, capacity building to participate in the peace process and training in democratic processes through the HD Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, Nyein (Shalom) Foundation, Hope International Development Agency, Euro-Burma Office, Myanmar Egress and Vahu Development Institute. Besides the value of building competence and political awareness among beneficiaries, the mentioned partner organizations laid important ground for Norwegian analyses of the political context. At this point in time, Norway supported organizations working inside the country, organizations on the Thai border, and Western-based exile or lobby groups. It became increasingly evident for Norwegian diplomats that the actors’ analysis of the political context was largely revealed by their geographical positions. Organizations situated on the border and in the West largely endorsed the mainstream democratic discourse of non-involvement which they reproduced through media outlets popular among international observers. Organizations working inside the country, on the other hand, argued for a more nuanced approach and active involvement of the international community. Although all the organizations mentioned above argued for engagement approaches, it was particularly Vahu Development Institute<sup>4</sup> and Myanmar Egress that were driving forces behind the Third Force-discourse. They argued for

<sup>4</sup> The Vahu Development Institute was a Thailand-based think-tank formed by Burmese Harvard alumni to work for political reform through research, advocacy and training in democratization processes.

compromise and dialogue with the regime (Megias 2015), and advocated towards Western governments. These organizations were interesting to Norwegian officials because their alternative understanding balanced the perspective of the democratic movement which had dominated Western policy for a long time. By building networks in both discursive camps, Norwegian officials were able to make a more comprehensive analysis of the situation at hand, and Norway's role in it. Networking efforts inside the country might explain why Norway was one of the first Western actors to pursue engagement approaches, as it had access to actors promoting engagement, which Western governments who pursued isolation, did not.

### **3.2.1.1 Door openers for Norway**

Building relationships through economic support came with an added advantage, however intentional or arbitrary this was for Norwegian officials. Founders of Norwegian-funded Myanmar Egress, and adviser to the Norwegian government Thant Myint-U, managed to build relationships with reform minded generals ahead of the election in 2010. They facilitated what would become a series of political visits by introducing Norwegian diplomats and politicians to the generals, and in this way acted as door openers for Norway in Myanmar. The military regime viewed both the international community and Myanmar civil society with skepticism, and had traditionally isolated itself from such influences (Pedersen 2008). It was therefore a win for Myanmar Egress to establish contact in 2009 with U Aung Min – then Minister of Railways, later Peace Minister - through family connections. Their closest connections in the junta, U Aung Min and U Soe Thane were later selected as President Thein Sein's right and left hand in government to lead the economic and political reforms. Egress' relationship with them prior to and after the elections<sup>5</sup> meant they were in a position to influence the reform agenda on issues such as agriculture, economy, the military's role in politics and the peace process. Egress introduced Norwegian diplomats to the generals, which developed into a close working relationship and thus gave Norway direct access to primary implementers of the reforms.

Egress' leader, Nwe Win Maung, in turn invited political adviser Thant Myint-U to their so-called Bangkok Process in 2008, and introduced him to the generals. Thant called for a relaxation of sanctions early on, arguing that international actors should seize opportunities through the 2008 constitution and 2010 election to widen the political space. Along with civil

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<sup>5</sup> Egress founder Tin Maung Tann explains how they met with U Aung Min in secret for many months ahead of the election. When U Aung Min was selected as Peace Minister in Thein Sein's government, Myanmar Egress founders became some of his closest advisers through their positions at the Myanmar Peace Center.

society organizations mentioned previously, Thant's perspective influenced the understanding among Norwegian officials. His networking skills and advocacy efforts in Norway and Bangkok made him one of the Norwegian government's most trusted advisers. Due to his connections, Thant Myint-U became a mediator between the GoM and the international community. He advocated for engagement approaches in the UN, and toward Western governments on the one hand, while trying to convince generals to open up on the other. According to himself, he had to convince the generals of the advantages of building a relationship with Norway. These efforts allegedly allowed Minister Erik Solheim to be the first Western minister to visit newly elected President Thein Sein in 2011 (Rønneberg 2015).

As Burmese culture place a large emphasis on personal relationships, Norway's networking tactics were in that regard vital in order to support the reform agenda. That Norwegian partners established relationships at government level gave Norway an exclusive access other governments did not have, and allowed Norway to pursue political visits earlier than most Western governments. The access to reform minded ministers like U Aung Min and U Soe Thane were key for Norway to be able to play a part. Some of the Norwegian-funded organizations later became key implementers of Thein Sein's reform agenda. Zaw Oo, Aung Naing Oo, Dr. Tin Maung Than and Win Min from Vahu Development Institute transitioned to Myanmar Development Resource Institute/Center for Economic and Social Development which played a vital role in reform policy making (Center for Economic and Social Development 2016). Nwe Win Maung, Hla Maung Shwe and Tin Maung Tann from Myanmar Egress (initially also Aung Naing Oo from Vahu) became central advisers to the peace process through the government's peace secretariat- the Myanmar Peace Center (MPC), which facilitated peace negotiations between the government and ethnic armed groups. Kyaw Yin Hlaing went from Myanmar Egress, to MPC, to establish the MPC-associated Center for Diversity and National Harmony (CDNH) to address intercommunal tensions. Norway funded the establishment of CDNH in 2014, which is its primary partner related to issues in Rakhine State. Euro-Burma office with its links to ethnic communities would also play a key role in the peace process.

### **3.2.2 Political visits**

Once Norwegian diplomats based in Bangkok had established contact with the regime, Norway engaged in a series of political visits (see full overview in figure 5). The main overall agenda of visits was to build bilateral trust through dialogue, in order to reduce the huge divide between the regime and international community caused by isolation. Norwegian

officials therefore had to tone down demands and criticism that had blocked Western countries in dialogue efforts in the past, and instead be willing to listen. That Norway was asked to lead international support to the peace process, and Thein Sein chose Norway as the first European country to visit after his inauguration exemplifies the success of this approach.

Like previously mentioned, Cyclone Nargis opened the door for dialogue as this was the first time the international community and the government collaborated to distribute humanitarian assistance. Deputy Foreign Minister Raymond Johansen and Minister of Environment and International Development Erik Solheim traveled to Myanmar to follow-up on the allocation of funds, but these visits were not official. Mr. Erik Solheim first got a chance to discuss Nargis funds with the regime during his second visit in June 2010. Earlier political visits from the West had failed to establish trust because both Myanmar and Western parties were too fixated on repeating old demands (Pedersen 2008). Norway's strategy during Solheim's visit was therefore to tone down criticism and demands (such as the need to persecute military generals in the ICC), and instead focus on common interests. Former diplomat at the Norwegian Embassy in Bangkok Arne Jan Flølo explains:

The winter of 2010, Gry Larsen and Solheim had official meetings in Naypyitaw with the old regime. This was groundbreaking in the Western community, as no Western governments were close to having political visits. In the meetings, we had a long list of issues we wanted to talk about, but had to find topics that could create cooperation instead of just criticizing them. With the purpose of building trust, we discussed climate change, as Myanmar already was involved in a regional climate initiative, and human trafficking. It is not possible to establish dialogue simply by listing up all the flaws in the country. We explored possibilities of collaboration to see if the government was willing to take steps in the right direction. It was with the intention of building trust to promote a greater purpose (freely translated).

For Norwegian officials however, the most important issue on the agenda was to discuss the forthcoming election. According to the military regime's Roadmap to Discipline Flourishing Democracy, democratic elections with the aim of transferring power from a military to a civilian government was planned to be held the same year. Although the international community viewed the Roadmap with a general disbelief, Norway was willing to give the generals the benefit of the doubt. Officials in the MFA had internally discussed the positive institutional changes outlined through the Roadmap already in 2007-08. The perception was that Than Shwe's potential reforms would not produce liberal democracy, but the possible gains in terms of political and economic liberalization by supporting the reform process was for Norwegian officials greater than a potential loss. There was a willingness, and eagerness



to take pragmatic steps to widen the humanitarian and political space available. Journalist Kristoffer Rønneberg who joined Solheim on his trip and attended Solheim’s meeting with the Minister of Agriculture writes: “The meeting resembled a courtesy call, but strengthened the Norwegian signal of support to the reform process even though other countries thought the forthcoming election was nothing more than an attempt to clothe the military junta in a shell of legitimacy” (2015:195, my translation).

May 2008	Deputy Foreign Minister Raymond Johansen
January 2009	Minister of Environment and International Development Erik Solheim
April 2010	Deputy Foreign Minister Gry Larsen
June 2010	Minister of Environment and International Development Erik Solheim
May 2011	Deputy Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide
October 2011	Deputy Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide
November 2011	Minister of Environment and International Development Erik Solheim
January 2012	Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre
May 2012	Deputy Foreign Minister Torgeir Larsen
November 2012	Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide
April 2013	Minister of Industry and Trade Trond Giske
May 2013	Deputy Foreign Minister Torgeir Larsen
February 2014	Foreign Minister Børge Brende
August 2014	Deputy Foreign Minister Morten Høglund
December 2014	Their Majesties the King and Queen of Norway Foreign Minister Børge Brende Minister of Trade Monika Mæland Deputy Minister of Oil and Energy Kåre Fostervold Deputy Minister of Environment Lars Andreas Lunde
June 2015	Deputy Foreign Minister Bård Glad Pedersen
February 2016	Deputy Foreign Minister Tore Hattrem

*Figur 5 Norway’s political visits to Myanmar between 2008-2016 during SPDC and USDP rule. Sources are calendars and articles at regjeringen.no.*

Dialogue with the SPDC regime at senior political level was groundbreaking in the Western block, but it was nevertheless after President Thein Sein’s government took office that Norway really scaled up political visits. Bilateral talks were a way to test the sincerity of

reforms, as well as confirming Norwegian support to the reform agenda. Although the focus was on collaboration rather than condemnation, Norway raised the issue of human rights abuses and encouraged the release of political prisoners. The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs were most enthusiastic about visits, but the Ministry of Trade also showed interest by sending their Minister both in 2013 and 2014 (different ministers), as well as a delegation from the Norwegian Parliament Committee on Trade in 2015. Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg came to open an Embassy office in Yangon in 2012, and President Thein Sein visited him in Oslo just three months later. In 2012, Aung San Suu Kyi, speaker of the Parliament Shwe Mann and five Myanmar ministers visited Norway (see full overview in figure 6). Most of them came by invitation to further the collaboration in peace support or development cooperation, and some were directly financed by the Norwegian government (Norad 2016). The grandest gesture from the Norwegian side however, came through the Royal visit in December 2014. A large delegation consisting of the royal couple, four ministers and a business delegation of 70 signaled Norway’s support to the reform process. Cooperation between the two countries were at the same time formalized through a

April 2012	Minister of Railways Aung Min
May 2012	Speaker of the Lower House Shwe Mann
June 2012	Aung San Suu Kyi Minister of Industry Soe Thane
August 2012	Minister of Energy Than Htay
October 2012	Minister of Environment and Forestry U Win Tun
November 2012	Minister of National Planning
February 2013	President Thein Sein Minister of the President’s Office Soe Thane
June 2013	Minister of Immigration Khin Yi
July 2014	Minister of Electric Power Khin Maung Soe
August 2014	Minister of Energy Zay Yar Aung

*Figur 6 Myanmar’s political visits to Norway between 2012-2016 (with author’s proviso of deficiencies). Source is regjeringen.no.*

Momerandum of Understanding (MoU), which declared Norway’s continued support to political, economic and peace reforms, and development cooperation.

The frequency of Norway's political visits, including meetings with the military junta, shows an early willingness to support positive changes in a time when most Western countries were "on the fence". But constructive engagement with the regime also included a risk of failure and risk of insulting Aung San Suu Kyi. Nevertheless, Norway's many talks with the government (and concessions which will be addressed below) established a trust between the countries which allowed Norway to take a part in the reform process, especially in the peace process. The reason why dialogue was successful was according to Norwegian officials due to the pragmatic approach taken, by showing interest and support rather than raising demands.

When Thein Sein met Jens Stoltenberg in Norway he said what he liked about Norway was that we sat down and talked to them, instead of shouting from far away. We showed common decency and discussed things. We were very clear on the human rights situation and talked about the big things in a constructive way, but also discussed other things (Norwegian diplomat, author's translation).

### **3.2.3 Concessions**

A part of the constructive engagement strategy was to take pragmatic steps alongside developments on the ground. While the international community had previously sworn to criticism and shaming of the military regime, the constructive approach sought to replace sticks with carrots. In the words of former deputy Foreign Minister Ms. Gry Larsen:

While we are clear on our demands, we must signal on behalf of the international community that a development in the right direction will be met in a constructive way. Burmese authorities have a choice. If they chose the road to democracy and growth, the international community will strengthen its political and economic interaction with Burma (Utenriksdepartementet 2010, 06.04).

In the following section, I will address how Norway transformed promises of support to the reforms into tangible initiatives and hence used concessions as a diplomatic tool. Because a trust relationship was already developed between Norwegian officials and some of the reformers, Norway became a natural first choice partner and adviser on some of the issues at hand. Norway would be quick to provide help and issue rewards for progress in the shape of economic and political concessions, upscaling of development assistance, peacebuilding support and business development, and capacity building in the bureaucracy. This allowed Norway to influence national legislation, norms and proceedings in the areas of political governance, electricity, hydropower, petroleum management, environmental conservation, tourism, telecommunications and more.

#### **3.2.3.1 Economic concessions**

Norwegian officials wanted to encourage further reforms by showing the generals that more openness and democratization would be beneficial for them. The strategy was therefore to

give rewards on par with positive developments on the ground. It was also a way to demonstrate that Norway was a reliable partner that kept its promises. Political visits were used as a mean to follow the developments, and keep the government accountable to their word. Deputy Foreign Minister Mr. Espen Barth Eide visited the government three times between 2011-2012, and was the first political representative from a Western government to meet Thein Sein (Utenriksdepartementet 2011, 28.11). According to a Norwegian diplomat, Mr. Eide's first time visit was made to listen to Thein Sein and his plans, while his second visit was made to hold Thein Sein accountable to his word.

In January 2012, Norway initiated a series of concessions "based on positive developments in the country" to "encourage further reform" (Utenriksdepartementet 2012, 24.01). Myanmar's membership in the Generalised System of Preferences was resumed to allow duty-free export on Myanmar goods to Norway, and travel bans placed on military generals and their families (which also affected Thein Sein and his government) were removed (Utenriksdepartementet 2012, 11,09; 2012, 24.01). The Schengen collaboration obliged Norway to follow the EU's sanctions regime, but the Norwegian appeal not to trade with, or invest in, Myanmar was retracted in January 2012 (Utenriksdepartementet 2012, 14.01). Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre justified the decision by pointing to developments in the country and said "the Norwegian policy change is a signal to the government in Myanmar that reforms work" (Utenriksdepartementet 2012, 14.01). When EU's sanctions were formally suspended in April 2012, a press release from the MFA again emphasized positive developments such as NLD's victory in the by-election and opposition in Parliament, the release of political prisoners, legislation regarding human rights, increased freedom of speech and a freer media, as well as ceasefires with eleven ethnic armed groups as reasons for the decision (Utenriksdepartementet 15.04). In January 2013, Norway (Myanmar's fourth largest creditor) cancelled Myanmar's entire debt of 3, 2 billion NOK (app. 388 million USD). "This is historical, not only for Myanmar, but also for Norway. Never have we cancelled so much debt to a developing country. I am proud that Norway once again leads the way" said Minister of International Development Mr. Heikki Holmås (Utenriksdepartementet 2013, 28.01). Political gestures from the Norwegian side included opening a full-fledged embassy and embracing the name change from Burma to Myanmar. The former was important not only for mere practical reasons, but also because it signaled a desire of closer cooperation with the authorities. The latter was symbolically important, because it signaled a change in political support away from the democratic movement, over to the newly elected government and its reform agenda.

### **3.2.3.2 Collaboration with Thein Sein's government: capacity building**

Furthermore, the more important way for Norway to show its support to Thein Sein's government and the reform agenda was to invest in Myanmar society and government apparatus through development cooperation, business development and capacity building in the bureaucracy. By engaging at an early stage, Norway had the opportunity to influence early developments. After Thein Sein's inaugural address 30.03.2011, diplomats at the Norwegian Embassy in Bangkok (with mandate over Myanmar) encouraged the MFA to discuss Thein Sein's promised areas of improvement, such as education, health, environment and governance through dialogue. The same e-mail dated 05.04.2011 says:

It becomes important to follow the signals given in the President's first speeches into materialization. It presents us with an opportunity to influence the new government in a more constructive direction toward national development and interaction with the international community (my translation).

Through dialogue with the reformers, it became clear that the Myanmar government acknowledged the magnitude of the challenges at hand, and they asked for Norwegian support to gain more knowledge on how to address them. Norway was ready to offer support, but chose collaboration on less controversial areas such as tourism and environment in the beginning based on the politicized environment. The Myanmar Master Tourism Plan released in November 2012 in collaboration between the Myanmar Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, the Asian Development Bank and Norway aimed to ensure that "tourism contributes to equitable social and economic development in Myanmar" by protecting environmentally important areas, safeguarding ethnic communities and creating employment opportunities (Asian Development Bank 2013, 05.06; Utenriksdepartementet 2012, 05.11). The importance placed on environmental and social sustainability clearly reflect Norwegian priorities (Meld. St. 10 (2014-2015) 2015), which together with a focus on human rights can be traced repeatedly through Norwegian collaboration efforts with Myanmar authorities. The early projects in environmental conservation paved the way for a Norwegian strategy on long-term development assistance in 2012, which placed particular emphasis on support to peace, democracy and reform, and natural resource management in energy and environmental conservation (Royal Norwegian Embassy in Yangon 2015, 04.12).

The absence and unwillingness of other Western governments and international organizations such as the World Bank to engage enabled Norway to take on much responsibility in the areas of political and economic reform. Aid through expert advice and capacity building in the Myanmar bureaucracy became a common strategy for Norwegian support, and moreover, a platform for influence. Norway inter alia sent an economic consultant to advise and build

capacity at the President's office, the Ministry of National Planning and the MDRI to address the many challenges that had built up during years of economic isolation (a vibrant black market currency trade, hand written national budgets, a broken banking system to name a few). Other initiatives included capacity building related to the implementation of the Freedom of Association Law and long-term placement of Norwegian hydropower experts in the Ministry of Electric Power. Between 2012-2015, Norway engaged in capacity building activities in at least seven Myanmar ministries including the Ministry of Environmental Conservation and Forestry (MoECAAF), Ministry of Electric Power, Ministry of Energy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Social Welfare, and Ministry of Communications, Posts and Telegraphs (Norad 2016, 17.10). These efforts have subsequently enabled Norwegian ministries, directorates and advisers (for instance the Norwegian Ministry of Petroleum and Energy, the Norwegian Environment Agency and Norwegian Water Resources and Energy Directorate (NVE)) to influence national legislation, norms and proceedings in the areas of electricity, hydropower, petroleum management, environmental conservation, waste management, water management, tourism, telecommunications and more (Royal Norwegian Embassy in Yangon 2015, 04.12; 2016, 19.05; Norad 2016, 25.05; 2015, 02.10; NIVA 2016, 11.03).

### **3.2.3.3 Support to the peace process**

Support to the peace process has been one of Norway's top priorities in Myanmar since 2012. The national peace negotiations between the Government of Myanmar (GoM) and ethnic armed organizations (EAO's) was launched through President Thein Sein's appeal for dialogue in August 2011. Norway was requested to coordinate support to the peace process on behalf of the international donor community. Although the GoM did not want a foreign mediator in the negotiations, Norway nevertheless obtained a prestigious mandate considering Thein Sein's personal investment in the matter. Norwegian responsibilities included leading the Peace Donor Support Group (later Peace Support Group), and launching and managing the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (MPSI), but also included training of key stakeholders in peace negotiation and peace building by arranging study trips to Norway and the Philippines.

When asked to explain why Norway was entrusted this mandate, Norwegian officials emphasize personal connections, Norway's previous experiences with peace processes internationally, and Norway's lack of direct interests. The first point relates to the trust

relationships built with government officials (as explained in under Political visits), but also to Norway's connections with ethnic communities, particularly the Karen National Union (KNU). As one of the largest EAO's with the longest history of opposition to the military, KNU's goodwill toward the peace process was essential in order to sign a National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). Thus, Norway's established trust relations in both camps was important in order to build bridges. Norway's status as small state also played a role when selected as focal point because of its perceived neutrality. The fact that Norway had no military or major economic motives in the peace process is likely to have strengthened the image of Norway as a trustworthy partner. Moreover, Norway's relative insignificance to Myanmar meant that Myanmar had little to lose should the initiative fail and Norway be dismissed from the position. Norway was therefore a less risky choice than bigger Western countries with whom Myanmar desired a stronger bilateral relationship.

The Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (MPSI) was established in 2012 as a temporary, flexible political mechanism to test ceasefires on the ground and in turn create trust between warring parties. The umbrella initiative comprised several small-scale pilot projects designed according to context. Norway took the lead, but gathered support from donors such as Denmark, Finland, Australia and the EU. According to the external evaluation report "Testing Ceasefires, Building Trust" (Johnson and Lidauer 2014), MPSI was "the right initiative at the right time", as pioneering pilot projects managed to gain traction in previously inaccessible areas (so-called black areas). Among the specific achievements listed in the report are opening access to previous conflict areas by testing ceasefires, supporting ethnic actors in peace negotiations, creating links between the GoM and EAO's, between ethnic leaders and their constituencies and between EAO's and the international community, giving a voice to conflict affected communities, and contributing with conflict analysis to policy makers. The authors argue that the successes were the result of the MPSI team's<sup>6</sup> knowledge, skills and network among ethnic communities combined with a flexible institutional framework.

However, the report notes that MPSI had clear weaknesses which hindered the initiative to reach its full potential (this view was confirmed through my interviews). Firstly, MPSI did not have a communications strategy and therefore lacked a cohesive understanding internally of

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<sup>6</sup> The team was led by Charles Petrie, former UN Resident Coordinator in Myanmar 2003-2007, who had already established respect and a wide network in Myanmar. Alan Smith and Ashely South were also key team members with experience and network in Myanmar.

how high profile the initiative should be, and how to communicate an innovative yet sensitive initiative. This caused for a lot of criticism from civil society, especially from organizations on the Thai border who felt excluded from the process and overrun by the international community (Johnson and Lidauer 2014; Zipporah Sein 2016, 14.01; Myanmar Peace Monitor 2016, 06.11). Secondly, MPSI had difficulties securing sufficient funding due to its untraditional and responsive approach. This might have worked for Norway where the Embassy could quickly get hold of flexible funds that did not need to be thoroughly reported on, but less so for more bureaucratic funding systems like DfiD, Echo or USAid. This point is illustrated by the fact that the Norwegian MFA fully or partially funded nearly all MPSI projects (see full overview in Myanmar Peace Monitor 2013, 13.06). Thirdly, the initiative lacked in political and operational leadership. The MPSI team was hired on part-time consultancies and had huge responsibilities in relation to its size (MPSI 2014). Because of limited funding and a desire to minimize institutional structure, an in-country secretariat was not in place before 2013. Organizational shortcomings created problems for communications, funding, HR and institutional learning and development (Johnson and Lidauer 2014). Additionally, this was coupled with a lack of direction from, and capacity of, Norwegian diplomats. According to Ashley South, one of three key MPSI consultants, Norwegian strategy in the peace process was not existing:

Part of the MPSI experience was spent with me, Charles and Alan trying to work out what the Norwegians were trying to do. We weren't given any briefing so that's why it was confusing, sort of reading the tea leaves.

For a period, I felt like we had Norwegian foreign policy subcontracted to us, and we could define what that meant to support the peace process. Unfortunately, we never got the full political or economic backing to make that a reality but it was quite a privilege and interesting to have that role to run with. But it seemed as if there was never really anything behind it as to what that meant to support the peace process. Which is strange.

A lack of capacity at the Norwegian Embassy might also explain why the MPSI secretariat was hired as a part-time secretariat for the Peace Donor Support Group (PDSG) - a high-level platform for dialogue between the Government of Myanmar, EAO's and international donors<sup>7</sup>. This caused more confusion to outsiders regarding the roles and responsibilities between Norway and the MPSI, the MPSI and the PDSG, and the PDSG and Norway.

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<sup>7</sup> PDSG founding members included Norway, Australia, the United Kingdom, the European Union, the United Nations and the World Bank, but later expanded to include Canada, Denmark, Finland, Indonesia, Japan, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States of America by 2015 (Embassy of Denmark Myanmar 2015, 15.10).



### **3.2.4 International advocacy**

A part of Norway's Western lead on constructive engagement involved lobbying efforts in bilateral and multilateral forums. The Norwegian Embassy in Bangkok shared insights and analysis on the ground, while Norwegian politicians simultaneously advocated for constructive engagement in the UN, the EU and toward the USA. Norway had a strategic interest in bringing larger actors like the USA and EU aboard both because it would boost the reform process, but also because Norway as a small state is dependent on these partnerships. In the words of former Minister Erik Solheim:

[It was important not to leapfrog Western partners] because Norway has so many issues of common interest [with the EU and the US]. We didn't want [efforts in Myanmar] to have a negative spillover effect. That's why it was important that the US accepted how we approached [the situation].

In the following, I will discuss Norwegian advocacy efforts in Bangkok, the EU, the UN and toward the US, respectively.

#### **3.2.4.1 In Bangkok**

Norway did not have a diplomatic presence in Yangon until 2012 when a shared Embassy Office with Denmark was opened by Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg (Utenriksdepartementet, 2012, 05.11), and hence initially all Norwegian activity in Myanmar was channeled through the Norwegian Embassy in Bangkok. A Swiss official notes how Norway was eager to encourage constructive engagement in Bangkok: "That was not only Norway, but Norway was the most visible doing that". Even though several Western countries were present in Yangon, they did difficulties obtaining information. However, Norwegian diplomats had established a wide network in civil society both inside and outside the country, a freedom that comes with the institutional flexibility within the MFA (this is one of Norway's comparative advantages as a small state, which I will get back to in chapter 4). Thus, a wide network and Norway's engagement at government level offered Western diplomats an alternative reading of what was happening inside the country. The Norwegian Embassy in Bangkok hosted monthly briefings for the diplomatic community where they shared experiences for instance from political visits, and their analysis of the situation. After MPSI was established, briefings were held both in Bangkok and Yangon. Because of its access to valuable information, Norway became sort of a gatekeeper to Myanmar for those countries looking to engage. Norwegian diplomats say the diplomatic corps were interested to learn about the reforms and generally positive to Norway's approach, but did not have the space to engage due to

continued skepticism at government level. Norwegian lobbying efforts at capital level were thus even more important.

#### **3.2.4.2 In the EU**

The European Union (EU) did not establish political contact with Myanmar until April 2012, when Vice-President of the European Commission Catherine Ashton visited Myanmar and opened an EU Office in Yangon (European Union 2013, 21.10) (the EU delegation to Myanmar was until then situated in Bangkok). This meant that Norway was in a position to provide the EU with valuable information regarding the reform process. According to official Norwegian outlets in 2011, the EU “showed interest in Norway’s political visits to [Myanmar], and in Norwegian perspectives going forward” as they internally discussed adjustments to the EU Common Position on Burma/Myanmar (Europaportalen 2011, 28.11). In 2011, Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre addressed the developments in Myanmar in the EEA Council (Europaportalen 2011, 15.11), while Minister of Defense (later Minister of Foreign Affairs) Espen Barth Eide was invited - as the first ever Norwegian politician - to brief the EU’s Political and Security Committee on developments in Myanmar (Europaportalen 2011, 28.11). Again, Norway’s access to inside information and alternative reading of the situation allowed Norway to frame the agenda and advocate for a more active European engagement in Myanmar. Minister Barth Eide noted: “[...] We must acknowledge that the current window of opportunity should be used while it is still open. We therefore want to involve the EU in updated policies” (Europaportalen 2011, 28.11).

#### **3.2.4.3 At the UN**

Norway advocated for a stronger international presence in Myanmar both at humanitarian level – by pushing for a widened UNDP mandate (Strømmen 2009; Currie 2012) and involvement of the World Bank and the IMF (Utenriksdepartementet 2012, 15.04) - and diplomatic levels (Utenriksdepartementet 2011, 21.09), for instance by supporting the Secretary General’s good offices in Myanmar. In 1993, the UN Secretary General (UNSG) were given a mandate through the General Assembly to engage in dialogue with the Myanmar military regime (Pedersen 2008). A number of Special Advisers were subsequently sent to promote national reconciliation and democratization through mediation efforts (although these efforts generally failed, see Magnusson and Pedersen 2012). In January 2010, former Special Adviser to Myanmar Ibrahim Gambari wrote to Foreign Minister Gahr Støre to:

...personally express my heart-felt gratitude for your consistent support to my efforts as Special Adviser to the Secretary-General and for your constructive contribution in advancing the Secretary-

General's good offices mission in Myanmar. [...] Throughout my tenure as Special Adviser to the Secretary-General, Norway and your Excellency have been a most reliable source of sage advice and encouragement in the implementation of my work.

Norway funded the establishment of a representative office in 2012, when the UNSG Good Office was able to establish permanently in Yangon (Norad 2016).

#### **3.2.4.4 The US**

Although the US was traditionally the Western country with the staunchest isolation policies against Myanmar (Pedersen 2008), Obama's redirection toward autocratic regimes opened up for a more pragmatic approach. In August 2009, Democrat Senator Jim Webb became the first American politician to visit Myanmar in ten years, and also the first to meet Senior General Than Shwe (PBS Newshour 2009, 27.08). Upon his return, Webb published an article in the New York Times entitled "We Can't Afford to Ignore Myanmar", arguing that the sanctions policies increased the economic and political influence of China in Myanmar, while "military presence could easily follow" (Webb 2009). Further dialogue initiatives at diplomatic level followed Webb's visit and a "Special Representative" with rank as Ambassador was appointed in Washington in April 2011 (later to become the first U.S. Ambassador in Myanmar since 1990 in 2012) (BBC 2011, 15.04). However, the Americans were cautious of moving ahead of developments on the ground. They were concerned about Myanmar's military relations with North-Korea (Utenriksdepartementet 2011, 21.09), and opposition from lobby groups in Congress and civil society, particularly among Burmese exiles, was still strong. In this climate, it was important for Norway to encourage further momentum.

According to sources, Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre played a mediating role between the GoM and the USA. Støre used his good connections in the Administration to keep the Americans closely informed about Norway's experiences and assessments. His close relationship with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton - who was personally dedicated to the policy of engagement (Nakamura 2015) – made Norwegian assessments all the more significant. After several visits from the State Department, and an official approval from Aung San Suu Kyi (Nakamura 2015), Secretary Clinton's visit to Myanmar in December 2012 illustrated the U.S.'s sincerity in strengthening bilateral relations, and simultaneously marked a "breakthrough" in the relations between Myanmar and the West (Magnusson and Pedersen 2012).

### 3.3 Achievements and shortcomings

This section summarizes the main positive and negative outcomes of Norway's constructive engagement approach. By using the tactics outlined above, Norway succeeded in (i) supporting and influencing Thein Sein's reform agenda, and (ii) gather support in the international community. Norway's political and economic investments in the reform agenda helped give momentum and legitimacy to the reforms. By acting as a norm entrepreneur of constructive engagement and honest broker in the peace process, Norway furthermore acted as a catalyzer for international support, triggering Western donor support to start earlier than what would perhaps be the case without Norway's lead. On the other hand, Norway's discursive shift combined with financial cuts to civil society groups in Thailand implied a de facto alienation of the democratic movement. Even Aung San Suu Kyi who had enjoyed a strong relationship with Norway ever since she received the Nobel Peace Prize, publically criticized the Norwegian approach of being over optimistic. Norway's image among civil society groups and ethnic communities was further challenged when business interests seemed get priority over human rights and peace efforts.

#### **3.3.1 Achievement: The reform agenda gains momentum**

First of all, by investing political and economic capital in the reform agenda, Norway helped strengthen the reform process. Thein Sein's agenda took the international community by surprise. They reacted with caution based on their established policies and the military's bad reputation. Although there was no guarantee for the military's sincerity or dedication to reform, Norway took the risk of investing in a process heading (in their opinion) in the right direction. Support shown through economic incentives were meaningful both in a practical and symbolic sense, but it was Norway's political support (demonstrated especially through political visits) that made most significant impact on the GoM. Informants say political support by a Western country was particularly important in a time when Thein Sein's government lacked legitimacy in the international community, and because reformers within the USDP were in minority in Parliament. According to Tin Maung Tann (founder of Myanmar Egress):

That [support] really created the confidence U Thein Sein, U Soe Thane and U Aung Min [needed] to make the daring move. That was the real tipping point to have a change in this country. The confidence given by the Norwegian government was a key.

This view was confirmed by Thein Sein's Information Minister Ye Htut in a seminar organized by the Norwegian Burma Committee in Oslo June 14<sup>th</sup> 2016. He claimed that while Western actors always wanted to "raise the bar" in spite of progress, Norway was ready to offer support: "Norway believed in us when others were on the fence", Ye Htut said. And it was likely the lowering of demands and willingness to hold dialogue that made the Norwegian approach successful. The traditional approach taken by Western countries reinforced in the generals a feeling of attack, which made them defensive. The message, in line with the mainstream democratic discourse, was that in order to restore democracy, the generals had to hand over power to the NLD and pay for their wrongdoings by handing themselves over to the International Criminal Court (ICC). Their options were limited to either maintaining the status quo, or give up their freedom. Thant Myint-U thinks that by lowering these demands, Norway, the US and others signaled that the generals could precede with reforms without sacrificing themselves, which had a positive psychological effect. The new message was that the international community did not expect a fully transitioned democracy, but rather that some progress was better than none. "Without this encouragement" says Thant Myint-U, "the changes would not have happened".

### **3.3.2 Shortcoming: alienating the opposition**

Norway's economic and political investment in Thein Sein's government created discontent in the democratic opposition. Organizations on the Thai border saw Norwegian support as biased in favor of the regime, especially when cross-border humanitarian assistance and some lobby groups received earmarked cuts around 2010-2011. Financial cuts coincided with the MPSI initiative, which was seen as an attempt to sideline cross-border groups in favor of organizations with affiliations with the government (Martov 2014, 02.06). Norway's policy change was considered Janus faced for a country with a historically good reputation created through the Democratic Voice of Burma and awarding ASSK the Nobel Peace Prize. The feeling was that the international community strengthened Thein Sein's government at the expense of the democratic opposition, further weakening Aung San Suu Kyi by actively patronizing her (Aagre 2015, 16.09). Choosing to bypass ASSK and the NLD was considered a betrayal, and in effect alienated Norway from environments that had "fought the good fight" for two decades (Buzzi 2015, 20.04).

The Norwegian Burma Committee (NBC) advocates for democratization in Myanmar and has represented oppositional grievances tirelessly in Norwegian media. Like other civil society groups, NBC criticized the policy of engagement of being too indulgent of the regime.

Observers feared that the international community (with Norway in the lead) moved “too far, too fast” and gave rewards ahead of actual changes (Aagre 2015, 16.09; Buzzi 2011, 17.10; Irrawaddy 2011, 31.10). The perception was that the international community legitimized the quasi-civilian government too fast, in effect strengthening old power structures (Verbruggen 2014, 28.06; Lintner 2015, 11.06). “[Norwegian] diplomats usually say the reform process is unmatched in world history. In reality a regime has never been so much praised and yet relinquished so little power” (Aagre 2015, 19.06, own translation). The message was therefore that Norway should slow down, raise more demands to the reformists, and use sanctions as an incentive for further reforms rather than releasing them without any strings attached (Røst 2014, 28.02).

Oppositional grievances received serious attention in Norway when Aung San Suu Kyi defied historic links to Norway<sup>8</sup> by publically criticizing the Norwegian approach for being over optimistic (Lote 2015, 05.09). According to NBC Secretary-General Audun Aagre, ASSK thought Norway overemphasized what was possible to achieve under a quasi-civilian government (Aagre 2015, 16.09). This was because Norway had bought into the generals’ narrative that economic development must come before political rights (Aagre 2015, 19.06). According to critics like the NBC and scholar Bertil Lintner, Norway’s unbalanced support to the President with focus on business development showed that Norway was “won” by the military regime.

The [Norwegian] Embassy appeared almost as a PR office for the Burmese government (and the regime before it) where Aung San Suu Kyi was actively patronized. Aung San Suu Kyi was claimed to have a low position among the populace (this was before her party won 43 of 44 seats in the by-election in 2012). The Embassy was indignant if the understanding of Thein Sein as reformist was challenged. The Foreign Service appeared to have caught the Stockholm syndrome, and money flows followed this political understanding. They created a bifurcation where you were either for us (and the President), or against us (Own translation of Aagre 2015, 16.09).

According to critics, Norway was too naïve in its support to the GoM because the reform process was never intended to establish democracy (Aagre 2014, 16. 10; 2015, 16.06; Buzzi 2011, 17.10). In his article “How the West was won”, scholar Bertil Lintner (2015, 11.06), presents a theory that the reform process was a façade created to lessen the military regime’s

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<sup>8</sup> Her gratitude of Norwegian support to her and the democratic movement was allegedly so great, Norwegian diplomats say the first person ASSK asked to see when released from house arrest in 2010, was the Norwegian Ambassador. She long wanted to visit Norway as the first foreign country as a sign of gratitude to Norwegian support (Irrawaddy 2011, 31.10).

dependence on China. According to Lintner, the international community was used in a game designed to legitimize an authoritarian regime and attract Western investment:

[...] any rapprochement with the West would require certain political initiatives such as the release of political prisoners, more press freedom and freedom of expression, a proper constitution for the country and a government that was not overtly military in nature. However, to give up power to a democratically elected government was never—and is still not—on the agenda. [...] The generals have succeeded. They have the West on their side, have lessened their dependence on China and, most importantly, they remain in power (Lintner 2015, 11.06)

The critique presented above exemplifies the collision between the mainstream and alternative discourse. Due to the polarized political environment, constructive engagement was inevitably not going to go down well with the opposition who had advocated for isolation for years. But Norway was unwise to cut funds without warning, and could have communicated their strategy in a better way. The MPSI evaluation report points to the lack of communications strategy as one of the main flaws of the initiative, precisely because of the poor handling of criticism from cross-border organizations (Johnson and Lidauer 2014). To echo Audun Aagre:

It has simply been poor diplomatic craftsmanship to end up in a situation where Norwegian authorities are seen as the leading supporter of a non-elected government without a popular mandate, while [at the same time] being criticized by the democratic opposition (Own translation of Aagre 2015, 16.09).

Whereas the mainstream opposition will claim Western sanctions succeeded in pressuring the regime to open up, alternatives will claim reforms were part of the military's process to control the transition to civilian rule which started in 1988, regardless of sanctions. The different understandings cause different interpretations of the role of the international community. If reforms only were a sham created to attract foreign investment, it is understandable to continue isolation and civil society support. But the pragmatic approach was based on an understanding that the military wanted to release (some) power, it only needed a push (or encouragement) to get there. It was this window of opportunity Norway took advantage of, in a hope that increased international presence and investment in the reforms would expand the political space to the point that it would be difficult to reverse the processes. In the context of constructive engagement policy, not raising demands did entail a risk of failure. However, for Western actors like Norway, actually doing something and failing was better than remaining passive, and prolonging the deadlock. A Norwegian diplomat explains: "One can choose to stand on the sideline and not get involved, but we think it is important to partake in something that is important. [...] if there is no engagement, nothing will either be achieved" (own translation). Although the military is still a powerful

political and economic actor in Myanmar today, the constructive engagement policy was successful considering how much the military was willing to sacrifice. Undoubtedly, international support to the reforms helped strengthen the process which led Aung San Suu Kyi to victory in 2015.

### **3.3.3 Achievement: Legitimacy to the peace process**

That the international donor community and the Burmese population looked at the reforms with a general disbelief was particularly true for the peace process. EAO's experience with ceasefires during SPDC rule was that disarmament came without political compromise. Ethnic militias were incorporated into a Border Guard Force scheme, but were denied political dialogue about the issues that concerned them - like greater autonomy - on the premise that they had no official political mandate from their constituencies. In this respect, ceasefires were seen as a way for the military to gain access to previously ethnic controlled areas, in order to win territory and extract natural resources (Myanmar Peace Monitor 2013). Hence, there was a fear that the NCA process would be a continuation of the strategies pursued in the past, a view which seemed to be confirmed when Peace Minister U Aung Min proposed a \$66 million 'peace-building fund' to support implementation of ceasefires and economic development in ethnic nationalities areas (Currie 2012). According to Thant Myint-U who acted as interpreter for U Aung Min, the fund was meant to strengthen fragile ceasefires by providing ethnic communities with alternatives to illegal commercial activities which had been used to finance the war economy. However, the ask was premature as neither international donors nor EAO's had sufficient confidence in the government's agenda and the peace process at this point. Ethnic communities feared that service delivery and economic opportunities was nothing but a continuation of clientelistic strategies previously used by the military regime (Johnson and Lidauer 2014; Currie 2012). MPSI's pilot projects was therefore a compromise between the government's great ambitions on the one hand and a reluctant international donor community on the other. A changed political environment after the signing of National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015 and a forthcoming political dialogue did however open the door for larger development initiatives in ethnic areas. International donors have now pooled funds in a Joint Peace Fund (JPF) to support peace building activities, mirroring the initial request of U Aung Min.

International assistance in the peace process was important mainly for political reasons. International donors were regarded as (fairly) neutral, and had succeeded in building trust with EAO's through economic support and advice. By having third party observers endorse a



controversial peace process initiated (in the eyes of EAO's) by an illegitimate government gave a sense of legitimacy to the NCA process. Norway's historical support to the democratic movement and a perceived neutrality was important in terms of legitimization. Tin Maung Tann illustrates this point: "I talked to the ethnic leaders [and said]: "If you don't believe in this issue, you can check with Katja<sup>9</sup>. You listen to her, and then you decide"". International support likely made it easier for EAO's to enter peace negotiations, also because they were not left at the mercy of a brutal military regime. International support to the peace process moreover helped strengthen Thein Sein internally. According to an article by Asia Society (Clapp and DiMaggio 2012), both military leaders with vested business interests attached to the military apparatus and hardliners within USDP were potential spoilers of reform. Increased international attention and investments in Myanmar's peace process would make it increasingly difficult to backtrack. Norway alone could not have provided the peace process with the legitimacy it required, but Norway did contribute in strengthening the process by taking an international lead, and by bringing in more donors through the PDSG.

### **3.3.4 Shortcoming: Norway's bad image**

Norway was criticized at home and abroad for being too soft on the regime by failing to place democracy and human rights abuses on the agenda (Røst 2014, 28.02). Allegedly, Norway's reduced demands was part of a strategy to position itself vis-à-vis Thein Sein's government in order to further business interests (Irrawaddy 2011, 31.10; Aung Zaw 2014, 09.05; Martov 2014, 02.06; Lintner 2015, 11.06). After all, "political stability is more conducive for business development than a democratic government" (Aagre 2015, 19.06). "[Norway is] bending over backward to justify a business-first approach to engaging with the Burmese government while continuing to betray the democracy and human rights movement they nurtured for decades," said David Mathieson, Human Rights Watch senior researcher on Myanmar (Macgregor 2015, 06.07). The criticism is not unjustified as business development was a Norwegian priority from the very beginning, and Norway did distance itself from former partner organizations in the democratic movement. However, I argue that the promotion of democracy and human rights has been part and parcel of the Norwegian strategy in Myanmar, and business development must be seen as complementary to this overall goal.

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<sup>9</sup> Katja Nordgaard was Norway's Ambassador to Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar from 2010-2014. Nordgaard's mandate over Myanmar was transferred to Ann Ollestad in 2013 when Norway established a full-fledged embassy in Yangon.

As Norwegian businesses started to enter the Myanmar market, Norway was criticized for using its lead role in peacebuilding as a gateway to make money (Jeremic, Nilsen and Tønnesson 2014, 16.10). In June 2013, Norwegian state owned telecom company Telenor was one of two foreign companies to win a license to Myanmar's previously monopolized telecom sector. Telenor is today one of the largest telecom company in Myanmar with roughly 15 million clients and a total profit of NOK 4.8 billion for 2015 (Telenor Group 2015). Norwegian state owned oil company Statoil won one of 30 offshore licenses in Myanmar's territorial waters in March 2014. The deep sea block could potentially contain oil or gas deposits which is in high demand on the Asian market. Other companies like paint producer Jotun, energy companies SN Power and Jacobsens Elektro are also present. In a country where personal connections are vital and corruption widespread, civil society organizations were of the impression that Norway's goodwill with the GoM had granted them lucrative business concessions (Macgregor 2015, 06.07).

Furthermore, an impression that the Norwegian Embassy "dropped" its focus on peace building efforts to promote business development created an impression that profit maximization was the underlying goal all along. MPSI was by many characterized as a failed initiative that "attempted to 'buy peace' in collusion with the Government's political, social and economic agenda" (Martov 2014, 02.06; Aung Zaw 2014, 09.05). According to Aung Zaw, ethnic communities characterized the Norwegian approach as "Taw Tha Htay," an expression meaning a wealthy person from a remote area with limited understanding (Aung Zaw 2014, 09.05). In regards to the NCA process, former MPSI advisor Ashley South thinks "the international community has been lacking in support [of the NCA]". Ethnic leaders I have talked to say they felt rushed by the international community to sign the NCA, although the agreement was not all-inclusive – meaning some EAO's were excluded as signatories by the GoM. The international community's push for EAO's to disarm while at the same time exposing non-signatories to attacks by the military (what EAO's see as a prolonging of divide-and-rule military strategy) created an impression that the international community failed to acknowledge ethnic grievances.

Matters were made worse when former Ambassador to Myanmar Katja Nordgaard transitioned to Telenor as Head of Corporate Affairs in 2014. "Now we see an ambassador who played a key role in reversing Norway's policy of prioritizing human rights also reaping the financial benefits of cozying up to the Burmese government", said Mark Farmaner, director of the Burma Campaign UK (Martov 2014, 02.06). Norwegian MFA officials'

transitions to the private sector (former deputy Foreign Minister Torgeir Larsen's transition to Statoil is also mentioned) were seen as rewards for their efforts to bring Norwegian companies into the Burmese market (Lintner 2015, 11.06; Martov, 2014, 02.06). Nordgaard was further accused of using her mandate for personal gain, as her government connections were likely to benefit Telenor in the future (Pettersen 2014, 29.05). The MFA rejected accusations that it profited from its connections at government level, and swore to the transparency of Telenor's tender process (Macgregor 2015, 06.07; Røst 2015, 19.04).

There is no doubt that Norway has business interests in Myanmar. Large delegations from the business community has accompanied Norwegian ministers on their visits to Myanmar, and the new embassy office in Yangon in 2012 was meant to facilitate an increase in Norwegian investment (Utenrikdepartementet 2012, 05.11). However, the notion that peace building initiatives are meant to "buy" stability, or that Norway is intentionally profiting on altruistic efforts is rather dubious. As explained in chapter 2, Norway pursued constructive engagement policies in order to further political change in Myanmar. Norway had a long history of supporting reform via the democratic movement, and the policy change must be seen as a continuation of this goal. Norway's alignment with a wider discourse on political change (alternative democratic discourse) is a case in point. Moreover, involvement in altruistic efforts internationally has become an important source of Norwegian national identity (Leira et. al 2007). Norway has facilitated peace negotiations and supported peacebuilding efforts around the world since the early 1990's, without other incentives than higher status in the international community (de Carvalho and Sande Lie 2015). Norway's altruistic undertakings are an extension of a self-image Norway likes to pride itself with both domestically and abroad. Hence, it is more likely that Norwegian support to Myanmar's peace process is a continuation of established practices. Lastly, the longtime diplomatic investments toward the SPDC and USDP regimes seems excessive effort for the sake of a business deal.

I think the early eagerness to promote business development must be understood partially as pressure from Norwegian stakeholders, and partially seen as means of poverty eradication and democratization efforts. Business development is seen by the Norwegian government as a more efficient tool to reduce poverty in developing countries than traditional aid (Meld.St.10 (2014-2015)). A vibrant private sector is believed to produce economic growth, jobs, and contribute to the state in terms of taxes, which can be conducive for development if invested in education and health sectors. The government also hold that: "Economic growth is often followed by openness, democracy, respect for human rights, environmental conservation and

social equality” (Meld.St.10 (2014-2015) s. 5). Former Minister Erik Solheim (who was central to Norway’s policy change) placed a firm belief in the connection between business and democracy. This was founded in a belief in a democratizing middle class, but also in the effect economic liberalization would have on political liberalization. In our telephone conversation, Mr. Solheim explicitly said that one of Norway’s greatest achievements in Myanmar was making Telenor one of the largest actors on the telecom market. According to him, the entry of Telenor was value-added to democratization efforts because it increased transparency and flow of information.

The impression that peace building was replaced by business development is unfortunate, which I think reflects the MFA’s lack of long-term strategy in Myanmar. Taking things one step at a time makes Norwegian efforts responsive and flexible, but also sensitive to leadership changes (read more under 4.3 Political will). Regarding accusations of corruption, the MFA seemed to be more concerned with how things work in Norway, and not so much how they were perceived on the ground. Even if business deals and employment transitions are legitimate and transparent, it becomes a problem when key partners interpret them otherwise. The MFA could easily have been more sensitive to the local context, especially considering the widespread distrust that still prevails in Myanmar society. Norway’s worsened image is serious in the sense that it tainted Norwegian neutrality which is part and parcel of the Norwegian “honest broker” approach to peace building.

### **3.3.5 Achievement: catalyzer for international support**

By taking a lead role in the policy of engagement, sources unanimously agree that Norway made it easier for others to follow. Thant Myint-U thinks: “Norway played a key role in leading Western engagement with the Myanmar junta from 2007 to 2011. This was in turn important to create the international space that contributed to support the historic changes we have seen since 2011” (Hustadnes 2014, 08.09). By actively challenging the mainstream discourse - for instance through international lobbying - and becoming a frontrunner for engagement - in the peace process, by granting concessions and establishing dialogue with the regime - Norway acted as a norm entrepreneur for constructive engagement policies, as defined by Grøn and Wivel (2011). A norm entrepreneur “successfully convince others of their own normative convictions, thereby creating an ideational basis for changing the institutional environment and/or specific policies” (Grøn and Wivel 2011). According to them, norm entrepreneurship is a strategy sometimes pursued by small states in order to gain influence, because soft power initiatives are easier to pursue for actors without hard power

resources. By branding Norway a norm entrepreneur, I don't mean to say that Norway is the sole reason for Western policy change in Myanmar (this would have happened at some point regardless of Norway's actions), but rather that Norway's actions had an effect in the Western community; Norway's first steps paved the way for others to follow and likely galvanized international support to the reform agenda. A part of the norm entrepreneurship strategy is to lead by example through so-called benchmarking, the point being that other actors will follow the "desired behavior". As explained in the chapter above, Norway took the lead in establishing dialogue with the regime, in granting economic and political concessions, but most notably took a lead in peace engagement. The idea of MPSI was to design an initiative other donors could easily join. By taking the brunt of political and economic investment in the initiative, Norway wanted to act as catalyst for other international donors. While Norway was most visible in the initiative, it did succeed in bringing other donors like Denmark, Australia, the Netherlands, EU, Finland, UK and Switzerland aboard. MPSI moreover laid the foundation for multilateral peace initiatives like the Peace Support Fund (PSF) and the Joint Peace Fund (JPF).

Norway's coordinating capacity of the Peace Donor Support Group (PDSG) was instrumental for obtaining more donors to MPSI, but also for building bridges between the GoM and a skeptical international community. According to Grøn and Wivel (2011), small states sometimes take the role as mediator, or honest broker, in order to exercise influence. Because small states do not have the resources to push their will upon others like great powers do, they are forced to compromise. But by using their problem-solving approach in a mediator role, small states are able to influence the agenda and policy outcomes (Grøn and Wivel 2011). The PDSG was initially established as a platform between U Aung Min and the international donor community. This interaction, in parallel with changes on the ground, was important in order to build trust in the reforms. Norway used its role as chair to expand the legitimacy of the forum by inviting the EAO's negotiation team the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) in the dialogue. Norway was continually concerned with this balance, in order to maintain trust in both camps. Norway was praised for these efforts, but at the same time, other donors started questioning Norway's honest broker approach (which had landed them the position in the first place). Certain PDSG members felt that Norway dominated the agenda without sufficient competence or resources to meet the demands of the mandate. Moreover, observers say that Norway insisted on its mandate from the President, but failed to acknowledge that all donors were at some point approached directly by the GoM in order to support the peace process. To solve the indifferences, the membership base was expanded and

Norway's chairmanship was in April 2015 replaced by a rotating chair mechanism among PDSG members.

### 3.4 Conclusion

This chapter sought to answer research question 2: "How did Norway try to influence Myanmar's reform agenda, and to what extent did it succeed?". By using soft power tactics like networking, advocacy, capacity building, economic support/catalytic funding and mediation, Norway managed to (i) support and influence Thein Sein's reform agenda, and (ii) gather support from the international community.

Norwegian politicians had wanted to replace isolation with constructive engagement for a long time, but the political climate was not conducive until President Obama signaled an American foreign policy shift, and Myanmar's military regime opened up for collaboration with the international community in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis. Norway was one of few actors to provide assistance to NGO's inside the country before 2011. Economic support to civil society organizations was important because it strengthened those actors who wanted to collaborate with the government. It also benefited Norway in terms of a larger network within the Third Force; actors who would widen Norway's understanding of what was going on inside the country, and later grant Norwegian officials direct access to reformers in Thein Sein's government. Diplomacy efforts through a series of political visits, and economic and political support demonstrated through concessions developed trust between Norwegian and Myanmar governments. Norway's early foothold enabled them to exercise influence in the reform agenda by playing an important supporting role through capacity building activities in the Myanmar bureaucracy, and as coordinator of international support to the peace process. Norway's political and economic investments gave momentum to the reform agenda as it gave reformers the self-confidence they needed to precede. It furthermore contributed to legitimize the reforms as such, especially the peace process. International endorsement of the NCA process and trust building among EAO's was important in order for EAO's to enter peace negotiations.

By taking a lead in constructive engagement policies, both discursively and on the ground, Norway acted as a norm entrepreneur for other Western donors. Norway's wide network in both discursive camps meant that they had access to information that was in demand in the international community. Norway's small state status and benchmarking was also important

in order to be convincing as norm entrepreneur. By utilizing this role, Norway could at the same time serve as an honest broker in peace support. In its coordinating capacity, Norway sought to build bridges between the GoM and a skeptical international community, while at the same time encourage international support through catalytic funding. Norway's lead probably made it easier for other countries to follow, and speeded up international donor support.

However, investing in the reform agenda also meant alienating the democratic opposition. While much of the critique were to be expected when Norway so clearly distanced itself from the mainstream discourse, the changes could have been managed more delicately. This is especially true regarding organizations on the Thai border who felt betrayed by Norway's tangent. Better communication and a smoother reduction of economic assistance would probably have saved Norway the staunchest criticism. If the claims that the Norwegian embassy talked patronizing about Aung San Suu Kyi is true, this was surely an unwise move considering the position she gained after the 2015 election. However, it has supposedly not had a noteworthy impact on cooperation. Norwegian diplomats assure that ASSK is still willing to prioritize meetings with Norwegian officials, and has requested Norway's continued assistance in the peace process. What is perhaps more severe is Norway's tainted neutrality. While Norway's perceived neutrality was important in order to legitimize constructive engagement policies and to secure its role as coordinator for international support to the peace process, Norway's neutrality was questioned in the PSDG, and its bad image created distrust among ethnic communities and pro-democratic groups. Allegations of corruption and vested business interests in the peace process might make more sense in Myanmar than in Norway, but Norway's worsened image is serious in the sense that it tainted the Norwegian "honest broker" approach to peace building.

# Norway's small state capabilities

The chapter will answer RQ3: «How did Norway's small state status enable it take a lead in engagement efforts in Myanmar?». By looking at Norway's comparative advantages compared to other Western actors, it becomes clear that Norway's small state status was important in order to take a role other international actors couldn't or wouldn't take. Moreover, the case of Norway's engagement efforts in Myanmar can be situated into a broader category of involvement policies within Norwegian foreign policy. Norway has systematically used its small state capabilities to “punch above its weight” on international issues. Not only has this contributed to national identity production, but it has also raised Norway's international standing, allowing it access to actors or processes otherwise unavailable to small states. The chapter argues that this tradition of involvement policy, Norway's historic links with Myanmar, combined with abilities and political will explain why Norway took the role as frontrunner.

## 4.1 Norway's comparative advantages

Why did Norway and not say, the USA, the UK or Switzerland take a frontrunner role for constructive engagement? The main argument presented in this chapter is that Norway took a role that others couldn't or wouldn't take. Norway had the neutrality, flexibility, competence and political will required in order to (i) support and influence Thein Sein's reform agenda, and (ii) gather support in the international community.

### 4.1.1 Neutrality

In the period between independence from Sweden in 1905 and the Second World War, Norway promoted a foreign policy of neutrality and isolation. In a context dominated by European rivalry, it was considered an advantage for a small state to remain neutral in case of war (Lange Pharo and Østerud 2009). Some, like former Prime Minister Johan Ludvig Mowinckel, thought Norway's perceived lack of interest placed it in an advantageous position:

Ingen [kan] mistenke oss for å ha nogen egoistiske eller særpoltiske hensikter eller interesser. For vårt vedkommende vet man at vi taler ut fra ganske objektiv kjærlighet til fred og fra rettsfølelsens vekst mellom folkene (Lange, Pharo and Østerud 2009:15).



The perceived neutrality without self-interest mentioned by Mowinckel is a key reason why small states are able to act as mediators, or “honest brokers”, in international relations (Grøn and Wivel 2011). Because small states are unable to force their will upon third parties, they are better served by striving for “the common good” through consensus-building. This leaves an impression that small states are not driven by strong self-interest in international cooperation. Norway’s perceived neutrality and insignificance to Myanmar were likely key factors when selected as international coordinator to the peace process. In contrast to the UK (or say, France), Norway did not have a colonial past in Myanmar, Asia, or in fact, any other country. Neither did Norway have any geostrategic interests in the country, like China or the USA did. Observers like Audun Aagre, Kelley Currie (2012) and Thant Myint-U (2011) have suggested that American reorientation in Myanmar was part of a containment policy to balance the influence of China in the region. Similarly, China wishes to maintain its economic position in Myanmar, and is uncomfortable with a strong Western presence along its border. Thus, the US has not had the same “neutral” position as a country like Norway. A small state could therefore take a lead in peacebuilding or capacity building in the government without it being politicized.

#### **4.1.2 Flexibility**

A factor that might explain Norway’s ability to take first steps on matters like economic concessions is its institutional flexibility. While the EU needs the approval of 28 member states to implement policy change, Norway has considerably fewer levels of decision making in the bureaucracy. Individual diplomats at embassy level have the flexibility they need to make good analyses and respond to different contexts, and decision-makers have easy access to information “on the ground”. Political adviser Ashley South used this illustration:

The good thing about Norway is that [...], as a country, Norway can move relatively quickly. I mean, by the time the Europeans have engaged their funding mechanism and.. It’s like a super tanker. I mean once the super tanker gets on the way and it has a certain amount of momentum behind it, then I guess it has real weight, but Norway is more of - like a sort of speedboat.

Moreover, in contrast to complicated funding schemes like EU’s, Norwegian funds are more flexible in terms of allocation and reporting. A Norad evaluation report pointed to the same finding: “Part of [Norway’s] willingness to be innovative and flexible may owe to avoidance of the strong audit culture and results management that have restricted the work of other donors” (Tilley et. al. 2016:41). This was an advantage for instance in MPSI where flexible funds enabled Norway to be responsive to developments on the ground. Norway’s lack of

membership in the EU was therefore a comparative advantage because it allowed a quicker policy transition.

### **4.1.3 Competence**

While neutrality and flexibility are general advantages to many small states, I will argue that Norway's competence within fields such as peace building, natural resource management and democratic governance made it particularly relevant to Myanmar authorities. Since the 1990's, Norway has facilitated and supported a number of peace processes around the world, and peace building has become an inherent part of Norwegian foreign policy. Mediation in conflicts such as between Israel/Palestine, in Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and in Colombia, to name a few, has given the MFA valuable competence that can be useful in other settings. Norway's reputation within peacebuilding was likely an important factor when asked to lead international support to the peace process. Likewise, Norway's many years of experience managing hydropower, petroleum, fish etc. was also in demand by the GoM. Thus, Norway's diplomatic efforts to build trust at government level combined with expertise in areas in demand allowed Norway to become an important partner for capacity building activities in the bureaucracy. This enabled Norwegian advisors, directorates and ministries to influence principles, legislation and governance in the bureaucracy, further strengthening the nascent reform efforts.

Other factors that may have made Norway relevant is its European and transatlantic links, and financial strength. The matter of debt relief was likely significant, as Norway was Myanmar's fourth largest creditor. When Norway chose to release all debt, it was significant not only for Myanmar, but also because it sent a signal to other creditors. This links to Norway's benchmarking for members in the international community. Moreover, normalized diplomatic relations meant an increase in development assistance and business development<sup>10</sup>. According to "Mohinga<sup>11</sup>", a development aid portal for Myanmar established to increase the transparency of donor support, Norway was among the top ten largest bilateral donors between 2012-2015 (Mohinga 2016, 09.12). For Norway, financial strength increases the

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<sup>10</sup> See annex 3 for a statistical overview of Norwegian development assistance to Myanmar between 2005-2015.

<sup>11</sup> Numbers from Mohinga are not completely reliable due to the fact that donors have to voluntarily submit their contributions, outside the OECD donor framework. Also, bilateral and multilateral assistance is not separated. OECD statistics would be more reliable, but their datasets are not user friendly.

likelihood of success in advocacy initiatives (Tilley et. al 2016). Erik Solheim lists money as one of three key ingredients for Norway's success in Myanmar:

Norway's Myanmar policy demonstrates "the three P's<sup>12</sup>: you must have the right policies, you need people who are willing to take a risk, and it helps to have money. Money gave us an opportunity to speak with the military during relief efforts after Cyclone Nargis (Solheim and Bromark 2013:92, own translation).

## 4.2 A small state exploited?

Using its small state capabilities as strengths enabled Norway to assume a role other actors couldn't or wouldn't take. This was important in a time ripe for alternative solutions. The pragmatic approach of dialogue and concessions proved successful in order to establish a closer collaboration with the Myanmar government. The US and the EU were reluctant to take this role, as domestic public opinion expected a continuation of the firm policy line where punishment was the strategy of choice. For an alternative strategy that replaced sticks with carrots, small states like Norway who specialize in soft power had a comparative advantage. Commentators like Kristian Stokke (2012), Kristoffer Rønnerberg (2015) and Bertil Lintner (2015, 11.06) suggested that the US and the EU utilized Norway's small state capabilities in order to test the sincerity of reforms:

The Americans (along with Norwegians) saw that a door was opening up, but were reluctant to change Myanmar policies without clear signs that the reforms were genuine. Norway became a "canary in the coal mine" – a country that could risk a different course with the generals than what had previously been attempted (Rønneberg 2015:206, own translation).

Lintner (2015, 11.06) supports Rønneberg's view, saying:

That [Norway's policy of engagement was done in consultation with the US] makes perfect sense. The United States could not directly "engage" the then ruling junta because of acts passed by Congress, and the other main Western power, the European Union, was also prevented from cozying up to Myanmar's generals because it had similar policies. But Norway was in an ideal position to act as a cutout for Western interests in Myanmar. Norway is not a member of the EU, but it is a partner of the United States in the Western defense alliance the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). All historians are aware of the tale of the Trojan horse, a subterfuge the ancient Greeks used to enter the city of Troy in disguise. So have we now seen a Trojan reindeer, with non-EU, NATO member Norway acting as a cutout for United States and perhaps also other Western strategic interests in Myanmar?

The argument presented above makes sense. For the US and the EU, Norway's small state capabilities were conducive to test out the policy of constructive engagement without taking

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<sup>12</sup> The three P's in Norwegian: Politikk, personer og penger.

major risks. After all, should engagement efforts turn out to be a failure, Norway had to pay the prize of a worsened reputation. However, Norwegian and foreign diplomats I've spoken to reject the idea that Norway pursued engagement on instruction from the US. The information I received through my interviews suggest that the US welcomed the policy change, as long as - in the words of Erik Solheim - Norway did not become "too soft on the regime". From the US' perspective, the threat of punishment was important in order to make progress. Throughout Thein Sein's tenure, the US carefully balanced the use of rewards and punishment, depending on ongoing developments<sup>13</sup>. For example, American sanctions remained in place in order to exercise pressure on the military, but were removed on the request of Aung San Suu Kyi after she assumed office (Fisher 2016, 16.09). Similarly, a European diplomat explained in conversation how political reform has been a precondition for European concessions like the release of sanctions. Clearly, because of the fact that great powers have larger resources available, it puts them in a better position to raise demands. Removal of European sanctions offers great incentive in the form of access to the European market. It is doubtful that the threat of Norwegian embargo could ever have the same effect. As a small state, Norway simply does not have the same economic (or military) tools available as big states do in order to exercise or organize pressure. A Swiss diplomat illustrates: "As a small country we really don't have the means for a lot of sticks. So it can be like a European soccer team where the different players in the international community play different roles". This statement might explain why Norway invested in lobby efforts toward the US and the EU. It recognized that in order to utilize all tools available, international supporters needed to act as a team. Thus, not only was Norway's small state capabilities advantageous for larger actors, Norway also relied on the resources and power of larger states.

### 4.3 Political will

Another (and arguably the most important) feature that distinguished Norway from others was its political will to embark on a policy of constructive engagement. An evaluation report ordered by Norad that compared four cases of Norwegian advocacy initiatives from 2005-2014 pointed to leadership at senior government level as a success factor (Tilley et al. 2016). For instance, former Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg was a driving force behind promoting

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<sup>13</sup> Roger Mitton (2015, 02.02) points to how the US uses demands and praise as a diplomatic tactic in Myanmar.

better maternal and child health internationally, while Prime Minister Erna Solberg has fronted education for development. Furthermore, “the drive and capacity of key people working in the government of Norway was perceived to be both a comparative advantages and a key driver of the progress achieved” (Tilley et. al 2016). In the case of Myanmar, Norwegian ministers Erik Solheim, Espen Barth Eide and Jonas Gahr Støre were described by informants as having a personal investment and enthusiasm for the transition process. Similarly, Norwegian diplomats were described as being more committed to the issue than their counterparts. After his first visit to Myanmar in 2009, Minister of Environment and International Development Erik Solheim encouraged a public discussion on Norwegian Myanmar policy in order to root policy changes in public opinion. This was during a time when no other Western government was willing to do the same. Like explained in earlier chapters, the strong sympathy of the democratic movement among Western governments, and Aung San Suu Kyi in particular, coupled with a worsened human rights situation after the Saffron uprising in 2007 made engagement efforts highly unpopular. Advocacy groups like the Burma Campaign UK, the Free Burma movement in the US, and the Swedish Burma Committee exercised great pressure toward their respective governments in order to keep a firm policy line. There was simply no political space for alternative approaches, even if prevailing strategies were failing. Erik Solheim said:

No central politician of a EU member state that I met disagreed that [sanctions were not working and we needed to open up]. But the sanctions were impossible to get rid of. No one wanted to take the strain by suggesting to remove them (Solheim and Bromark 2013:63, own translation).

Norway’s policy change was anchored at the highest political level, mainly driven by ministers Erik Solheim, Espen Barth Eide, and Jonas Gahr Støre under Jens Stoltenberg’s administration. Political drive is crucial in order to assume a role as norm entrepreneur, but it also poses a risk of unsustainable initiatives (Tilley et. al. 2016). Initiatives where individuals are main drivers are likely to be less institutionalized, and therefore more sensitive to leadership changes. In the external evaluation report “Evaluation of Norway’s Support for Advocacy in the Development Policy Arena (Tilley et. al 2016), getting the attention of new leaders was one major risks in terms of sustaining a policy initiative. Thus, the transition from a left-leaning to a right-leaning government in Norway in 2013 might explain why partners noticed a change in Norwegian priorities in Myanmar. While multilateral cooperation, environment and peace efforts were top foreign policy priorities for Jens Stoltenberg’s government, the new government led by Erna Solberg prioritized European integration, the security situation in the Middle East and Europe and business development. When asked to

explain his party's foreign policy stance ahead of government takeover in 2013, Mr. Morten Høglund from the Progress party (later deputy Foreign Minister) said:

The extensive peace efforts and the contact Norway nurtures with certain movements in the Middle East are examples where we will not be as proactive [as the former government]. We do not think Norway has the qualifications to play as big of a role as previous governments have suggested, it is not right or natural. We therefore want to be cautious in undertaking too many peace endeavors (Gullikstad 2013, 06.09).

Moreover, the Government Platform said: "Norwegian Foreign Service will to a larger extent be an instrument to promote Norwegian business interests abroad" (Frifagbevegelse 2013, 09.10). Although Myanmar was made one of twelve so-called "focus countries" for development assistance (Utenriksdepartementet 2014, 08.10), Foreign Minister Børge Brende did not show the same level of interest for the developments in Myanmar as his predecessors. Despite his declared support to Myanmar's peace process (Utenriksdepartementet 2015, 31.03; Bolle and Røst 2015, 19.04), the Foreign Minister did not pay a visit to the NCA signing ceremony in October 2015, as was expected. By some, this was interpreted as a lack of support to the outcome of the process. This was after a period of downsizing the MPSI initiative, and Switzerland's takeover of the PDSG chairmanship. While peace efforts were toned down, business efforts were scaled up. Norwegian Refugee Council's (NRC) Partnership Manager in Myanmar, Kelly Flynn noted: "[After Telenor entered the market], we've noticed a corporate shift at the Embassy". The impression that Norway assumed a role in the peace process, only to "drop" this engagement when Norwegian businesses entered the market seemed like a cynical move in order to make profit, and affected Norway's image. But it also meant a de facto withdrawal from the position as frontrunner in international support to Myanmar's transition. Through interviews, informants explain how Norway was in a position of limbo after the government change, trying to redefine its role in the international community. While different government priorities might help explain the shift, it also reflects a lack of long-term strategy that could be transferred from one government to the next. It illustrates how advocacy initiatives are dependent on political leadership, and at the same time, sensitive to leadership change.

## 4.4 Foreign policy as identity politics

To invest political and economic capital in efforts on the other side of the world with no obvious reward seems like an odd undertaking for a small country with limited resources. Especially through the lens of mainstream IR approaches which identify power maximization, territorial expansion and material wealth as key state interests (Jackson and Sørensen 2012). In an anarchical international system, “the powerful do as they will, and the weak do as they must” (Ingebritsen 2002:1). However, a growing literature on norm entrepreneurship challenges the view that small states are passive actors in the international community. For Norway, advocacy initiatives, a large development aid portfolio, and support to peace and reconciliation processes has long been an integral part of Norwegian foreign policy. The so-called policy of involvement (“engasjementspolitikk”) emerged in the 1990’s as an explicit part of Norwegian foreign policy. It built on established foreign policy practices like supporting multilateral cooperation and development assistance, but for scholars like Lange, Pharo and Østerud (2009) and Kristian Stokke (2012), the end of the Cold War represented a clear turning point. They propose that Norway - as a small state, rich in natural resources and with a historical tradition of international solidarity – could use involvement policies to exercise influence on the international stage (Lange, Pharo and Østerud 2009). Thus, the end of the Cold War opened a space for Norway to establish itself in international relations (Stokke 2012).

The policy of involvement has traditionally been justified on the notion of altruism, and has moreover been an important source of national identity construction. Early representations of Norway as a “peace nation” from the 1900’s were rooted in the social democratic movement highlighting equality, solidarity and rights, in parallel to the Christian tradition of “loving thy neighbor” through missionary work (Leira et. al. 2007). According to Lange, Pharo and Østerud (2009), Norwegian governments used this early notion of a moral obligation, combined with tradition<sup>14</sup>, and the opportunities Norway’s small state status presented for exercising influence internationally to legitimize the policy of involvement. Alongside the altruistic explanation existed a representation that claimed the policy of involvement was not undertaken purely based on an idealistic foreign policy, but also to promote self-interest

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<sup>14</sup> The tradition of Norway as a «peace loving nation» is attached to awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize from 1901, national heroes like Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson’s and Fridtjof Nansen’s work for international peace and refugees in Europe, respectively, international collaboration through the League of Nations and the United Nations, and more.

(Skånland 2008; Stokke 2012). Based on an analysis of Norwegian peace efforts in the Middle East, Hilde Henriksen Waage (2009) asserts that peace engagement can be seen as a foreign policy tool to increase state power and influence. Norway's self-interest in peace engagement became more explicit in national discourse the 2000's, especially after Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre's "refleksprosjekt" initiated in 2006. As a way to merge idealistic (development aid, peace engagement, human rights) and interest based foreign policy (security and business interests), the White Paper on foreign policy "Interesser, ansvar og muligheter. Hovedlinjer I norsk utenrikspolitikk" (St.meld.nr.15 (2008-2009)) stated that globalization made it essential to view them as part of a whole rather than separate. The notion of national interest was expanded to include altruistic efforts because they served as useful tools to promote traditional national interests. In reference to this development, Kristian Stokke (2012) uses Norway's peace engagement in Myanmar as an example to illustrate how peace engagement has partially become "a means to enhance Norway's standing, relevance and influence in international politics".

de Carvalho and Sande Lie (2015) goes even further, claiming that the policy of involvement has increased Norway's status in the international community. Status must be understood not only as reputation or recognition, but as a social hierarchy where states are placed in relation to each other. Status is constructed through interaction, and is constantly reproduced. "Status seeking is, therefore, a sub-category of state identity politics" (de Carvalho and Neumann 2015:5). A central hypothesis to de Carvalho and Neumann's book "Small State Status Seeking, Norway's quest for international standing" (2015) is that because small states do not have the same resources as great powers do, they seek status through moral authority. By being *a good state*, small states can be recognized in the international community. Better yet, by being *better* than their counterparts, small states are able to increase their status vis-à-vis others. Status can provide access to clubs otherwise closed to small states. But, for de Carvalho and Sande Lie (2015), small state status seeking is first and foremost an end in its own right, and usually not used instrumentally to further additional self-interest. The notion of moral status is interesting because it implies that power does not only come through hard power capabilities. The introduction of the concept of soft power in IR (Nye 1990) altered the traditional view that power only comes through coercion. Power can also come through ideas and norms, and thus not only great powers with hard power capabilities can claim to be powerful. A growing literature on norm entrepreneurship exemplifies how small states can exercise influence through norms and moral authority, and usually gain international



recognition as a result (Tryggestad 2014). This is relatable to Norway's policy of involvement. Not only has idealistic foreign policies boosted the Norwegian image of self, it has also made Norway visible in the international community (Leira et. al. 2007). A key representation that emerged nationally and internationally was Norway's ability to "punch above its weight" on international issues (Korte 2016, 10.05). When former Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg visited the White House in October 2011, President Obama said: "I've said this before but I want to repeat, Norway punches above its weight" (de Carvalho and Sande Lie 2015:56).

Former minister Erik Solheim has publically argued that the policy of involvement should be used to gain international recognition. In his book "Politikk er å ville", Solheim (Solheim and Bromark 2013) emphasizes how Norway can become interesting to the US by assuming roles the US cannot take themselves, for instance in peace processes. In terms of engagement efforts in Myanmar, Solheim said in conversation that there is "no doubt" that Norway's efforts in the peace process has made it interesting to the US. He asserts that the Norwegian ambassador has had a central position in the diplomatic community in Yangon, and Norway's efforts has strengthened the image as a country that "punches above its weight" in Washington:

I was in the Senate last week and got so many inquires when they realized I was from Norway. People were beside themselves and praised Norway's international efforts, for being willing to contribute the way we do.

Norway's relevance at embassy level was confirmed by the Norwegian Ambassador. This remark is not to suggest that status seeking was a prime driver for Norwegian engagement efforts in Myanmar. In the words of a Norwegian diplomat: "That Norway is more interesting in international forums is a nice spin-off". Rather than status seeking, I suggest that Norway's efforts in Myanmar has contributed to status maintenance. Norway did not seek to establish a new identity, but to reproduce the representation of a small state that "punches above its weight", thereby maintaining its image as a reliable partner.

## 4.5 Conclusion

Since the end of the Second World War, Norway have been a champion of multilateral cooperation through the UN system, and is a large contributor to system maintenance relative of its small size (de Carvalho and Sande Lie 2015). Increased oil revenue in the 1970's gave momentum to development assistance, and Norway has for many years been at the global top

of ODA relative to GDP, aspiring to keep development aid at a 1 % level. From the 1990's, Norway engaged in peace and reconciliation efforts in parts of the world it had no strategic interest. Additionally, Norway has taken policy leadership in a broad range of international issues over the past decade, including in the areas of women, peace and security (WPS), illicit financial flows, UN reform, and maternal and child health (Tilley et. al. 2012). This so-called policy of involvement which gained momentum after the Cold War has constructed a national identity in Norway, and placed Norway on the political map. By using its small state status to increase moral authority (rather than military or economic power), Norway has gained status in the international community.

I argue that Norway's engagement efforts in Myanmar is a continuation of this approach. Norway used its comparative advantages as a neutral, flexible, competent small state to act as norm entrepreneur for constructive engagement efforts in Myanmar. Its abilities, political will, and experience thus enabled it to play a role other actors couldn't or wouldn't take. It also had a historic link to Myanmar, and a wide network in government and civil society, which made it more likely to succeed. Norway's endeavors helped reproduce an international representation of Norway as a small state that "punches above its weight". By continuing to assume roles great powers are unable to take, Norway reproduces the image as a relevant and *good* partner, which is important as a way to maintain status.

# Conclusion

The starting point for this thesis was to further investigate the motivations behind Norway's policy change in Myanmar. Norway had previously been a loyal supporter of the democratic opposition that rose out of a popular uprising in 1988. Along with other Western governments, Norway practiced a policy of isolation, in order to pressure the military regime into submission. However, from the 2000's, Norway started pursuing constructive engagement strategies by opening up dialogue with the military regime. Research question 1 asked: "Why did Norway change its Myanmar policy from one of isolation to one of constructive engagement?" I answered this question by looking at discourse. Two discourses on democratic change in Myanmar existed in parallel to each other, albeit one more popular than the other. I argued that Norway's quest for political solutions in Myanmar has been constant, but the strategies on how to get there changed. Norway's constructive engagement efforts in Myanmar must therefore be seen as a continuation of its policy of involvement. By aligning itself with the norms and ideas within the Third Force discourse, Norway was willing to challenge the prevailing practice among Western governments. By promoting a new set of norms and benchmarking in constructive engagement, Norway acted as a norm entrepreneur in the international community.

Research question 2 asked «How did Norway try to influence Myanmar's reform agenda, and to what extent did it succeed?». I argued that in line with the concept of soft power, small states are able to exercise power on the international stage through ideas and norms. Norway's soft power tactics like networking, advocacy, capacity building, economic support/catalytic funding and mediation, enabled it to (i) support and influence Thein Sein's reform agenda, and (ii) gather support from the international community. However, Norway's constructive engagement approach also entailed a de facto alienation of the democratic opposition, and tainted Norway's perceived neutrality, especially in the peace process.

Finally, I identified the success factors that enabled Norway to assume a role as norm entrepreneur. Research question 3 asked: "How did Norway's small state status enable it take a lead in engagement efforts in Myanmar?" I argued that Norway's small state status gives it comparative advantages in the international community. By using its perceived neutrality, institutional flexibility and competence, Norway can assume roles otherwise difficult for great powers. Its small state capabilities, political will, historic link with Myanmar, and tradition for

assuming roles as norm entrepreneur internationally explain why Norway became a frontrunner for constructive engagement. Like in most endeavors of norm entrepreneurship, Norway's efforts in Myanmar reproduced its image as a good helper in the international community and thus maintained its level of international status.

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## ANNEX 1 Interviews

### In Oslo

04.02.16	Audun Aagre	Secretary-General of Norwegian Burma Committee
12.02.16	Arne Jan Flølo	Senior Advisor at the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
14.04.16	Katja Nordgaard	Former Norwegian Ambassador to Thailand and Myanmar

### In Yangon

23.02.16	Ann Ollestad	Norwegian Ambassador to Myanmar
23.02.16	Claudine Haenni	Diplomat, Swiss Embassy
25.02.16		Diplomat
25.02.16	Nilar Myaing	Managing Director, Sapphire Language and Consultancy Services. Previous employee with Thai Burma Border Consortium.
29.02.16	Per-Erik Hylland	Chief Representative Officer, Telenor Myanmar
29.02.16	Mon Mon Myat	Journalist
04.03.16	Khin Maung Win	Deputy Director, Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB)
07.03.16		Diplomat
07.03.16	Sithu Aung Myint	Newspaper Editor. Interview was translated
09.03.16	Peter Lysholt Hansen	Danish Ambassador to Myanmar
09.03.16	Ingeborg Moa	Country Representative, Norwegian People's Aid (NPA). Previous consultant in MPSI.
10.03.16	Kelly Flynn	Partnership Manager, Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)
10.03.16	Thant Myint-U	Special Advisor to the Myanmar peace process and Norwegian adviser
11.03.16	Manuel de Rivera Lamo de Espinosa	Diplomat, EU Delegation
11.03.16	Tin Maung Tann	Advisor at Myanmar Peace Center

### In Chiang Mai

16.03.16	Ashley South	Professor at Chiang Mai University. Previous consultant for Norwegian MFA	
16.03.16	Zipporah Sein	Vice-President, Karen National Union (KNU)	
17.03.16	Nai Hong Sar	Leader of Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT)  Representative from United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC)	Group interview with translator.

		Representative from New Mon State Party	
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**Via telephone**

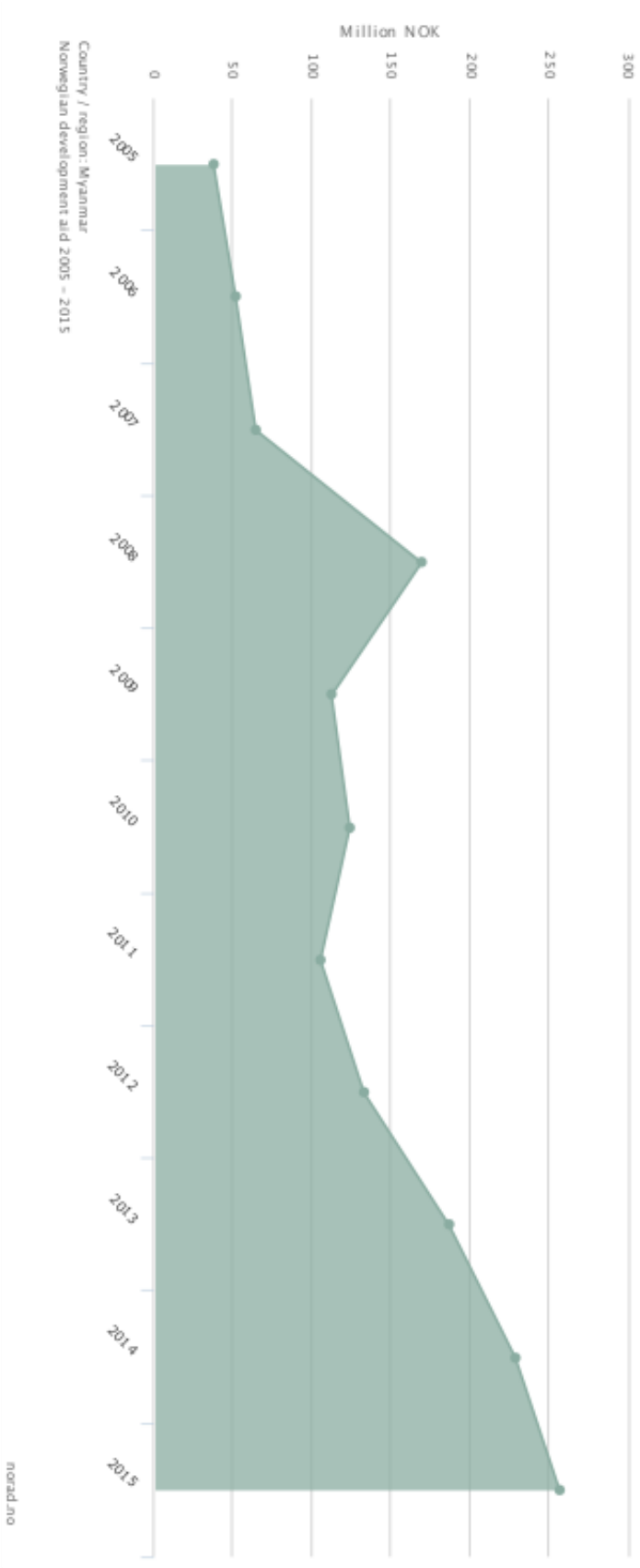
17.10.16	Erik Solheim	Executive Director of UN Environment Programme (UNEP). Former Norwegian Minister of Environment and International Development
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## ANNEX 2 Interview guide

I had three types of templates I used as interview guides; one for Norwegian officials, one for Norwegian partners like Western governments, and one for critics (however they overlapped with many questions). The template was usually adjusted to the individual informant. This is an example of a “critics” interview guide.

- Why did we see a change in many Western countries policies toward Myanmar around 2011-2012?
- Why do they take such an interest in Myanmar? (business, geopolitics?)
- Countries like Norway have partnered with the current government on several issues like peace building, capacity building and more. What is the danger with such an approach?
- Is there an alternative to supporting top-down reform processes?
- What was the military’s goal with the roadmap?
- Some will imply that political reforms were a way to attract western investments as a way to balance China?
- How can the international community better encourage further reforms, by carrots or sticks?
- Why is the peace process important to the government?
- Will territorial control through an NCA mean that the military will relinquish political power?
- Is political compromise possible through political dialogue? Or is the government only interested in development and not resolving political issues?
- What sort of impact has it had that international actors have supported the peace process?
- Do they have anything to gain by supporting peace?
- What has international support done to their relationship to the ethnic groups?
- How is Norway perceived?
- What do you think about Norway’s efforts in the peace process?
- Norway has received criticism for contributing to peace on the one hand and introducing Norwegian businesses on the other. Does Norway mix roles in Myanmar?
- Did Telenor win its concession in a fair manner?
- Norway spends its development aid on capacity building in the bureaucracy especially within fields we have experience on like hydropower, telecommunications, oil revenue management and environment. At the same time we see that Norwegian businesses in these fields have gained access to the Myanmar market. Is this problematic?

# ANNEX 3 Norwegian development assistance to Myanmar between 2005-2015.





Norges miljø- og biovitenskapelig universitet  
Noregs miljø- og biovitenskapelige universitet  
Norwegian University of Life Sciences

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