

# Myanmar's Political Aspirations & Perceptions 2015 Asian Barometer Survey Report



*Prepared by*

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# About The Myanmar Asian Barometer Survey

The Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) is a cross-national survey conducted in 14 East and Southeast Asian countries including Myanmar. The survey is a research project implemented by a consortium of academics based throughout East and Southeast Asia and the United States. The focus of the questions examines a range of political attitudes and behavior, from social capital and political culture to views of international affairs and globalization. The survey is particularly associated with the study of democracy. The project is based at the National Taiwan University and is now in its fourth wave of surveys in the region beginning from 2000. It is affiliated with the Global Barometer Surveys project conducted throughout the world.

The Myanmar ABS survey was implemented by the Yangon School of Political Science (YSPS) and comprised a local team of over thirty staff and interviewers. The project was led by Myat Thu and Myo Aung Htwe in consultation with the YSPS Board. The ABS fieldwork and data entry was managed by Arkar Soe and Nan Thu Thu Kyaw based in Yangon. There were four teams conducting fieldwork, led by five field supervisors. The interviewer team included over twenty-five young Myanmar citizens who were part of the capacity-building training of the project as interviewers, quality controller, and data entry clerks. The survey team was also assisted by Phyto Wai Min, Chaw Ei Khine, and volunteer staff of YSPS.

The ABS project is led by Professor Yun-han Chu of National Taiwan University. The Myanmar survey was advised by the core ABS

team comprised of Professor Bridget Welsh, who was the lead Senior Advisor, Associate Professor Min-Hua Huang, Dr. Wen-Chin Wu, Dr. Alex H. Chang, and Dr. Kai-Ping Huang. The project was also assisted by members of the ABS team based in Southeast Asia, including Tan Seng Keat of Malaysia, Dr. Thawilwadee Bureekul of Thailand, and Dr. Sokhom Hean of Cambodia.

The Myanmar ABS was conducted in all fourteen states and regions (including the capital) from January 5 through March 19, 2015 with the permission of national and local authorities. The survey questionnaire consisted of 237 questions and is included as an appendix. A total of 1620 respondents were surveyed.

The project was funded by two organizations. The National Endowment for Democracy funded the national and pilot surveys in a grant from September 2014 through March 2015. The Taiwan Foundation for Democracy funded the training for the survey project from May through December 2014 and the presentation of the findings for feedback in August 2015.

The findings were made public in Yangon in August 2015, alongside this report, an extension of those findings.

# Acknowledgements

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

In Myanmar, the YSPS played the leading role in implementing the survey. Special thanks is given to Myo Aung Htwe who brought the survey to the YSPS Board and was the project's main advocate. Thanks is also extended to all of the YSPS Board for their support of the project, especially Myat Thu whose commitment to expanding public knowledge of political attitudes and behavior anchored the eight-month collaboration. All of the YSPS staff played an important supportive role, but we would like to acknowledge Phyo Wai Min and Chaw Ei Khine for their assistance.

The Myanmar team of the ABS was managed by Arkar Soe and Nan Nan Thu Kyaw (also known as Ma Thu), who supervised the project in the field and steered the quality control and data entry procedures. The field supervisors included Nyi Aung, Nan Tin Nilar Win, Than Shwe, Thant Zin Htun and Khine Zar Moe Hlaing, whose hard work was instrumental in the project's success. The ABS also included nearly 30 interviewers, data entry and quality control staff whose energy, enthusiasm and hard work are greatly appreciated.

A vital component of the project was the cooperation of national and local authorities who granted permission to conduct the ABS and assisted with the data needed to build the sampling frame. We would especially like to thank U Soe Thein and his staff in the Office of the President for their assistance, along with senior staff in the Ministries of Planning and Immigration and Population as well as representatives in the General Administrative Department. We also would like to

acknowledge the leadership of the different states and regions for their kind cooperation and assistance, as well as the cooperation of township officers in villages/wards where the survey was implemented.

The financial support for the project was essential. In this regard we extend our deep appreciation to the National Endowment for Democracy, which funded the survey, and in particular to John Knaus, Aung Maw Zin and Brian Joseph for sharing their wisdom. We are also grateful to the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD) whose support for the capacity-building and public dissemination of the project was among the most valuable contributions to the ABS. Over ten training workshops were conducted from May through December 2014 to prepare for the survey. From June through August 2015 a series of public exchanges to discuss, interpret, and present the preliminary findings were initiated, all with the kind support of the TFD.

All surveys are collaborative efforts, and the Myanmar ABS was especially so. Within the ABS academic and survey practitioner network, the project was greatly assisted by the ABS Myanmar team based in Taiwan noted above and our ABS colleagues based in Southeast Asia. Special thanks is given to Associate Professor Min-Hua Huang for his work in developing and explaining the sampling frame, to Dr. Wen-Chin Wu for coordinating the project in Taiwan and engaging in training, to Dr. Alex H. Chang's valuable insights during the pre-test and pilot as part of the training, to Dr. Kai-Ping Huang for her preparation of charts for the presentations and reports, to Tan Seng Keat of Merdeka Center for his multiple trips to Myanmar to assist with training and survey preparation, to Dr. Thawilwadee Bureekul and Dr. Sokhom Hean for sharing their knowledge of surveys in Cambodia and Thailand with the Myanmar survey implementers, and to Professors Yun-han Chu and Yu-tzung Chang for their leadership of the ABS project and support of the Myanmar project.

We would like to extend our thanks to Kim Ninh of the Asia Foundation and Steve Cima of the International Republican Institute, two organizations that conducted survey research prior to the ABS and were helpful in sharing their experiences and insights. On a personal level, Professor Bridget Welsh would like to thank Kyaw Kyaw Lwin and Win Ma Ma Aye for their kindness and support during the ABS project,

as well as many friends and sages who offered recommendations but prefer to remain anonymous.

As with all worthwhile endeavors there were challenges in implementing this project. In the history of the Asian Barometer, this project involved the most time and preparation, as it included the most extensive capacity building effort to date. It was also among the most meaningful. We thank the people of Myanmar for their graciousness in sharing their views and their time.

# Summary of Key Findings

## **Economic Conditions & Vulnerabilities**

- Despite considerable changes in the economy, Myanmar citizens did not perceive improvements in economic conditions.
- Myanmar citizens saw current economic conditions as more difficult than the past, but were optimistic about the future. Myanmar citizens were also optimistic about themselves and their children moving upwards on the social ladder.
- The economy stood out as the most important problem facing the country, and Myanmar citizens had negative perceptions of price stability and the fairness of income distribution.
- Rural Myanmar citizens were in a more vulnerable position in terms of losing income and considered the potential impact of a loss of income to be very serious.

## **Social Capital & Trust**

- There is a robust civil society in Myanmar with citizens across all walks of life recording high levels of joining organizations and extensive social networks, indicating that Myanmar's civil society is strong and has deep historical roots.
- Myanmar citizens joined religious, charitable and local residential and community organizations to a greater extent than political parties and other groups.

- Myanmar citizens recorded low levels of social trust. Trust in relatives, neighbors, and acquaintances was also relatively low compared to other Southeast Asian countries.

### **Political Culture & Values**

- Myanmar citizens recorded the most conservative traditional political culture in Southeast Asia.
- Myanmar citizens also expressed the least support for choosing a girl over a boy, and comparatively low levels of support for women in politics, indicating that gender equality is an area without broad public support. Those that did support women in politics had a strong political affinity to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.
- In keeping with traditional values, Myanmar citizens tended to respect hierarchy and authority and to put group and national interests before one's own.

### **Political Freedoms & Democracy**

- A majority of Myanmar citizens supported democracy.
- Myanmar citizens also recorded one of the highest preferences for democracy in Southeast Asia, with the lowest preference for an authoritarian alternative.
- Myanmar citizens showed a broad understanding of democracy that included both procedural and substantive dimensions.
- Support for democracy among Myanmar citizens was superficial on many levels, as Myanmar citizens expressed the second highest level of support for authoritarian values in Southeast Asia (after Vietnam) and did not support many of the processes of accountability that are necessary for a functioning democracy.
- When asked to choose between democracy and economic development, more Myanmar citizens opted for economic development. In a choice between democracy and economic

equality, Myanmar citizens were more equally divided.

- Myanmar citizens did not see their country as a full democracy, but did recognize changes between the current and previous leadership and were optimistic about democratic change in the future.
- Myanmar citizens observed higher freedoms of expression and assembly, but a third noted difficulty in conversing about politics.

### **Psychological Involvement**

- Less than a majority of Myanmar citizens were interested in politics, with more men interested in politics than women.
- Only a fifth of Myanmar citizens followed political news regularly, with lower numbers in rural areas. Even a third of those who expressed interest in politics did not follow political news regularly, highlighting a lack of political knowledge among the public.
- Myanmar citizens recorded moderate levels of political efficacy when compared to other countries in Southeast Asia, with no differences between rural and urban areas.

### **Political Participation**

- Myanmar citizens were divided on how they viewed the electoral process. Only slightly above a third of Myanmar citizens trusted the election commission, the lowest level of trust in Southeast Asia.
- A majority of Myanmar citizens expressed reserve over future vote choice, opting not to answer. Those that did answer were more inclined to vote for the National League for Democracy (NLD), with differences in voting preference between the Bamar-majority regions and ethnic-majority states.
- A majority of Myanmar citizens did not identify with a political party. Those that did showed relatively equal levels of closeness to the dominant national parties, the NLD and Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).

- Most Myanmar citizens showed reserve in answering their preference for presidential candidate, with the largest share of respondents preferring Daw Aung San Sui Kyi.
- Large shares of Myanmar citizens had participated in local politics or would like to do so, reinforcing the importance of local communities in political engagement. Other forms of political participation were not frequently engaged in.

### **Political Identity & Conflicts**

- Myanmar citizens expressed high levels of religiosity, with a majority agreeing with the non-secular view that religious authorities should be consulted in law-making.
- Myanmar citizens recorded positive views regarding greater religious freedom and the equal treatment of religious minorities, with religious minorities expressing less positive views.
- A majority of Myanmar citizens believed citizenship should be tied to religion.
- When asked to prioritize the most important aspect of one's identity, the majority chose religion over other forms of identity.
- A majority of Myanmar citizens across communities recognized the seriousness of ethnic conflict.
- A majority of Myanmar citizens also held that ethnic groups were treated equally, with ethnic minority respondents from the Bamar majority differing on this issue.
- A majority of Myanmar citizens expressed support for greater political autonomy, strengthening the federal system, and devolving political power through chief ministers being elected by regional/ state legislatures.
- Myanmar citizens also expressed confidence in the peace process, with ethnic minorities more reserved in judgement.

## **Trust in Institutions**

- Only a small portion of Myanmar citizens expressed a 'great deal of trust' in various political institutions, with a larger portion expressing the other positive category, 'quite a lot of trust'.
- There was considerable variation in the trust of different institutions, with the executive, military, and NGOs receiving the highest trust, and police and courts the lowest level of trust across institutions.
- Cross-national comparisons of the trust in political institution showed Myanmar's low trust levels in the executive, police, courts and military, while the low trust level of parliament was on par with other countries in the region.

## **Military & Constitutional Reform**

- More Myanmar citizens disagreed than agreed on whether the military should be involved in the economy.
- In terms of the military's involvement in politics, Bamar and ethnic minorities held different views.
- Most Myanmar citizens did not answer questions on constitutional change, but those that did were in favor of reforms.

## **Systemic Support**

- Most Myanmar citizens would like change in the political system.
- A majority of Myanmar citizens believed the political system was capable of solving problems, but the share who believed this was among the lowest in Southeast Asia.
- Rural Myanmar citizens were more likely than their urban counterparts to endorse the political system and government performance.

## **Governance & Services**

- A majority of Myanmar citizens believed people had basic needs for housing, clothing and shelter, but the share who believed this was the lowest in Southeast Asia.
- Only a third of Myanmar citizens believed the government was responsive, the lowest in Southeast Asia. President U Thein Sein received a positive assessment of his performance.
- In assessing specific services, Myanmar citizens fared positively, but was among the lower comparative assessments of access to services in Southeast Asia.
- Access to the Internet was limited to just less than a fifth of Myanmar citizens, with higher access in urban areas.
- Less than a third of Myanmar citizens saw corruption in government, slightly higher at the national level.
- Land grabbing was seen as a serious problem by a majority of Myanmar citizens.
- Myanmar citizens were divided on whether there was equal treatment of rich and poor and on opportunities to do business.

## **Globalization**

- More than a majority of Myanmar citizens were ready to defend their way of life, and very few would be willing to live in another country, the lowest in Southeast Asia.
- A large share of Myanmar citizens opposed an increase in the flow of immigrants.
- Less than a third of Myanmar citizens gave China positive evaluations, while impressions of the U.S. were much more positive.
- Over a majority of Myanmar citizens felt close to ASEAN.



# Introduction

The Myanmar Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) is part of a growing body of survey research being conducted in Myanmar. The ABS project was initiated in Myanmar for three reasons. First, as Myanmar is undergoing political change, it is important to include the views of the public in these ongoing developments. Survey research provides the best means to include public voices. The fact that the Myanmar public has been largely excluded from political life only accentuates the need for their inclusion. Second, the issue of inclusion extends beyond public participation. Political research on Myanmar has been limited in scope, and while this is rapidly changing, most of the work centers on developments within Myanmar. There is little work on how Myanmar compares with other countries. The ABS allows for regional and global comparisons through the similar core survey questions applied across the Barometer surveys. We now have insights on how public views in Myanmar compare with their neighbors and other countries in East and Southeast Asia. While Myanmar is following its own path, the ABS reveals



how similar (and different) the public views of citizens in Myanmar are. In the process, this comparative research is 'normalizing' Myanmar in the study of Asia, as a valued member of ASEAN and an important country in the region. Finally, as the ABS is conducted on average every four years, the 2015 survey begins an important time-series of data analyzing political attitudes and behavior. As Myanmar moves forward, with expected changes in the political environment and climate, it will be valuable to understand the consistencies and changes ahead. The ABS achieves this goal, and aims to continue to implement the survey and share findings with the policy-making and research communities.

This report summarizes the findings of the national survey conducted from January to March 2015 in all fourteen states and regions including the capital Nay Pyi Taw. The methodology for the Myanmar ABS is developed below. This report focuses on answers to the main questions in the different sections of the survey. The ABS looks at a wide range of issues, from political culture and engagement, social trust and social capital to views of economic conditions, governance, democracy, political participation, and globalization. As such, the focus below is on findings that would have immediate relevance to the ongoing changing political environment. As the ABS data is made publicly available after an embargo period of one year from when the data was cleaned and reviewed, scholars and practitioners are welcome to conduct further analysis and research. This report builds on the preliminary findings presented in Yangon in August 2015 and in Washington DC in September of the same year. To accentuate the cross-national dimension of the research, comparison is made to other Southeast Asian countries using the most up-to-date ABS data. Minimal attention is paid to the differences among Myanmar citizens – although some of the findings are differentiated along key socio-economic cleavages, such as the rural-urban divide, religion and ethnic identities and gender when they are relevant to a specific issue. These differences among Myanmar citizens are not addressed with depth. Further research and analysis will be needed to look more carefully at how and why Myanmar citizens have different political attitudes and behavior among themselves.

As this research is part of an expanding body of research and survey tools, this report aims to deepen understanding and welcomes feedback.<sup>1</sup> The findings below often raise questions and call for further research. Our approach has been not to over-interpret the findings, leaving the readers space for different and even contradictory interpretations. We recognize that the ABS is only a modest effort as part of an evolving understanding of the complexities and vibrant political developments taking place in Myanmar.

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<sup>1</sup> Feedback on and questions related to the report can be sent to [asianbarometer@ntu.edu.tw](mailto:asianbarometer@ntu.edu.tw) or directly to the authors, Bridget Welsh at [bridgetwelsh1@gmail.com](mailto:bridgetwelsh1@gmail.com) and Kai-Ping Huang at [kaipingh232@gmail.com](mailto:kaipingh232@gmail.com).

# Myanmar 2015 ABS

## Methodology

Data was gathered through face-to-face interviews of adult citizens aged 18 years old and above who had been enumerated by the Ministry of Immigration and Population and the General Administrative Department (GAD) of the Ministry of Home Affairs. The village/ward lists, provided by local township authorities, were provided directly to the Asian Barometer team and the field supervisors in the field. The baseline information for the sampling for the national survey was drawn from the 2013 population data collected by the Ministry of Immigration and Population. Monks, prisoners, military personnel stationed on military facilities and individuals listed as Internal Displaced Persons (IDPs) were not included in the survey.

The Myanmar ABS survey included over 237 questions (available on the ABS website), including the core questions of the Global Barometer and Asian Barometer surveys that allow for cross-regional comparisons, as well as specific questions directly related to Myanmar.<sup>2</sup> The main topics explored range from perceptions of governance, trust in institutions and social capital to political culture, partisanship and political participation, views of democracy, globalization and regional powers. Many of the Myanmar-specific questions in particular are directly related to conflict and are the focus below. The questionnaire

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<sup>2</sup> For more details regarding the Asian Barometer Survey please see: <http://www.asianbarometer.org/>. For the Global Barometer Surveys see: <http://www.globalbarometer.net/>

and its translation was released in August 2015, coinciding with the public release of the findings. As with the pattern of all the ABS data, the Myanmar data will also be made public for scholars after a year-long embargo period.

The Myanmar ABS survey adopted random stratified sampling from available population data. The data comprised a total of 330 townships in all 15 of Myanmar's administrative regions (including Nay Pyi Taw). The sample size was set at 1620 to assure a high quality national sample, drawn from 36 randomly selected townships. The findings do not represent any individual state, but speak to the country as a whole. A total of three wards or villages were randomly selected per township, with 15 households per ward or village. Sampling was thus carried out in two stages (township and ward/village levels) in accordance with the probability proportional to size (PPS) method. At the third stage for the household selection, systematic random sampling was adopted due to the lack of reliable and available population data at the household level. In each household, an eligible respondent was randomly selected by using a Kish table as part of landmark sampling. Landmarks were chosen after initial fieldwork and were reviewed after the pilot survey. They included the USDP party office, the village welcome sign, a religious institution, a non-USDP political party office, a village headman's office/home and more, and were assigned randomly to different interviewers. Gender and age distribution was randomly assigned at the landmark sampling level. To assure quality, a series of quality control measures from random checks in the field to retesting by another survey team were conducted. A technical report of the methodology is available.<sup>3</sup>

The ABS was conducted from January through mid-March 2015 in each of the major states/regions in Myanmar, including the Rakhine, Kachin, and Shan states (detailed in the map below). No replacements had to be made to the 36 randomly selected sample points, and the team was fortunate to avoid tensions and fighting in some states/regions with early fieldwork implementation. A total of 1620 people were surveyed. These interviews took an average of an hour and fifteen minutes. YSPS

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.asianbarometer.org/survey/wave4-myanmar>

staff was trained and advised by the Asian Barometer team from May 2014 through the end of the survey in March 2015. The national survey was conducted after a successful pilot survey of 720 respondents in September-October 2014 in the state of Bago. The ABS survey was conducted in Burmese, and in the ethnic minority areas with interpreters in local languages. The survey was carried out with the permission of national and state government authorities, with the knowledge and cooperation of local township officials. While there were a few minor misunderstandings in the fieldwork with local government officials, the relationship with the government was cordial as officials allowed the implementation of an independent national survey without any major incidents. The main challenges in the field included logistical access to locations (as a result of poor transportation infrastructure) and difficult physical conditions, especially in more remote areas such as the Chin state.

As public surveys are a relatively new phenomenon in Myanmar,<sup>4</sup> and the historical record of surveying in the country in the period after the 1990 election is checkered, another challenge involved public confidence and interaction. There were comprehension issues of some of the questions, particularly among lower educated and more remote, less exposed respondents. Significant efforts were made to improve comprehension and question wording during the survey implementation process, but there were understandable gaps and some of the more complicated questions solicited higher 'don't knows'. Given general concerns about the political climate and authoritarian history of Myanmar, the response rate for the ABS exceeded 75% and interviewers reported high cooperation on behalf of the majority of respondents.

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<sup>4</sup> Two major surveys were released in 2014, a political poll by the International Republican Institute to be found at [http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/flip\\_docs/2014%20April%203%20Survey%20of%20Burma%20Public%20Opinion,%20December%2024,%202013-February%201,%202014.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/flip_docs/2014%20April%203%20Survey%20of%20Burma%20Public%20Opinion,%20December%2024,%202013-February%201,%202014.pdf) and a survey by The Asia Foundation: *Myanmar 2014: Civic Knowledge and Values in a Changing Society*. <http://asiafoundation.org/publications/pdf/1445>



# Economic Conditions & Vulnerabilities

One of the most common subjects of survey research examines perceptions of the economy. These questions allow for assessments of current conditions, but also serve as a research tool to look at how views of economic performance influence other political attitudes and behavior. In Myanmar, the economy has been the main focus of the USDP government, as it has engaged in a series of reforms since assuming office in 2011. The Myanmar economy has grown rapidly in recent years, reaching 8% in 2014 and is projected to reach 7% in 2015. This economic expansion has included increases in foreign investment and trade and increased availability of consumer goods in the marketplace. While assessments have stressed the need to deepen and broaden



economic reforms, overall assessments of economic performance in Myanmar have been positive, especially when compared to earlier decades.

The ABS findings show that the public does not see the economy through the same lens. While most Myanmar citizens are optimistic about the future (78%), their assessments of the current economic situation are more measured. Close to half of Myanmar citizens (46%) perceive the economy as the same, with nearly a quarter (22%) believing that conditions have worsened. In fact, a majority of Myanmar citizens hold that conditions were better in the past (53%), with less than a third (32%) perceiving that current conditions are an improvement. These findings suggest that gains from the economic reforms have yet to be widely perceived by ordinary citizens, although they are hopeful for economic improvements in the future.

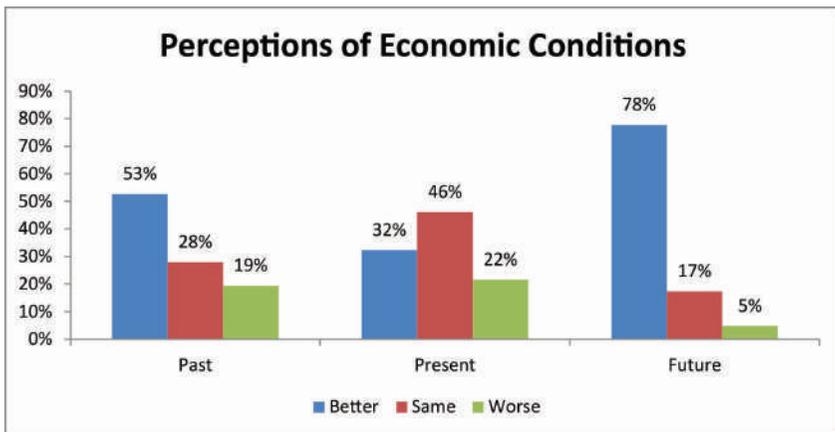


Fig. 2 Perceptions of Economic Conditions

Myanmar citizens consider the economy the most important problem facing the country. Nearly half of the respondents (45%) identified the economy as the most important problem, followed by concerns with governance (15%) and government services (14%). A focus on the economy included a range of bread-and-butter issues, from employment to inflation and the cost of living. These concerns speak to the challenges the Myanmar public perceives in managing economic realities, despite

studies showing improvements in livelihoods.<sup>5</sup> When one includes those citizens who identify food security and agriculture (6%) as serious problems, concerns with livelihoods preoccupy the majority of the country.

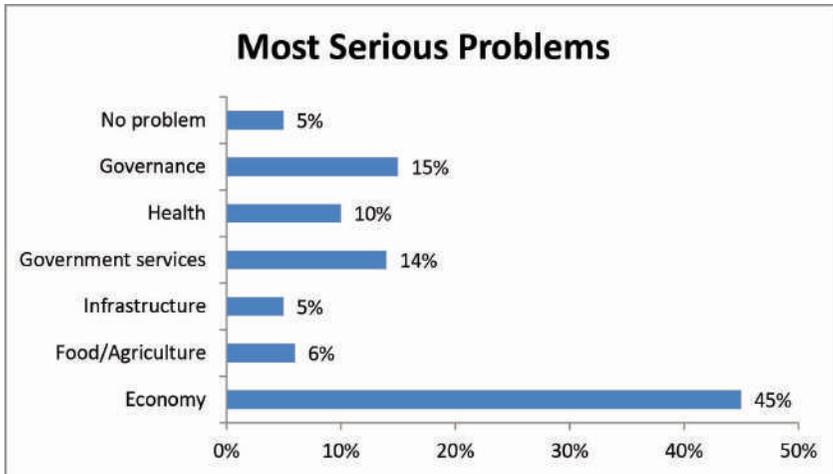


Fig. 3 Most Serious Problems

One dimension of how Myanmar citizens conceive of the economy involves prices. The Myanmar kyat has depreciated over 2014-2015, a factor that has, along with weather conditions and market access, influenced local prices. Inflation has also increased due to higher wages and other input costs. For Myanmar citizens, there is widespread recognition that prices are not stable and this perception extends across the rural-urban divide.

<sup>5</sup> World Bank Group. *Myanmar. Ending poverty and boosting shared prosperity in a time of transition. A systematic country diagnostic*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank. Available at [http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2014/12/15/000350881\\_20141215093840/Rendered/PDF/930500CSD0P150070Box385388B00OUO090.pdf](http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2014/12/15/000350881_20141215093840/Rendered/PDF/930500CSD0P150070Box385388B00OUO090.pdf)

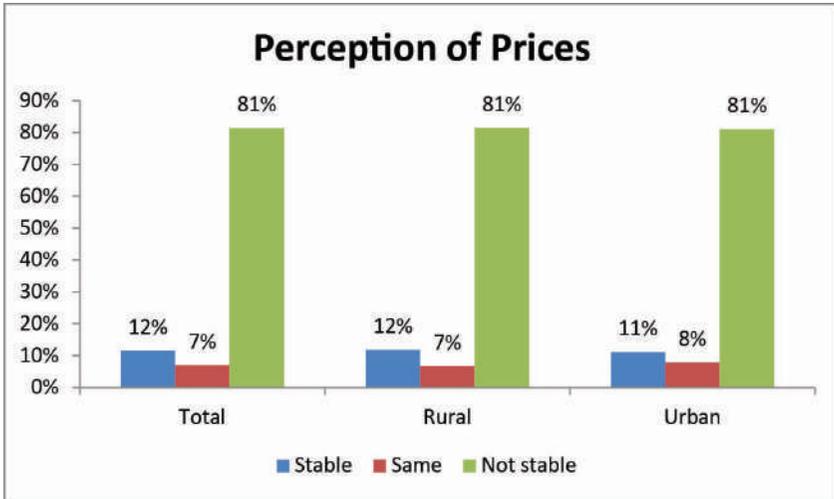


Fig. 4 Perception of Prices

Traditionally, studies of the Myanmar economy have distinguished between the rural and urban economy, with the latter dominated by agricultural production, especially by rice. In recent years this divide is becoming less significant, largely the product of labor mobility and closer integration in the economy as a whole, with improved infrastructure and greater liberalization. This divide, however remains important when it comes to perceptions of economic vulnerability, as it is clear that rural Myanmar citizens perceive less of a safety net in the event of a loss of income. Studies continue to highlight that poverty is concentrated in rural areas.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> UNDP Millennium Goals, <http://www.mm.undp.org/content/myanmar/en/home/mdgoverview/overview/mdg1.html>

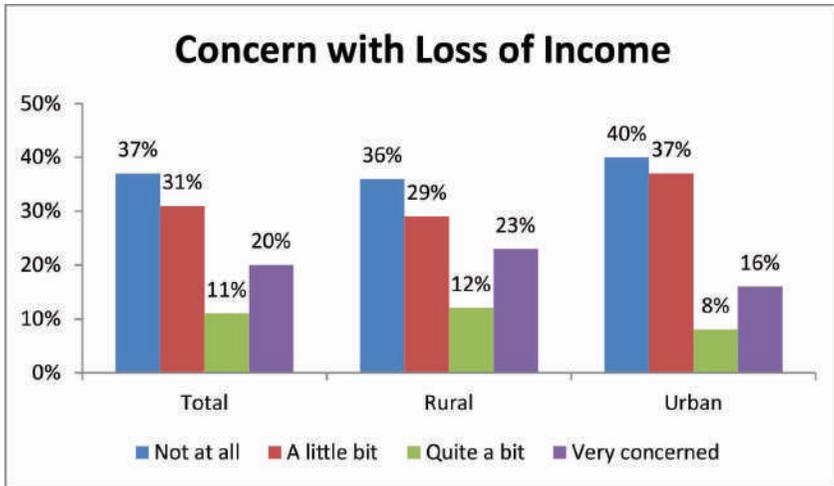


Fig. 5 Concern with Loss of Income

Disproportionately, more rural Myanmar citizens (45%) as compared with urban Myanmar citizens (35%) report that a potential loss of income would create difficulties in coping, highlighting the proportion of Myanmar citizens that lack an economic safety net and are vulnerable. While those vulnerable make up the lion's share of respondents, just shy of a quarter (24%) of those in rural areas and a third (32%) in urban areas report that they could 'manage just fine'. This speaks to the variation among citizens, and highlights that while vulnerabilities are significant and involve large sections of the population, Myanmar citizens have developed survival skills and safety nets of their own.

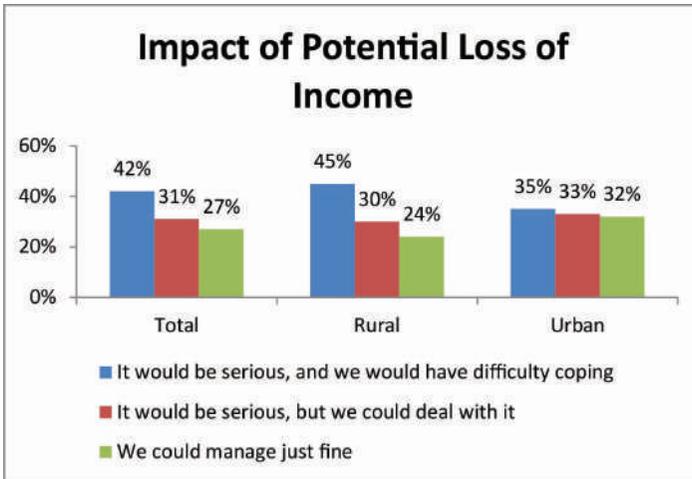


Fig. 6 Impact of Potential Loss of Income

In fact, a little more than a third (37%) are not concerned with the potential loss of income. While this lack of concern is higher in urban areas, it extends to a plurality in rural areas as well. This lack of concern with income loss belies significant issues with the low levels of income in Myanmar citizens. When compared to other countries in Southeast Asia,<sup>7</sup> Myanmar's income distribution weighs heavily in the lower quintiles like other countries. Although Myanmar continues to experience high levels of poverty, a majority of Myanmar citizens, interestingly, classify themselves in the middle. This calls out for further research and a review of the different quintiles used in the survey, to better assess the variation among Myanmar citizens according to reported income. It will be interesting to assess whether Myanmar citizens prefer to classify themselves in the middle or whether the categories themselves were inadequate in capturing the variation among Myanmar citizens.

<sup>7</sup> The countries and waves of surveys used for comparison include Cambodia and Indonesia (both of them wave 3 done in 2010-2012), and Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam (Wave 4 conducted in 2014-2015).

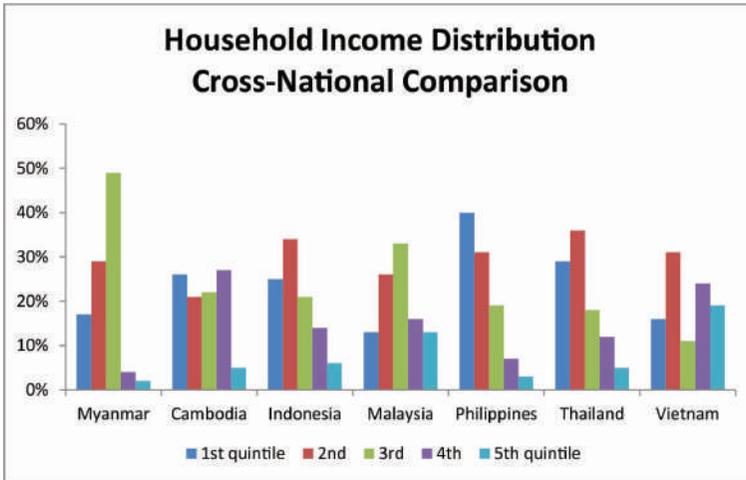


Fig. 7 Household Income Distribution. Cross-National Comparison

A closer look at the reported distribution of household monthly income levels show that 49% make between \$100-500 monthly, with only 2% reporting an income of over \$1000. One of the challenges of measuring income levels is that there is considerable under-reporting and there are often difficulties in capturing monthly levels when income is seasonal, as is the case for a large share of Myanmar citizens who work in the agricultural economy. Generally, self-income reporting is not one of the most reliable measures. What this indicator does show is the heavy concentration of Myanmar citizens in the lower income levels.

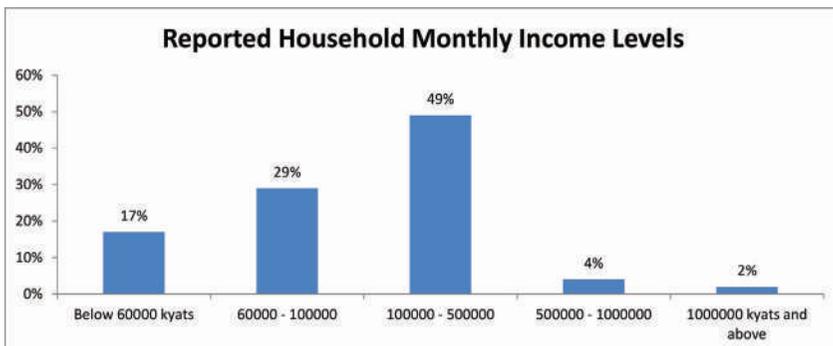


Fig. 8 Reported Household Monthly Income Levels

What is more reliable are assessments of how income is seen to be distributed. A large majority (78%) view income in Myanmar as unfair, with 29% of this majority perceiving income distribution as 'very unfair'. This stands in stark contrast to the mere 2% who see income distribution as 'very fair'. Myanmar citizens consider their society very unequal.

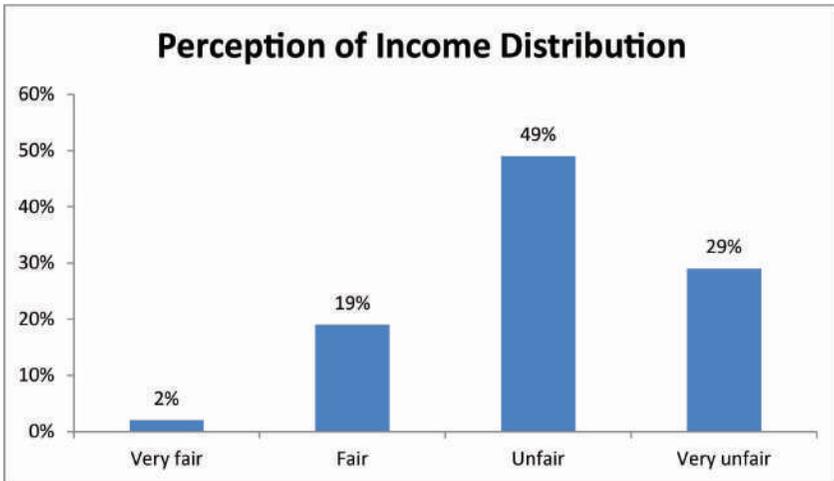


Fig. 9 Perception of Income Distribution

While Myanmar citizens have negative perceptions of current patterns of income distribution, their assessments of social mobility are more positive. Generally, in keeping with the aspirational finding of this study, citizens perceive greater social mobility for their children. There is a consistent pattern of more optimistic assessments of their children's future. The assessment of the current generation's social mobility is more mixed. Some Myanmar citizens report a decline in social mobility as compared to their parents, reaffirming the views noted above of perceptions of difficulty in the current economic environment. This view of declining social mobility is not across the board. In fact, more Myanmar citizens see their current situation more positively than their parents. When examining levels of social mobility, most citizens classify themselves in the middle, a tendency noted above.

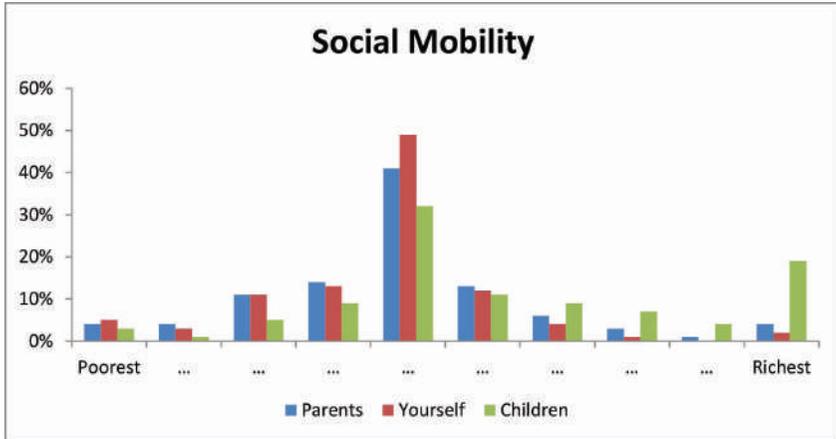
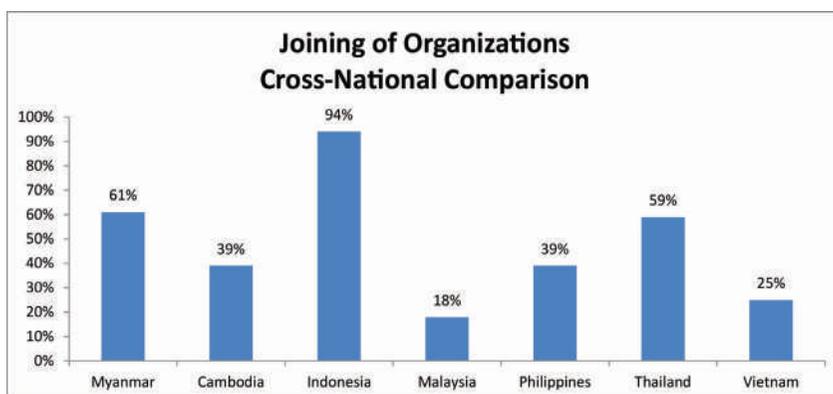


Fig. 10 Social Mobility

# Social Capital & Trust

Myanmar citizens also reveal themselves as joiners, citizens who join organizations in civil society. A majority (61%) of Myanmar citizens fall into this category of joining organizations. While this is not as high as Indonesia (94%), it is higher social participation than most Southeast Asian countries. Joining is a key ingredient in civil society, and this high participation in social organizations challenges the long-standing view that Myanmar has lacked a dynamic civil society.



**Fig. 11** Joining of Organizations. Cross-National Comparison

Myanmar citizens join a variety of organizations. They follow the pattern elsewhere, joining organizations that have long-standing roots and history and have been allowed the space to operate. It is thus not surprising that the organizations that Myanmar citizens most join are religious organizations and charities. This is also the pattern in Indonesia. What distinguishes Myanmar citizens is the prominence of

local residential associations. Many of these organizations provide social services such as assisting funerals or accessing credit. A considerable smaller share of Myanmar citizens join political parties and public interest groups. The ‘other’ category includes a broad range of groups, from business associations to sports and alumni clubs. Myanmar citizens not only join organizations in high numbers, they join many of them, as there are high numbers of repeat joiners.

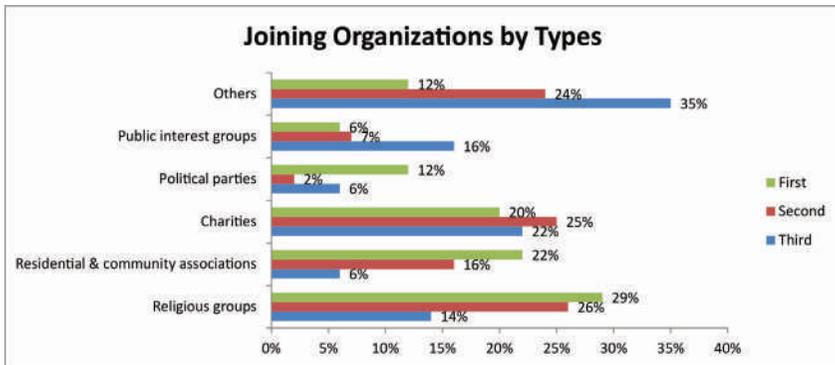


Fig. 12 Joining Organizations by Types

The pattern of participating in social organizations crosses the rural-urban divide. The level of participations in religious groups and residential associations are similar. Urban Myanmar citizens join charities to a higher level than rural citizens do, in large part due to the greater number of charity organizations in urban areas. Rural Myanmar citizens are marginally more inclined to join political parties, public interest groups and other alternatives, revealing that Myanmar’s civil society extends across the country.



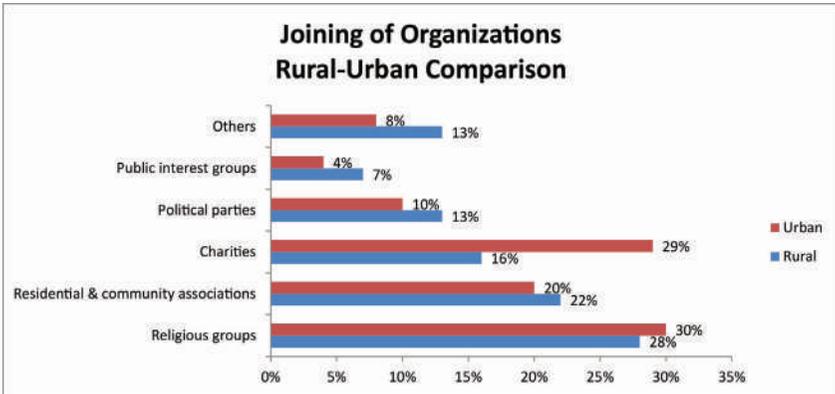


Fig. 13 Joining of Organizations. Rural-Urban Comparison

While Myanmar citizens are joiners, the breadth of social networks they have vary considerably. Myanmar citizens were asked if they had people they could turn to in need of help, a measure used to assess the level of meaningful relationships a person has in a given society. Over a third (37%) had no one, and this was both in urban and rural areas. Traditionally, urban areas are seen to be less supportive, as they often are comprised of migrants. In Myanmar the rural-urban divide was not important in distinguishing the breadth of social networks. A similar number (37%) had a few people they could rely on with the remaining third divided between ‘quite a few’ (16%) and ‘a lot’ (10%).

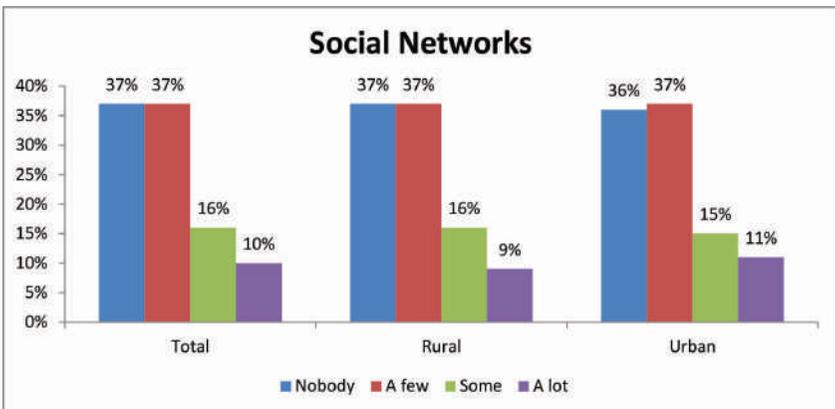


Fig. 14 Social Networks

Most Myanmar citizens are connected, either through their organizational ties or their personal relationships. Yet, the ABS found that Myanmar citizens do not trust each other. Less than a fifth (19%) expressed social trust. When asked to choose between whether ‘most people could be trusted’ or ‘you have to be careful in dealing with people’ – most chose the latter. A lack of social trust is common in post-authoritarian and post-conflict societies, as in the example of Cambodia.

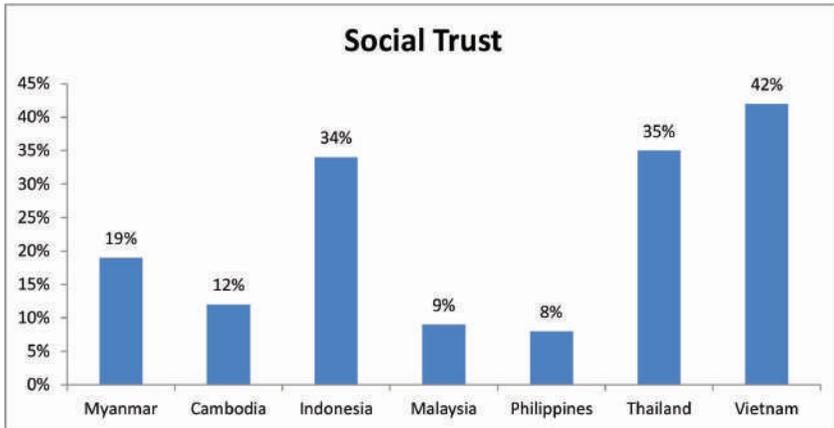


Fig. 15 Social Trust

Myanmar citizen’s trust in anonymous others is also low and trust in relatives, neighbors, and people they interact with is not as high as other countries in the region. Only two-thirds of Myanmar citizens trust their relatives and even fewer trust their neighbors and acquaintances. This pattern is consistent across the rural-urban divide, with trust levels only slightly higher in rural areas. This lack of trust in society extends into political life and has the potential to affect the ongoing political transformations taking place.

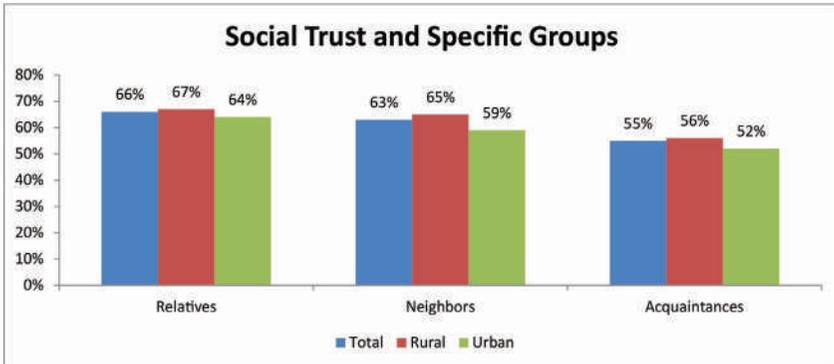


Fig. 16 Social Trust and Specific Groups

# Political Culture & Values

Along with the low levels of social trust, the ABS found that Myanmar stands out in its political culture. Myanmar is the most traditional (conservative) political culture in Southeast Asia – by considerable margins. Below captures a composite indicator of responses to over twenty questions in the ABS on political culture, and Myanmar citizen’s high score indicates the level of traditional political culture.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, citizens hold not only socially traditional values, but also hold politically traditional values when compared to other Southeast Asian countries.



Fig. 17 Traditionalism. Cross-National Comparison

<sup>8</sup> Social traditionalism includes questions concerning social harmony, group and national interests, and respect for authority. Political traditionalism, on the other hand, contains questions about checks and balances, pluralism, and paternalism.

In terms of rural-urban divide, although rural Myanmar citizens are slightly more socially conservative than their urban counterparts, urban dwellers are slightly more politically traditional than their rural counterparts. Such differences, however, are not significant; rural and urban Myanmar citizens are equally conservative on both grounds.

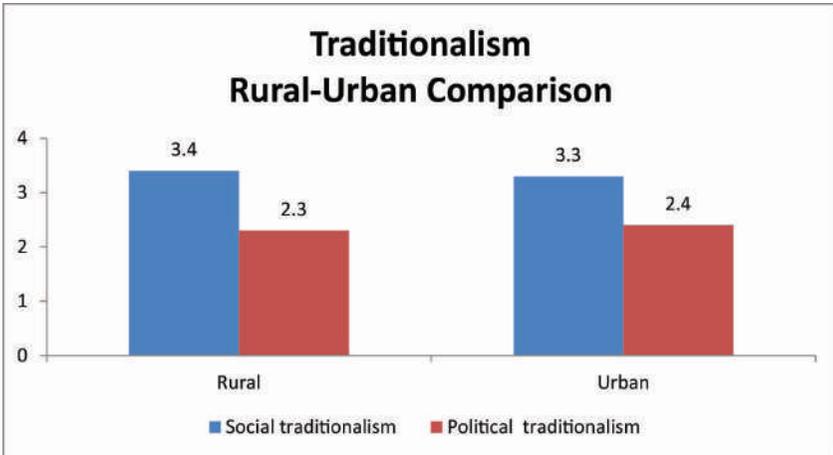


Fig. 18 Traditionalism. Rural-Urban Comparison

To illustrate this conservativeness more concretely, below we lay out the answers to specific questions. Consider the responses regarding political hierarchy, a majority (70%) agreed that one should obey political leaders if they are moral, opting to turn over political power to elites.

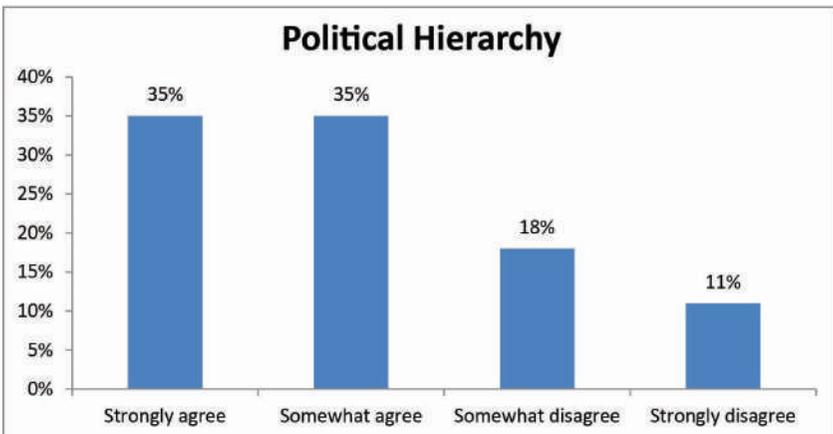


Fig. 19 Political Hierarchy

Citizens also believe that conflict should be avoided, by a large majority (84%). A majority of Myanmar citizens (53%) strongly believe in conflict avoidance. This is in spite of (or even a product of) a history of conflict in Myanmar. Rather than oppose one other, Myanmar citizens prefer to avoid conflict altogether.

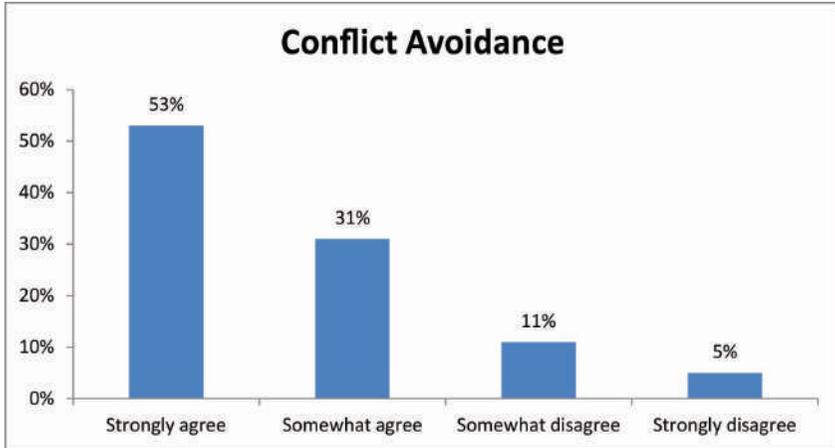


Fig. 20 Conflict Avoidance

This preference to avoid conflict is paralleled by an opposition to different views within society, an anti-pluralism. Myanmar citizens were asked whether they believed that too many different views were chaotic, with a large majority (95%) agreeing. This reflects a lack of tolerance of difference in Myanmar's political culture.

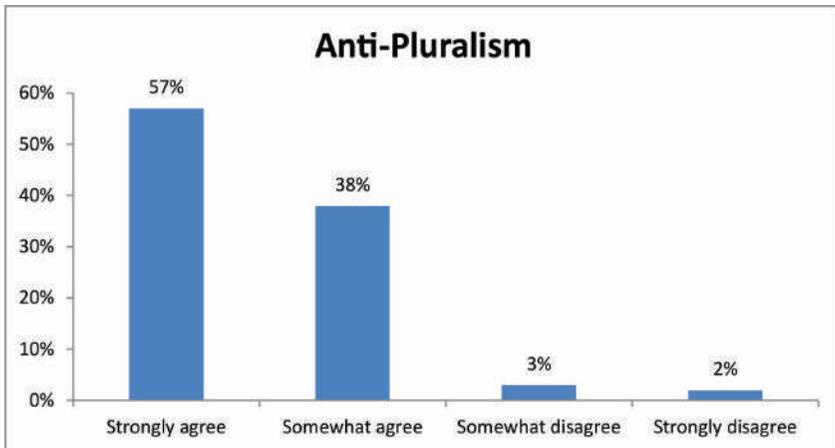


Fig. 21 Anti-Pluralism

One area where Myanmar citizens were particularly conservative involved gender relations. Myanmar citizens were asked if they preferred a boy over a girl, with a majority (60%) agreeing, the highest level of male preference in Southeast Asia. The closest country to Myanmar was the Philippines, where only 46% recorded a male preference.

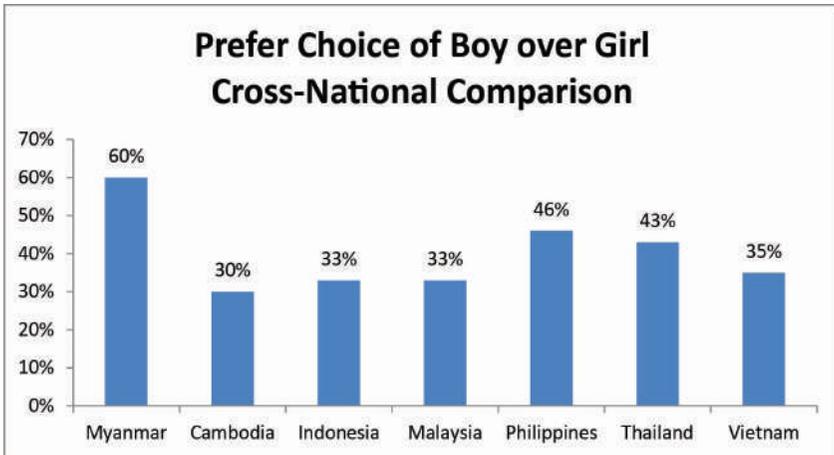


Fig. 22 Prefer Choice of Boy over Girl. Cross-National Comparison

However, a different picture emerges when Myanmar citizens were asked about female participation in politics. A majority (58%) agreed that women should equally participate in politics as men. We found an 'Aung San Suu Kyi effect' with those more inclined to support women, more inclined to support her as president. While Myanmar citizens do have conservative views about gender preferences, these do not extend to political involvement to the same degree.

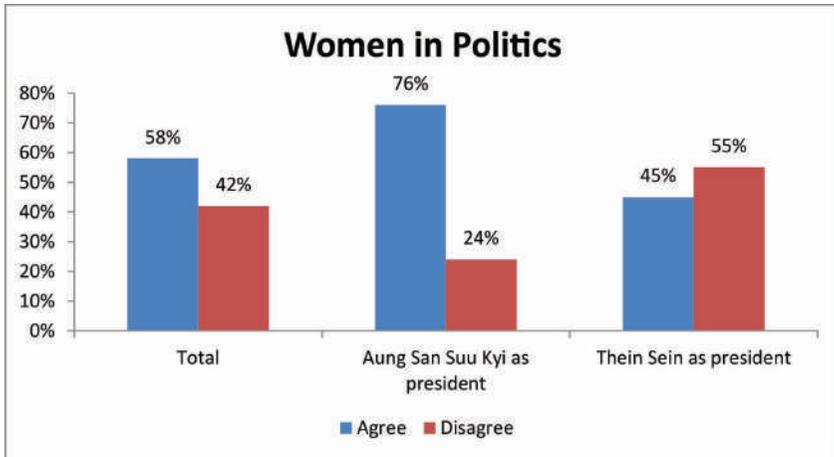


Fig. 23 Women in Politics

Finally, a majority agree that individual interests should be put second after group and national interests. National interests, in particular, are regarded much more important than individual interests that should be sacrificed. Despite long-term repression from the state, often justified by prioritizing community and national interests above individual freedoms, this conservative norm is still widely accepted in Myanmar society.

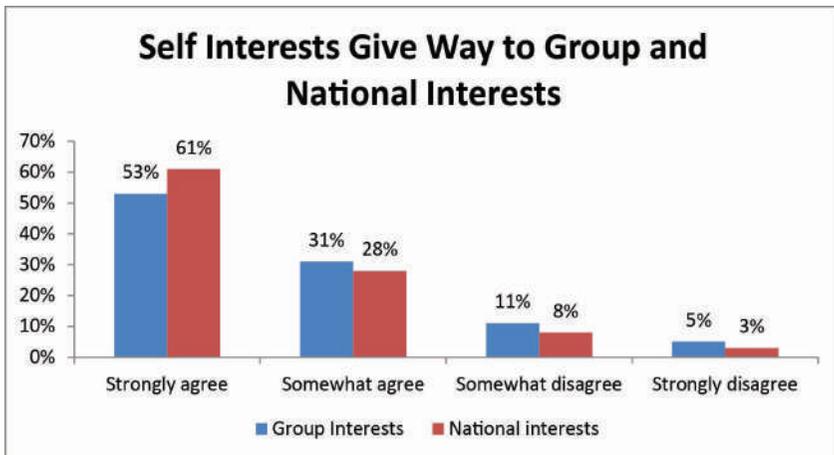


Fig. 24 Self-Interest Gives Way to Group and National interests

Overall, Myanmar's conservative political culture, especially with regard to political hierarchy, acceptance of difference, avoidance of conflicts, and the willingness to sacrifice individual interests for the sake of group and national interests, will pose a challenge to extending democratic practices.

# Political Freedoms & Democracy

Even as they hold conservative views, a majority of Myanmar citizens (90%) support democracy. Support for democracy is high across the mainland Southeast Asia, even in Cambodia's one-party dominant system and Communist Vietnam.

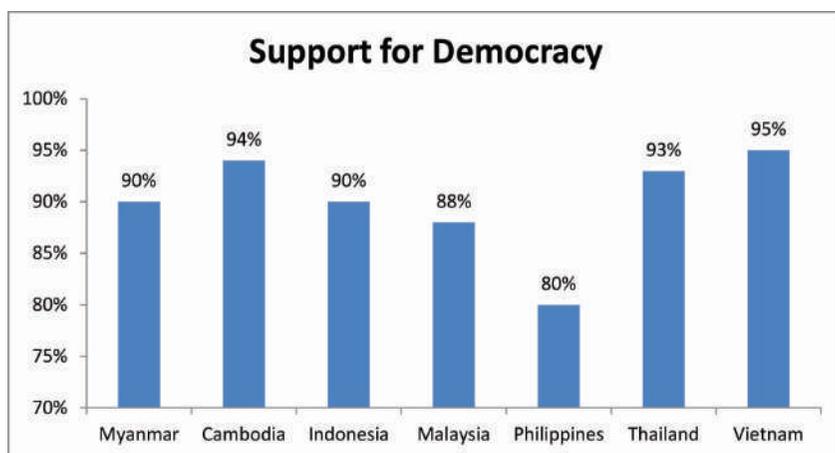
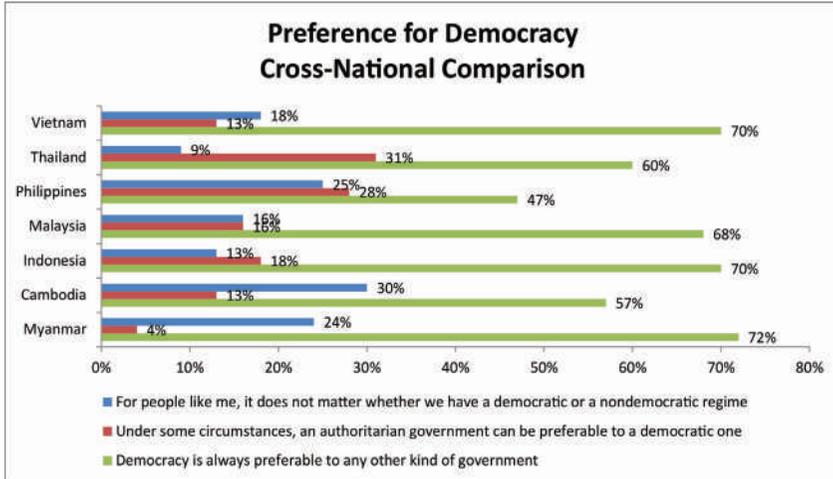


Fig. 25 Support for Democracy. Cross-National comparison

Myanmar citizens were further asked to select among democratic and non-democratic alternatives. A majority (72%) opted for democracy, with a quarter (24%) expressing the view that neither system has an effect on them. What is telling is the low number of Myanmar citizens who opted to the non-democratic alternative (4%) – the lowest in

Southeast Asia. The long history of military authoritarian rule has left a legacy of low levels of support for this type of governance.



**Fig. 26** Preference for Democracy. Cross-National comparison

As part of the ABS study of democracy we ask how citizens conceive of democracy. Earlier research on East Asia has found that Asians conceive of democracy differently than those in the West, with greater focus on good governance and equality as opposed to an emphasis on procedures such as elections and political freedoms. The ABS includes a battery of questions that ask respondents to prioritize the components they see as integral parts of democracy. Myanmar citizens stand out in Southeast Asia for their conceptualization of democracy as equality. There are high levels of prioritization of all the different dimensions of democracy. Myanmar citizens are comparatively less inclined to view democracy as good governance compared to their ASEAN colleagues. Importantly Myanmar citizens view democracy as more than procedures such as elections.

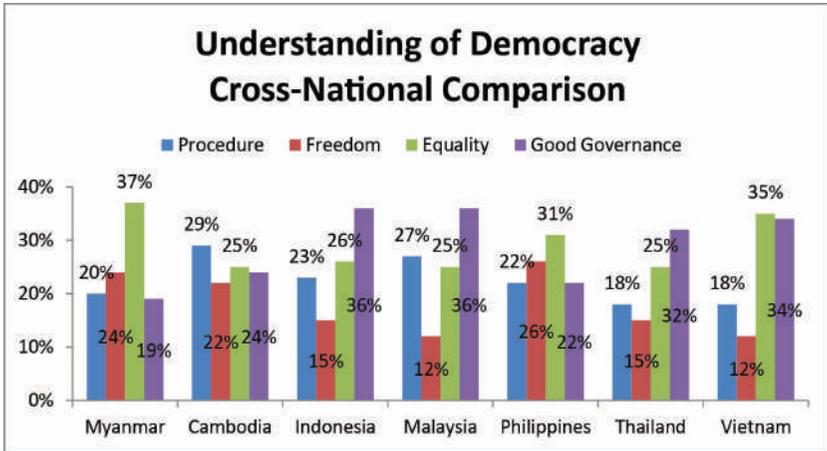


Fig. 27 Understanding of Democracy. Cross-National comparison

We examined whether there were differences across the rural-urban divide in how Myanmar citizens conceived democracy and found that rural and urban Myanmar citizens alike were inclined to prioritize equality. However, urban citizens also tended to define democracy as freedom.

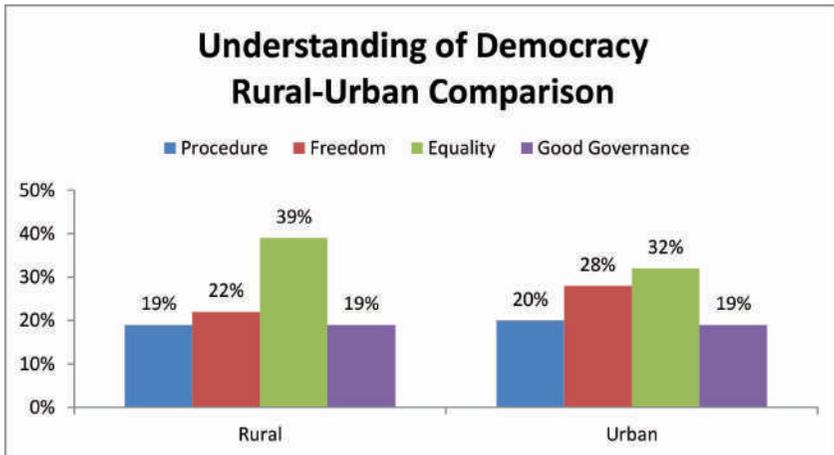


Fig. 28 Understanding of Democracy. Rural-Urban Comparison

Although Myanmar overwhelmingly support democracy and have a good understanding of what democracy is, when asked to choose between economic development and democracy, more than a majority (53%) opted for economic development, while only 30% thought democracy more important than economy. When asked to choose between economic equality and political freedom, almost equal numbers of respondents chose one of the options (42% vs. 39%).

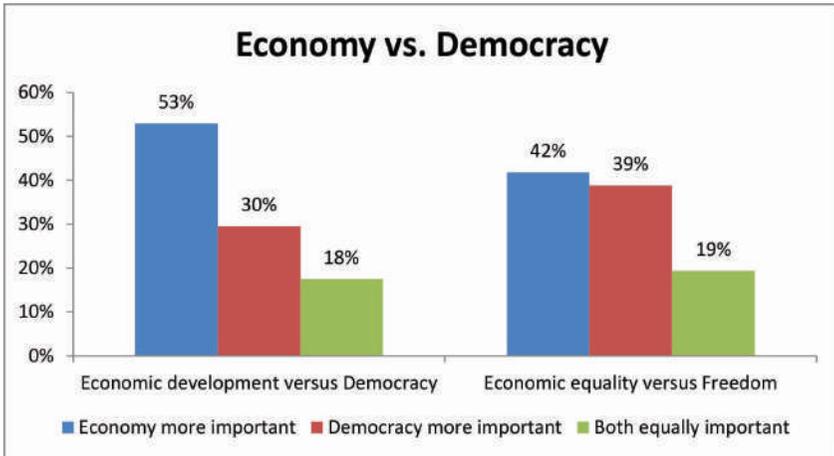


Fig. 29 Economy vs. Democracy

Moreover, when delving into the values undergirding the practice of democracy, Myanmar are found to have a high level of authoritarian orientation, just after Vietnam. Authoritarian orientation is measured through questions concerning vertical and horizontal accountability, support for paternalism, pluralism, and equality. In particular, over a majority of Myanmar (62%) disapproved horizontal accountability—i.e. legislative checks on the executive power. This might due to the fact that most Myanmar have lived under an authoritarian rule and are relatively unfamiliar with democratic practices. With the power handed to the NLD after the November 2015 elections that accelerates the process of democratization, hopefully, Myanmar will acquire necessary values to deepen its democracy.

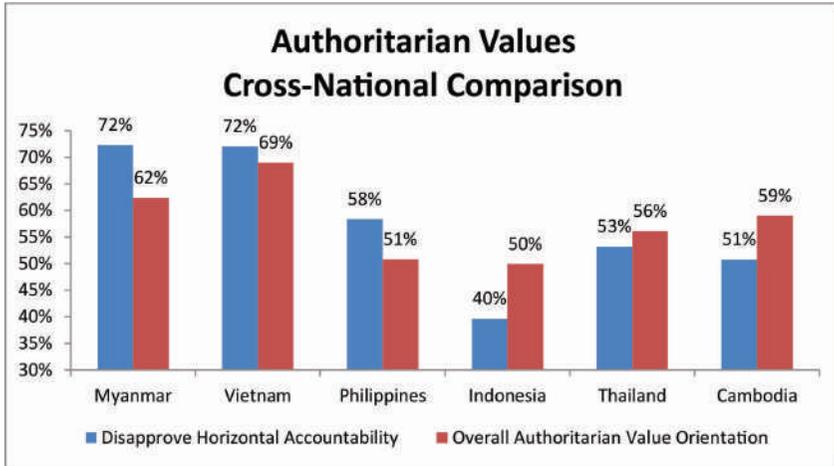


Fig. 30 Authoritarian Values. Cross-National Comparison

Myanmar citizens held different views among themselves on how they assessed the level of democracy in the country when the survey was conducted. Only a small number (5%) believed Myanmar citizens to be a full democracy, with triple this figure (15%) believing it was not a democracy at all. The majority were divided between those who held it was a democracy with minor problems (35%) and those who held it was a democracy with major problems (25%).

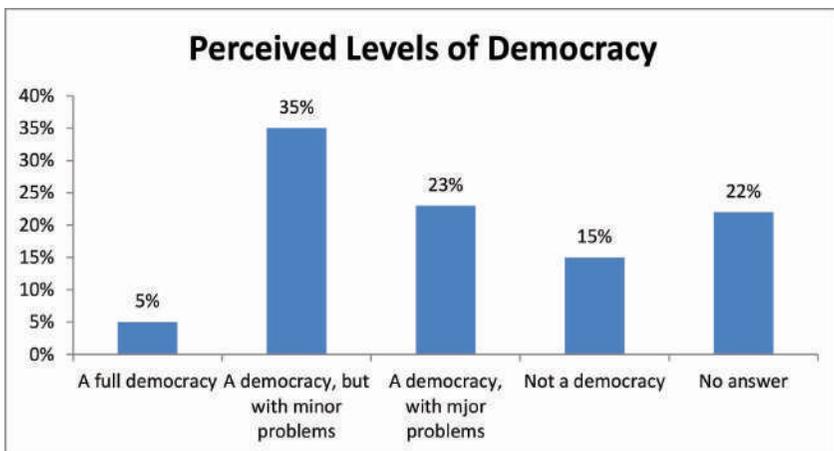


Fig. 31 Perceived Levels of Democracy

When Myanmar citizens were asked to assess different regimes of the past and the future, there were marked differences in how they perceived levels of democracy. The two charts below capture the distribution of views assessing the levels of democracy, with 1 as the lowest and 10 the highest. Myanmar citizens favorably assess the regime of U Thein Sein compared to that of Senior General U Than Shwe, with an assessment on average of 5 for the former and the lowest average score in democracy of 1 for the latter. As Myanmar citizens look at the future, they are hopeful that Myanmar will have greater democracy. They are even more positive when asked about how they see Myanmar ten years ahead. This is in keeping with the aspirational findings of the Myanmar ABS.

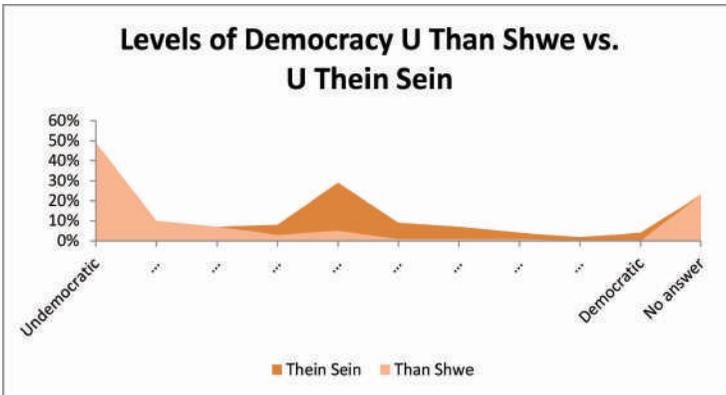


Fig. 32 Levels of Democracy U Than Shwe vs. U Thein Sein

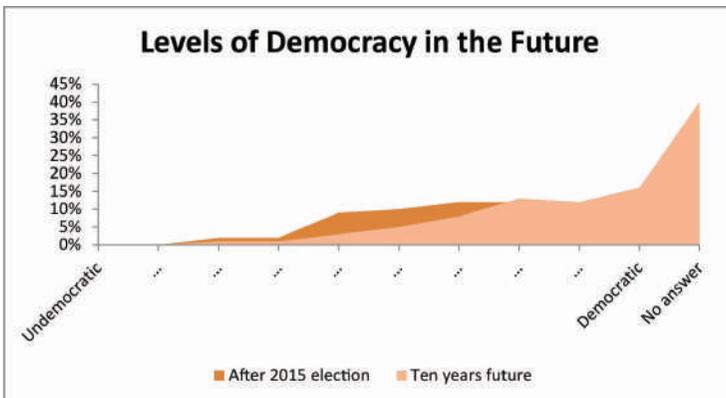


Fig. 33 Levels of Democracy in the Future

Myanmar citizens recognize meaningful changes to the political environment in the area of political freedoms. Citizens were asked to assess whether they had freedom of expression and assembly. In both cases a majority concurred (67% and 76% respectively). Myanmar citizens felt that there was less freedom of expression as compared to the right to assemble.

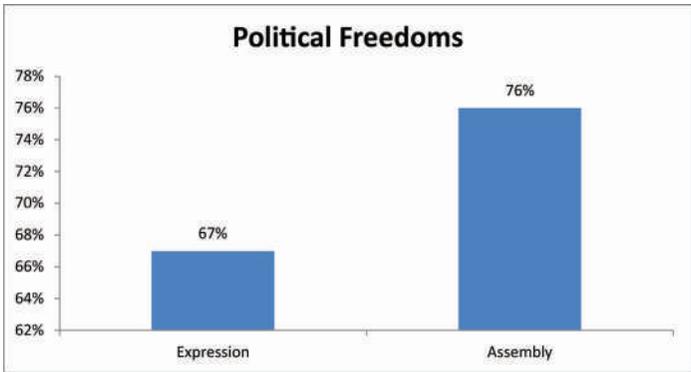


Fig. 34 Political Freedoms

This issue of freedom of expression was examined further, and Myanmar citizens continued to assess the political environment favorably, with a majority (50%) stating that it was not hard to converse over political issues. More than a third (37%) recorded that it was difficult to discuss politics. There were no major differences between rural and urban areas.

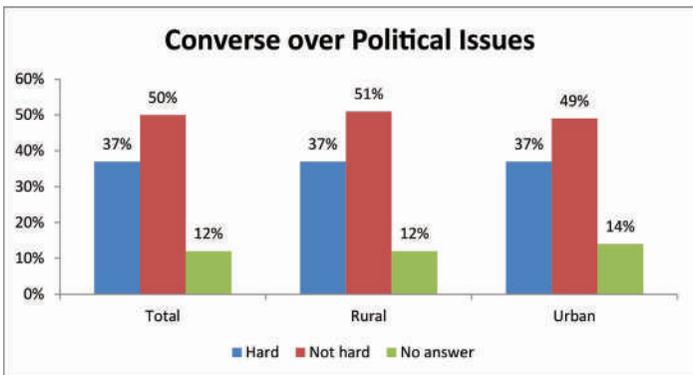
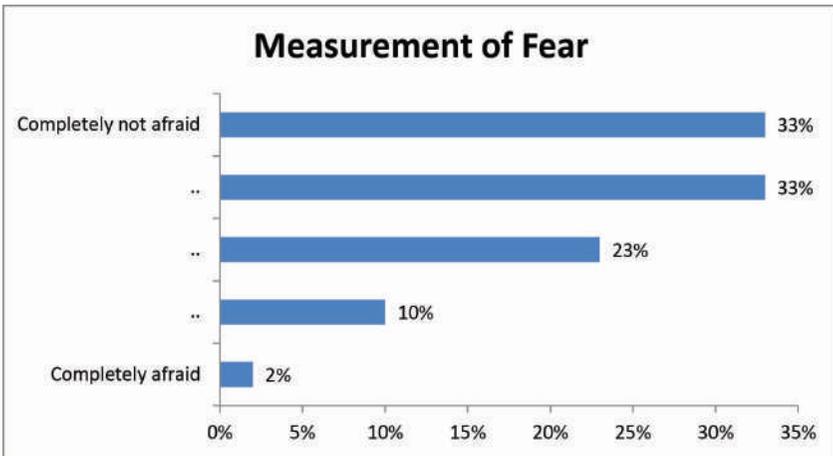


Fig. 35 Converse over Political Issues

As part of the fieldwork, we asked our interviewers to assess the level of fear expressed during the interview process. One of the main concerns of conducting survey research in Myanmar was reluctance on the part of citizens to answer freely and honestly. Our interviewers found that a majority did express some apprehension, with only a third (33%) not expressing fear. Yet, the level of fear was not high, as only a small share (12%) were significantly afraid. Fear remains a consideration in assessing the results, as there are areas involving sensitive political issues where citizens show reluctance in answering questions.



**Fig. 36** Measurement of Fear

# Psychological Involvement

Although a majority of Myanmar citizens are looking forward to the arrival of democracy, interest in politics is relatively low compared to in other Southeast Asian countries. Myanmar is only ahead of Indonesia and Malaysia where less than half of the citizens expressed interest in political affairs.

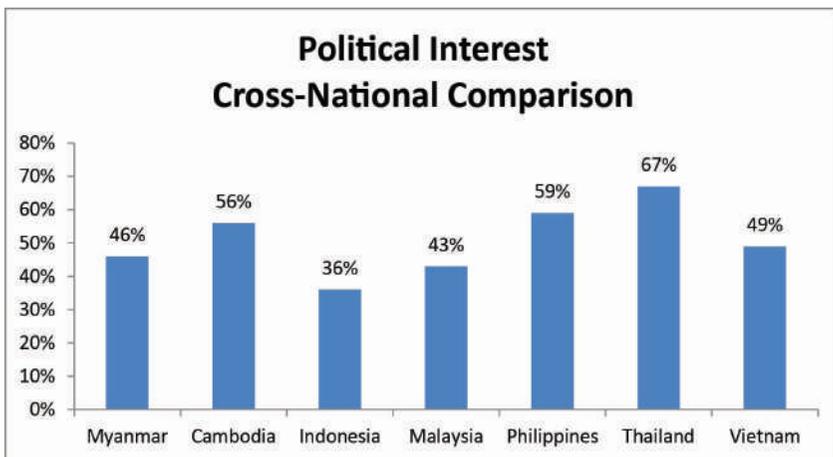


Fig. 37 Political Interest. Cross-National Comparison

Such disinterest was also found to be consistent across rural and urban areas. However, slightly more rural citizens expressed their interest in politics as compared to their urban counterparts.

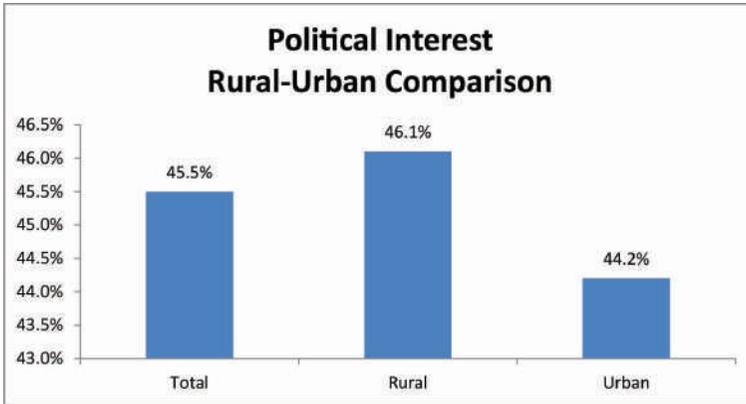


Fig. 38 Political Interest. Rural-Urban Comparison

An important cleavage which influences political interest is gender. Studies globally show that women are less interested in politics than men, in part a result of less time to devote to politics due to family commitments and patterns of socialization. This difference is evident among Myanmar citizens as well. Men show more keen interest in politics, with 15% “very interested” as compared to women (7%). Over a third of women (43%) expressed no interest in politics at all.

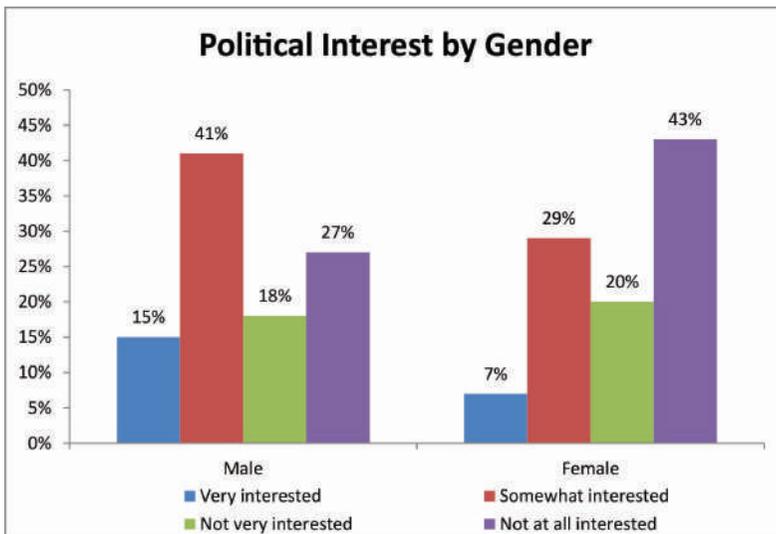


Fig. 39 Political Interest by Gender

Myanmar citizens are not only disinterested in politics, they also follow political news less frequently. For those who expressed interest in politics, more than a majority (67%) do not follow news regularly. The lack of political knowledge among Myanmar citizens was one of the main findings of the 2014 Asia Foundation survey. This theme finds resonance in the ABS findings as well, as a large majority (80%) do not frequently keep informed of political news. This could be the product of the political environment in Myanmar, with its limits on opportunities for political engagement. Nevertheless, the low level of accessing political information helps us understand why Myanmar citizens lack political knowledge.

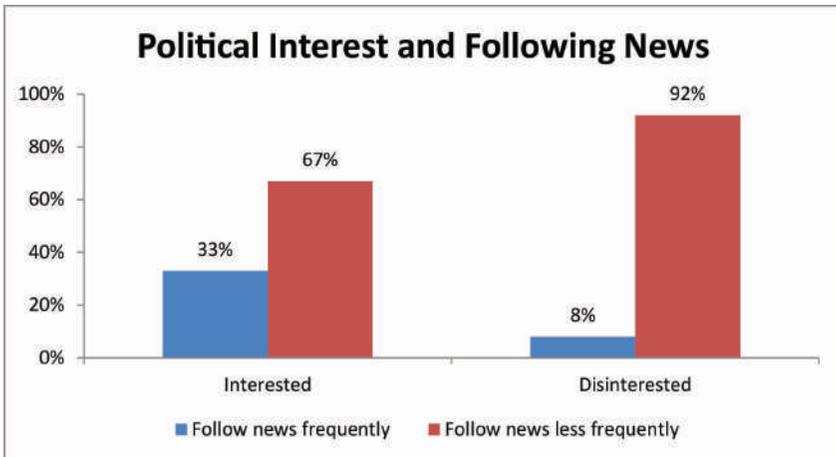


Fig. 40 Political Interest and Following News

Part of the explanation lies with where in Myanmar respondents were located. The rural-urban divide is significant. Myanmar citizens in urban areas where there are more sources of information accessible follow the news double than citizens in rural areas (30% compared to 15%).

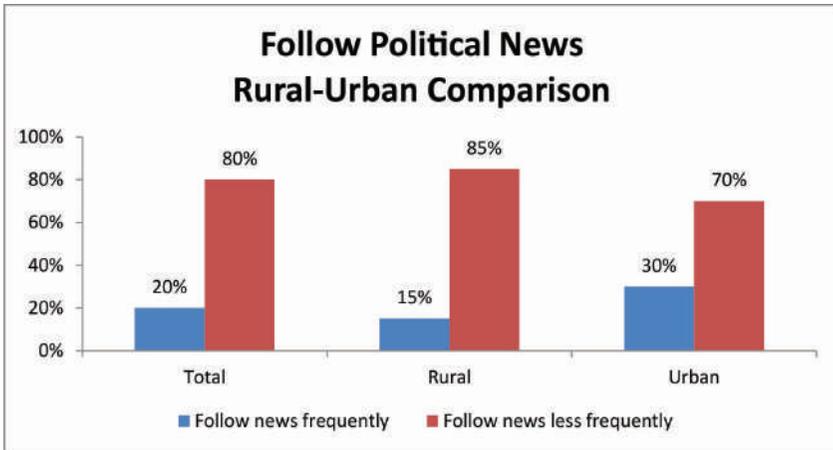


Fig. 41 Follow Political News. Rural-Urban Comparison

A lack of political knowledge does not translate into low levels of political efficacy, however. Nearly a majority (47%) of Myanmar citizens do feel they can affect politics. This falls squarely in the middle of the region's findings.

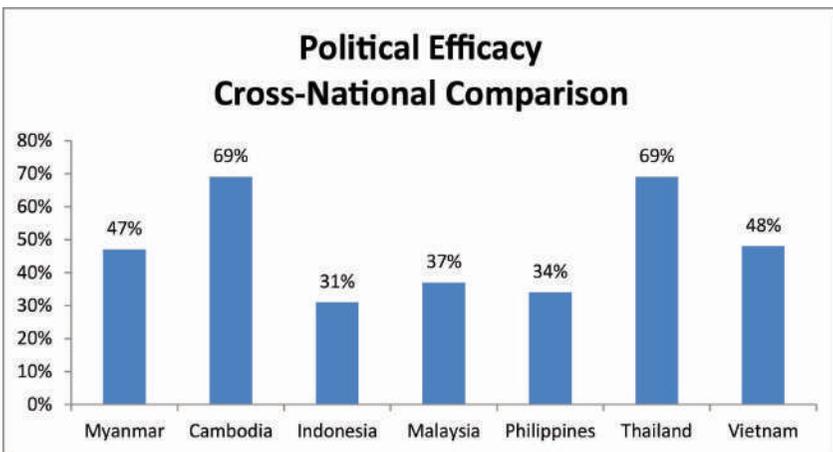


Fig. 42 Political Efficacy. Cross-National Comparison

Moreover, rural residents are equally confident about their ability to affect politics as their urban counterparts. Although the percentage is slightly higher in urban areas, the difference between rural and urban areas is not significant.

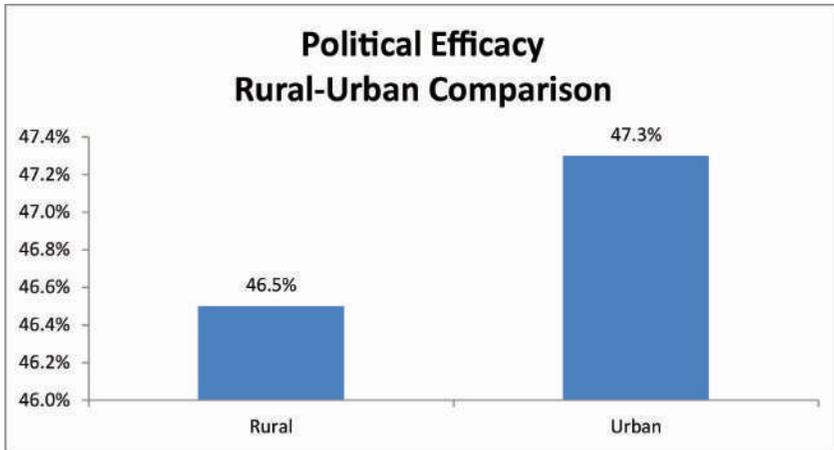


Fig. 43 Political Efficacy. Rural-Urban Comparison

Combined together the levels of political interest and efficacy reveal that Myanmar citizens are politically engaged and perceive that they can influence politics. Improving access to political news and deepening political knowledge will enhance the quality of political engagement.

# Political Participation

In light of the landslide victory for the National League for Democracy (NLD) in the November 2015 elections, the ABS data reveals insights into how Myanmar viewed the then upcoming polls. Two patterns emerge – a lack of trust in the electoral process and reluctance to reveal one’s vote choice. Myanmar’s Union Election Commission (UEC) entered the polls with the lowest levels of trust in the region. Only slightly more than a majority (53%) expressed a favorable trust assessment.

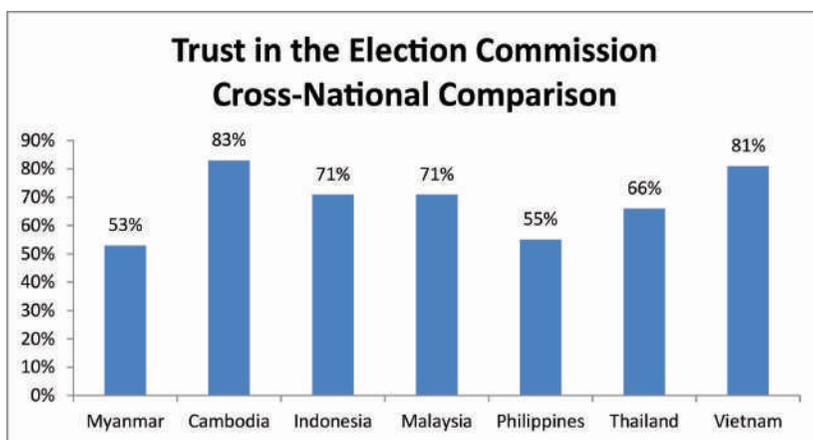


Fig. 44 Trust in the Election Commission. Cross-National Comparison

The low level of trust among Myanmar citizens of the UEC, thus, did not translate into optimism over the polls. Myanmar citizens evaluated the 2010 and 2015 elections (the latter in advance), and less than a third (28%) assessed the 2010 poll as completely free and fair. This number increased for the 2015 election (33%). The high positive assessment reveals a lack of knowledge of what constitutes a free and fair election.

This lack of knowledge as well as reserve over this sensitive political question contributed to the high ‘no answers’ (33%). The remaining citizens perceived the polls with varied levels of flaws, from minor problems to completely not fair. There was considerably more optimism in the electoral process for the 2015 polls as compared to those in 2010.

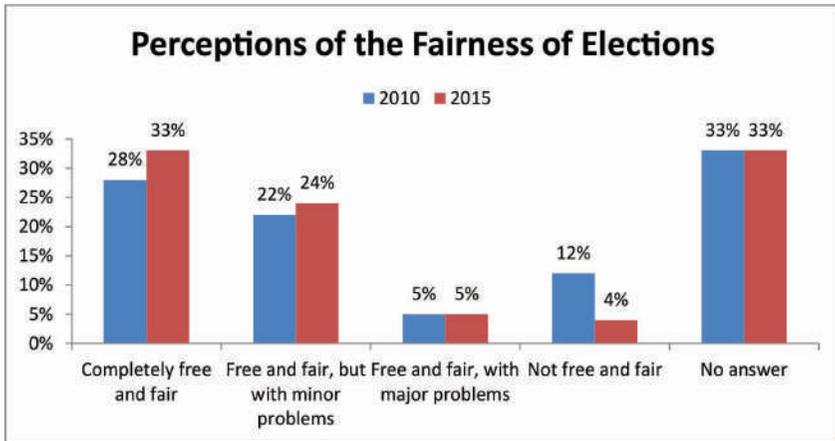


Fig. 45 Perceptions of the Fairness of Elections

When Myanmar citizens were asked about their future vote choice, there was even more reluctance to respond. Half of the respondents (50%) refused to answer this question. These prospective voters were opting to keep their preference to themselves or had not yet decided which party they were supporting up to eleven months before the election. Those that did respond showed a higher preference for the National League for Democracy (NLD), the party that won the election decisively. Many of those reluctant to speak out of indecision opted to support the NLD. The USDP received a national average of 15%,



not far off of the amount they received in the popular vote in the final November tally.

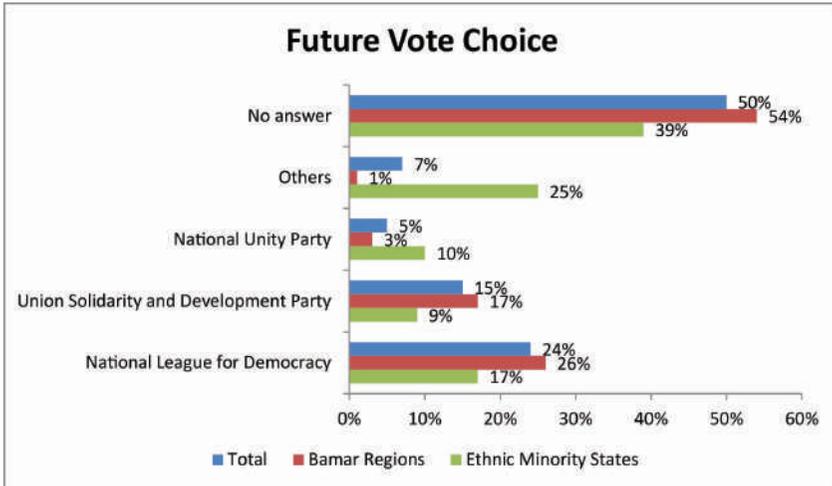


Fig. 46 Future Vote Choice

We distinguish between Bamar majority regions and ethnic minority dominated states and see that ethnic parties (listed under the ‘other’ category) received a quarter of support, but their vote was split among other parties as well. In the final count, most voters in ethnic minority states followed the national trend of voting for the NLD.

The findings for the preferred president choice among Myanmar citizens are in line with party preferences. A majority (54%) did not answer, with those that did showing a preference for NLD leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (26%). This varied little across the states and regions. The USDP leader President U Thein Sein received a level of support on par with that of his party (16%). Daw Aung San Sui Kyi was able to pull more support than her party. The presidency is an indirect election by Myanmar’s parliament, but early on voters were signaling their preferred choice.

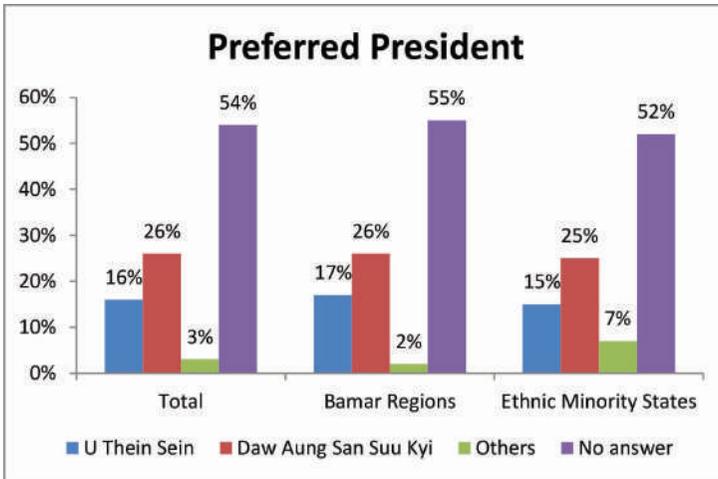


Fig. 47 Preferred President

Surveys examining politics are a relatively new phenomenon in Myanmar. The lack of familiarity as well as concerns over the political climate, including possible fear in answering politically sensitive questions, can help us understand the high level of political reserve in answering questions surrounding vote choice. This question always receives higher no answers in the Barometer surveys, as many believe that vote choice is private. We do see, however, in looking at how Myanmar citizens responded to voting preferences in the 2010 election that there is higher reserve (44%) in answering this question as compared to other countries in Southeast Asia. The ABS shows that Myanmar citizens are not (yet) comfortable in sharing their voting preferences.

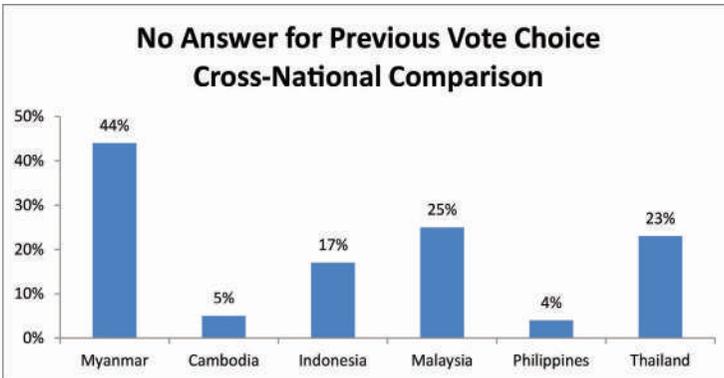


Fig. 48 No Answer for Previous Vote Choice. Cross-National Comparison

This lack of comfort extends into how Myanmar citizens reflect their partisan identity. A large majority of Myanmar citizens (62%) do not identify with any political party. This high number reflects reserve in answering this question, but also reveals that partisan identity in Myanmar is low. Only a small number of Myanmar citizens identify with political parties. The highest affinity is to the NLD (19%), followed by USDP (14%). There was higher party identification with the NLD in Bamar regions (22%), while ethnic parties receive higher party identity in ethnic minority states (10%). The ABS data reveals that both the NLD and USPD have their core supporters.

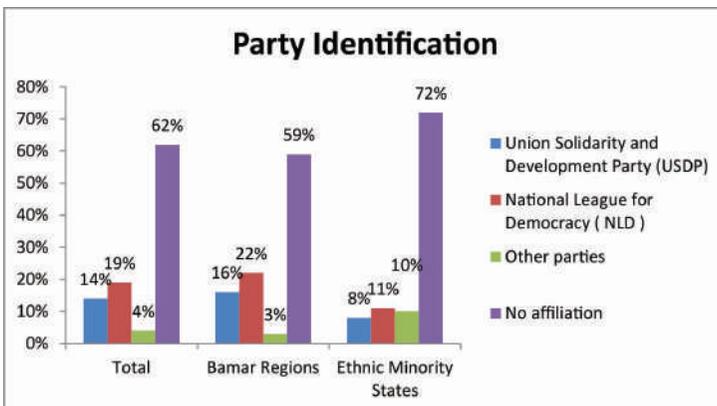


Fig. 49 Party Identification

These core party supporters are comparatively weak, however. In fact, among those that responded to party identification, only a quarter (26%) stated that they were 'very close.' This number is higher for the NLD (29%) than the USDP (22%), but both partisan affinities are low.

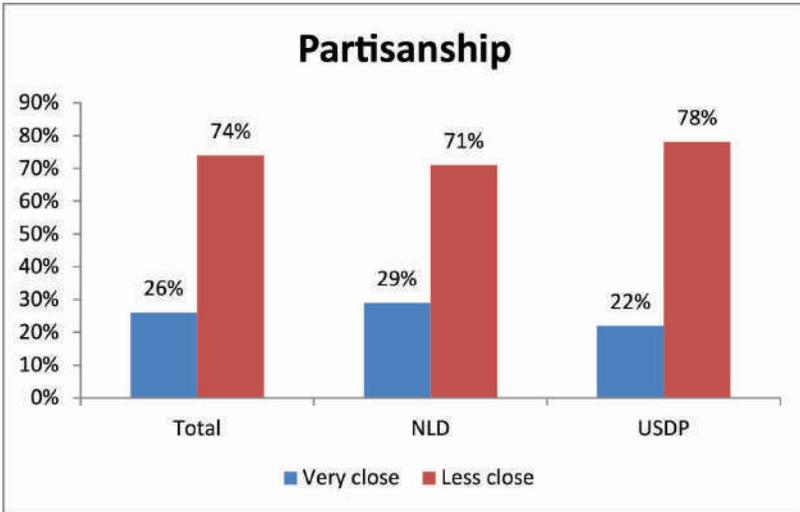


Fig. 50 Partisanship

Political participation in Myanmar extends beyond elections. Generally, when asked whether Myanmar citizens participate in signing petitions, demonstrating and contacting officials, Myanmar citizens record very low numbers. These avenues for political participation are expanding, but the overwhelming majority of Myanmar citizens still do not participate in these areas. Where they do participate in political life is at the local level. This reaffirms the high levels of local engagement in social organizations noted above. Two fifths of Myanmar citizens (40%) participate in solving local problems, with the majority of these (34% out of 40%) participating more than once. A quarter (25%) answered that they would not participate, but above a third (35%) expressed a willingness to participate when given the chance. There are no significant differences across the rural-urban divide. This finding challenges the view that Myanmar citizens do not participate in politics.

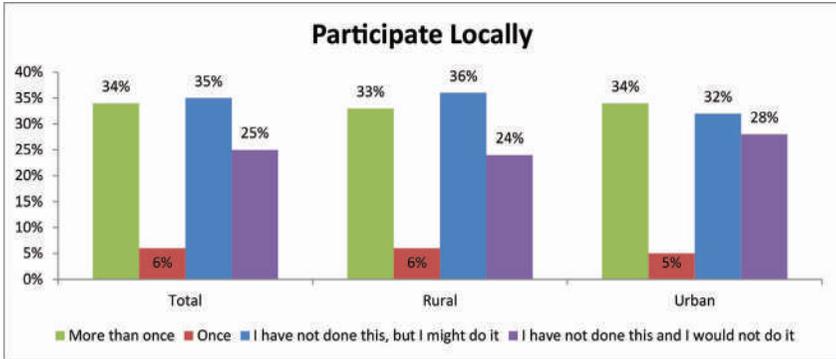


Fig. 51 Participate Locally

# Political Identity & Conflicts

How Myanmar citizens participate in politics is shaped by how they identify themselves and how they are engaged by government. One of the main findings of the ABS survey is the central role that religion plays in the political identity of Myanmar citizens. This finding will not come as a surprise given the level of religious mobilization in the past few years.

Compared to other Southeast Asian countries, Myanmar citizens report high levels of religiosity, with a majority (73%) practicing their faith at least once a day. This high level of religiosity extends across faiths, from the majority Buddhists to Christians, Hindus and Muslims. The only other two countries that have higher levels of religiosity are Indonesia and Malaysia.

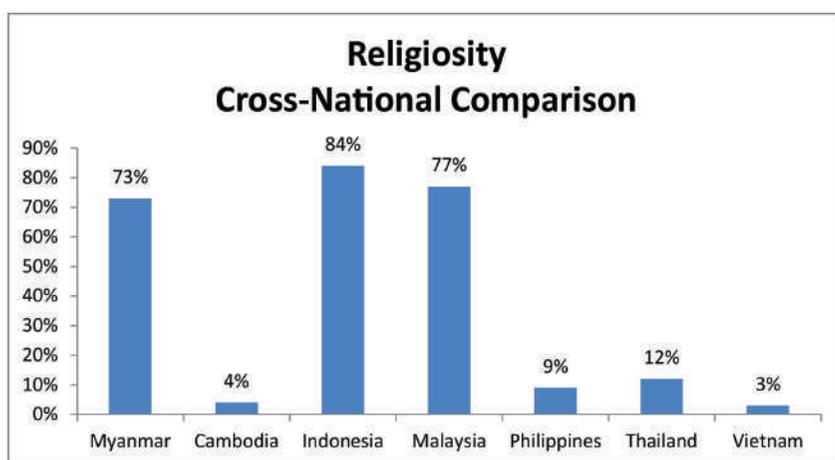


Fig. 52 Religiosity. Cross-National Comparison

Religiosity also translates into high-levels of support for consulting religious authorities when making law. A majority (69%) favored this practice, with only a small minority disagreeing (14%). These findings show that support for secular governance is limited in Myanmar.

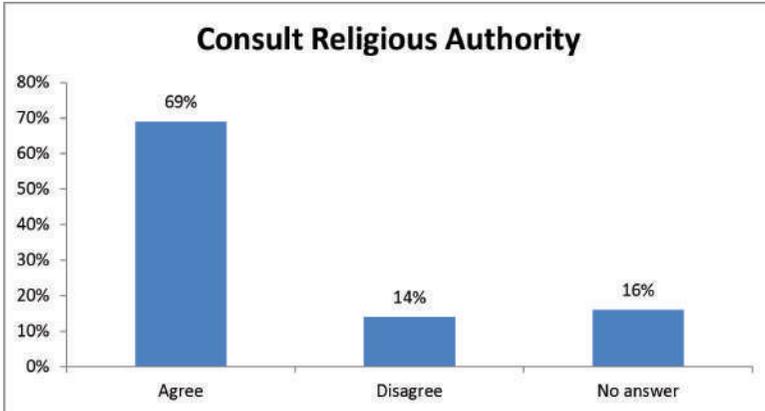


Fig. 53 Consult Religious Authority

Other responses also confirm this trend. Myanmar citizens were asked whether citizenship should be based on religion, with a similar large majority (61%) concurring. There are differences according to faiths, with a majority of non-Buddhists (52%) disagreeing on the tie between citizenship and religion.

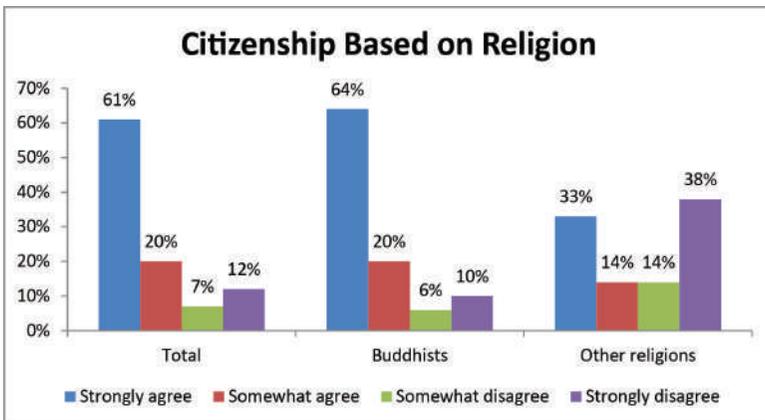


Fig. 54 Citizenship Based on Religion

These differences over citizenship rights extend into perceptions of how different groups are treated by the government. Myanmar citizens were asked whether different religious communities are treated equally, with a majority (64%) agreeing that there was equal treatment. Religious minorities had very different views on this issue compared to the majority Buddhists. A majority (56%) of non-Buddhists disagreed.

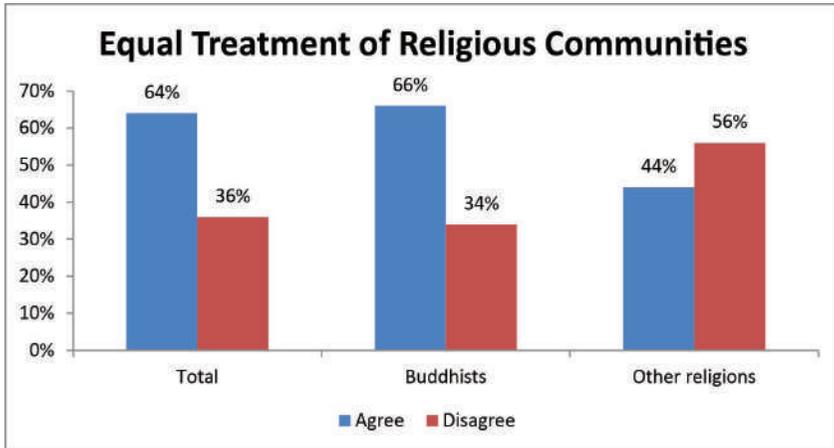


Fig. 55 Equal Treatment of Religious Communities

A similar question was asked about the treatment of ethnic minorities. Here the majority who perceived equal treatment was smaller than with regard to religious communities (55% as compared to 64%), but there were different views of this issues according to whether you were part of the minority. A majority of ethnic minorities (59%) did not perceive equal treatment. The relationship between the minorities and the government in Myanmar remains one of the most challenging areas of governance, feeding into conflict whilst also being reproduced by conflict. Minorities in Myanmar – both religious and ethnic – perceive discrimination, while the majority Buddhists/Bamar have very different outlooks on this issue. These differences speak to the need for greater dialogue and the need to address underlying causes of discrimination.

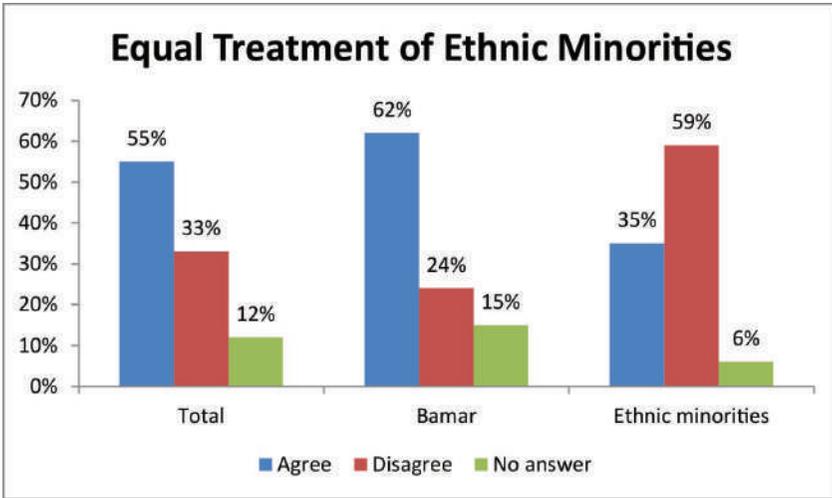


Fig. 56 Equal Treatment of Ethnic Minorities

How Myanmar citizens relate to the state remains a contentious issue. There are ongoing conflicts in Myanmar even as there has been progress in negotiating ceasefires. The ABS findings suggest that religion is the most powerful marker of political identity. Respondents were asked to prioritize their self-identity, to select either their religion, ethnicity or the nation of Myanmar. The majority of Myanmar citizens (53%) opted for their religion, followed by a third (32%) selecting ‘Myanmar’. Only a small minority (15%) opted for ethnicity.

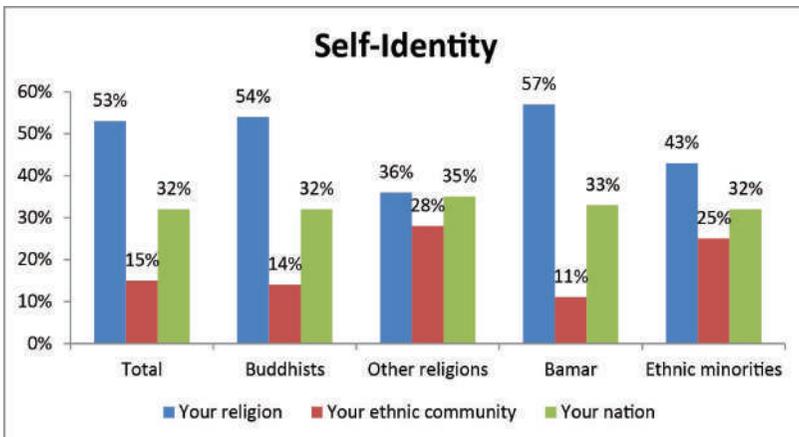


Fig. 57 Self-Identity

Here too the differences between the majority and minority in terms of how they self-identified emerged. Buddhists were more inclined to identify with their religion first (54%), while non-Buddhists were equally divided between their religion (36%) and Myanmar as a nation (35%). This division extended into ethnic minorities as well, as more ethnic minorities self-identified with their ethnicity compared to Bamar (25% compared to 11%). The low level of ethnic identity among ethnic minorities was surprising, with more ethnic minorities opting for Myanmar as a nation (32%). This speaks to the nation-building process in Myanmar. While the focus has been on ethnic conflict and division, the ABS data indicates that a third of Myanmar citizens put the country first in how they identify themselves.

The ABS findings more generally revealed positive signs for the future of ethnic conflict in Myanmar. First of all, a large majority of Myanmar citizens (71%) recognized the seriousness of ethnic conflict. While this number was larger among ethnic minorities than Bamar (83% as opposed to 67%), this recognition was widespread.

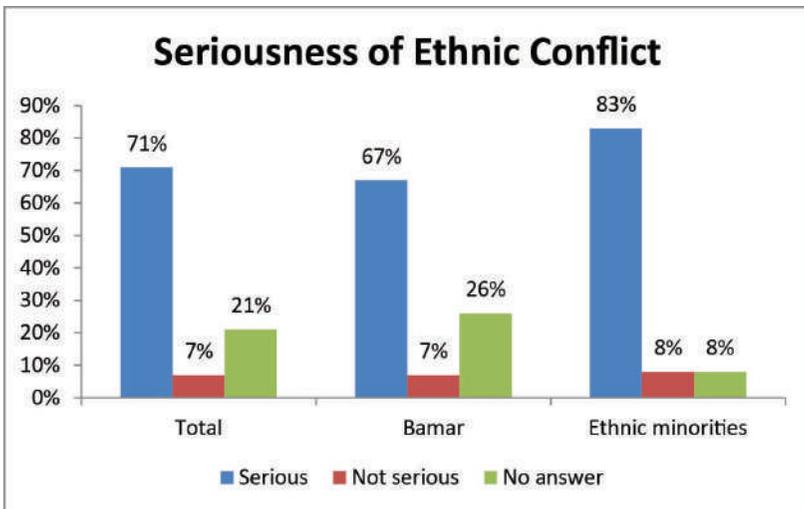


Fig. 58 Seriousness of Ethnic Conflict

Second, there is also widespread support for decentralization measures that will ameliorate ethnic conflict. A majority (52%) supported granting greater autonomy to ethnic minority states. While

this was higher among ethnic minorities (75%), a majority of Bamar (52%) also supported this decentralization of power.

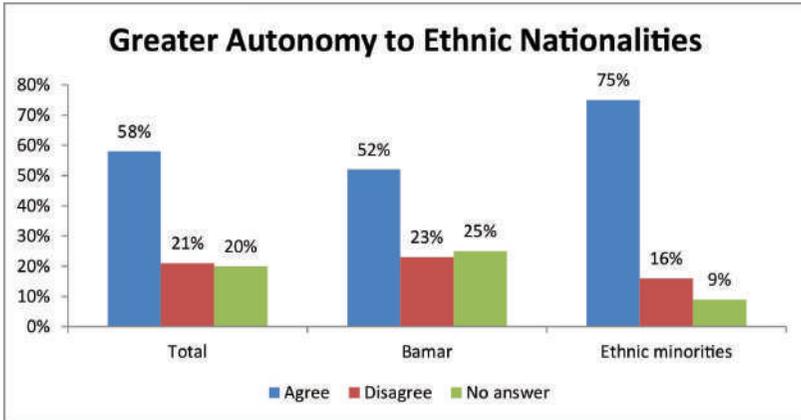


Fig. 59 Greater Autonomy to Ethnic Nationalities

A similar high level of support was extended to strengthening the federal system (51%). While in this case a majority of Bamar did not agree with the measure (only 45%), many reserved judgement and did not answer the question (35%). Not unexpectedly, a majority of ethnic minorities (67%) believed in strengthening the federal system.

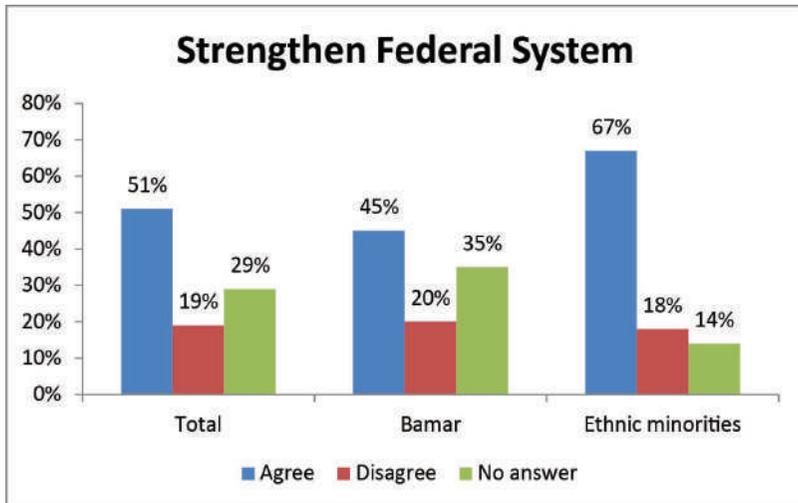


Fig. 60 Strengthen Federal System

The trend supporting decentralization of authority extended to the appointment of chief ministers to regional legislatures, with a majority supporting the power of regional legislatures to do this (64%). This extended across communities, but was supported at a higher level by ethnic minorities (77% as opposed to 60%). Currently, chief ministers are appointed by the central government. This issue has been discussed as part of ongoing constitutional reforms. The ABS data shows that there would be broad public support for such an initiative.

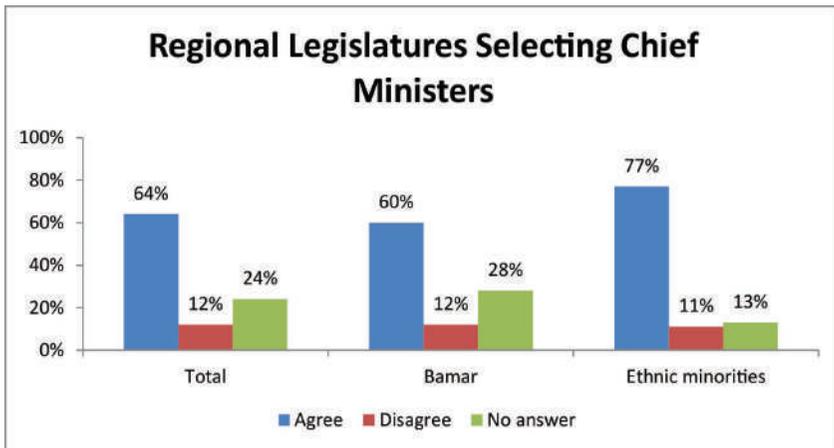


Fig. 61 Regional Legislatures Selecting Chief Ministers

Finally, there is support for the ongoing peace process, with a majority viewing the process as offering protection for ethnic minorities (54%). Nearly a third of ethnic minorities (30%) had less of a positive view of the peace process, however. More Bamar comparatively did not answer this question (26% as opposed to 15%). Nevertheless, the positive view of the peace process bodes well for future talks and negotiations.

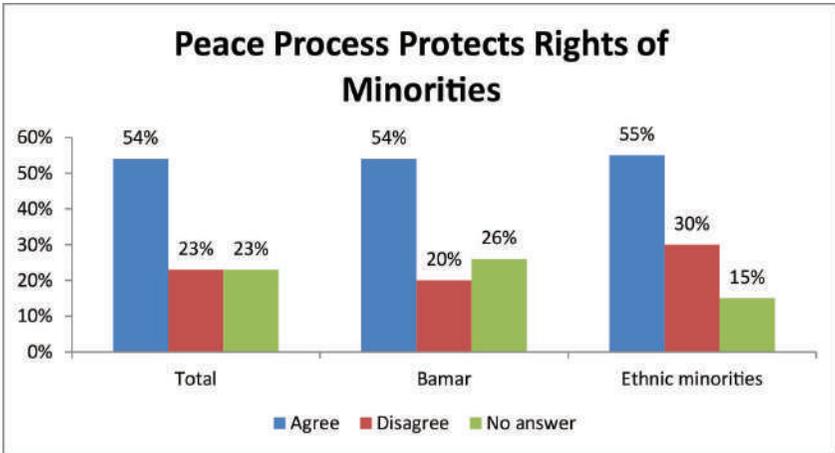


Fig. 62 Peace Process Protects Minority Rights

# Trust in Institutions

One of the main components of the ABS examines the level of institutional trust among the public. We ask respondents to assess their level of trust for a broad range of institutions, from the executive to the media. In the chart below, the



positive assessments are presented, with the core (high) level of trust distinguished from the only other positive alternative. The findings show that political institutions have low levels of high trust. Among the highest are the president and military. Taken together with other positive assessments of trust, only two institutions receive positive assessments in trust from a majority of Myanmar, the president (53%) and television (50%). There is also considerable variation in the trust levels of different institutions, with the police (27%) and the courts (32%) being the least trusted institutions. Local governments, where there is more interaction with citizens, have slightly more trust than state/regional and national government(s) (48% compared to 47% and 45% respectively). The comparative high level of trust given to NGOs and television when compared to political institutions reveals how low institutional trust is.

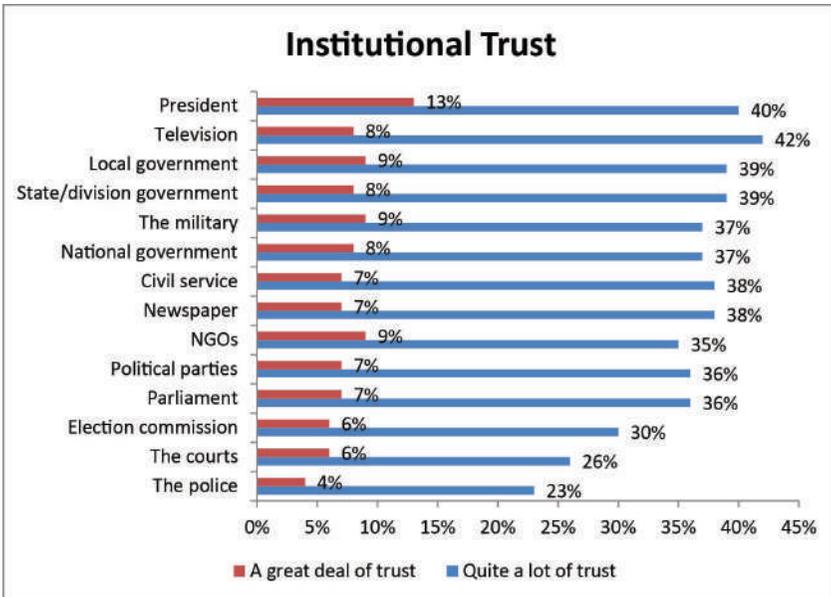


Fig. 63 Institutional Trust

When one compares the positive levels of trust in Myanmar with other countries in Southeast Asia, the levels fall towards the lower end of the spectrum. The trust of the executive in Myanmar (53%) is even lower than that recorded in the Philippines, where there is a existence of a critical citizenry. It is not as high as other selected countries in the region.

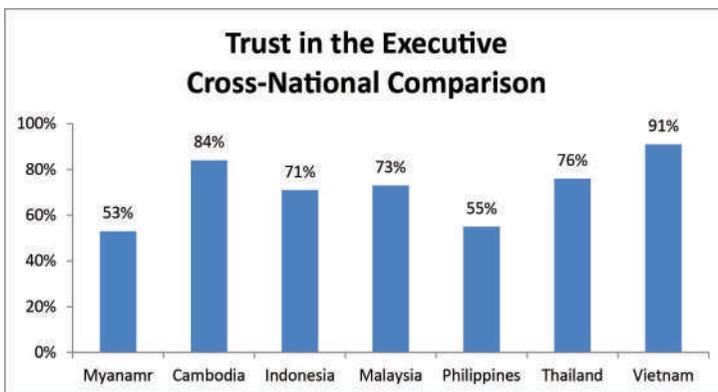


Fig. 64 Trust in the Executive. Cross-National Comparison

Myanmar citizens join the Philippines again in sharing the lowest level of trust of their parliament (43%). The institution that receives the lowest assessment and sharply stands out in this evaluation is the courts. Myanmar records the lowest level of trust in the courts across Southeast Asia (32%), only lower than the closest country, the Philippines (43%).

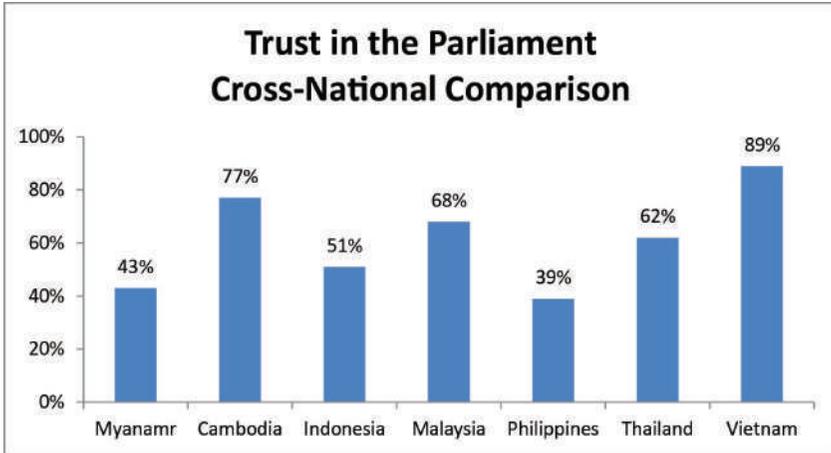


Fig. 65 Trust in the Parliament. Cross-National Comparison

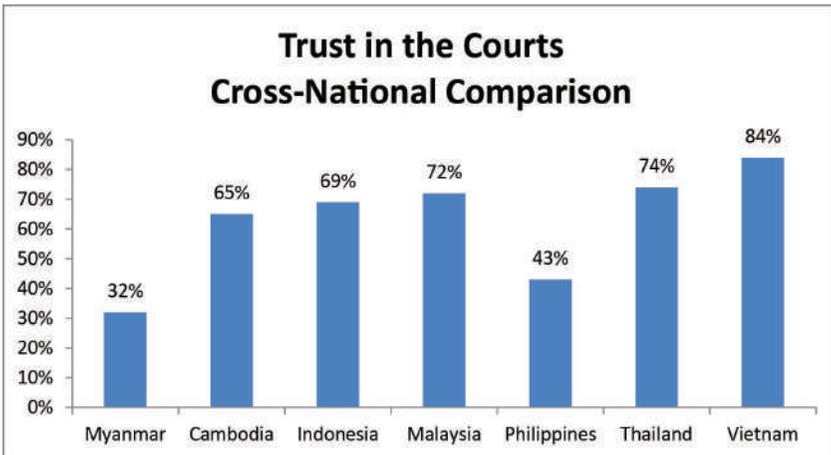


Fig. 66 Trust in the Courts. Cross-National Comparison

The judiciary is not valued as a check on other political institutions in Myanmar. Less than a third of Myanmar citizens believe that the

judiciary should check the power of leaders (31%), while almost a majority disagree (47%). This reveals the low opinion Myanmar citizens have of their courts.

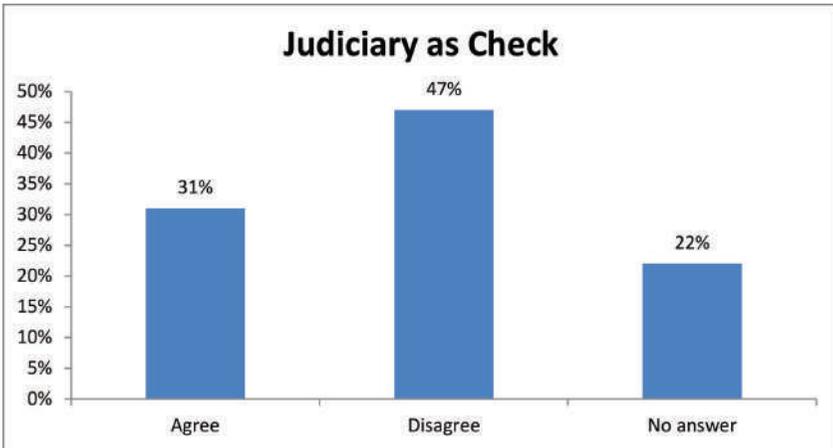


Fig. 67 Judiciary as Check

The low level of trust in the courts is only exceeded by the low level of trust in the police (28%), an assessment far below police forces in other countries in Southeast Asia. The ABS findings speak to the need for the police force to strengthen its public reputation.

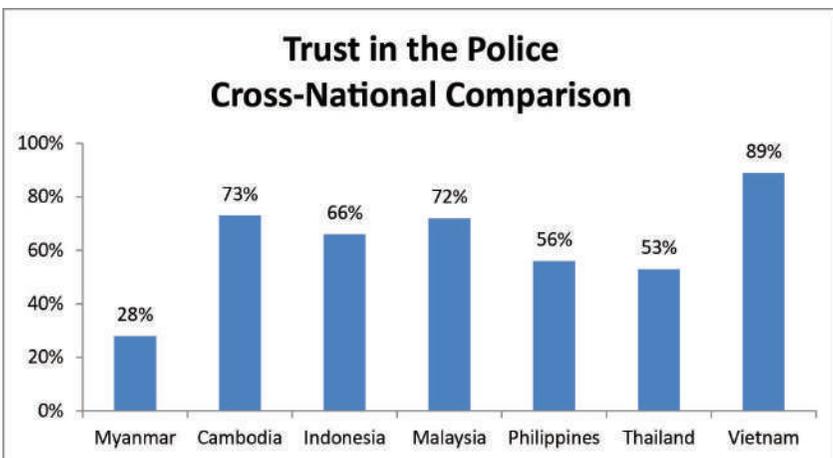


Fig. 68 Trust in the Police. Cross-National Comparison

# Military & Constitutional Reform

While Myanmar's military, the *Tatmadaw*, remains one of the most trusted political institutions in the country (at 46%), the trust levels regionally reveal that the military has among the lowest levels of support in Southeast Asia. Vietnam's military has almost double the levels of trust of Myanmar's military. Even the Philippine armed forces has higher trust levels (65%).

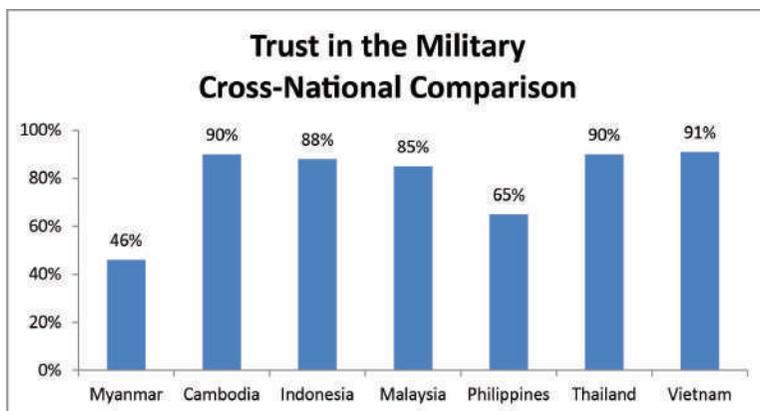


Fig. 69 Trust in the Military. Cross-National Comparison

The role that the *Tatmadaw* will play in political life in Myanmar is evolving and changing. The ABS findings show that Myanmar citizens are almost equally divided on whether the military should play a role in politics, with almost the same percentages taking opposing positions (39% and 40% below). This division highlights the challenge that Myanmar will face in negotiating a different role for the *Tatmadaw*.

There is however more agreement over whether the military should play a role in the economy, with a majority opposing a role in the economy (51%) and less than a third supporting it (29%). In light of the sensitivity of these questions, there were many who did not answer this question.

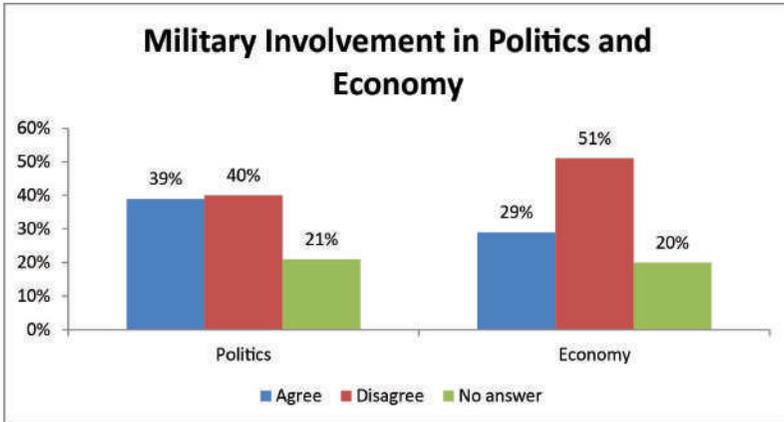


Fig. 70 Military Involvement in Politics and Economy

The role of the military in politics has caused different views among the Bamar majority and ethnic minorities. Nearly 60% of Bamar agreed that the military should come in to govern the country, with only 40% of ethnic minorities concurring. On the other hand, there is no difference between rural and urban respondents; more than half agreed.

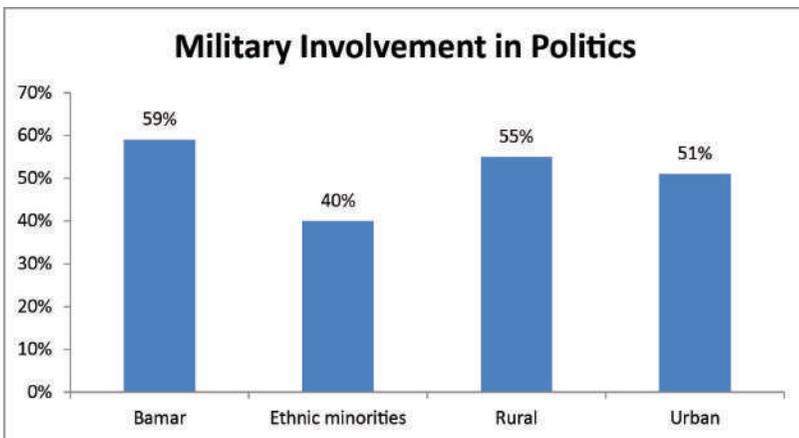


Fig. 71 Military Involvement in Politics

Myanmar citizens were even more reluctant to share their views of constitutional change. This could be the product of a lack of understanding of the provisions, but more likely this was tied to the sensitivities of the issues involved. A majority (57%) did not answer the question as to whether the threshold to change the constitution should be changed, effectively making amendments easier. Those that did, 37% respond in favor.

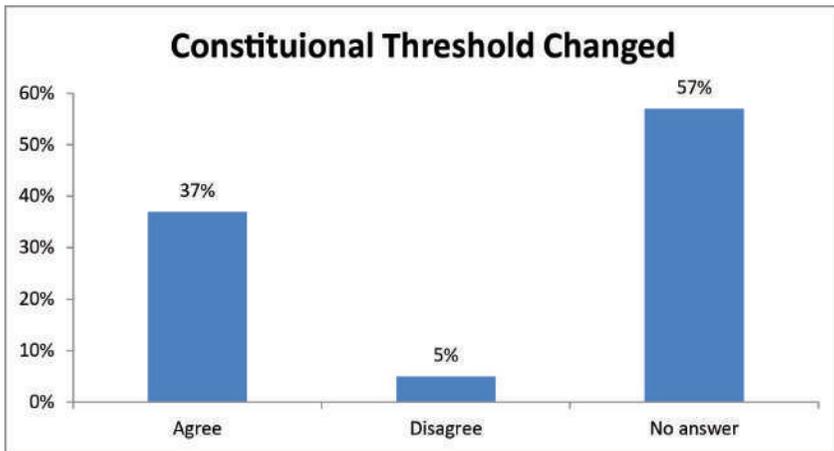


Fig. 72 Constitutional Threshold Changed

The need to lower the threshold to allow amendments to the constitution is tied to one of the most controversial measures in the document, clause 59F. This provision prevents Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from becoming the president as it does not allow a person who is married to or has children who are not Myanmar citizens to hold the office. A similar pattern was evident in the responses, with a majority not answering the question (57%) and those responding doing so affirmatively (36%). The constitutional issues remain among the most challenging in Myanmar's ongoing changes.



Fig. 73 Removal of 59F Clause

# Systemic Support

Myanmar citizens do want political change. This was evident in the November 2015 election results, but is also apparent in the ABS survey. About a fifth of Myanmar citizens (21%) believe the system is fine as it is. A majority would like change, either minor or major change (30% and 45% respectively). Of all the Southeast Asian countries, Myanmar records the highest support for major change. The Myanmar public is not alone in asking for changes in their political systems, as shown in the cross-national comparison.

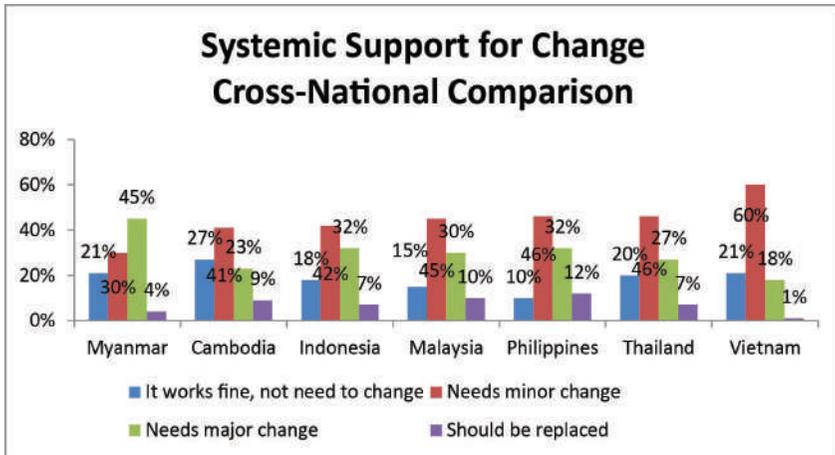


Fig. 74 Systemic Support for Change. Cross-National Comparison

Traditionally in Southeast Asia, rural areas are seen to be more supportive of incumbent governments, in part due to the lack of information and comparatively lower standards of education. In examining the rural-urban divide, there are some modest differences.

More rural Myanmar believe the system is working fine as it is (20% compared to 13%), but the levels who believe the system needs major change are similar across the divide.

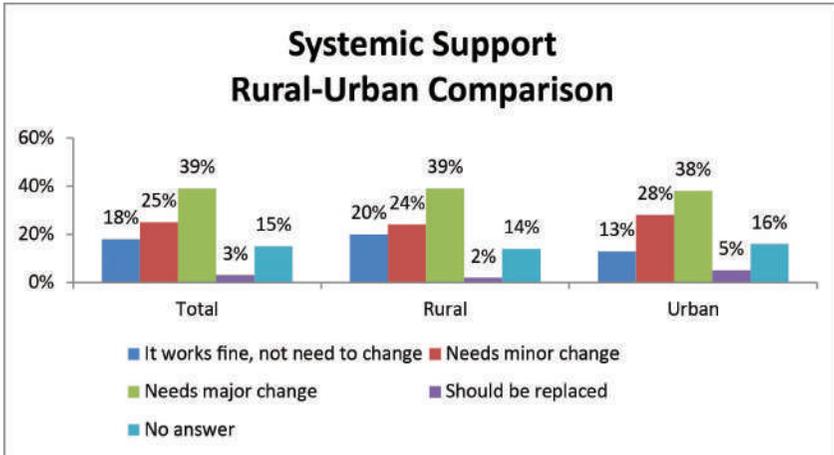


Fig. 75 Systemic Support. Rural-Urban Comparison

Beyond the issue of change, the ABS asked whether the political system was capable of solving the country's problems. The majority agreed (65%), indicating a confidence that Myanmar is capable of solving its own problems. This level is lower than other countries in the region, however.

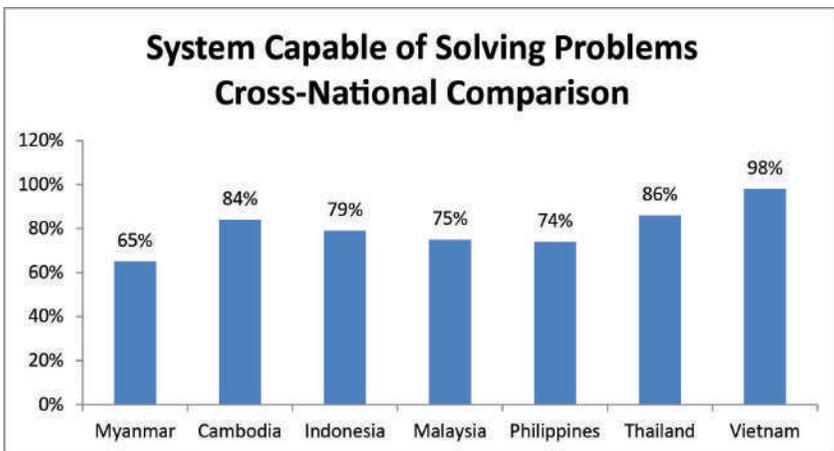


Fig. 76 System Capable of Solving Problems. Cross-National Comparison

In a rural-urban comparison of the belief in current system being able to solve problems, rural Myanmar citizens are more confident in the system than their urban counterparts. It confirms that rural residents do have the tendency to support the current system, while urban dwellers are more critical.

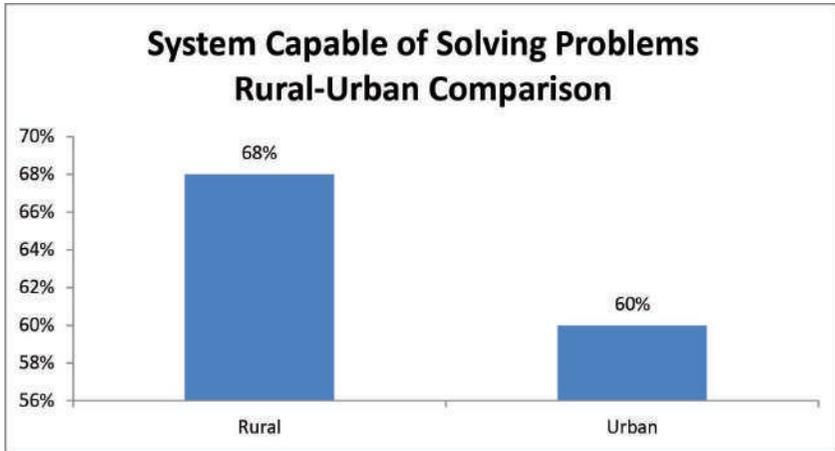


Fig. 77 System Capable of Solving Problems. Rural-Urban Comparison

# Governance & Services

Public assessments of the Myanmar government show room for improvement. Myanmar citizens were asked to assess the responsiveness of government and only 40% gave the government a favorable assessment. Myanmar joins Indonesia and the Philippines in the lowest rank of the assessment across the region.

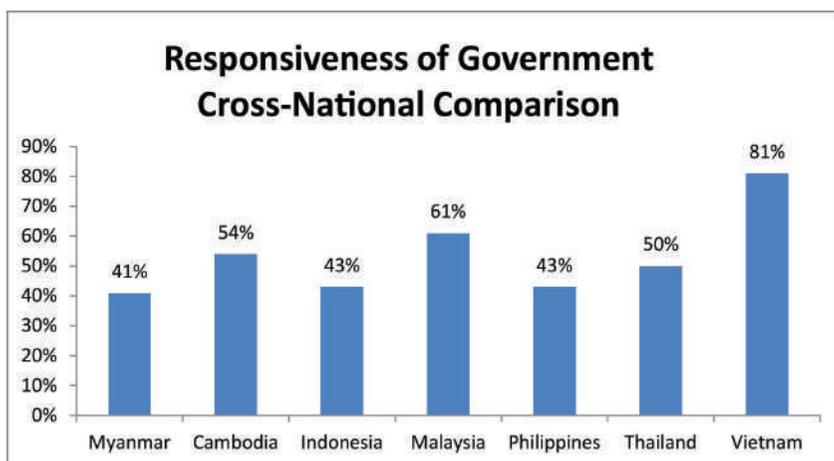


Fig. 78 Responsiveness of Government. Cross-National Comparison

In terms of a rural-urban comparison, rural Myanmar citizens, again, are more willing to give the government positive evaluations, while urban residents are more negative. This more favorable assessment of governments in rural areas as compared to urban dwellers is a common pattern in Southeast Asia, as in Indonesia.

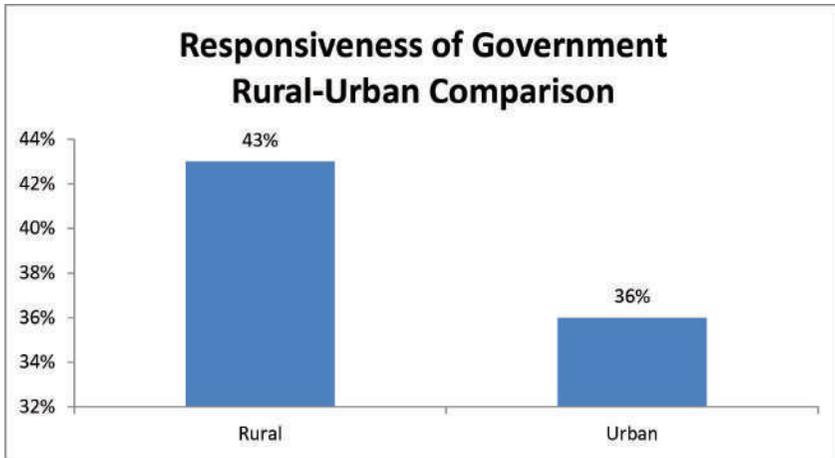


Fig. 79 Responsiveness of Government. Rural-Urban Comparison

Myanmar citizen’s assessment of government responsiveness was the lowest in Southeast Asia. This low ranking was echoed in how Myanmar citizens assessed whether people have basic needs fulfilled (housing, food, water). A majority (56%) believed they did, but this was far lower than the assessments of regional neighbors.

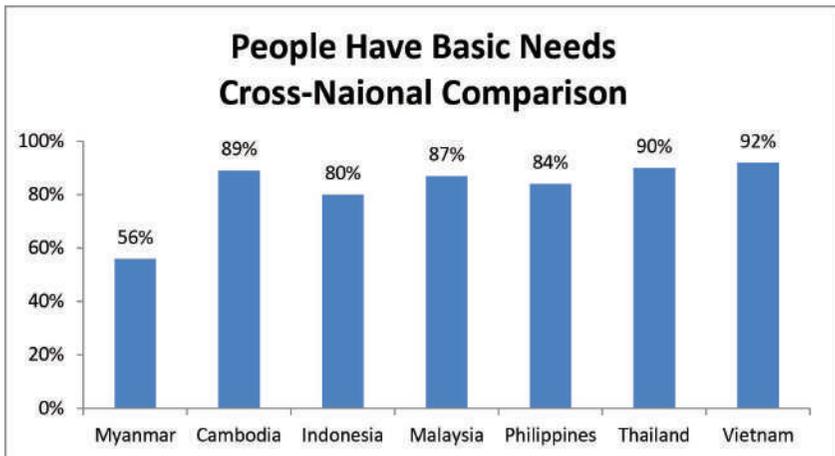


Fig. 80 People Have Basic Needs. Cross-National Comparison

Although poverty is rampant in rural areas, more rural Myanmar citizens gave positive assessments about the provision of basic necessities

than their urban counterparts. This might be due to the definition of basic needs being different in rural and urban areas. However, rural Myanmar citizens tended not to give negative evaluations concerning governance.

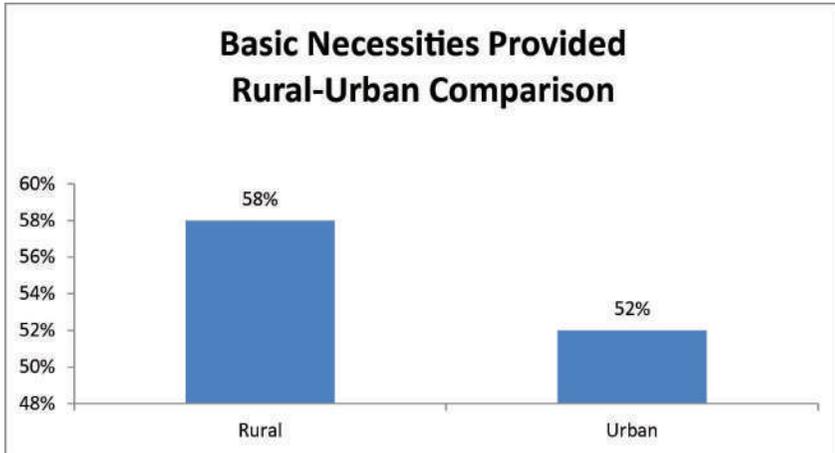


Fig. 81 Basic Necessities Provided. Rural-Urban Comparison

Myanmar citizens were asked how they assessed the performance of President U Thein Sein, with a high majority giving him a favorable rating (80%), although the largest share were only ‘somewhat satisfied’ (56%). Despite the outcome of the November elections, the President U Thein Sein’s performance was seen as positive.

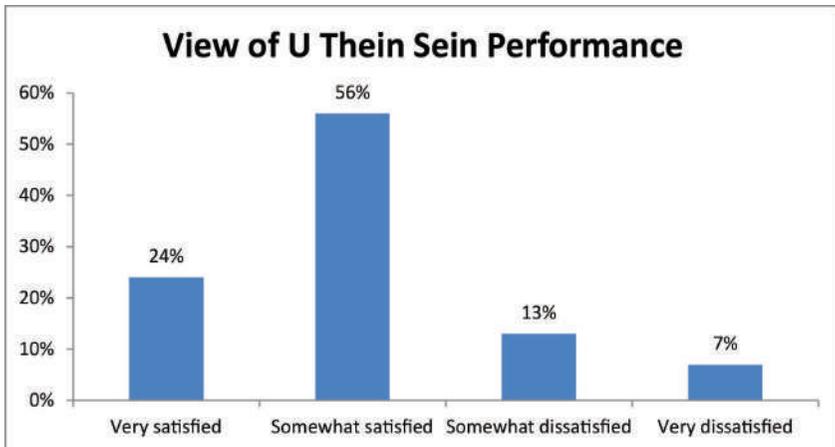


Fig. 82 Views of U Thein Sein Performance

Myanmar citizens also had positive assessments of access to public services. Recall that 14% of Myanmar citizens held that government services was the country's most serious problem. A close look at the responses below, show that Myanmar compares well with other countries, notably in the provision of public schools. The one standout result is the low evaluation given to the police, with only a quarter (25%) of the population giving it a favorable rating.

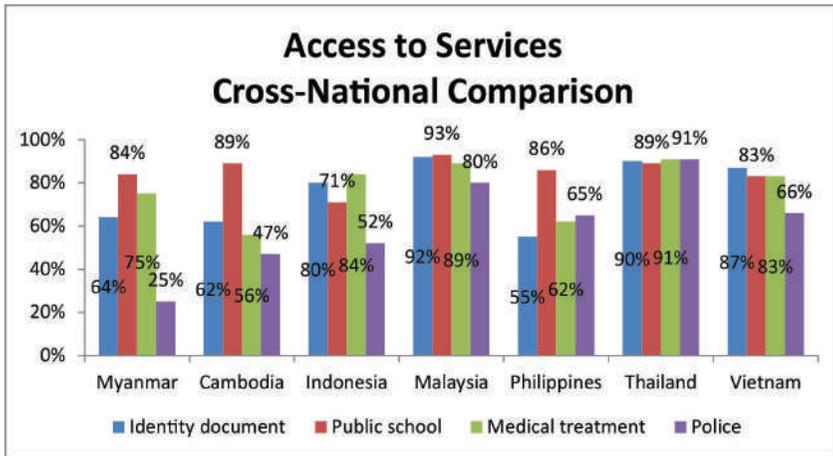


Fig. 83 Access to Services. Cross-National Comparison

There were some differences in assessing services according to rural and urban areas. Transportation and medical treatment were more accessible in urban areas (89% compared to 68% in the former and 88% compared to 74% in the latter). As identity documents are provided by local government authorities, it is not surprising that there is more access in rural areas (66% compared to 61%). These highly positive assessments of services do not conform to many of the conditions in Myanmar, especially in rural and remote areas. There is actually minimal provision of public transportation, as services are provided by private individuals. This shows that political knowledge needs to be improved generally, including regarding service provision.

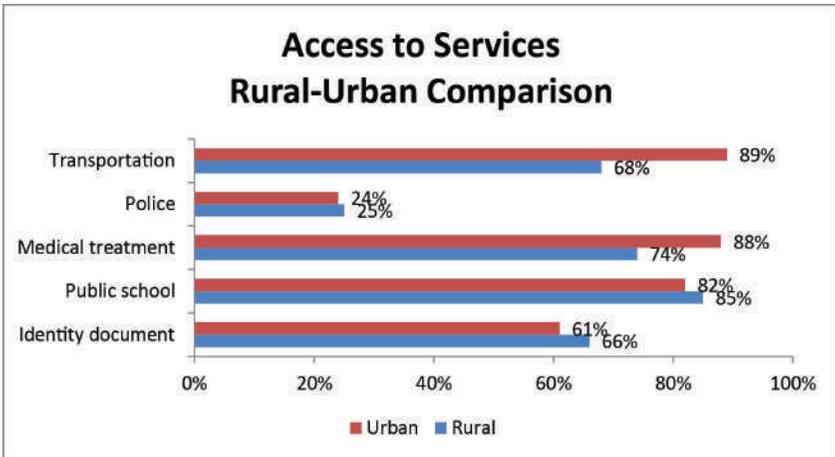


Fig. 84 Access to Services. Rural-Urban Comparison

One area where there has been rapid and meaningful expansion of services has been the Internet. This has been brought about by the improvements in telecommunications, as most Myanmar citizens access the Internet through smart phones. Nearly a fifth of Myanmar citizens now have internet access (18%), with this being larger in urban areas (31%) where the telecommunication infrastructure is better.

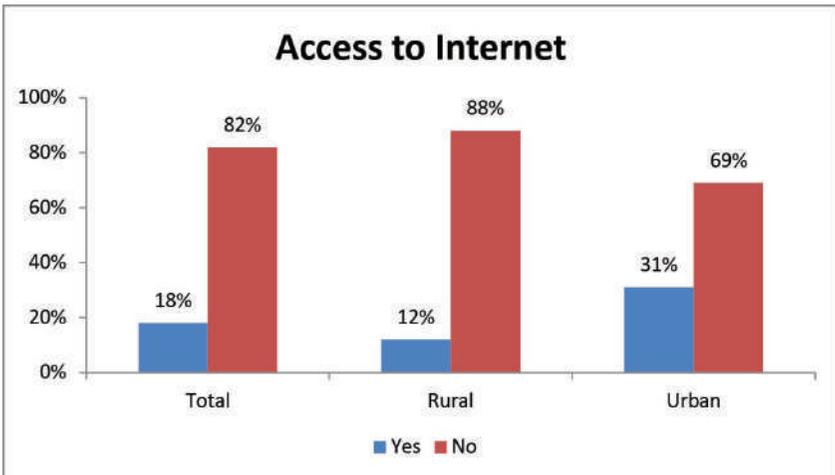


Fig. 85 Access to the Internet. Rural-Urban Comparison

Myanmar citizens were asked other questions examining the quality of governance. Despite Myanmar scoring low on the Transparency International Corruption Index, only 40% perceive that their government is corrupt, with local government that is more familiar to most citizens receiving slightly lower and more negative assessments (41% compared to 42%). However, compared to other countries in the region, citizens generally perceive corruption as widespread in the government; with the national government receiving even more negative evaluations.

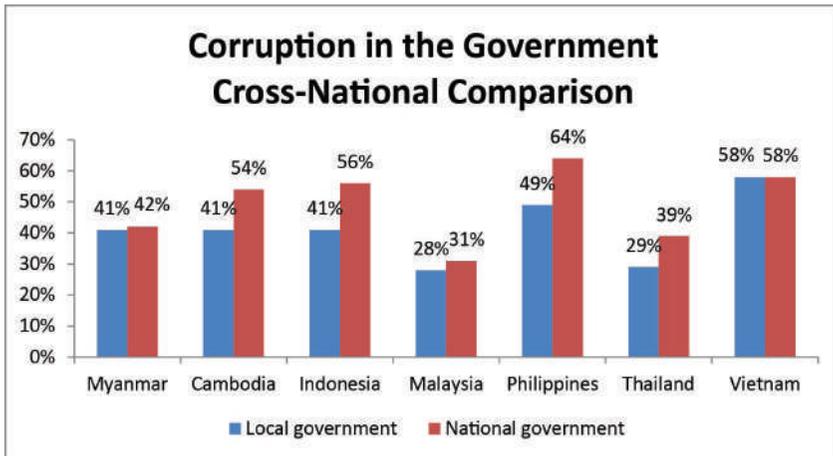


Fig. 86 Corruption in Government. Cross-National Comparison

Myanmar citizens were asked questions about corruption in specific institutions, and there was considerable variation. The police received the worst assessment, with over two thirds (69%) believing they were corrupt. A majority of Myanmar citizens also believed that judges/magistrates (59%), business executives (54%), tax officials (54%) and government officials (54%) were corrupt. Religious and traditional leaders were seen as the least corrupt, with less than a quarter viewing them as corrupt (24% and 21% respectively).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> These questions are part of the Transparency International battery that was implemented along with the Myanmar ABS and will be published in more detail in a separate report.

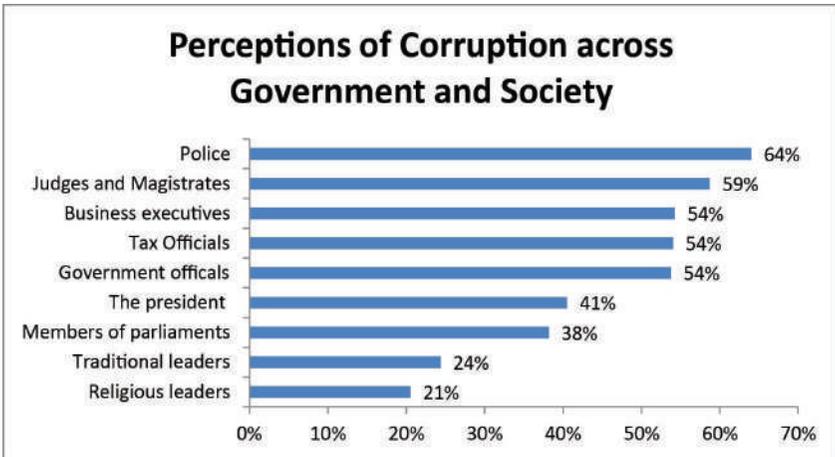


Fig. 87 Perceptions of Corruption across Government and Society

Myanmar citizens were also asked how they perceived corruption over the last year, with the plurality perceiving corruption on the decline (47%). Only a small minority (18%) believed corruption had increased, with the remainder perceiving corruption levels as the same (28%).

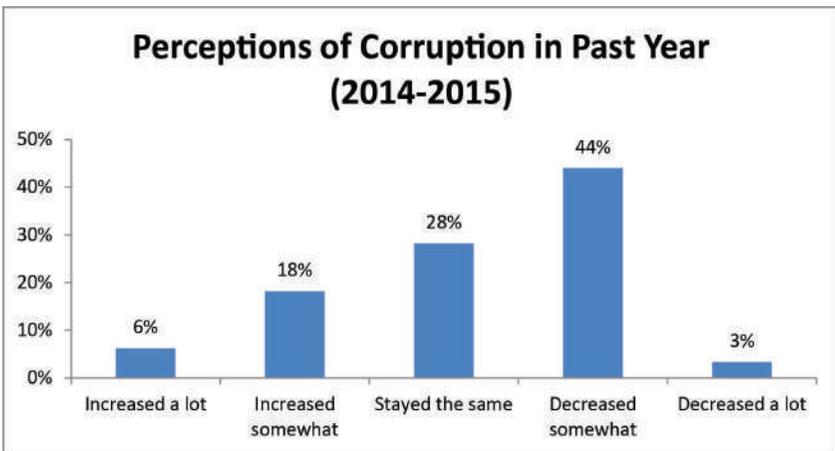


Fig. 88 Perceptions of Corruption in Past Year (2014-2015)

Myanmar citizens were more critical in evaluating whether officials abuse their power in office. Compared to neighbors in mainland Southeast Asia, Myanmar has the highest percentage of citizens believing

that government officials and leaders abuse their power frequently. Such perception is even worse than in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines.

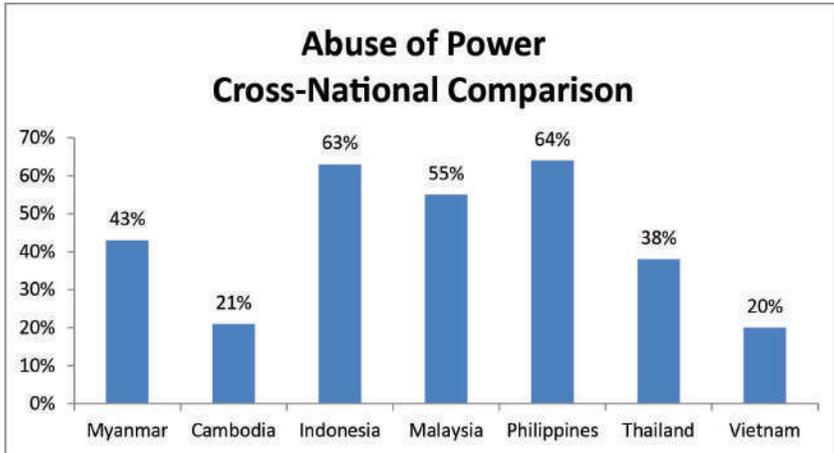


Fig. 89 Abuse of Power. Cross-National Comparison

One of the most prominent issues in Myanmar has involved land grabbing – a region-wide problem. A majority of Myanmar citizens see this issue as serious (70%), with most of these perceiving the problem as ‘very serious’ (54%).

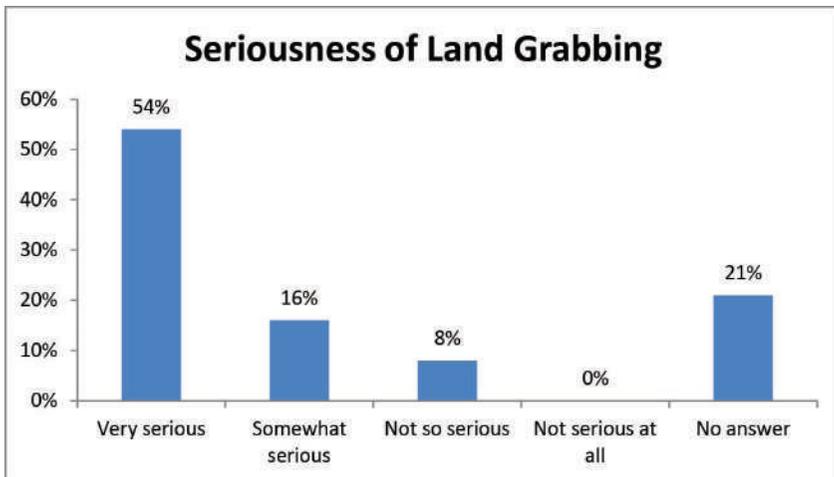


Fig. 90 Seriousness of Land Grabbing

Myanmar citizens were evenly divided on whether the government treated rich and poor equally. A majority however (59%) did not perceive an equal opportunity to engage in business.

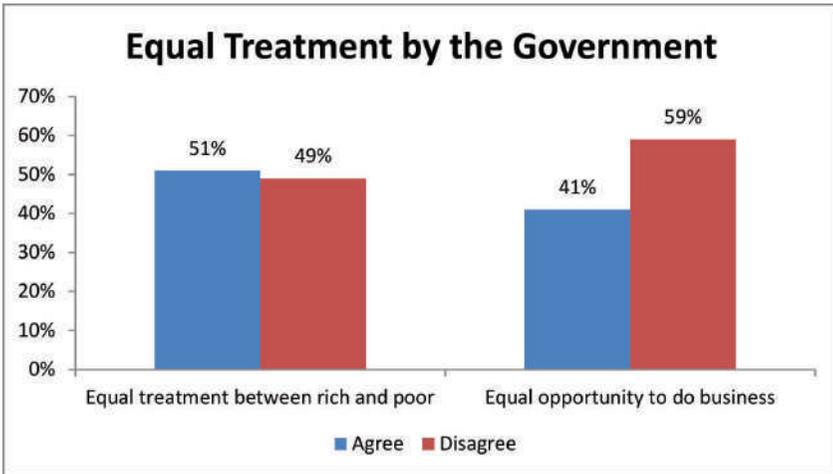


Fig. 91 Equal Treatment by the Government

# Globalization

Along with questions about domestic environment, the ABS asked Myanmar citizens their view of globalization and regional relations.

Myanmar citizens were asked whether they should defend the Myanmar way of life, with a majority concurring (79%). When this response is examined cross-nationally, Myanmar's call to defend their way of life is lower than the neighbors. In fact it is among the lowest. Myanmar is traditionally characterized as highly nationalistic. The ABS findings call into question this label, which is often applied more to Myanmar than to many other countries in the region.

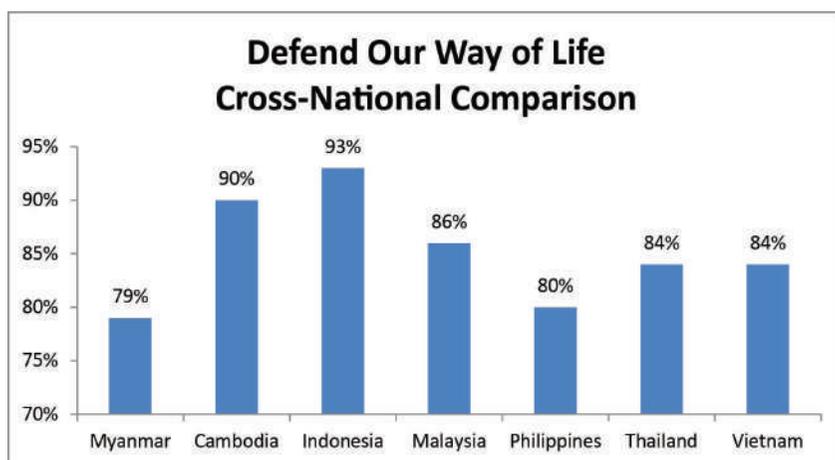


Fig. 92 Defend Our Way of Life. Cross-National Comparison

Myanmar citizens show a strong affinity to their country is when they are asked how willing they are to go abroad. Only 10% wish to live abroad, the lowest in Southeast Asia.

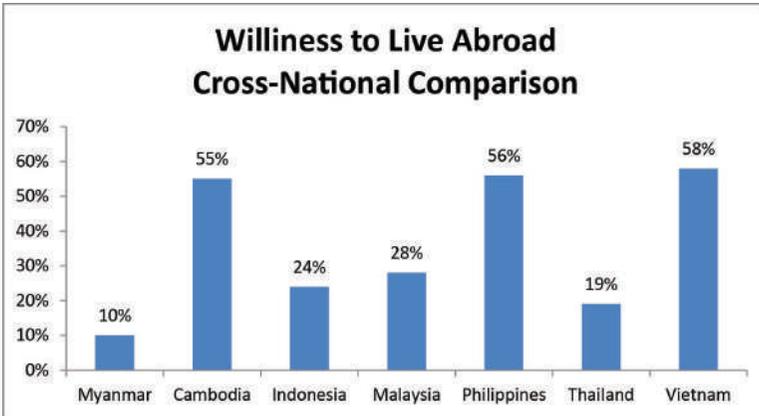


Fig. 93 Willingness to Live Abroad

Myanmar has also been described as highly protectionist, with measures to limit reform in tariffs featured in parliament in recent years. The ABS findings show that while a majority of Myanmar citizens favor limits on goods, it is on par with other countries in the region.

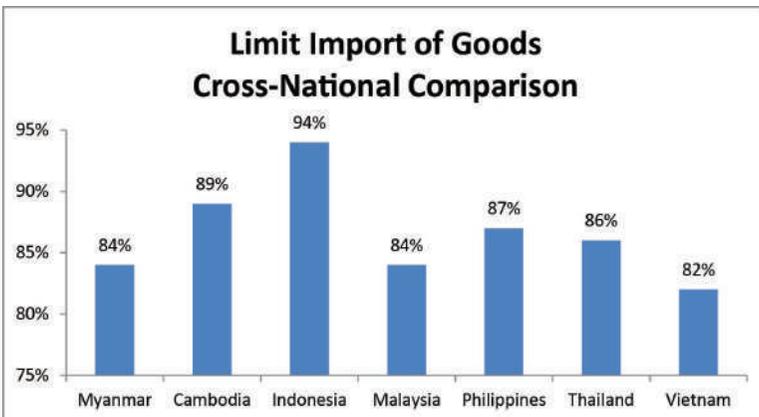


Fig. 94 Limit Import of Goods. Cross-National Comparison

In recent years, controversy has surrounded the issue of immigrants. This has been closely tied in the public domain to the treatment of the Rohingyas (also known as Bengalis). A majority would like to curb or reduce immigration (71%). This figure is almost identical to that of Thailand and Malaysia, where they receive more foreign migrants

than exporting labors to other countries. For countries where overseas remittances have been an important financial source for households, opposition is much lower.

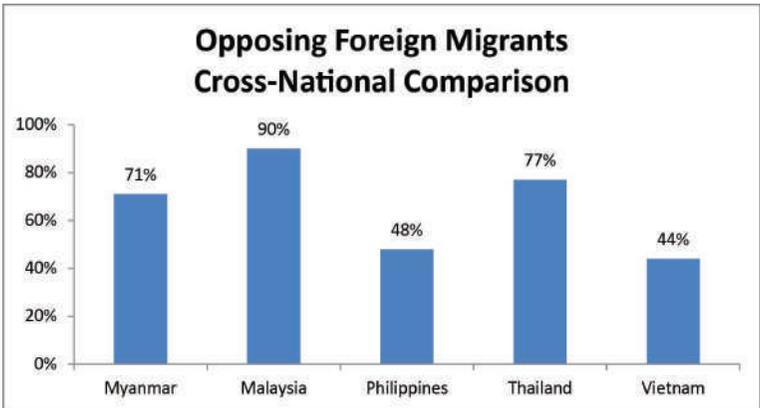


Fig. 95 Opposing Foreign Migrants. Cross-National Comparison

The ABS also asked respondents their views of China and the U.S. An overwhelming majority of Myanmar citizens have positive views of the U.S., while only 28% believing China has done good to the region. Myanmar, however, is not alone; China also rated poorly in the Philippines and Vietnam; both countries have territorial disputes with China.

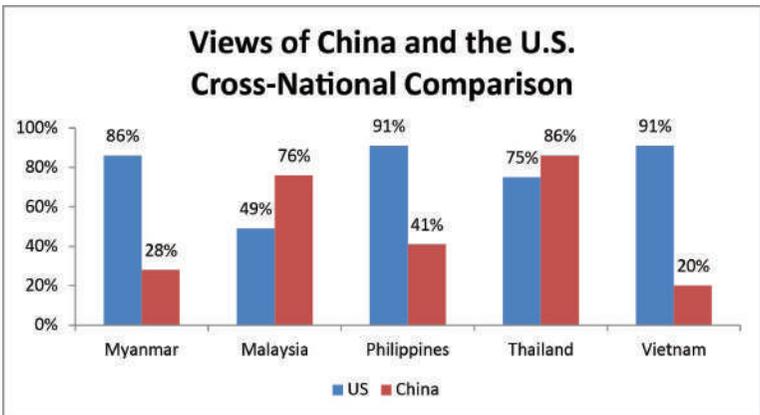


Fig. 96 Views of China and the U.S. Cross-National Comparison

Finally, compared to other countries, a majority of Myanmar citizens felt close to ASEAN, the second-highest measure after Vietnam. This might be due to the fact that Myanmar served as ASEAN chair in 2014 and this increased the visibility of ASEAN.

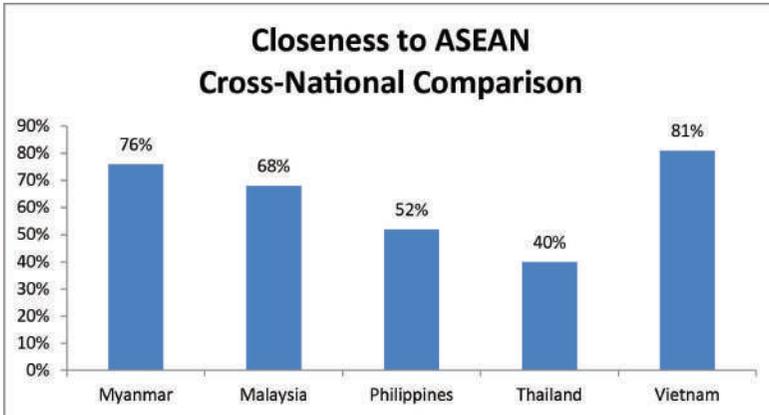


Fig. 97 Closeness to ASEAN. Cross-National Comparison

# Conclusion

The ABS survey provides insights into how ordinary Myanmar citizens view their political system. It joins a growing body of work that brings the perspectives of the public into our understanding of political attitudes and behavior. The findings suggest that there is considerable optimism about the country's future. Myanmar citizens are aspirational, looking ahead with hope in both the economy and politics. This optimism during this period of political change reinforces the ongoing positive trajectories and reaffirms the role and support of the public in moving Myanmar forward.



Myanmar citizens want change. There is strong support for political reform, particularly democratic reform. They want a political system that is not just based on elections, but brings about good governance and assures political freedoms. Myanmar citizens especially want greater equality. While Myanmar citizens were evenly divided on the role of the military in politics, they emphatically rejected a return to military rule. A majority also opposed a role for the military in the economy.

At the same time, Myanmar citizens expect improvements in the economy, as this is the most important issue for ordinary citizens. The economy is more important than political reform for most Myanmar citizens. There is widespread recognition of the need to improve socio-economic conditions. Only a majority of Myanmar believe that the government had provided basic necessities to the population, the lowest in Southeast Asia. Economic vulnerability remains high, especially in rural areas where poverty is concentrated.

A key ingredient in bringing about economic development will be reforms in governance. Myanmar citizens were not confident about the capability of the government to solve important problems and considered the government unresponsive. However, Myanmar citizens were more reserved when asked to evaluate the performance of the president and their trust in key political institutions. There was also a perception of corruption, especially in political institutions such as the police and judiciary. Despite frank assessments of governance, there was faith in the system being able to resolve the challenges the country faces.

While acknowledging improvements in political freedoms, on sensitive questions Myanmar citizens tended to give positive answers or declined to answer the questions altogether. Reserve in areas such as vote choice, party identification, and constitutional change reveal continued concern with the political space to share views. Living under military rule for decades, Myanmar citizens have learned to be cautious about what they say. Even though Myanmar is undergoing political transition, fear still lingers.

The ABS survey also found that Myanmar citizens had the most conservative political culture in Southeast Asia. Rural and urban Myanmar alike tended to respect authority, put group and national interests before individual ones, and endorse paternalism. Myanmar

citizens also emphasized social harmony and opposed pluralism. Such conservative values will likely pose an obstacle to the practice of democracy and in bringing about inclusion and greater equality.

With respect to ethnic and religious conflicts, a majority of Myanmar citizens agreed with potential solutions that could ameliorate division, namely strengthening the federal system and decentralization. However, in assessing the treatment of ethnic minorities and religious communities, Bamar and Buddhist majorities tended to give positive evaluations, while the minorities were more negative. The findings point out that there should be more dialogue and confidence-building measures among Myanmar's citizens to gauge perceptions and to address underlying issues tied to perceived discrimination.

Although Myanmar citizens in general were not satisfied with the political system and yearned for major change, the ABS survey found several positive aspects of Myanmar society that will strengthen the practice of democracy. A majority of Myanmar citizens were joiners, revealing a vibrant civil society. Moreover, Myanmar citizens were active in participating in local affairs, with two-thirds having done so at least once or considered to do so if given the opportunity. Local politics was the most important arena for ordinary Myanmar citizens. Support and preference for democracy also ranked high in Myanmar, higher than several Southeast Asian countries. Although interest in politics was low and a majority did not follow news regularly, Myanmar citizens were confident about their ability to affect politics.

Taken the findings together, Myanmar's ongoing political transition will face challenges. The population still endorses a conservative political culture and rejects pluralism and inclusion. However, optimism is strong and this aspirational dimension of Myanmar's public should not be underestimated. A majority of Myanmar citizens looked forward to major change as they had high hopes for democracy and improvements in the economy. As Myanmar enters another phase in its political history after the NLD's victory in November 2015, we hope these findings from the ABS survey provide insights that will help bring about a dynamic future for Myanmar.

# Profile of The Respondents

The Myanmar ABS was based on the 2014 census released in May 2015 and weighted for gender, age distribution and the rural-urban divide accordingly. The charts below capture the distribution.

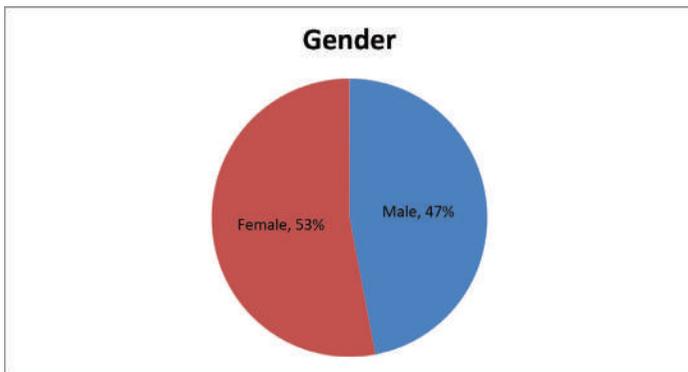


Fig. 98 Gender Distribution

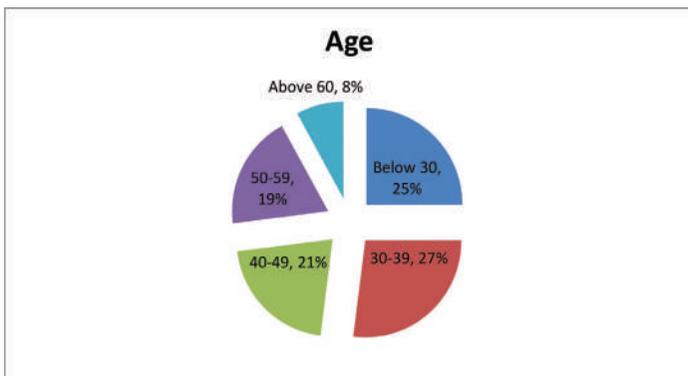


Fig. 99 Distribution of Age Groups

The census has not yet released information involving other socio-economic cleavages. The education distribution shows that only a minority (12%) have received some level of university education, with 40% not exceeding primary school.

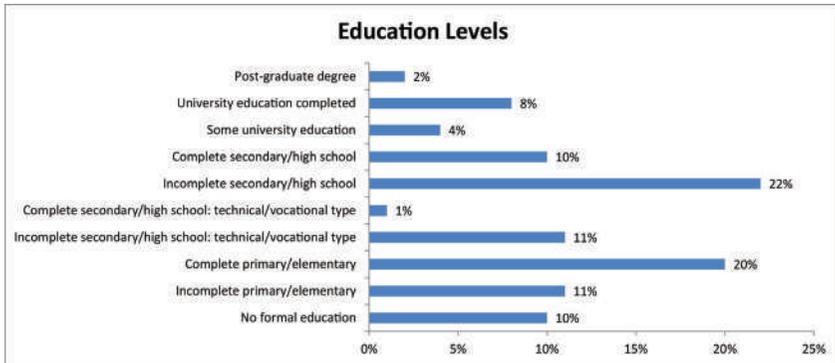


Fig. 100 Education Levels

Another area not yet released from the census is the ethnic composition of Myanmar. The ABS survey covered 31 different ethnic communities of the 135 nationally identified. The majority ethnic group covered was the Bamar.

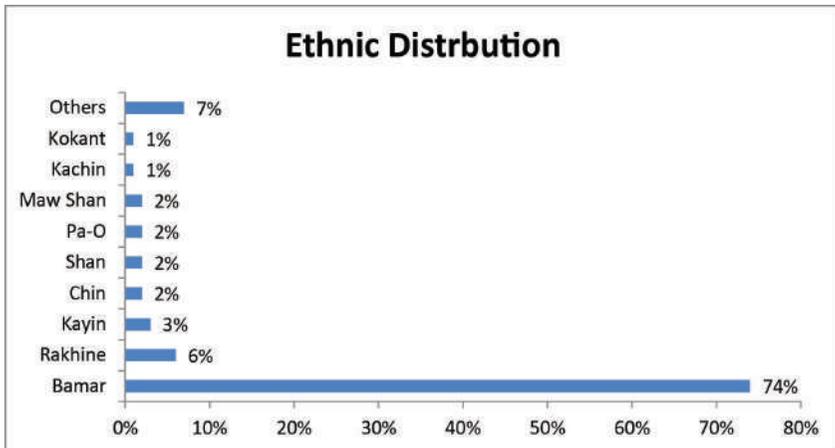
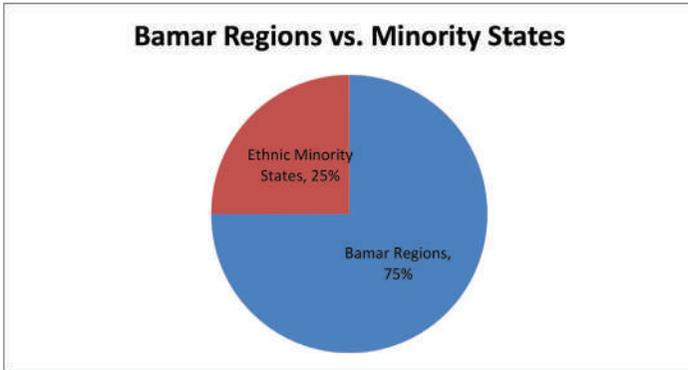


Fig. 101 Distribution of Ethnic Groups

The survey was also conducted nationally, with a quarter of the respondents from ethnic minority states, and the remainder from the more populated Bamar regions.



**Fig. 102** Distribution of Bamar Region and Minority States