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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Preventing Communal Violence in Myanmar: Power and Legitimacy in Local Conflict Prevention

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ABSTRACT

Violence between Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar again reached international attention in 2017 when the newly elected democratic government failed to protect Rohingya Muslims from persecution. While inter-group violence is endemic, however, there are clear and strong examples of peaceful co-existence. This article draws on interview and ethnographic evidence from a case of prevented violence in Mingalar Taung Nyunt, Yangon, in 2017, to argue that engaging with the local, complex, and dynamic process of communal violence prevention can enrich contemporary theories of communal violence. The article draws specifically on insights from the theories of political manipulation and civic engagement to argue that the most effective analysis of communal violence will focus on the power dynamics that shape local responses to escalating threat. In Mingalar Taung Nyunt, violence was prevented through the concerted effort of individuals in unique positions that provided them with the legitimacy and political power that allowed them to successfully de-escalate tensions. The article contributes to the understanding of communal violence by emphasising how the role and importance of inter-group associations, government bodies, and others is shaped by the laws and norms of the community in which violence is escalating. The article's conclusions furthermore outline how the recent military coup in the country will destabilise local peace-keeping efforts in central Myanmar and how such institutions may be rebuilt.

KEY WORDS

Communal violence; peace and conflict; case study; Myanmar

Violence between Buddhists and Muslims again caught the attention of the international community in 2017 when Myanmar's elected government failed to protect hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims from persecution by the Burmese military (*BBC News*, December 12, 2019; *New York Times*, October 11, 2017). This case was devastating domestically and internationally, revealing the precarious state of Myanmar's democratisation (*UN News*, September 11, 2017), which has only weakened since the military took control of governance in February 2021. While the case of the Rohingya was especially destructive, however, violence between Buddhists and Muslims is not new to Myanmar. Indeed, Muslims have been treated as the "enemy within" for at least a century and are often treated as deserving of legal and extra-legal victimisation (Wade and McGoey 2019).

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The clashes in 2017 are only the most recent expression of this tension (Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2020). While such violence is endemic, however, there are clear examples of peaceful co-existence. Even as violence raged in the Rakhine State and elsewhere in the country, in 2017 and before, residents worked together and successfully prevented communal violence from breaking out in their own communities (Schissler, Walton, and Phuy Phyu Thi 2017). This article draws on evidence from one such case of prevented violence in 2017 using it to explore the way violence is prevented in Myanmar and in so doing extend contemporary understandings of communal violence. Beyond its contributions to the theory of communal violence, the article's conclusions are especially relevant now as the 2021 military coup has disrupted many of the systems of violence prevention that are explored in this article, with potentially devastating consequences for communal peace.

The analysis and evidence presented in this article contribute to ongoing scholarship on the causes and consequences of civilian violence organised around identity-based characteristics like religion. It draws evidence from Buddhist-Muslim violence in Myanmar to show that while existing theories have successfully explained communal violence within their own contexts, they are difficult to generalise to cases with different political histories. Governmental systems vary, for example, changing the incentive structures and state capacity that politicians face when deciding whether to intervene in escalating tensions (van Klinken 2007; Wilkinson 2004). Likewise, varying regulations around assembly and speech, and the varying relationship between civilian associations and the state, make an emphasis on civil society difficult to generalise (Tajima 2014; Varshney 2002). Myanmar, and particularly its political structure in 2017, is an important case with which to investigate the generalisability of these theories. Ultimately, the analysis in this article draws on insights from both sets of theories to develop a grounded explanation that recognises the impact that legal and cultural variation has on power dynamics, and thus, the impact that this variation has on the form and likelihood of communal violence and its prevention. Thus, the article will argue that while the political manipulation and civic engagement theories capture aspects of this case, they must be extended if they are to explain the process by which violence escalated and was prevented. It develops a tentative framework through which such an argument can be accomplished by focusing on the way in which structural power and popular legitimacy are locally determined and distributed.

The article develops this analysis drawing on evidence from 55 interviews conducted in Yangon with participants who were currently or previously involved in responding to cases of communal violence.[1] The evidence focuses on one incident of prevented communal violence that occurred during fieldwork: an encounter between nationalist Buddhist monks and a woman who was allegedly harbouring migrants from violence-torn Rakhine State (*Frontier Myanmar*, May 12, 2017). The article presents a close account of how this neighbourhood in Yangon, called Mingalar Taung Nyunt (MTN), prepared for and responded to the threat of communal violence. While their story and circumstances are unique, the successful prevention of violence in MTN has clear and important implications for our theories of communal violence and for attempts to prevent violence in the future. It is argued that in order to understand how violence was prevented, it is necessary to understand how structural power was distributed at that time and place and who was popularly recognised as a legitimate authority.

Alternative Models of Communal Violence Prevention

Communal violence, sometimes called ethnic riots, refers to violence between groups defined by identity-based characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, nationality, or religion

(Horowitz 2000). Following social constructivist understandings of ethnicity such as that by Wimmer (2013) and Brubaker and Laitin (1998), the article treats the identity-based characteristics that determine the groups that are in conflict as malleable and established by a collective process of meaning making. This article furthermore follows the standard practice in scholarship on communal violence by treating religion as an ethnic marker for analytical purposes but recognises some of the difficulties with this generalising approach (Brubaker 2015). The violence studied here also excludes cases where one of the two groups in conflict is the state, and it excludes violence that is non-ethnic in character, such as gang violence. The kind of violence under scrutiny here is therefore treated as analytically similar to the endemic Hindu-Muslim violence in India (Wilkinson 2009; Varshney 2002; Brass 2003), Christian-Muslim violence in Indonesia after the fall of the Suharto regime (Tajima 2014; van Klinken 2007), as well as White-Black violence in the USA between the 1960s and 1990s (Olzak 1992; Spilerman 1970).

Contemporary scholarship on the topic has coalesced around two broad sets of theories on the causes of communal violence: political manipulation and civic engagement. Despite their differences, these sets of theories both focus on the dynamics that determine why violence breaks out in some cities and not others, all of which have similar demographic, political, and economic conditions. The goal of this scholarship, to put it differently, is to identify why "sparks" of communal tension lead to "fires" of communal violence in some places, but not others (see Varshney and Gubler 2013). While these theories have adequately explained conflict dynamics in their own contexts, the conclusions have been difficult to generalise to other countries; the sparks that cause the fires of communal violence in places like India and Indonesia are not the same as those that cause communal violence elsewhere.

Political Manipulation

Political manipulation theories focus on the incentives of political elites and argue that violence is the outcome of either their direct involvement in fomenting conflict or in their lack of intervention in preventing violence. The work of Snyder (2000), for example, mobilises this logic to argue that ethnic conflict, broadly defined, follows periods of democratisation because political elites in these contexts have strong incentives to use nationalistic language to garner votes. Similarly, Wilkinson's (2004, 2009) work on riots in India showed how incumbent politicians are incentivised not to intervene in some cases of communal violence because this violence could help them garner votes during upcoming elections. Van Klinken's (2007) study of Indonesia found similar patterns, where local-level politicians decided whether to get involved in incidents of violence depending on the economic and political benefits that they could gain. While there is substantial evidence for the role of political elites in inciting conflict, however, these theories tend to over-emphasise and over-generalise the power of these elites to control where and when violence occurs (Varshney and Gubler 2012). Politicians may have incentives to escalate violence around elections in some countries, but it is difficult to make this argument when local politicians are not elected or when the political culture of a country does not align with group boundaries. In Myanmar, for example, neither of the largest political parties, the National League for Democracy (NLD) and the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), was supportive of the Muslim community.[2] How are we to understand communal violence under such widely varying political incentive structures? These theories furthermore place the entire burden of response on the government,

whether it intends to foment or quell violence, when civic organisations and residents can play important roles in both preventing and instigating conflict.

Civic Engagement and Inter-Group Contact

Civic engagement theories emphasise the peace-keeping work of the local community including residents, community leaders, and organisations who can work together to prevent violence from happening in the first place. Communal violence, they argue, is a failure to prevent violence from escalating. Fearon and Laitin (1996), for example, drew on evidence from around the world to construct game theory models that explain peace as a consequence of information sharing between communities. This argument continues to be influential in work that emphasises the importance of inter-group organisations and contact in preventing conflict (see, for example, Smidt 2020). Tajima's (2014) empirical work in Indonesia similarly finds that communities with strong inter-communal connections were able to maintain peace even as government forces were removed from their communities after the fall of the Suharto regime. Varshney's (2002) study in India found that inter-group relations, especially as established in formal and informal associations, allow communities to mobilise peace-keeping groups and co-ordinate actions with the government, halting violence from escalating. The evidence for inter-group contact theories is substantial, but this set of theories fails to generalise due to its insistence on a specific form of peace-keeping mobilisation: inter-group contact. Inter-group contact likely does contribute to long-term peace, but it is not necessary for violence to be prevented.

Peacekeeping as Complex and Dynamic, and Local Systems of Power Relations

The evidence presented in this article supports insights from each of these sets of theories but highlights the complexity of local peace-keeping processes and the vital importance of recognising this complexity for understanding why communal violence escalates and how it can be prevented. Indeed, claims of nefarious actors co-ordinating behind the scenes, which is a central argument in the political manipulation theories, are common to many if not all incidents of violent ethnic conflict, and recognising inter-group history and engagement, the core of civic engagement theories, is equally vital for understanding why violence occurs in some spaces and not others. The goal of this article is not to discount either of these approaches, but instead to encourage an analysis of communal violence that is grounded in local customs, political culture, and law. In so doing, the proposed framework is meant to reduce the focus on politicians as instigators and inter-group organisations as peace-keepers, showing how government officials sometimes prevent conflict, how intra-religious organisations can help de-escalate tension, and when inter-faith organisations remain uninvolved. The goal, then, is to move beyond current disagreements between these literatures and to contribute to a discussion of how particular structures of power relationships construct peace-keeping strategies. The evidence presented in this article suggests that such an analysis ought to begin with an investigation into who holds structural power over important peace-keeping resources as well as who holds popular legitimacy over would-be rioters.

Researching Peace-Keeping: Data and Method

This article draws on 55 interviews conducted in Yangon during field site visits totalling about eight months between 2013 and 2017, with most interviews conducted during the

first half of 2017. The interviews were conducted with a breadth of people including members of parliament (MPs), military officials, NLD officials, Buddhist monks of various political affiliations, Muslim leaders and Imams, political activists, community leaders, civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-governmental organisation (NGO) members, journalists, businesspeople, teachers, students, and others. During the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to discuss their experiences with people of different religions, their general impressions of Buddhist-Muslim relations in the country, city, and in their neighbourhood, and the ways that their community has responded to conflict in the past. The interviews lasted between one and four hours, with the average interview lasting one and a half hours. In accordance with recommendations for ethic committee approval, interview recordings were uploaded to a secure server using a secure connection and then immediately deleted from physical devices. The names of respondents were furthermore excluded from all file names and documents to protect their confidentiality. The interviews were transcribed into English and then analysed through two cycles of qualitative coding. First, following the grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967), thematic open coding was used to identify common themes throughout the interviews (Saldaña 2015). Second, pattern coding was used to organise themes from the first coding cycle into fewer and more theoretically relevant themes (Saldaña 2015). Any claims by interviewees of involvement in conflict were triangulated through responses from other interviewees and with newspaper accounts and NGO reports.

The interviews were conducted in Burmese with simultaneous translation into English with the help of one of two translators. The background of the translators and the researcher affected who was willing to be interviewed and the content of those interviews. The project was shaped by the presence of the author, a White foreign man, and the gender, ethnicity, and religion of the translators, both of whom were young Burmese men between 20 and 30 years old and are Atheists, although they were identified as Buddhist by interviewees. The history of colonial rule by the British and the long period of isolation from the world caused by government policy creates a unique position for Western foreigners. Access to NGOs, renowned religious figures, and government officials may be easier for foreigners than for local researchers, for example. Yet the race and gender of the author and translators contributed to a sample skewed by gender; while the goal of sampling was to include an equal number of men and women, most interviews were ultimately conducted with men (48 out of 55). Religious and political figures tended to be men and were thus over-represented in those categories, but men were also more willing to be interviewed by the research team. Although the team attempted to interview more women for the project by visiting spaces often frequented by women, the majority refused to be interviewed. While the content of the interviews was likely also shaped by the race and gender of the research team, the focus of the interviews was on descriptive claims that could be verified and triangulated with other sources and thus were not affected, at least in content, by these characteristics.

The interview sampling strategy occurred in three stages. First, a translator and the researcher approached individuals at tea shops, restaurants, and public spaces, seeking to interview an equal sample of Buddhists and Muslims. Next, based on the responses of residents, we interviewed people that they suggested had or would become involved in cases of communal violence. Finally, this sample was supplemented by a theory-driven sample of religious leaders, business leaders, government officials, and civic organisations. This final sample was used as a means of testing findings against influential theories in the literature, following the methodological insights of Burawoy's (1991) extended case method;

by interviewing CSO members, community leaders, and government officials, this study attempted to gather evidence that would reconstruct the findings of theories emphasising the role of civil society in peace-keeping and theories relying on the role of government officials in igniting or intervening in violence (Burawoy 1998, 5). These sampling stages often overlapped as we scheduled interviews with local leaders and developed rapport within the different networks. The goal of this data collection strategy was to gather evidence from a variety of perspectives to triangulate the information received and test people's claims of involvement in cases of communal violence.

Mingalar Taung Nyunt (MTN), where the incident described in this article occurred, is an urban township near the downtown area of Yangon, the largest city in Myanmar. Economically, MTN looks like other residential townships around downtown Yangon. According to the 2014 census the high school graduation rate is 15%, substantially higher than the city's 10% average and about 3.4% of households in MTN own a car, compared to the city's 1.7% average (Republic of the Union of Myanmar 2015). While no official information on the ethnic and religious make-up of MTN is available, due to the restrictions placed on data from the 2014 census, ethnographic evidence and interviewee responses suggest that the township has a large population of Muslims and may in fact be the township with the largest Muslim population in the city. The average township in Yangon has a Muslim population of 3% (Republic of the Union of Myanmar 2016); a member of parliament representing MTN estimated a Muslim population of 50%. The specific neighbourhood within MTN that is studied has an even larger Muslim population, with the Ward Administrator for that neighbourhood estimating about 85%.

Communal Violence in Mingalar Taung Nyunt

The incident in question began at around 9:30 pm on May 9, 2017, when Buddhist monks and laypersons associated with a Bamar Buddhist nationalist organisation called the Patriotic Monks Union (PMU), led a small group of police to a Muslim-majority Ward in MTN.[3] The PMU claimed that Muslim refugees fleeing violence in Rakhine State were illegally living in an apartment building on the corner of a busy street. The police officers entered the apartment and inspected the documents of the members of that household but found that they were citizens and that there was no evidence of migrants from Rakhine. As the search dragged on, however, a large crowd began to gather around the building. The PMU members who accompanied the police were not satisfied with the police's conclusions and accused them of negligence and even of protecting the migrants. They demanded the police take the owner of the house to the police station, but the police refused.

When the police exited the building and announced, attempting to disperse the crowd, that there was no evidence of wrongdoing, someone in the crowd responded by grabbing an iron pipe and striking a nearby Muslim man on the head, severely injuring him. The wounded man was quickly taken away and fights broke out in the crowd while many ran home to prepare for escalating violence. Ko Win Thu, a Muslim betel shop owner who works nearby, said during our interview the day after the incident: "As soon as the monks were in the car they shouted, 'Beat them all!' Their people who were in the middle [of the crowd] were mad because the police didn't do anything. So, they started beating the people around the building. All the people, monks, and the people around there, and the police, ran away immediately." U Win Sein, a Muslim businessman who lives nearby and was present at the time of the incident reported that he ran home and grabbed a weapon,

a bamboo rod, and stood guard in front of his house along with his neighbours, ready for the PMU to come. As he said in our interview, "If they ever came into the street, we would attack them." The crowd led by the PMU gathered around the police station down the street to pressure the police chief. According to Ko Win Thu, the crowd then used slingshots to shoot pieces of bicycle chains at the police station, after which the police responded by firing two warning shots into the air. The crowd quickly dispersed. Residents took their places on their street, armed with machetes and bamboo rods, to protect their neighbourhood.

Both Buddhist and Muslim neighbours recognised the possibility of violent attacks by the PMU and its nationalist allies, and they knew from incidents of communal violence in the Rakhine State and Meikhtila in 2012 and 2013 that police might stand by as homes were destroyed (see Smith and Hassan 2012). Thus, residents took the safety of their homes and families into their own hands. A local garment worker who stood watch in the street that night explained: "I went back outside and sat, along with all the people in the neighbourhood. For security … One man from each household came out … We didn't leave the street, we just waited here … It's just like what happened in 2013 after the Meikhtila violence broke out there …". Ko Win Thu, the betel shop owner, emphasised the police's slow response:

> In my Ward there is no security. To protect my street and to protect my house is my responsibility. It is our responsibility. The police came after … Once they arrived, we put our weapons away, our knives and rods and swords … We were a bit relieved when the security force and the police car arrived. But we were still aware that we must take care of our own security.

In addition to arming themselves and monitoring their streets, many residents barricaded the entrance to their streets. Streets in the neighbourhood are generally one-way and connected to the main street on only one side, with the other side connecting to a network of smaller residential and walking roads. Residents barricaded the exits to the main street with whatever they could find, including plastic chairs and bamboo rods, creating makeshift checkpoints. They questioned anyone who wished to enter, ensuring that they lived on the street or were at least friends with someone on that street. When Ko Aung Lay, a Buddhist activist from outside of the township, tried to enter the neighbourhood to follow a truck occupied by suspected nationalists, he needed help to manoeuvre around barricades:

> Once [my Muslim friend and I] came into the street, the Muslim people surrounded us and asked us who we were. My friend, his name is Ali, he said, "I am Ali, I am Muslim," and he got out! He left me alone in the car! I said no, I'm with you guys, I'm here to help. One guy asked me to just go back, because the mob just came in and – because it was near the mosque … I was scared so I did go back. But then I took a wrong turn and went into the street again, but the wrong way. It was a one-way street, but I went in the opposite way. Then, I was alone, and all the Muslim people came down from their houses with swords! I was alone in the car, driving and in the end – I thought the street was connected to the main road, but it was clearly not. So, I had to turn again! One guy had a sword on the corner, so I closed my car's window and turned again and escaped.

Tensions were high and there was a real possibility that the situation could become much worse. Rumours were spreading over social media that the Muslim man who had been injured earlier was dead. According to a Buddhist businesswoman who works nearby and was hiding at her house at the time, some men walked down the street shouting, "Kill all the Buddhists! Kill anyone not wearing a skullcap!" Some streets away, a group of men in a car yelled anti-Muslim epithets out the window. Yet the situation did not escalate. No one else was injured that night.

How Communal Violence is Prevented

This incident was not unlike many similar incidents that occurred regularly in central Myanmar between 2012 and 2017. Most of the time, these cases did not reach this level of intensity, and only rarely did they escalate to anything close to communal violence. When these cases did escalate, however, the violence usually left dozens dead and caused widespread property damage (see, for example, Szep 2013). The MTN community, no strangers to conflict, responded to the police's warning shots by preparing for violence. They gathered weapons, machetes, and bamboo rods and barricaded the entrances to their streets. This escalation and calm before the conflict mirrors what Horowitz (2000, 546) called the "lull" that usually precedes ethnic violence. The situation could have escalated if not for the concerted efforts of a few key community members in critical positions of power. The evidence gathered for this project, from MTN and from other communities in Myanmar, revealed that the actors critical in the prevention of violence were ones that were able to retain popular legitimacy while also having some authority within the local government. Government officials, religious leaders, residents, civic organisers, and others played important roles in de-escalating violence, but their efficacy was ultimately determined by their relative status within the community (Table 1). What mattered most, in other words, was their capacity to influence the behaviour of others or what Bourdieu (1986) identifies as their "social capital."[4] Who holds this social capital varies by city and even by township, but in MTN, it was people like the Ward Administrator and the MPs who prevented violence through their capacity to command or demand action by the police and through the popular legitimacy that they could mobilise to convince would-be-rioters to return to their homes.

Structural Power

While resources outside of government can be used to maintain peace, as Tajima (2014) recognised in Indonesia, the state was critical in the peace-keeping process in central Myanmar at the time, and particularly in Yangon. At the time, this aspect of the distribution of power was shaped by the 2008 constitution and the local government legislation passed in the early 2010s. This legislation paved the way for democratisation, but also established a bifurcated system of governmental authority with important implications for the local distribution of structural power (Kyi Pyar Chit Saw and Arnold 2014).

The first side of Myanmar's bifurcated government was under the control of the military, which ruled under various names between 1962 and 2015 and has now regained power through the February 2021 coup d'état. Of the three ministries under the control of the military in the 2008-2021 period, the Ministry of Home Affairs was especially important for local violence prevention. This ministry oversaw several branches of local governance including the police, the Bureau of Special Investigation, the prison and fire

Table 1. **Distribution** of power and legiti**macy in MTN**

Actor	**Structural** power	Legitimacy
Member of Parliament	High	High
Ward Administrator	Medium	High
Township Administrator	High	Low
Chief of Police	Medium	Low
Local Leaders	Low	High
Muslim Organisations	Low	Medium
Buddhist Organisations	Low	Medium
Other NGOs	Low	Low

services, and, perhaps most importantly, the General Administration Department (GAD). GAD is the country's bureaucratic arm, its "vertical core" that connects all 36 of the country's ministries to each other as well as connecting the population to the government through licensing offices and other government services (Kyi Pyar Chit Saw and Arnold 2014). The most influential office in the GAD at the local level in Yangon was the Township Administrator's office, which co-ordinated local government projects and services.[5] During instances of communal violence, the Chief of Police along with the Township Administrator, both of whom are military appointees in the Ministry of Home Affairs, were tasked with making many of the immediate decisions regarding the government's response to escalating tension.

The other side of Myanmar's bifurcated government in the 2008–2021 period was controlled by the elected parliamentarians, the majority of whom were, by 2017, affiliated with the NLD, led by Aung San Suu Kyi. The NLD was the largest opposition party to the military regime at the time of the study, and was widely supported, especially in the ethnic Bamar majority areas in central Myanmar. In 2017, the NLD had local influence primarily through the two MPs who represent townships in the regional parliament, called the Regional Hluttaw and the MPs in the *Pyidaungsu Hluttaw*, or national parliament, which is a bicameral legislature split into the *Amyotha Hluttaw* (House of Nationalities) and the *Pyithu Hluttaw* (House of Representatives). The local involvement of MPs varied a great deal across the country, but they were generally expected to work with the Township Administrator's office on a variety of development projects and otherwise help maintain peace and stability in their township (Batcheler 2018, 43). MPs had some authority over the actions of the local military-controlled branches of government through their influence in parliament and their relationships with regional and state level military officials, but this authority was vague and varied by township and by parliamentarian. As an MP in the Yangon Regional Hluttaw explained:

> We don't have direct control over the police or the administrators, but on the other hand we can present and submit our point of view in Parliament, and say publicly whatever we think is wrong … The minister in the Yangon Regional Government [who is part of the military controlled GAD] also attends Parliament … we can ask [him] questions in Parliament and he has to answer. In this way, we have some control.

While MPs did not have direct authority over the Township Administrator and the Chief of Police, then, they could still pressure these figures to act by threatening their careers through contacts in parliament. Thus, MPs had important roles to play during communal violence as popularly recognised and trusted authority figures with some real power over government resources.

Popular Legitimacy

Locally respected figures vary by country, region, city, and even by township. In some spaces, religious figures hold great sway while in others, activists and community organisers are more widely recognised and respected. There are some general patterns to who holds popular legitimacy in central Myanmar. Firstly, it is important to remember that the military-controlled offices of government were largely untrusted due to the country's long history of draconian rule. Interviewees repeatedly noted that they interacted with the police and other branches of the military government, such as the Township Administrator's office, only when absolutely necessary (Thura Aung and Win Win May 2019). This lack of trust poses an important problem for peace-keeping efforts. Without

trust in the police, residents may turn to seeking justice or protection for themselves, which can escalate tensions and ignite communal violence.

The peace-keeping efforts in MTN relied on figures that could serve as brokers between the untrusted figures with government resources and the people. There are several candidates that can serve this brokerage role in central Myanmar including CSOs such as NGOs, Government Organised Non-Governmental Organisations (GONGOs), and religious organisations, as well as local government officials and other popularly recognised leaders. Civil society is arguably quite strong, although formal associations were banned for much of the country's recent history (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007). Before the colonial period, for example, religious organisations served a vital role in distributing resources and handling local disputes (see Aung-Thwin 2013). Formal associations in the Western tradition originated during the early twentieth century, after colonisation. These included religious organisations like the Young Buddhist Monks Association and the Burma Moslem Society (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007, Yegar 1972). Organisations from this period, and particularly those led by Burmese nationalists, served a pivotal role in the anti-colonial movements of the 1930s which culminated in the country's independence from the British in 1948 (see Khin Yi 1988).

After the 1962 coup, however, the military's tight control over civic associations left most formal organising weak until the democratisation of the early 2010s. The 1964 National Unity Act all-but banned civic organisations in the name of national unity (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007, 155). In 1988, following another coup, the military government passed the Law Relating to Forming of Organisations No. 6/88, which limited CSOs to ones with close ties to the regime (*The Irrawaddy*, July 1, 2014). Even in this context, however, some aspects of civil society could exist and a few were allowed to flourish. Religious organisations established by the government, for example, included the Sangha Mahanayaka Committee (MaHaNa) and the Five Muslim Organisations, established as representatives of their constituencies.[6] These GONGOs were still relevant at the time of this study and, because of their close connection to the government, had important roles to play in the mediation between the people and the state.

CSOs unaffiliated with the state began to re-emerge in Myanmar, or at least become public, in 2008 when, despite crackdowns and arrests (Human Rights Watch 2010), NGOs were established to co-ordinate and provide aid to victims of the devastating Cyclone Nargis. Later that year the 2008 constitution was ratified by the military regime and relaxed legislation around assembly, allowing many of the organisations established in response to Cyclone Nargis to survive and evolve beyond this case (Lidauer 2012). In 2014, the democratically elected *Pyidaungsu Hluttaw* passed the Association Registration Law, which further reduced barriers to establishing CSOs (*The Irrawaddy*, July 1, 2014).

In 2017, the most influential local leadership in MTN and in much of central Myanmar were not known for their involvement in NGOs, however, but were instead known for their anti-military social movement activism in 1988 and in 2007. The movement against the military government in 1988, known as the 8888 Uprising, called for an end to the military regime and the establishment of a democratic government. The movement began in earnest in March 1988 with protests calling for reprieve from the rising price of goods. On July 22, after months of brutal military crackdowns on protestors, General Ne Win, the dictator ruling the country since his 1962 coup, announced his resignation and called for a return to multi-party democracy. While the movement succeeded in the short-term, however, their success was short-lived. On August 8, a date chosen for its auspicious numerological significance (and where the name 8888 Uprising comes from), mass demonstrations calling for democracy were organised around the country. The military responded by gunning down protestors, with an estimated

death toll of 3000 (Smith 1991, 4). Then, on September 18, after a month of bloody protests and skirmishes, the military organised a coup d'état, throwing out Ne Win's plans for democratic elections and instead establishing General Saw Maung as the head of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (Smith 1991, 15). The leaders of the 8888 Uprising who survived the consequent violence and mass imprisonment continue to be popularly recognised and influential leaders. This includes internationally recognised figures like Aung San Suu Kyi.

A second mass mobilisation occurred in September 2007, when Buddhist monks led citizens into the streets to protest unfair economic practices and call for political change. The Saffron Revolution, as it became known, escalated for some days, but in October, the police and military imprisoned the leadership and fired on crowds of protestors, repeating their behaviour from 1988. Despite its swift end, the Saffron Revolution did increase international pressure on the military regime, pushing the government to recognise the need for political change. Videos of the violent crackdown shared internationally by journalists exiled to neighbouring countries undoubtedly shook the military government that had otherwise kept the country sealed away from the world (see Steinberg 2008). A year later, the military regime began the country's turn toward what they called a "discipline-flourishing democracy" (David and Holliday 2018, 46). The monks and lay people affiliated with the 2007 Saffron Revolution are also popularly recognised and trusted figures in central Myanmar.

The history of totalitarian governance, which included strict laws around censorship and assembly as well as the long-term imprisonment of political dissidents, led to a deep mistrust in government. It is no surprise that many citizens mistrust the police and refuse to believe the platitudes of government officials. The election of the NLD to the majority position in government in 2015 eased some of this tension in the years when the data collection for this project occurred; the very same activists and community leaders that were previously imprisoned were then MPs with some real authority. These activists and politicians, many of them known for their participation in the 8888 Uprising or the 2007 Saffron Revolution, had substantial legitimacy in their communities since they were widely recognised as supporting the people. However, the rest of government, including the local government officials, the police, and the entire bureaucratic arm of government, remained under military control. Local governmental decisions, then, often came down to collaboration between these activists turned politicians and the police and bureaucrats from the military controlled GAD.

Responding to Communal Violence in MTN

As violence escalated on the night of May 9 and into the early hours of May 10, community leaders and government officials organised a response. The Chief of Police was the first to respond to the conflict. He arrived at the scene shortly after the police officers who were brought by nationalists began their investigation and later made the original decision to fire warning shots and disperse the crowd. As tensions escalated, the Chief of Police contacted the Township Administrator, who began the wider response. While these officials have relatively high governmental power, however, they have little popular legitimacy and could not de-escalate the conflict on their own. The Ward Administrator, U Ye Naung Thein, and MPs, including Daw Phyu Phyu Thin, learned about the escalating situation from their own contacts and began to organise their own networks. They and other neighbourhood leaders tried to restore calm in the neighbourhood by organising and leading street patrols, by encouraging residents at the barricades to return home and by encouraging trust in the police to keep them and their families safe.

Initial Community Response

U Ye Naung Thein, the Ward Administrator, was the first civilian community leader to learn about the incident. The Ward Administrator's Office is the most local branch of the military-controlled GAD, but the Ward Administrator is, unlike every other official in the GAD, locally elected rather than appointed by the military. This makes the Ward Administrator the highest-ranking member of the GAD that is not seen as directly controlled by the military. On the night in question, U Ye Naung Thein was preparing to sleep after a long drive to the beach for a short holiday with friends and family when he received a phone call from the Township Administrator at about 10:30 pm. He quickly gathered everyone together in the car to return to Yangon. U Ye Naung Thein's driver, a locally elected Street Administrator from the Ward, lent him his phone, as did U Ye Naung Thein's wife, meaning he had five mobile phones to use on his way back to the city. He recalled:

> The whole night I was calling people and answering phone calls from everyone I know. I had to call every [locally elected] 10 Household and 100 Household Heads [Street Administrators] that I know to go there and help calm the people down. I also called three MPs, one from the regional level and the two from the upper and lower houses … I also tried to call all of my friends to go there and see what's happening and try to help. I wasn't just calling. I also received a lot of phone calls because many people wanted to know what was happening. The whole way back I was on the phone.

The calls were from his network of religious leaders, civic organisations, government officials, and friends who assured him that they would go and stop the violence from escalating. He also relied on the Street Administrators, who are locally elected residents serving those small constituencies. As the highest-ranking civilian member of the military-controlled GAD, and the only elected individual in the GAD, U Ye Naung Thein was in a critically important structural position that allowed him to begin the community's response.

Among the first people U Ye Naung Thein called was national MP Daw Phyu Phyu Thin. She was in the country's capital of Nay Pyi Taw and could not reach Yangon until the next morning. Nevertheless, she responded to the conflict by calling MTN's two regional MPs and co-ordinated de-escalation from afar. As she explained during a later interview in Yangon: "When I picked up the phone during the riot, I couldn't put it down, because everybody was calling me. The public was reporting to me what was happening and I needed to direct my people to their respective areas." After the group of nationalists around the police station had dispersed, Daw Phyu Phyu Thin sent a "mole" into the nationalist group to gather information on their plans. She learned that they planned on moving to Bahan Township after they failed to ignite violence in MTN, so she alerted one of the Bahan Township MPs. Later, when an MP called back to warn her the nationalists were planning on returning to MTN, she passed on the notice to her friends and contacts in the area. Daw Phyu Phyu Thin and her colleagues monitored the situation until around 3:00 am, one hour or so after the nationalists finally dispersed near Bahan Township.

Co-ordinating with Civil Society

Most of the crowd in front of the apartment dispersed after the Chief of Police fired the warning shots, but several people remained to help de-escalate the situation by organising street patrols. The two regional MPs mobilised by Ward Administrator U Ye Naung Thein and MP Daw Phyu Phyu Thin remained on the scene, as did members of local religious organisations

and other local leaders. They sought to reassure residents that the police would handle the situation and protect them from the nationalists. Yet convincing people that the police are on their side is not an easy task. As the chairman of a local NGO explained:

> When I got there, they [the residents] were swearing at the policemen. If you see them [these angry residents] with sympathy, they are not wrong. All the incidents that occurred like Rakhine and Meikhtila, everything happened right before the eyes of policemen. Houses are burning and people are being killed right in front of the police … On that night people … said things like, "This is your job, if you do not stop it you are responsible." When we spoke to them [the people], though, they listened, they know me and they know my position. So maybe it's because of this respect that they accepted [what I had to say].

To spread their message more quickly, he and other local leaders organised small patrols composed of trusted community members like Street Administrators, regional MPs, and members of NGOs and Muslim community organisations. The patrols used the legitimacy of their leaders, who included NGO members as well as at least one 8888 Uprising leader, to encourage residents to return to their homes, to put down their weapons, and trust the police for protection.

As the largest and most developed city in the country, most NGOs have an office, if not their headquarters, in Yangon. Many of these organisations have contacts in their local communities, although few of these are in MTN and most are focused on charity work and activism outside of the metropolis. One of the few such organisations headquartered in MTN, which provides legal support for citizens who are denied National Registration Cards because of their religion, provided support to MTN the night of the conflict and in the days afterward. As U Thant Soe, the head of the organisation, explained during our interview:

> We didn't do it under the name of the organisation but the people from our organisation tried to control the situation … We also worked together with the Ward Administrator and we did security of this area … We made this office a headquarters for the security of this township and if something happened, people could come here and see a list of phone numbers of people to contact … We announced on Facebook that if you need something, come to this office and we told the people to co-operate with the Ward Administrator … We [posted] links to the Ward Administrator, MPs, local government and we have phone numbers of police other important contact persons.

In the days after the conflict, U Thant Soe co-ordinated with the Ward Administrator's office and through their own network of other civic and religious organisations to stop the spread of potentially dangerous rumours:

> Most people prepared to block the street if the rioters tried to come in but for us, we didn't get involved in such things, we just tried to get the correct information and share it … For example, people said, "a man was killed in that area" but our members said "no, this information is wrong." So, we gathered and finalised the true information and shared it [in our network and on Facebook] … Also, if someone spread false information like, "a man got beaten to death," we tried to contact that person to take down the post.

Thus, U Thant Soe and his organisation were able to contribute to de-escalation by making use of the Ward Administrator's structural authority. Through collaboration with this authority figure, U Thant Soe was able to provide legitimate information on Facebook and was able to mobilise his organisation's resources in support of his community.

Failed Mobilisation

The work of activists and CSOs was ultimately effective only if they were able to, like U Thant Soe, co-ordinate with someone with governmental authority such as the Ward

Administrator or MPs. On their own, these CSOs lacked the structural power to effectively de-escalate the conflict. The Buddhist and Muslim organisations of the neighbourhood were not as effective as they could have been, for example, due to their lack of contact with governmental authorities. Al-Hajj Karim, for example, a local leader in one of the Five Muslim Organisations recognised as representing Muslims' interests to the government, spent the night of the incident monitoring the streets along with the police seeking to contribute to de-escalation. Karim returned home and slept about three hours before organising a meeting of the local branch of his organisation. The organisation decided its strategy for the next few days. According to Karim:

> First, we wanted to release a statement. There were lots of rumours already on Facebook and other social media. So, the statement said not to believe the rumours spreading on social media. At the same time, we had to work with the authorities, police and the representatives. If they would like to know anything, we would provide the information … After that we went to the offices of our parliamentary representatives and spoke with them, built trust with them. All three representatives are very engaged with the community. We told them what we can provide and asked them what they needed.

Karim made his network available to local authorities and made it known that his organisation was willing to help in any way the authorities deemed appropriate. But other than inviting the Five Muslim Organisations to a public community meeting, local authorities and the MPs mostly ignored their offers of help. Despite being Muslim and having direct ties to one of the Five Muslim Organisations, of their involvement, U Ye Naung Thein, the Ward Administrator, said, "I didn't work with them or anything, but they came here to ask me questions and to get information." The organisation helped de-escalate the situation during the incident and they published their statement, but were otherwise under-utilised by the GAD and the MPs.

Furthermore, although Buddhist organisations could have helped respond to the violence in MTN, and they have done so in other cities, they did not do so in this case. Since Buddhist monks have been involved in many cases of communal violence in the past, the MaHaNa has an important role in de-escalating conflict and punishing transgressors. It is a government-sanctioned group of Buddhist clergy tasked with policing the behaviour of Buddhist monks. During that night in MTN, however, the chairman of the MaHaNa was absent and did not even learn about the incident until the following morning. Without a call from the GAD, MPs, or the Chief of Police, the MaHaNa was completely disconnected from the incident. As the chairman explained during our interview: "If they had called me, I would've resolved it right away. It was just like that other time [in 2013], when I helped, but that was with the previous Chief of Police. This Chief of Police is new, he should've called me, but we don't have much of a relationship." It is unclear whether the chairman's involvement would have resolved the situation as easily as he suggests or whether it is true that he was oblivious of the developing situation. While Buddhist monks have been involved in de-escalating conflict in Myanmar more generally and are vital for some cities like Mandalay, it does not seem to be a common practice in Yangon. The chairman's comment about the Chief of Police also signals an alternative way that violence could have been prevented that night: co-ordination between the police and the MaHaNa. This type of response would have focused on questioning the perpetrators from the start, rather than on de-escalation.

Maintaining Peace

Communal violence was prevented that night, but there was potential for escalation in the days afterward. This potential, like the conflict that night, was kept under control by

the work of individuals in key positions of power. The day after the incident, the ultra-nationalist monk U Wirathu became involved. He is widely cited by journalists and academics as one of the leading figures in spreading anti-Muslim hate speech in Myanmar (see, for example, Walton and Hayward 2014). The monk wrote on Facebook that he was not satisfied with how the police had dealt with the situation and declared that he would go to MTN on May 15 to "turn the township upside down" looking for illegal migrants. This declaration and the possibility of renewed violence spurred the local government to quickly arrest the instigators, while community leaders worked to re-frame the incident as one related to the greed of malicious people instigating violence, rather than to communal hatred. These efforts culminated in a public community meeting organised by U Ye Naung Thein for the evening of May 14, where community leaders, GONGOs, and NGOs disseminated accurate information, encouraged residents to trust the police, and demonstrated community solidarity.

Government and Civil Society Co-Ordination

The GAD and MPs co-ordinated their efforts in the days after the incident to find those responsible. The township administrator's office gathered evidence the day after the incident that suggested the case had little to do with illegal immigration but was instead the result of a dispute over money. According to the police, the conflict started when the woman who owned the apartment under investigation, Daw Win, asked her neighbour for a loan while using her house as collateral. Her neighbour, Aye Per Tun, acted as the broker. Daw Win was a construction contractor and her business was not doing well. After seeing that she would never be able to repay the loan, Daw Win sold the house and used that money to pay back the loan. When Aye Per Tun learned that Daw Win had sold the house for more than the loan, she demanded that Daw Win pay her an additional fee. The feud escalated when Aye Per Tun was contacted by two nationalist leaders, known as Ko Latt and Ma Aung, from the growing nationalist movement. They told Aye Per Tun that she should demand more money and pay the nationalists a fee in exchange for their help. Aye Per Tun agreed and after Daw Win again refused to pay, Ko Latt and Ma Aung mobilised the PMU to pressure the police to arrest Daw Win on charges of harbouring undocumented Muslim migrants.

The day after the incident, Ward Administrator U Ye Naung Thein worked with the police and the Township Administrator's office to clear Daw Win's name of Aye Per Tun's accusations, and to officially begin their investigation of the nationalists. That same morning, national MP Daw Phyu Phyu Thin, who had returned to MTN, met with members of the GAD to compare information about the case. She also spoke with the police to inquire why they had not acted earlier that night: "They said they didn't receive a command from the higher level. So, I told them that if they are not going to arrest [the instigators], the next time this happens I would arrest them [the police]." Daw Phyu Phyu Thin also sent a letter to the Chief Minister of the Yangon Regional Hluttaw and to the Ministry of Religion and Culture, demanding the arrest of the PMU members involved in this case. According to a local activist, it was Daw Phyu Phyu Thin's efforts that resulted in the eventual arrest of the perpetrators, explaining: "She forced the government to arrest all of those people. Without her it would not had happened. This was the first time that the government took action on those extremist groups – because of her." Indeed, that same evening, arrest warrants were issued for seven people, including two monks, charging them with inciting violence, which carries a maximum sentence of life in prison (*Reuters*, May 15, 2017). Ko Latt and Ma Aung, the two nationalists who first approached Daw Win, were arrested quickly, and three other lay people who worked

with them turned themselves in to the police after the arrest warrants were issued. The two monks, Sayadaw U Thu Seitta and U Pyinnya Wuntha, however, were not apprehended (*The Myanmar Times*, May 23, 2017).

In the days after the incident, the role of Aye Per Tun and the nationalists working with her to ignite violence was spread quickly through traditional and social media platforms. This occurred despite the PMU's attempts to frame the violence that night as self-defence and a righteous attempt to bring illegal activity to justice (*The Irrawaddy*, May 11, 2017). In response to the widespread accusations of incitement and the arrest warrants, the notorious ultra-nationalist organisation *aMyo-Batha-Thathana saungshaukye apwè*, known by its acronym MaBaTha and usually translated as the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion, of which U Wirathu is a prominent member, held a press conference where they claimed no connection to the nationalists involved in the incident in MTN. They claimed that the PMU, of which the nationalists arrested for the incident were members, had no official relationship with the MaBaTha and that although their ideals might be aligned, their strategies were different.

The peace-keeping efforts of the community leaders and members of MTN culminated in a public community meeting held the day before U Wirathu had suggested he would come to the neighbourhood. The Ward Administrator, in co-ordination with other local leaders, organised this event to explain what had happened to their community, but also to display the community's strength and unity to deter any further attempts at instigating violence. As U Ye Naung Thein explained:

> We set up the meeting at 8:30 pm on the May 14. The day before Wirathu was supposed to come. We invited all the people from the ward to come join us if they felt worried. I invited the MPs to come to the ward office and asked them to give speeches to encourage the people. They were telling them not to worry, not to be afraid, that if anything happened, we would act according to the law. They told them that if anything happened, the MPs and the ward administrator would stand in front of them to protect them. We would call the police station and have them help too. We also told them not to act rashly, not to carry weapons, "Don't do anything yourselves, these four people [the two regional MPs, Daw Phyu Phyu Thin and U Ye Naung Thein] will solve the problems for you." So, the MPs were trying to encourage the people so they wouldn't feel worried. There were about 150 people at the meeting. Everyone felt pretty satisfied after that. On the May 15, police cars and motorcycles came around here and guarded the office to show power. Show that police are here and ready.

Although the MaBaTha press conference made U Wirathu's visit unlikely, the community did not take any chances. The public meeting was a huge success, bringing in a crowd so large that the Ward Administrator's office had to set up chairs outside of the office and into the street. Ultimately, U Wirathu never did visit MTN. The next day remained peaceful, as did the weeks afterward.

Power and Legitimacy in Violence Prevention

The evidence presented in this article reveals the complex network of actors and strategies that culminated in the prevention of communal violence. In MTN, the actors included members of the local government, elected representatives of the neighbourhood, NGOs and GONGOs, religious organisations, other community leaders, as well as the community members themselves. While the work of all these organisations and residents contributed to the de-escalation of violence, however, the work of certain figures was always central. These included the Ward Administrator U Ye Naung Thein and the three MPs representing the township, including Daw Phyu Phyu Thin. These individuals co-ordinated the activities of the various groups by setting up street patrols, quelling rumours,

encouraging people to return to their homes, and eventually organising to apprehend the instigators. These individuals were able to co-ordinate and contribute to both sides of the de-escalation by mobilising their influence over the police and by mobilising local community groups through their locally recognised authority as allies against the military. In other words, their substantial structural power and popular legitimacy allowed them to effectively respond to and prevent violence from escalating in MTN that night and in the days afterward.

The role of these key figures in preventing violence that night was not merely due to their individual commitments to peace-keeping, although that undoubtedly did contribute. These figures were effective in preventing violence due to the unique governmental positions they held, as well as the popular recognition they receive as allies against the military. The constitution created a bifurcated system of governance where local issues like escalating communal violence are under the jurisdiction of the military. However, the history of draconian rule and the examples of the military's lack of intervention in the 2012–2014 communal violence created a widespread and deep mistrust of the military-affiliated branches of government. Indeed, rather than shut themselves in their homes and wait for police intervention, neighbours instead armed themselves and barricaded their streets, taking their family and business security into their own hands. It was people that the community trusted, figures with a history of anti-military activism and actual position of power to influence the actions of those figures, that the community would listen to and trust to de-escalate tensions. Furthermore, those organisations and individuals who attempted to contribute to de-escalation without contacting these leaders, including Ko Aung Lay and Al Hajj Karim, were ultimately not effective in de-escalating the conflict.

Political manipulation and civic engagement theories, then, do explain some of what happened in MTN that night, but do not capture the process of communal violence in this case. While there was nefarious co-ordination in instigating this conflict, for example, the evidence does not support the political manipulation argument as articulated by Snyder (2000), Brass (1996), or Wilkinson (2004). Each of these authors argues that violence is instigated (or not prevented) in response to upcoming elections with the goal of garnering more votes from co-religionists. The nearest elections to the May 2017 incident presented in this article were the November 2018 mid-term elections. If the violence were an outcome of political manoeuvring, why would they ignite it so early? Why not wait for the next elections, which were more than a year away? That is not to say that the communal violence in 2017 did not have political overtones or consequences, or that there was no nefarious manipulation. The PMU may in fact have been allied with the MaBaTha, despite their public denunciation, or even have allies within the military regime. The communal violence could have been ignited to keep fear of Islam alive in hopes of challenging the NLD government's aptitude. However, it seems more likely that the PMU borrowed what Varshney (2002, 55) refers to as the "master narrative" – Buddhist-Muslim antagonism – as a way of achieving its economic goals of pressuring Daw Win to pay Aye Per Tun. Like the participants in Fujii's (2009) analysis of genocide in Rwanda, the PMU were likely borrowing the "script" of religious conflict and "performing" communal violence as a means of achieving their personal goals (see van Klinken 2007; Das 1995). The manipulation may not have been political, then, but there undoubtedly still was some manipulation. While the reliance on elections in political manipulation arguments does not likely apply here, the logic of political manipulation more broadly is still relevant and explanatory.

Likewise, civic engagement theories were partially correct in explaining the drama of that night. The information shared between U Ye Naung Thein, the MPs, NGOs, and the

community at large, as well as the strategies of barricading streets and conducting street patrols, do reveal a kind of "institutionalised peace system" as expected by Varshney (2002, 11). However, the source of this peace-keeping system was not the inter-group solidarity that underlies the civic engagement arguments of Varshney (2002), Tajima (2014), or Fearon and Laitin (1996). In other words, it was not a Putnam (2020) kind of bonding social capital that explained why violence was prevented. MTN is highly segregated with a clearly defined Muslim neighbourhood. Furthermore, when violence escalated in MTN, there were few if any inter-group organisations present and none that were especially effective. While strong inter-communal associations and their partnerships with government could have contributed to de-escalating conflict and may have prevented the situation from escalating to the extent that it did, these were ultimately not necessary to prevent communal violence that night.

Conclusion

The violence between Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar, which has recurred since at least the British Colonial period in the mid-twentieth century, may seem entrenched and almost inevitable, particularly now as the country continues to destabilise. Indeed, the recent military coup may lead to renewed conflict between these and other communities in Myanmar. While the violence is endemic, however, there are powerful examples of peaceful co-existence and practical examples of effective work to prevent violence from escalating. This article draws on one such case of prevented violence in Myanmar in 2017 to emphasise how engaging with the local, complex, and dynamic process of communal violence prevention can enrich our contemporary theories of communal violence. Specifically, it showed that while the dominant theories of political manipulation and civic engagement explain conflict in some cases, the specificity of those arguments makes them difficult to generalise to Myanmar. While communal violence has been used as an electoral strategy in nearby India and Indonesia, for example, it is unclear how this incident of communal violence in MTN would affect election results when the nearest election was over one year away. Furthermore, the available evidence suggests that the instigators in this case were driven by economic ends, not political ones. Similarly, theories of civic engagement emphasise the work of inter-group co-ordination and community integration both through formal and informal associations. Such arrangements, however, are far from universal and as the case of MTN reveals, communal violence prevention is possible even when communities are deeply segregated. While inter-group associations, cross-cultural dialogue, or contact across groups may contribute to de-escalation, these were ultimately not what prevented violence from breaking out in Yangon that night.

The grounded analysis of communal violence in this case revealed that certain actors, ones with combined governmental authority and popular legitimacy, were pivotal in the peace-keeping process. This evidence suggests a framework of communal violence prevention that focuses away from claims about government intervention and inter-group co-ordination and instead broadens our perspective to account for variation in local systems of structural and cultural power. A framework that focuses on the distribution of power not only helps us understand how violence was prevented in Myanmar but is also broad enough to incorporate both the inter-group co-ordination that prevents violence in India (Varshney 2002) and the inaction of local government actors that allowed for violence in Indonesia (van Klinken 2007). While the framework developed in this article is tentative, given that the analysis focuses on one case, the need to extend the

political manipulation and civic engagement theories to explain cases like the one in MTN should be clear.

The military coup of February 2, 2021 ended a decade of democratisation with devastating consequences for the stability of the country. Among its economic and political consequences, the coup has halted the democratic government's innovations in local governance and policing, replacing them again with the fear and mistrust that gripped the country since 1962. While imperfect, the peace-keeping efforts of communities like MTN in the period between 2011 and 2021 offer important insights into effective strategies for de-escalating conflict. Specifically, the evidence from this case reveals the vital importance of providing structural power to figures with popular legitimacy. The NLD's changes to the GAD, which placed civilians in these critical positions of local government, promised a new system whereby residents could trust and rely on their local government (*The Irrawaddy*, December 21, 2018). The military coup has unfortunately destabilised these innovations and the State Administration Council has replaced these trusted figures with individuals allied with the military regime (*Eleven Media,* May 6, 2021). If Buddhist-Muslim tension were to rise again, as it has in the past, there is a real possibility that incidents like the one in MTN will not be prevented from escalating. While we do not know what the future holds for Myanmar, and especially following the 2021 military coup, the evidence from this article has shown, however, that peaceful co-existence between communities is possible and practical if communities can rely on individuals with both governmental authority and popular legitimacy.

Notes

1. These interviews were conducted as part of a broader project that included a total of 93 interviews, divided among four townships within two cities, Yangon and Mandalay. Of the 55 interviews in Yangon, 12 were conducted in MTN, 16 in Pazundaung, and 13 in various other locations with interviewees that had city-level constituencies.
2. The USDP and its nationalist allies attempted to label the NLD as a Muslim party during the 2015 election campaign but did not succeeded. The NLD responded to such claims by removing all Muslim NLD candidates (*The Irrawaddy*, August 31, 2015). While the USDP arguably made a stronger claim for the relationship between their party and Buddhist nationalism, they were unable to label the NLD as a Muslim party. This dynamic is likely different in the Rakhine State and in other states and regions where local political parties may be more closely associated with different religions (like Hindu-Muslim politics in India).
3. The narrative portrayed here is constructed from newspaper reports and first-person accounts. The details were cross-referenced where possible, but some information represents only one source's account. Where the information could not be triangulated, it is noted that the information came from a single individual. The names, occupations, and gender of interviewees are changed throughout this article to protect confidentiality. Exceptions are made for government officials and individuals whose position was important for the article's argument. In such cases, the interviewees were asked for permission to use their names and titles and were only included if consent was given.
4. As opposed to alternative formulations of the concept, Bourdieu's social capital is concerned with power; social capital is not a resource common to a community, but a measure of the resources available to an individual *over* a community. As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, 119) explain: "Social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition." In short, social capital is the measure of an individual's socially recognised authority within and over some group of individuals. Other forms of bonding social capital, like that of Putnam (2020) or Coleman (1988), may help explain long-term trends of peaceful co-existence (that is, the reason there are rioters in the streets in the first place), but that mechanism cannot explain why a specific case of potential violence is prevented or not.
5. In municipalities outside of Yangon, Mandalay, and Nay Pyi Taw, many of the tasks of local governance are co-ordinated by Development Affairs Organisations. These organisations are government agencies at the township level that are overseen by a local committee that includes representatives

from industry and other sectors. In these three large cities, however, these offices are replaced by ones at the city government level (Arnold et al. 2015). In Yangon the replacement organisation is the Yangon City Development Committee, which is led by the city's mayor.

6. The Five Muslim Organisations, together sometimes referred to as the All Myanmar Islamic Religious Organisation, includes the Islamic Religious Affairs Council, the Myanmar Muslim Youth Religious Organisation, the Myanmar Muslim National Affairs Organisations, the Jamiat Ulaama, and the Myanmar Molwi Organisation. Each of these organisations has different goals, structure, and constituencies but are together recognised by the government as representing Muslim interests. Their leaders occasionally gather in a shared office space in downtown Yangon as a "coalition" in order to deal with issues that affect the Muslim community as a whole such as the preparations for Ramadan or deciding on yearly arrangements for the Hajj (Five Muslim Organizations, May 2017, Yangon).

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