Dear PPW,

Although this paper is about social movements, I write it from another discipline (anthropology) and its theoretical groundings (ling-anth semiotics) are not, I think (but am not sure), in much conversation with social movements theory. I want to see how a paper written through these former lenses reads to scholars who look at these kinds of phenomena (social movements, that is) all the time. I am curious whether this kind of argument (essentially: 'everyone, including the activists themselves, think that activists know substantively what they want and what they believe in, but as their tactics end up in some nutty places [because of escalation and such], and in their fight to change the material conditions imposed on them [such as having their stolen land given back], praxis itself changes the conditions so much as to change the conditions of possibility for those substantive views’) seems (a) to be what I’m actually saying and (b) if so, is it at all novel, or if, on the other hand, you read this and say, “oh yeah, that’s old hat, an argument adumbrated by John Doe 1996” or (c) you read this and say, “well, that’s just boring. Who cares what they believe at some given moment? of course, ideas are always changing in praxis” that would be helpful for me as well.

Thanks,
Elliott

Grassroots Protest Movements and Political Indeterminacy in an Evolving Burma

Elliott Prasse-Freeman

Introduction

Since Burma began its lauded transition a number of years ago from its half-century long military rule to quasi-democracy, two central themes have emerged in both popular and analytical discourses: the significance of macro-economic and macro-

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1 Research for this article was supported by, respectively, the Wenner-Gren and National Science Foundations. My Burmese tutor Kyaw Moe Tun assisted with many of the translations and helped me
political reforms on one hand, and the concern over the “unleashing” or exacerbation of sectarian animosities on the other. As a result, a noteworthy political phenomenon has mostly evaded analysis: the explosion of collective social actions emerging around the country to mobilize for, inter alia, constitutional reform, media freedom and protection, education system decentralization, better worker treatment and compensation, responsible environmental protection and stewardship, local influence over development projects, access to livelihoods, and fair energy prices. Most impressive have been the hundreds of collective actions devoted to seeking recognition of, and redress for, the millions of acres of land forcefully expropriated from peasants, mostly at the hands of the military and its associated businesses, across the past four decades.² What do these conflagrations signify for Burma’s political future?

An apparent answer to that query is straightforward: not much. Indeed, if these protests merely demonstrate people exercising freedoms—to assemble, organize, and speak—that had long been denied, such actions can be understood as buttressing the general march towards liberal democratic reform (even when the actions rail contentiously against the extant power structures). After all, so the logic goes, are these citizens not participating in democracy, attempting, through the application of reason in the public sphere, to change regressive policies to more enlightened ones? Such a perspective comprehends the social movements as the background noise to the critical conversations occurring “above” them, whether in parliament, at the Myanmar Peace Center, at the ASEAN summit (hosted by Myanmar in late 2014), or in on-going political wranglings between Aung San Suu Kyi, chairperson of the opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD),

² This article draws heavily on national and Burma-focused diaspora media reports (in both Burmese and English), all of which are listed in the Bibliography.
and the military. Moreover, the perspective creates a clean and convenient bifurcation between these healthy and laudable liberal social actions and the chauvinistic and exclusionary ones led by U Wirathu and his anti-Muslim, monk-led 969/Ma Ba Tha movement.3

Undoubtedly, Burmese people are exercising new freedoms. Moreover, these actions can often be described as liberal-democratic, in that they seem to encourage respect for and faith in liberal legal and political institutions. But a question is whether in so doing they are also contesting the terms and trajectories of this disciplined transition to disciplined democracy. Indeed, the majority of the movements stand in an ambiguous relationship to the agendas of all elite politicians, principally because while Burma’s elite political actors—generals and democrats alike—were once able to invoke “the people’s desire”, comforted that there were few avenues or opportunities for those people themselves to articulate the actual content of such desire, the situation is now markedly different: people’s desires are being channeled through a multitude of heterogeneous demands that are proving difficult to assimilate. As such, when those in the entrenched establishment have observed these protests at all, it has been to subsume them as consistent with elite interests or to mark them as a threat. Aung Thein Lin, a member of the USDP’s central executive committee and of the Farmland Investigation Committee, has commented: “These protests are everywhere and I fear they may result in a national uprising and if this happens it will reverse our democratic transition” (Min Min 2014). Mostly, however, the protests have been ignored, their content and aspirations dismissed.

3 Ma Ba Tha is the Burmese acronym for the Myanmar Race Protection Organization and is led by nationalist monks who work to create a Burma for Burman (the majority ethnicity) Buddhists. Their main policy initiatives include a series of four bills (that have been signed into law) that restrict Buddhist women’s marriage and religious conversion choices.
Looking more closely at that content and those aspirations, I will ask whether the actions and demands trouble the current transition by fostering more capacious conceptions of democracy and politics. I present introductory research on these social movements, looking particularly at the way movement actors describe their political objectives and enact them in protest. While I have also conducted ethnographic work exploring the subjectivities of those who have become protesters, here I want to intersperse some of those data with discursive “readings” of the protests that occurred in Burmese media. It is here that we can look at the relationships between those leveling the contentious public claims, the various institutions of power (state structures, businesses interests, religious institutions) navigating those claims, and various publics overhearing (and ignoring, assessing, endorsing, or rejecting) them, providing insight into the ways these movements challenge the conventional relationship between leaders and “the people” in Myanmar.

**Studying Burmese Protesters’ “Textual” Tactical Ambivalence**

To comprehend political rhetoric in the movements developing in Burma, I surveyed documents featuring protests, focusing primarily on the Burmese and English editions of a number of popular Burmese journals and newspapers: Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), Mizzima, Eleven, The Voice Weekly and The Irrawaddy. I read approximately 200 of such articles (although many covered similar events and conveyed similar accounts), watched 17 web-based videos of different protests (mostly produced by Radio Free Asia and DVB), took screenshots of those signboards which were legible and which did not repeat the main messages from other protests (creating a cache of approximately 100 signs), and transcribed call-and-response
chants where possible. During a proceeding nine months of fieldwork in Myanmar working with, respectively, land activists and a legal-aid organization dedicated to defending land-grab victims, I viewed several more protest videos and interviewed farmers (in Sagaing and Mandalay divisions), many of whom had participated in so-called “plough protests”. I also interviewed organizers who engage these farming communities; lawyers who defend the farmers; other civil-society professionals whose work directly or tangentially touches these issues; journalists who cover the stories; and numerous average Burmese with whom I chatted in various locales (taxis, teashops, on the street). Finally, I visited the Michaungkan protest camp twice during October and November, and twice during the City Hall protests of December 2014 (as will be elaborated below).

This article examines protest chants, messages inscribed on the signboards ubiquitous in these protests, the main narratives conveyed by protesters in media interviews, and reflections by protest actors on their conduct. It studies the way these explicit linguistic messages interact with the congeries of different bodily actions that contribute to the affect of a protester’s performance. In Clark McPhail’s taxonomy, this includes examining how participants’ “face, voice, hands, and legs” are both specific and interacting loci of analysis (2006). By looking at these variables together, I attend to how protesters construct the central messages that they want heard and the publics they want to hear them.

I use “public” in the sense elaborated by Michael Warner, who recognizes the classic definitions of “the public” as an imagined “social totality” such as a nation or even humanity, and also as a specific audience in a bounded space (such as the public

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4 The plough protest warrants its own study, given its connections with the Burmese communist movement of the 1940s and whether those meanings are still relevant today. Tin Myo Win has conducted introductory research on the topic (2014).
in a theatre) to then articulate a third kind, “the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation” (2005). But “text” must be qualified here. Warner is part of an emerging tradition shared by literary studies and anthropology in which “text” is not understood as simply a linguistic artefact—a segmented, replicable, often authored thing such as a book—that can be “read” as standing in for the larger culture. In the context of the Burma protests, taking that classic perspective would entail reading the protests as a window directly into certain definitive and even immutable aspects of Burmese culture. But as anthropologists Silverstein and Urban, theorists of this newer perspective, assert:

… to equate culture with its resultant texts is to miss the fact that texts (as we see them, the precipitates of continuous cultural processes) represent one, ‘thing-y’ phase in a broader conceptualization of cultural processes. Moreover, to turn something into a text is to give it a contextualized structure and meaning, that is, a form and meaning that are imaginable apart from the spatiotemporal and other frames in which they can be said to occur. (1996)

Their focus on the continually churning processes of “entextualization” shows how texts are simultaneously a part of, and deracinated from, their original contexts. Such processes—quoting the speech of others, transcribing oral discourse, performing old texts in new ways—are all examples of the quotidian aspects of culture transformed into sedimented texts, best objectified in material “text-artefacts”. By focusing on

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5 The seminal exemplar of the “culture as texts” perspective is Clifford Geertz’s “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight”, which appeared first in 1973 (Geertz 2005). Geertz presents the cockfight as Balinese society’s self-representation of itself to itself, adducing in it a pedagogical function that instructs and clarifies to its audience-participants on the meaning of aspects of the culture.
extextualization processes, text can be imagined as both “embedded in richly contingent social action” and “something formal, along the lines of text grammar, in which a text is seen as a larger-than-sentence-level output conformable to something like a grammar” (Silverstein and Urban 1996: 15). The point here is that rather than seeing culture-as-text, we might see processes of text-making as efforts by participants in a given culture to change that culture by calling attention to certain aspects of it, by performing new versions of it.

Such attention compels examination of the performative and metapragmatic contents of speech. While performatives (in which speakers use descriptions of the world as ways to change the world so that it comes to conform to those descriptions) (Austin 1955) and metapragmatics (the way speech use itself becomes an object of speech, one effect of which is that a text’s meaning is informed by the contexts that it influences and is influenced by) (Silverstein 1993) are always part of all speech, speech-acts in protest movements often have a relatively higher concentration of these elements. This is both because speakers appeal to audiences to consider and effect the change in the world that the protesters suggest, and because the protesters themselves have been deterritorialized by an event or series of events that have compelled the actors to protest, a fact which suggests that they have come to see the world differently (Butler and Athanasiou 2013).

This review of text, performatives, and metapragmatics is meant to encourage a different way of looking at protests and at the “texts” they create in them. I describe the moments in protests highlighted below—the text of a signboard in the context of a specific protest or set of protests—as singular parts of necessarily longer engagements. The “meanings” of these moments are not fixed, and hence we can read
them as mutating texts to be reinterpreted, and scripts to be redeployed, throughout the cycle and beyond it.6

For instance, the statement “Respect the Rule of Law” that appears on signboards and in call-and-response chants in protests across Myanmar may at the moment of the protest contain an endorsement of a normative standard. But, as the demand is structured as an imperative directed at the state, the placards and chants do not make definitive claims about the Rule of Law in itself. These demands are tactically ambivalent, leaving open the assessment of the Rule of Law. Hence, should the protesters’ appeal fail, the same placards may come to stand as grievances against the failure of those stated standards or even their impossibility: what was an ethical demand for Rule of Law becomes an empirical complaint at its inefficacy or artificiality (therefore part of, for instance, a different appeal for legal pluralism or decentralization). The same placard hence sharpens political interpretation and action by forcing a response that then helps decide the meaning of the placard itself. The political reaction to the placard’s ambivalent meaning determines which possible meaning the placard will possess politically. In this sense, protest declarations are not fixed interpretations of empirical reality or claims pressed for normative goods; they are speech-acts in the form of public-creating texts whose meanings are decided by political reactions to them.

Protest Stylistics and Conceptions of the Political

The contingent, temporally-fleeting conception of a public—where a public snaps into existence when interpellated only to dissolve moments later—can provoke a

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6 For an example of a similar phenomenon in Iranian protests, see Manoukian (2010: 245-6). I thank Tri Phuong for directing me to this source during the editing process.
consideration of the concept of “public” versus “private” (in regards to space and functions in those spaces) in the Burmese context. While the paradigmatic distinction has long been critiqued (Gal 2002), the subjective understanding of “public” and “private” lives on in daily experience for many around the world (reinforced by apparatuses and institutions of power); a question is how Burmese consider and live the distinction. Such an inquiry is particularly resonant in a context where the state continues to arrogate the right to enter anyone’s home at any time (through the Guest Registration Law – see Fortify Rights 2015), where parks were long closed to citizens, and where certain kinds of broadcasted speech (where an individual or group call hail strangers with messages) continue to be heavily constrained. How do these new social movements engage this particular milieu?

In this regard, on one hand these local protests, at the level of both objectives and tactics, appear quite radical: their tactics often threaten the existing “disciplined” order, as some have destroyed property, others have occupied land or state areas (such as parks), many have put their bodies in front of bulldozers, in at least three separate occasions groups have invoked the spirit world to curse government officials and business persons, one group has taken hostages, another kidnapped policemen, and still another killed a police officer. Moreover, in their messages they repudiate some of the more anti-democratic aspects of Burma’s current transition, challenging in particular the subtle insistence that poor people must sacrifice for the country’s development (Prasse-Freeman 2014a).

But on the other hand, these actors cannot simply be construed as inassimilable actors committed to a radically new order. Land-grab demonstrations in

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7 As such questions are far too large for this paper, I would merely like to open the question of “public” and suggest that spaces in Burma in which strangers come to associate (for market and social transactions) may not confer or imply the same entitlements, opportunities, or dispositions as associated with such spaces as in other comparative contexts.
particular seem to have been launched only at the end of respective contentious mobilization cycles (Traugott 1995), only after movement leaders had reached out to those whom they thought should make amends and asked to negotiate a fair compromise. Most only escalated to more contentious tactics after their disciplined and respectful appeals were rebuffed or—sometimes considered worse—ignored. At these early moments, the participants invoked moral economies and did not beckon broader publics to get involved (and hence did not challenge the entire system).\(^8\) Or at least these are the ways that protesters have been able to narrativize their movements: as only radical because they were forced to be.

The progression of fairly radical outcomes from quiet appeals for fairness is a message literally written into the demonstrations themselves. Protesters seem to be particularly focused on entextualizing their movements with the hope for broader circulation, and as a way to narrate the extent of the violation they have experienced, thus substantiating their incursion upon public/state space. Text-artefacts in the form of signboards function as anchoring devices for the protests, focusing the narrative while concentrating demands. Striking is the sheer amount of words evident in the protests surveyed. Furthermore, a mixture of defiance and obeisance can be read directly off the bodily comportment of protesters: they deploy affects that are simultaneously acquiescent and transgressive, both cool and enflamed (Lempert 2012). For instance, when farmers occupy former land to plough it, they are both breaking the law and “restoring” (an always evolving version of) the moral order; by using the land as if it were never taken from them, they “write” with their bodies their symbolic claims to both land and to different political values. The “Michaungkan” protest, constituted by a group dispossessed in the 1990s, helps illustrate these points.

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\(^8\) For a discussion of escalation in protest movements, see della Porta 2008.
Michaungkan

Michaungkan is a neighborhood in northeastern Yangon’s Thingangyun township, from which movement members were removed by the military in the 1990s. Michaungkan’s history is contested, with former denizens claiming the area was their land for generations and that they were displaced punitively for their political actions during the 1988 mass uprising, while others suggest that the Michaungkan members were illegal squatters on public land causing problems for the original residents (by grazing cattle or cultivating crops in the area). This fundamental dispute over ownership may speak to the clash of ontologies over how claims to land are generated: on the one hand, lawyers with whom I spoke about this issue relied on a state logic that determines the condition of possibility for legality to be, in the first instance, animated by the state. Hence, as the land had been declared public land, the Michaungkan dwellers were always-already illegal. The denizens themselves, on the other hand, seemed to invoke a land-to-the-tiller logic [damma ucha ဓ၁မီးခ်] and often pointed to the land taxes they paid as proof of state recognition of this status. To further complicate the picture, after their dispersal the military moved in a different group of workers to work as sharecroppers; this group has also been mobilizing to achieve redress after it was, in turn, displaced to make way for a planned veteran’s housing project (Yen Snaing 2014).

It is against this convoluted background that the current so-called Michaungkan movement began in early 2012, when activists approached authorities to negotiate for a return of the land they call their own. When return was not

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9 My interviews with legal-aid representatives familiar with the area and protests took place on 2 Oct. 2014 and 7 Dec. 2014, respectively.
forthcoming, they established a protest camp outside of their original land. After being promised that the officials would mediate compensation negotiations with the current owners of the land, the protesters returned to their homes for the duration of the SEA Games in late 2013, as the authorities impressed upon them that they should not bring regional shame to the country. That they were willing to relinquish such significant leverage is noteworthy. It remains difficult to ascertain whether the capitulation indicates the extensive, perhaps excessive, good faith with which the movement has operated, or whether the actors believed at the time that any beneficial outcome could not be coerced out of the state (and were hence operating strategically). The point here is that the protesters from the start mixed conciliatory and obstinate tactics into a broader strategy in order to effect the best outcome for themselves.

When the SEA Games finished and the authorities still did not revisit their pledge to resolve the Michaungkan activists’ demands, the movement escalated the intensity of its tactics by erecting a protest camp outside of Mahabandoola Park (across from Yangon’s historic City Hall building, the site of a number of anti-colonial protests). Turning to the actions in this space, we can observe the mixture of compliance and resistance reproduced at the level of the micro-encounter of the protest itself. The protesters, for instance, cut figures that integrate bodily actions characterized by both militancy and a strict collective discipline and shared respect for spaces shared with strangers. For instance, when they chanted their demands in classic Burmese call-and-response slogans (Keeler 2009)—respondents shouting “Doh-a-yay, doh-a-yay!” (our cause, our cause!) while pumping their fists in synchronicity—the protesters invested their presence with expressive, animated

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10 I thank Christina Fink for highlighting this connection (personal communication, May 2014).
resistance. However, when not rallying, they sat in tidy rows, their bodies self-contained and their heads bent. The participants wore matching red T-shirts and headbands emblazoned with slogans that identified them as a collective. When a parliamentarian came to visit, they were photographed remaining seated, their hands reaching up to touch their patron.

**Figure 3.1 : Michaungkan Protesters Chant Slogans and Raise Fists, but Let their Signboards Calmly Explain their History**

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11 The headbands read: “Michaungkan land was taken illegally”; the shirts are branded with statements such as “Original owner of the Michaungkan land in Thingangyun Township” and “Our ancestors’ land is not military-owned land”.
Turning to their signboards, a similar mix of styles defined the messages: demands (“Give us our land back”),12, pleas (“The [public chosen] parliamentary
representatives, save us please")\textsuperscript{13} and explanations of context. The latter occupied the most textual and physical space, acting as constellations bringing together bodies, texts and images. Indeed, Michaungkan’s largest protest sign—held by eight people and standing nearly as tall as them—narrated their history of the contested land. The sign is organized into five columns: a photograph at the top of each with text below describing the photograph (see Figure 3.1). The columns read as follows:

(1) The pagoda that our ancestors had built on Michaungkan land, which was confiscated by the military; (2) The empty piece of land, that the military confiscated after having cleared the monastic buildings; (3) Scheming up the religious conflict by giving the permission to build a Muslim house for the elderly; (4) The army confiscated the land by getting rid of the villagers including the families of Moe Thee Zhun, and gave some apartments to a minority of the people as part of its ‘huts to concrete buildings’ propaganda; (5) The Yangon division army took the monastery land and the ancestral land illegally, and transferred it to the municipal army.\textsuperscript{14}
Several textual/visual aspects are noteworthy here. As in other protests occurring in Burma, the activists used photographs to ground their appeals in the materiality of the transgressions they suffered. By presenting photographs of Michaungkan land over a long period they were able to implicitly refute a counter-discourse circulating during this time that suggested that many land-grab protesters are merely opportunists fabricating claims to land they actually never had a history of living on.

Another notable reference on the signboard is to Moe Thee Zhun, who is invoked without introduction. While a well-known dissident to the politically engaged, Moe Thee Zhun spent much of the past two decades outside of Myanmar: he fled after the 1988 crackdown, formed the Democratic Party for a New Society (DPNS) in exile, and lived most of the last decade in the USA as a refugee. What purpose did indexing him serve? By referencing Moe Thee Zhun without contextualization, the signboard both hailed a politically engaged audience and performatively insisted that his name be known to any reader. In the context of the struggle, in which Michaungkan residents argued that they were evicted as punishment for their political views—and were hence not “squatters” violating collective morality—Moe Thee Zhun and family acted as icons substantiating that identity.

15 Protests in Letpadaung and across the country in solidarity with Letpaduang featured the faces of monks burned by phosphorous.
16 Members of opposition political parties and local NGO workers, respectively, suggested in interviews that many of the protesters were trying to cheat the state. For a brief reference to this phenomenon, see DVB 2014a. I have heard journalists use a play-on-words to joke that sometimes the protesters are not farmers (သင္င်မှာတို့) but schemers (သင္င်မှာတို့).
Together these features suggest that protesting in Burma is a delicate proposition: while officials insist that protesters be “tidy” (သန့်ရောက်) and demand they respect other citizens (Thazin Htwe 2014), injunctions which channel a desire to effect an affect of quietude, protests always contain an affective component that is disruptive, challenging, destabilizing. Demonstrations scholar Olivier Fillieule insists that demonstrations must occupy public space; express demands; include multiple participants; and be of a political nature (whether intentionally or not)—all such actions must convey an affective desire to change conditions in the world (2012). Given this inherently transgressive quality, the Michaungkan actors’ self-discipline may not be a mere tactical response to authority; rather, the self-discipline may be a response to a dual demand in Burma protests to simultaneously destabilize and restore order. Protestors hence tread lightly when they disrupt shared spaces, while also narrating their strategies and the trajectories their movements have taken in order to simultaneously challenge the state and enrol the public to support them. Michaungkan activists have foregrounded the injustices they have suffered through photographs, a narrated history of struggle, and its symbolic connection with the icon of Moe Thee Zhun; the audience that is hailed to pay attention by chants and physical occupation of space is reassured, through these texts, that the protestors have a legitimate grievance.

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17 For observations on this phenomenon of politeness in public space in comparative context, see Lee 2012.

18 After all, by occupying state space they have already enraged the government, and with signs such as “If you will not coordinate and discuss, come arrest us” [ညောင်င်းမှူးတို့ကြည့်ရှုရမှာ ကိုမိုရှိုးလွှဲးမယ်] they entice clear provocation.

19 I thank Charlie Carstens, scholar of Burmese Buddhism, for making an analytical point out of this observation; he has tracked similar phenomena in other Burmese public demonstrations (including the so-called Saffron Revolution of 2007, in which monks chanted the Metta Sutta, a world-restoring act in which loving kindness was conveyed to all even as space was occupied and the military-state challenged).
Such legitimacy is also built through the maintenance of connections with certain resonant and respected cultural symbols, even as these symbols are used for destabilizing and even violent ends. For instance, the protesters received funeral rites from monks in a photogenic ritual, demonstrating that they had monastic endorsement while conveying to the government and the public their ultimate commitment. “We are not afraid to die,” said many explicitly. Here Buddhism, an institution collectively understood as stabilizing and maintaining order, facilitates the protesters’ goal of challenging the current order of things. Further, but more ambiguously, when at the end of March 2014 the government demolished their Mahabandoola camp, Michaungkan protesters stepped outside of the putatively secular legal-juridical realm and seemed to call upon a wholly different domain—that of occult spirits—to continue the political struggle. On a signboard, complete with a large picture of a demon, the protesters asked the land-spirit ogre to curse [kyeinsa ကျင်စ်] those who have harmed them:

The curse is, ‘The officials who have abused the law, may these aforementioned big people and their following generations meet with violent deaths and with various tragedies and may they live on Michaungkan land as spirit ogres through their successive lives, and may their blood boil till their death in the past, in the future, and in the present on this land. May they live as ghosts and spirit ogres for 505 worlds without being liberated until the end of the earth. May they be led by the earth ogre to violent deaths. May it be so.’ (DVB 2014)²⁰
While the symbols are potent, the meanings are highly ambivalent. On one hand, to engage in a kyeinsa is to risk violating collective morality. As an informant told me, “Kyeinsa is against Buddhism and we are forbidden to do so from the religious perspective.” On the other hand, the imagery may evoke the oaksar saunt, a spirit tasked to protect the treasure trove of the future Buddha. These spirits must wait until the Buddha arrives unless they can find a proper replacement—in the form of one whose accumulated bad karma exceeds their own. Considering this cultural script, it is possible the protesters at some level understand the land-spirit ogres in the vein of oaksar saunt, encouraging the ogres to replace themselves with officials who have abused the law. If this is true, the point is that the cursing ritual operates somewhat within the moral system: this is not (only) a utilization of black magic (with the negative normative connotations such operations suggest) but rather a way of getting the wheel of karma sped up a bit to punish the deserving. Regardless, it is a creative and provocative insertion of a culturally resonant script into a new context, an experiment in the reception of a new writing of that text—by both the spirit world as well as the Burmese public.

21 E-mail correspondence, 5 Jan. 2015.
22 I thank scholar Phyo Win Latt for this insight. He also guided me to a text by monk Moe Thu (Mandalay) who discusses how the avaricious will get turned into ogres (2014: p 143).
23 There does not appear to be a great deal of literature on cursing ceremonies and their sociological import. Luce’s short article (1936) describes a number of curses and mentions cursing a handful of times in his book Old Burma, Early Began (1969); see also Ohno 1971. I thank Charlie Carstens for direction to these sources.
Cursing rituals that have emerged in other parts of the country have made the kyeinsa’s symbolic role more explicit. In Thaygone, locals who held a kyeinsa were indicted for defaming the state (the indictment itself perhaps suggests the socio-political power transmitted by these acts). In response to the accusation, protester Thant Zin Htet described its goals: “‘May they die with a violent death, may their families break apart,’ we cursed. We did it as a performance. Only then will the world know.”

While the protesters called for the painful death of government members and the destruction of their families, the protester Thant Zin Htet also describes the act as a performance (he uses the English loan word *pa-faw-mant*), noting as such that the curse is meant to (also) operate on the plane of symbolic politics: the world is the public that he wishes to reach, and only through the staging of such spectacles will such a public be compelled to pay attention.

Such escalation can also be seen in Letpadaung, in Sagaing region. In one ritual protesters dress as zombies, invoking the dead ancestors meant to judge the present. A photograph in *Letpadaung Chronicle* (various authors, n.d.) features participants who had painted their bodies black and eye sockets white, staring wide-eyed into the distance. A number of participants described the rationale behind holding such ceremonies:

“Regarding the LPT mountain copper project, this local area’s land for which compensation has not yet been accepted is being fenced off...”


25 The adjacent photograph in the book shows four similar figures lying in shallow coffins, with hundreds of villagers sitting in prayer behind them. The caption is “To protect this land, the kin who have died have been called and enrolled”: ဤယ#ကiu ဤယ#င%&eရ(*က%ပ+ရန% ပန#$က&'အပ#)*+သည#. သ”uပ%&ပက(က% သန္႔ဇင္ထက္ က ၒာင္းပါ (Yay Keh [Pyay] 2014).
illegally, the local peasants are being terrorized, prosecuted and arrested, the ordination hall destroyed piece by piece. Because they are not being protected by the law, we held a cursing and wishing ceremony by reporting it to the mountain father spirit,” said Ma Win Win Htay from Sedeh Village.

“As no one at all will come to carry out to help and resolve the difficulties that our area is now experiencing, we are praying and invoking the mountain father spirits,” said another local.26 (Aung Thu 2014)

In both descriptions, villagers explicitly recount how they have exhausted legal methods—that in fact the law is being used against them—and are turning to extra-legal tactics.

For outsiders to grasp the full meaning and cultural resonances of these cursing rituals would require exegesis by scholars of Buddhism and politics. What is clear is that these are highly performative political acts, “performative” both in the sense of acting for an audience and in the Austinian sense of changing the world through descriptions about it. The Thaygone protesters make it clear that they are performing in both senses: the curse could operate directly through the spirit or indirectly through the effect it has on other audiences. This especially becomes clear

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26 လက္ပံေတာင္ေတာင္ေၾကးနီစီမံကိန္းနဲ႔ပတ္သက္ၿပီးဒီေဒသေတြရဲ႕ေလ်ာ္ေၾကးမယူေသးတဲ့လယ္ယာေျမေတြကိုဆံစည္းရိုးခတ္မတရားသိမ္းယူတာေတြ၊ ေဒသခံေတာင္သူေတြကိုအၾကမ္းဖက္တာေတြ၊ တရားစြဲဆို ေထာင္ခ်တာေတြ၊ လယ္တီသိမ္ကိုတစ္စစီၿဖိဳဖ်က္ပစ္တာေတြကို ဥပေဒအရကာကြယ္မႈမရရွိတဲ့အတြက္ ေဒသခံေတြယုံၾကည္ကိုးကြယ္မႈျပဳရတာေတြ၊ ေဒသခံေတာင္သူေတြက အၾကမ္းဖက္တာေတြပါ၀င္းကူညီေျဖရွင္းေဆာင္ရြက္ေပးမယ့္သူမရွိေတာ့လို႔ေတာင္ႀကီးရွင္ဘႀကီးကိုတုိင္တည္ဆုေတာင္းမႈ ျပဳလုပ္ရတာပါ
when juxtaposing traditional kyeinsa—which were carved into Bagan-era temples to ward off evil spirits—with the way kyeinsa are being used today. Let us consider a photograph of the Letpadaung protesters (Figure 3.3).

Figure 3.3: Letpadaung Protesters Use the Spirit World as Part of “Secular” Strategies

The photograph is visually divided into four levels: in the immediate foreground is a *gadaw-pwe* (ကန့်ထားခြင်း), an offertory in which bananas and coconuts surround lit candles and incense; a lone farmer woman kneels in prayer directly behind, her eyes closed and hands folded below her chin; at the third level she is framed by two handwritten signboards, the messages physically and metonymically enclosing her prayer, contextualizing her actions. The left sign is obscured but seems to say “May military crony U Paing and Wan Bao Company that illegally stole the people’s land be cursed”, while the sign on the right clearly states, “‘May the military crony U Paing and Wan Bao Company that destroyed the chedi and the ordination hall go to...”
hell.’—The Letpadaung local people”.

Finally, in the distance, farmers in conical hats stand against a bucolic agrarian scene, providing the viewer more material context. While the photograph (by Kyay Baing) is certainly taken with skill, the women set the scene, attending to the ways their event will be “read” by others.

In doing this, the protesters in this and other cursing rituals effectively deterritorialize the kyeinsa: they take it on the move, allowing it to seek out new publics. Ancient kyeinsa seemed to seek out spirits as their audience, and perhaps recognized self-selecting members of the Buddhist community as ratified overhearers (Goffman 1981)—a fairly narrow public, as one had to come across a kyeinsa to read it. But protesters in all three contemporary kyeinsa contexts considered here utilize an undifferentiated broadcast model: if you can hear the protest you are already both a ratified overhearer of a message sent to others (in this case the spirits) as well as an intended recipient (of the symbolic political meaning). And the ability to construct these new audiences is likely more felicitous in Burma than it might be in other contexts; for instance, Brian Larkin, anthropologist of speech culture in Nigeria, notes that Nigerians have trained themselves to ignore many spontaneous broadcasts (Larkin 2013). Given Burma’s long period of policed public speech, people may be struck by the novelty of public speech laden with assertoric force and directed at everyone, and hence may be more eager to take note.

While I have not witnessed a kyeinsa, I was able to observe a contentious action of a similar kind in which both government and public were addressed. On the evening of 12 December 2014, the Michaungkan protesters left their protest camp and began marching north; the rumour that swept through activist networks was that they

27 လယ်သာဒေါင်းနှင့်သောဇောင်းနှင့်သောဇောင်းမှာ ထောင်သုံးချင်းနှင့်ချင်းနှင့်ချင်း –
“လက်ဖျင်မလေးလေးဖြင့်စားသောက်ခြင်း”
intended to block traffic at the Sule Pagoda traffic circle, forcing the government’s hand. But as such an act would inconvenience citizens travelling home after a long day at work, it was perhaps not surprising that Michaungkan activists instead occupied the space outside of City Hall, using a megaphone to deliver messages to passers-by and to the buses and cars travelling slowly through the roundabout.

The authorities attempted to prevent the transmission of those messages by rolling out a number of four-foot-high stereo speakers and blasting electronic dance music to drown out the chants. The protesters, unfazed, altered their tactics in response: they amended their signboards with the message: “Thank you for playing loud music; now more people will know about our cause”. As darkness fell, rather than yelling against the din, the protesters lit candles and bent their heads in prayer; the music and synchronized bodily movements illuminated by candlelight combined to create a powerful spectacle that brought dozens of people to stop and read the messages. The combination of music, light, and prayer invoked a ritualistic, almost religious feel in which the protesters remained calm and respectful in the face of tumult (in the form of music and government threat) buffeting them (a tumult they had in part created). Again, they managed to combine transgression and maintenance of order.

I returned three days later to observe their daily actions and enquire about their goals, strategies, and the ways tactics such as kyeinsa featured therein. At this point, the government’s speakers had been removed but barbed-wire barriers now framed their small camp. Patriotic songs lauding the independence-era nationalist group Doh-Bama Asi-Ayone [တော်ဘာမော အစိုးရအုပ်] pervaded the vicinity as I spoke with passers-by who stopped to read the signs; many told me they were just then learning about the movement, and I watched cars in the traffic circle slow to observe the scene.
Periodically the music gave way to protest leaders guiding the group in call-and-response chants, which included demands to return the land, and declarations that Rule of Law was their cause. Later I spoke with those leaders; to a question about kyeinsa, one of them described the ritual not as a unilateral curse but rather as a sort of trial, in which both parties would be judged. If the Michaungkan protesters were unfairly claiming the land then they, rather than the government, would fall victim to the wrath of the ogre, he said. This sort of risk and challenge, in which the protesters put themselves on the line in both legal-juridical as well as moral/cosmological domains, is noteworthy. When I enquired about the thought and strategizing that went into developing such messages, my interlocutor redirected me: “We have no experience with this. We simply do depending on the situation.” Such a statement stresses the improvisational tactics that the movement has deployed and relied on, suggesting that we should attune ourselves to the way that (con)texts are continually reimagined. Such an orientation is shared by other movements as well, as Letpadaung shows.

**Letpadaung**

In 2012 a group of farmers in the Letpadaung area of Sagaing, who had had their land appropriated by the military government years earlier and which was recently given to a Chinese-funded copper mine project, started staging protests and conducting civil disobedience actions to contest their displacement. These farmers first defied the local government, then a brutal police crackdown that included the use of phosphorous on protesting monks, and finally, perhaps most surprisingly, democracy leader Aung San
Suu Kyi. After the violence against monks raised the issue to national prominence,\textsuperscript{28} Aung San Suu Kyi was appointed to lead an investigation commission which ultimately found that the project should proceed after certain reforms were made; she told the locals that they had to respect “Rule of Law” and sacrifice their lands for Burma’s development. In interactions captured by a number of journalists, the Letpadaung protesters’ vehemently rejected Aung San Suu Kyi’s conclusions. In a DVB video entitled “Anger at Suu Kyi”, a woman is featured yelling at an off-camera Aung San Suu Kyi:

\begin{quote}
All the love we had for you, now it’s nothing. We put so much hope on her. But now her report is like a death sentence for the people ... Don’t come here, Daw Suu, we feel bad for General Aung San’s name.
\end{quote}

An off-screen woman is heard inserting her own complaints: “It’s like she’s just sitting aside. You’re supposed to protect the people, the monks ... You said this yourself. You said you wouldn’t trick the people.” In other DVB footage Aung San Suu Kyi explains her reasoning to the locals, and is rebuked by a group of women who ultimately lead a series of chants that seem to exhort her to recommit to her original political position of standing for the oppressed: “For whom will Daw Suu stand up? For the country, for the country. For the people, for the people.” They

\textsuperscript{28} Not only do articles about Letpadaung continue to dominate headlines, books such as Letpadaung Chronicle compile newspaper articles on the conflict to provide readers with a more diachronic understanding of the issue.
proceed to sing the national anthem. A visibly shaken Aung San Suu Kyi is rendered speechless.\textsuperscript{29}

The farmers utilized similar performative techniques when deploying the phrase “Rule of Law”. Burma scholar Nick Cheesman tracks such dynamics, noting the metapragmatic content written into the signs themselves:

On marches, demonstrators carried placards and banners that responded to and rebutted the legalese of the official injunctions by duplicating the contents and imitating the style of government notices. Hundreds of people marched under a red and white banner reading, ‘Respect the law’—the message not only of the current government but also of its predecessors for the last couple of decades. They also erected signboards styled after those of officialdom prohibiting trespassing onto designated land, which in their case they designated to be the villagers’ fields, thereby challenging the authority of the township administration to declare their land off limits through a series of orders that had themselves invoked the rule of law (Cheesman 2013).

By imitating the Rule of Law discourse of the elite, the villagers utilized the symbolic power of the phrase, borrowing some of its social meanings but also improvising an immanent critique through it; indeed, while appeals to a value system external to a specific milieu can be dismissed as irrelevant or illegible (a problem that Burmese democrats have long encountered when deploying “human-rights” rhetoric), working

\textsuperscript{29} An analysis of these encounters carried out by DVB describes Aung San Suu Kyi as “drift[ing] between utter exhaustion and rage as she argued with residents” and “star[ing] listlessly into the mob” (DVB 2013b).
within a regime of power’s own logics has a disarming effect. To wit, the locals mimicked Burma’s state discourse, one that has fulfilled theorist Michael Holquist’s paradigm of “official state discourse” which he has characterised as being “in extreme versions… similar to autism in so far as they are totalitarian and do not recognize otherness: they abhor difference and aim for a single, collective self” (1990: 52). By mimicking the discourse, did the protesters become the same kind of “autistic” speaker, making demands that could not brook dissent? Or did they metapragmatically call attention to the entire mode of address (and mode of politics) and, as such, critique it? Mimicry welcomes both meanings simultaneously, allowing the protesters to communicate an inflexible defiance in the context of their oppression, as well as a willingness to recognize the futility of always operating in such univocal modes. As those in power are rendered dumbfounded by their own logic deployed against them in the speakers’ co-optation/critique, a space is created in which protesters are able to throw this logic into examination. This phenomenon takes an embodied form in Aung San Suu Kyi’s speechlessness described above: the protesters’ chants acted both as endorsement and critique—an endorsement of the versions of Aung San Suu Kyi or Rule of Law they would like to see, and a critique of those forms that do them harm.

Cheesman argues that the protesters not only brought attention to their plight, they attempted to perform a new relationship to law, one of equality as rights-bearing citizens. This is certainly one possible conclusion about the meaning of those performative assertions. Yet when we examine some other signs that the protesters deployed and the actions that they took since initial protest cycles, the suggestion that protesters desire a classic normative “Rule of Law” under which all subjects are equal might be challenged.
In Figure 3.4, for instance, a photograph of a protest at Letpadaung, we observe potentially discordant messages.

Figure 3.4: While the Second Sign Asks for Rights, does the Fourth Demand Racial Privileges?

The first sign from left reads “Terminate the Letpadaung hill copper project”, the third, “People’s voice, people’s wish: absolutely terminate the Letpadaung hill copper project” and the fifth, “Terminate every project not in accordance with the people's wish”—all are important demands, but the second and fourth make unique claims. The second reads: “To receive fully the citizen rights/opportunities described in the Constitution”, 30 a claim consistent with Cheesman’s reading of subjects enacting “rightful resistances” that aim to hold the law to its word. 31 But the fourth stands in awkward juxtaposition, reading: “This is our nation, this is our land, that is our owned

30 ဗုဒ္ဓိသည် ကျပ်ရှင် ဝိဟို့ ပြည်သူကြီး သိပ္ပါးခြင်း

31 The term “rightful resistance” was popularized by Lianjiang Li and O’Brien’s eponymous 2006 book. For a review of the argument and responses to critiques of it, see O’Brien 2013.
land, master race, we Bama”.\textsuperscript{32} These two claims are not, of course, incompatible. As James Holston shows in his ethnography of Brazilian citizenship, “rights” can be structured as differentially accessible under what he labels a “rights of privilege” regime (2008). It is difficult, though, to read radical claims to egalitarian citizenship \textit{for all} from a signboard asserting racial superiority (especially given Burma’s highly heterogeneous polity).

Attending to the indexical content of these claims provides some insight. First, the current context: the company displacing the Letpadaung farmers is a Chinese one, so perhaps the protesters are appealing to their co-ethnics in government to reject the outsider (an expression of an “external” xenophobia rather than an assertion of “internal” superiority vis-à-vis Burma’s non-Bama minorities). Moreover, the use of “master” in the context of “We Bama” is likely a reference to the anti-colonial movement, in which Burmese used the term “master” with each other to contest the British insistence that white and Indian people be referred to by that title (Khin Yi 1988). Read this way, the master language makes a political claim based on cultural intimacy and operates on a level primary to, or at least parallel (and even potentially in conflict) with, citizenship claims to rights.\textsuperscript{33}

Further, the movement’s escalating actions are difficult to understand as consistent with idealist readings of Rule of Law. When locals told Aung San Suu Kyi that they read her report only to immediately burn it in disgust, when one physically threatened her (DVB 2013b), when they cursed the company and revelled in mysterious accidents that consequently led to worker deaths and injuries, when local

\textsuperscript{32} Michael Herzfeld describes “cultural intimacy” in his eponymous book as “the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality” (1997: 3). The invocation of “master race” in the context of the perceived emasculating influence of the Chinese fits the definition well.
farmers went as far as to kidnap two employees of the Chinese mining company Wanbao and hold them hostage, we are compelled to understand “Rule of Law” and claims like it as provocation and critique, part of “texts” that are being continually rewritten based on the goals and demands that emerge recursively with the evolving conditions of possibility for political action. In similar situations across the country—whether farmers are ploughing occupied land or holding policemen hostage—explicit violations of the law attended discourses that promoted it, a phenomenon that places law itself in an ambiguous position. As a local activist from Nyaung Wun, Mandalay division (where farmers took police members hostage after the latter attacked them) told me: “We have to teach people about the law, but on the other hand we have to break the law.”

Farmers in Myo Tha, Mandalay division (who are currently actively fighting against an industrial-zone project that is being built on their land) had similar observations to make: a protest leader described how her chants included demands invoking the law and the Constitution. But when I asked her how the Constitution could help her, she replied, “The law is just on paper. It does not exist in reality.”

What Significance for Burma’s (Conceptions of) Politics?

A question is what these movements signify: are these conflagrations that flare up to burn out fast? Or does each leave a residue to be picked up by others in different locales, eventually coalescing to challenge or change the new order? Much depends on whether these various movements can begin working together, forming coalitions and even political bodies (from parties on the formal side to organized networks on the less formal) that tie together places that share the same challenge (such as land-grab)

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34 Interview, 30 Nov. 2014.
35 Q: သင့်ကြိုးစားပါသည်က သင်ကြားသည်သူက သင်၏လူငယ်များသို့ အမှန်တကယ်လို အမှန်တကယ်လို မရှိပါဘူး။ A: သင်များနိုင်သောအချိန်အပိုင်းများ၏ အမှန်တကယ်လိုမရှိပါဘူး
or link multiple issues that share some common substrate (such as concern for “people’s values”, “workers”, “producers” or similar idioms).

Political theorist Ernesto Laclau identifies such production of common rhetorical labels as part of the creation of “chains of equivalences” that braid heterogeneous claims into populist forces. According to Laclau (2005), populism constitutes the heart of all politics in its simultaneous engagement of differences and equivalences: recognizing the differences that an urban-based movement fighting for electricity has with a rural-based movement for protection of land, the two respective groups might still recognize their equivalence in their shared difference from political-economic elites who marginalize them both. Laclau holds that the rhetoric deployed in these contexts often mobilizes what he calls “empty signifiers”—terms such as “the people”, “the workers”, “we Burmese” and “the Rule of Law”—that by meaning nothing in particular, or rather a vector of potential things, can capture and hold together the various heterogeneous demands levelled at those in power. Is such a politics possible in Burma today?

It is a fraught question. On one hand, the environment seems fecund. Solidarity marches have been held for Letpadaung on various occasions by a number of different civil-society and religious groups; 88 Generation students have been providing legal aid and advice; and the All Burma Federation of Student Unions has supported the Thaygone farmers; its member Phyu Hnin Htwe was arrested for aiding Letpadaung. The Burmese mainstream national newspaper Eleven has been largely sympathetic to, and supportive of, the movements. The NLD has been an essential force at the township level, organizing farmers by cataloging land grabs and advocating to their parliamentarians for support. Moreover, when in May 2014 Burma’s Vice-President declared that Burmese people could comfortably live on
2,000 Myanmar kyat per day, a torrent of invective was directed at him and his elite class, a discourse that coalesced around the elite disconnect from the challenges of the average person.

Later in 2014, the Asia Foundation (TAF) released its survey on “civic knowledge and values” in Burma. While opposition political members condemned it (mostly, it seems, because the survey found that the people did not despise the government sufficiently), and the TAF used it to declare the need to conduct “civic education”, both ignored essential political content that seemed to emerge in the survey. For instance, to the question “What does democracy mean?” a stunning 35 per cent of the respondents said, “I don’t know” (only 3 per cent said a “government owned by the people”; 53 per cent said “freedom”; and 15 per cent said “legal rights”). While the TAF described such answers as problems of knowledge (and hence that the Burmese need to be taught what democracy is), “I don’t know” could also be read as a challenge to the government and the polity itself: “I don’t know” might mean “I don’t know yet”: we don’t know what democracy will look like, given this transition, given these movements fighting for new meanings and new structural conditions.

But on the other hand, many factors are militating against such a creative and pro-poor politics. The NLD has devoted its party resources not to farmer issues but to massive rallies to amend the Constitution so as to provide Aung San Suu Kyi an opportunity to be president. The Voice Weekly, a newspaper similar in style and

36 At the event’s release on 14 Dec. 2014, panelist Ko Ko Gyi of 88 Generation Students bashed the report for what he claimed were inadequately anthropological methods; Eleven ran an editorial entitled “Applying ‘Make-up’ to the Fake Democracy: Asia Foundation after IRI” (Nay Tun Naing 2014).

37 As the TAF puts it: “The survey findings underscore a continuing and critical need for accessible and inclusive civic education to deepen and sustain public commitment to democracy, as well as to overcome the lack of social trust and deep political divides.”

38 This is my interpretation public comments made by TAF staff at the report launch on 16 Dec 2014.
readership to *Eleven*, has run at least one story suggesting that grassroots movements are being orchestrated by nefarious “disruptive elements” foisting alien ideologies upon the farmers (Voice 2013). The government also sees activists behind every conflagration (Kyaw Hsu Mon 2014a), and even opposition political actors suggest that the farmers are being manipulated. As an illustration, in October 2014 I asked two colleagues, both former political prisoners now working with NGOs, about three of the groups organizing farmer movements: Movement for Democracy Current Force (MCDF), People’s Service Network, and Facilitators Network for Farmers and Laborers (FNIFL). Both of my colleagues concurred that these groups compelled peasants to betray their interests by encouraging them to engage in dangerous activities and indoctrinating them with radical ideas. At the same time, these colleagues recognized the irony in that assessment, given that the military had levelled precisely the same accusation against *them* when they were trying to mobilize students during the 1990s.

Activists from MDCF and FNIFL in turn conveyed to me suspicion about the agendas of what they saw as elite NGO workers unwilling to “stand with the people”. While this schism warrants full exploration elsewhere, the dispute can be theorized here. One explanation is that these activists are not only perceived as disrupting the parked transition, but as imbued (through their resources and relatively influential status) with the power to do so, which indicates that farmers themselves are not perceived as agential social actors capable of generating politics. As a legal-aid professional told me, “Farmers rise up but only out of desperation.”

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39 The government has gone as far as to mistake political satire for leftist conspiracy (*Eleven* 2014e).
40 Interview, 18 Oct. 2014, Yangon.
41 Interview, 29 Nov. 2014, Yangon.
42 12 Jan. 2015, discussion with legal-aid professional.
explanation is that the farmers’ messages and actions are so ambiguous or provocative as to send readers on a search for legibility, resulting in their falling back on the simple conspiratorial narrative of the “big black hand behind the curtain”, 43 in which communists or *agents provocateur* foment chaos by hoodwinking peasants.

The relationship between farmers and activists is a complex one and cannot be defined here. Regardless, every one of the dozens of farmers groups I spoke with self-organized *before* contacting activists. This typically involved the aggrieved farmers locating fellows who had been displaced; debating and designing a strategy for redress; collecting signatures and information on the amount of land each person had had stolen; and then taking action, which almost universally started with writing appeal letters to various government officials. These significant actions—and their potential for further political effects—are elided in debates about scheming activists.

Indeed, those being represented in Myanmar are often eclipsed by their representative, a general phenomenon captured well in a mid-2014 *Eleven* editorial. The article begins by challenging the distinct line drawn by Burmese conventional wisdom that separates politicians and average people, suggesting that the former may not necessarily be of higher quality. Yet by the fourth paragraph, the article is recounting the sacrifices of the 1988-era politicians and asserting their authority to speak for the people today. 44 It warns that some of these politicians are squandering their reputations, forfeiting their legacies as those who sacrificed for the national cause by selling out to moneyed interests. But then, instead of interrogating the problems with a polity reliant on such exceptional sacrificial figures, the editorial’s conclusion effectively endorses that model, and actually reinforces it:

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43 MCDF and FNIFL activists referred to one another this way, mocking the label they felt had been ascribed to them.

44 In the original Burmese version, it is described as မိန်ညွှန်စာချောင်း
In conclusion, Eleven Media would like to offer the country’s politicians this advice from [academic] Maung Htin: ‘However bad politics can be in reality, anyone who desires to serve in the public interest is responsible for turning bad politics into good politics’ (Eleven 2014a).

Politicians become the putative audience, and the effect is to inform average people overhearing this advice that rather than ceasing the search for perfect sacrificial leaders, they must continue to wait and merely hold those heroes to account.

Such a disjuncture may be explained by Burma’s contemporary political history, where politics was the domain of “big men” while average people invested these figures with awe and hatred. Burma’s independence hero Aung San explicitly tried to eliminate the gap between the two, reimagining the political as the stuff of daily actions in which people must be involved. In a 1946 speech he said:

> The fact is that politics is neither high nor low, neither magic nor astrology nor alchemy … politics means your everyday life. It is you in fact … It is how you eat, sleep, work and live, with which politics is concerned” (Aung San 2012: 264–5).

But John Badgley found that Aung San’s rhetoric did not lead to a situation in which average people described local resource negotiations or conflict resolution as “politics” (1965). The gap was maintained and exacerbated by the military era.
Anthropologist Jennifer Leehey looks closely at merit-making rituals employed by Burmese generals during the 1990s, finding that

at the Shwedagon, the regime was able to make an elaborate bid for moral authority by presenting themselves as devoted patrons of the sasana (religion) while simultaneously alluding to other kinds of forces, amoral forces, being marshaled in support of their rule.

Leehey adds that the military regime was able to emphasize its “elite access to higher levels of esoteric knowledge and power” (2010: 164); she maintains that Burmese publics observing these performances held the regime in opprobrium and recognized its power simultaneously. As Matt Walton points out, people still incorporate into daily Buddhist practice prayer for protection from the five evils, one of which is government (2012: 73). While these fragments of daily perceptions of power are not dispositive of entire worldviews, they are meant to illustrate the ways that political power as distanced from the polity is continually re-embedded, running alongside more egalitarian discourses that flow through society as well.

Reinforcing the gap was the fact that during the years of military rule collective social action in and around Burma was often characterized by a central bifurcation: to directly contest the military-state (by joining political parties, participating in student unions or organizing underground networks) or to avoid that domain entirely, working to ameliorate damaging social conditions in non-adversarial ways (Prasse-Freeman 2012). While such a clean divide seems like a false one—in an authoritarian context, small collective actions of survival and negotiation with the state could certainly be construed as eminently political (Thawnghmung 2011;
Tagliacozzo and Chang 2014)—Burmese social actors themselves described the split as such: contentious collective action was often called “big-P” politics, while the later mode of work was referred to as “small-P” or even “non-political”.45 The state’s form of engagement with the polity made the divide real: actors who contested the state were inducted into the big-P political domain, forced to bear enormous costs (life in political prison, exile on the border) that often came to be described in terms of struggle and sacrifice, and objectified as such.

This meant that the figures of the political prisoner, the underground organizer, and, of course, of Aung San Suu Kyi, became icons of struggle for Burmese society. As icons they circulated in political communication: images and narratives of these political figures could be shared, providing people with hope during dark times. Yet this also had the concomitant effect of narrowing, or rather maintaining, the conception of “the political” as an elite and rarified practice not accessible to average citizens (Prasse-Freeman 2014a). Indeed, iconization of the political actor creates a gap between that exemplary struggler and the people who observe her performance.

Returning to the theme of (re)entextualization, “the people” and who speaks for it remains contested and open. One concern is that the populism possible in which a politics of the daily clashes with a political culture that cherishes elite leaders is one which will find other objects of derision on which to concentrate its in-group forming energies. Demagogues, following the model laid down by the jingoistic U Wirathu in his campaigns against Burma’s Muslims, can harness the anger and alienation felt by

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45 This split manifests today in the way Burmese vernacular distinguishes NGOs: politically inflected groups are called ရပ်ဘက်လေး (loosely translated into English as “CSOs” or “NGOs”) while those doing service delivery are less likely to be labeled as such, instead being given the name လမ်းဆောင်ရွက်သူ which refers to its purely social content.
those left out of reforms but who are yet unwilling to sunder their icons. Scapegoats become easily identifiable in these situations (Prasse-Freeman 2013), especially as intensifying structures of governmentality in Burma make categories of difference, such as along religious or ethnic lines, more salient.

But there is another option. The signifier “the people” can be constructed in opposition to anything, and the current protests around the country provide potential opponents who go beyond foreign Others. They include those who do not care for the workers and farmers, those who benefit from the transition while the lives of average people get worse. Such a maneuver would be consistent with the kind of performatives articulated by movements throughout this article: we support the leader, provided she is a just leader; we support the law, provided it is a just law; we support the transition, provided it is a just transition. And those ideas of justice, certainly not ossified and immutable but changing with the context, may emerge from the politics of the daily that is immanent in the quotidian struggles of average Burmese people today. The next era of Burmese politics will witness how entities and movements articulate and perform those evolving conceptions of justice (Prasse-Freeman 2014b).

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46 A re-examination of the doh-bama asi-ayone could be useful here, as their “others” were the thudo-bama [those Bamar] who capitulated to foreign interests or ignored the poor (Nemoto 2000).


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