Universiteit Leiden

Cyclone Nargis, a political storm?

The effects of a natural disaster on a political system

Master of Arts in International Relations, University of Leiden
Dissertation by Maud Mosterd
Student number: s1746138
Student e-mail: m.m.mosterd@umail.leidenuniv.nl
Thesis supervisor: Dr. L.O. Black
Submission date: 2 June 2017

Universiteit Leiden

Contents

Abstract

On 2 May 2008, the South of Myanmar was struck by Cyclone Nargis, which crushed the area, killed around 140,000 people and displaced millions. To look into the political significance of this disastrous event, this research tests the framework of Mark Pelling and Kathleen Dill, which analyses the impact of natural disasters on political systems. Is their theory applicable to the case of Cyclone Nargis and Myanmar? Especially the role of LNGOs and CSOs in this event is emphasized. This thesis draws conclusions on using theory to understand the effects of a natural disaster on a political system. Events like this always have to be studied with regards to the concerning context and it is complex to use a generalist framework as Pelling and Dill propose.

1. Introduction

'Nargis was the worst experience of my life. The last thing I remember is the
lightning coming together with a strong wind and later a giant wave covered my
daughter and me while we were running to the monastery. Then we were
separated. I was washed away by the wave and became unconscious. When I came
around, there were no clothes on my body and I could not walk as I had no strength.
Beside me there was a dead body. I was lying like that for two days I think. I tried
very hard to look for my daughter. Later people with a boat rescued me. There was
no warning about the storm'.[1]

This is only one of the countless horrible remembrances from the most devastating
natural disaster Myanmar has ever experienced: Cyclone Nargis. The cyclone hit the
shores of the Ayeryawady Delta on Friday, 2 May 2008.[2] Approximately 140,000
people were killed or went missing and almost 2,5 million people were directly
affected.[3] Even after surviving the massive floods, the people in the cyclone-struck
areas faced many other challenges. Health facilities and drinking ponds were
damaged, farmlands destroyed and the infrastructure was wrecked. The overall
economic loss amounted to 4 billion USD.[4] This is equal to almost 13% of Myanmar's
GDP in the year of 2008.[5]

The cyclone resulted not only in social and economic devastation, but it also
had a major impact politically. Cyclone Nargis revealed many shortcomings of the
military government. Until this point, in 2008, senior general Than Shwe had ruled
the country for sixteen years through a personalist dictatorship.[6] The natural disaster

---

[1] Human Rights Watch, *"I want to help my own people". State Control and Civil Society in Burma after Cyclone Nargis* (New York, April 2010), 17.

[2] The Ayeryawady Delta is located in the most Southern part of Myanmar. It is densely populated and is one of the most important areas for rice cultivation in the country.

[3] Being displaced or injured for instance.

[4] Recovery Status Report, *Cyclone Nargis 2008: Rehabilitation in Myanmar* (2010), 1.

[5] The GDP of Myanmar in 2008 was 31,37 billion USD, making 4 billion USD of economic loss 12,75% of the national GDP of that year. Numbers derived from: 'Myanmar GDP', Trading Economics, http://www.tradingeconomics.com/myanmar/gdp (accessed 27 May 2017).

[6] Although Myanmar was ruled by the military, in reality it was under a personalist dictatorship of senior general Than Shwe. As Barbara Geddes discusses about personalist dictatorships: 'the leader may be an officer and may have created a party to support himself, but neither the military nor the party exercises independent decision-making power insulated from the whims of the ruler'. Derived

placed heavy pressure on the position of Than Shwe and the military. Since the military did not provide sufficient assistance, civilians in affected areas relied upon the help of local non-governmental organisations (LNGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs). To gain more knowledge on this topic, this thesis aims to answer the following question: to what extent did Cyclone Nargis disrupt the political status quo in Myanmar and lead to political change?

The focus of journalists, policy makers and academic researchers has predominantly been on whether democracy has been implemented in Myanmar and not on the impact of the cyclone on political change.[7] However, the effect of cyclone Nargis should not be diminished, since natural disasters have political consequences – this will be discussed in more detail in the literature review.

The structure of this research is as follows. Before starting the analysis, the political context in which Cyclone Nargis occurred, will be outlined. Hereafter a literature review will follow, in which the precise focus of this thesis is connected to the academic literature. Then, a brief elaboration of the utilized theories, analytical framework, key concepts and methodology in this research will be outlined. The analysis follows in two chapters. The first chapter (6.) reveals the shortcomings of the military government in responding to the cyclone and how this affected the position of LNGOs and CSOs in the country. In the second chapter (7.) the theoretical framework of Mark Pelling and Kathleen Dill is tested based on the findings of chapter one. Here the complexity of using a theoretical framework to understand the political effects of a natural disaster is exposed.

---

from: B. Geddes, 'What we know about democratisation after twenty years', *Annual Review of Political Science* vol. 2 (1999): 121-122.

[7] In November 2010, the military government held its first 'democratic' elections. Although the elections did not respect international standards, they did highlight a new development in Myanmar's political arena.

2. Political context

From 1988 onwards[8], after violent crackdowns of civil protests, Myanmar's citizens were under the rule of a strict military regime (*Tatmadaw*)[9], which viewed themselves as the saviours and guardians of the nation.[10]

In this authoritarian regime, non-state actors could not engage in the political space. Despite popular protests, economic and political crises and dissatisfaction with the military rule, the Tatmadaw stayed in power. In the years after the 1988 consolidation of power, the military established itself as a competent institution with uncontested control over society and the state apparatus.[11]

In 2003, the military regime introduced its seven-step roadmap to a 'modern, developed and democratic nation'.[12] The road map would take time to fulfil and government officials described it as a train with seven stations to democracy.[13] The

---

[8] This outline on the political context of Myanmar starts in 1988, because from 1988 onwards, the military regime that was ruling Myanmar until 2011 came to power. This does not mean that nothing relevant happened in the political field before 1988, but this moment is most relevant for the scope of this thesis.

[9] In 1988 anti-government demonstrations emerged against the regime of general Ne Win, who took power in Myanmar in 1962. These pro-democracy demonstrations took hold of the whole country and became known as the 8888 Uprising. Students started the demonstrations but soon many citizens and monks joined the movement. On 18 September 1988 a bloody military coup ended all of this. Reportedly, thousands of people were killed, although the government itself puts the number of casualties on 350.

[10] M. Callahan, 'The generals loosen their grip', *Journal of Democracy* vol. 23, no. 4 (2012): 121; The military regime frames itself as the guardian of the nation, for instance by stating that 'whenever the country faced a crisis, it was the Tatmadaw that had stood in front of the people to protect the nation and the interests of the people', derived from: H-E. U Khin Maung Win, 'Myanmar Roadmap to Democracy: The Way Forward' (Presentation at Seminar on Understanding Myanmar, Yangon, 27-28 January, 2004).

[11] R.L. Huang, 'Re-thinking Myanmar's political regime: military rule in Myanmar and implications for current reforms', *Contemporary Politics* vol. 19, no. 3 (2013): 247.

[12] The seven-step road map includes: 1. Reconvening of the National Convention that has been adjourned since 1996; 2. After the successful holding of the National Convention, step by step implementation of the process necessary for the emergence of a genuine and disciplined democratic state; 3. Drafting of a new constitution in accordance with basic principles and detailed basic principle laid down by the National Convention; 4. Adoption of the constitution through national referendum; 5. Holding of free and fair elections for Pyithu Hluttaws (Legislative bodies) according to the new constitution; 6. Convening of Hluttaws attended by Hluttaw members in accordance with the new constitution; 7. Building a modern, developed and democratic nation by the state leaders elected by the Hluttaw; and the government and other central organs formed by the Hluttaw. Derived from: U Khin Maung Win, 'Myanmar Roadmap to Democracy: The Way Forward'.

[13] Democracy was not a new concept for Myanmar. The ethnically diverse country experienced a period of parliamentary democracy after it gained independence from the United Kingdom. From

direction of this train could not be changed, but whoever wanted to join the ride was welcome. However, democratic opposition and ethnic groups were not pleased with the role that the military crafted for themselves for this train ride – namely a very influential one.[14] The most important aspects of the roadmap to democracy were drafting a new constitution and holding free and fair elections in 2010. The referendum for the adoption of the new constitution was planned on 10 May 2008. Just one week after Cyclone Nargis had crushed the country.

Immediately after the 1988 uprisings, the Tatmadaw promised to bring about a new government through multiparty elections. However, they also stated almost a year before the 1990 elections that those elected could not form a new government until there was a new constitution. Only after the constitution was drafted could a power transition take place.[15] During the 1990 elections, which were considered fair elections, 93 parties and 87 independents competed for 479 seats. Because of the many parties competing in the elections, the Tatmadaw expected a fragmented result, which would have meant that their grip would remain on power. However, the opposite happened. The National League for Democracy received 59,87 percent of the votes, equal to 392 seats in government. As a response, the military regime refused to acknowledge the results of the elections, claiming that they were researching irregularities in the vote count.[16] The outcome of the 1990 elections never got honoured and the results were shattered with the reality of the continuation of military rule.

It was in this political reality that the roadmap to democracy was introduced. The promise of multiparty elections recurred in 2003, but the process would take years – under the guidance of the military government. When looking at this

---

1948 until 1962 Myanmar was under the rule of a civilian government and its people enjoyed more freedom than under any previous government – and the military governments that followed. However, this period ended abruptly when General Ne Win took the lead in a coup in 1962, which resulted in a one-party, military led regime until 1988. Derived from: D.I. Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar – what everyone needs to know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 61-62; Author unknown, 'Myanmar Profile', *BBC News*, 2 May 2017, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-12992883 (accessed 28 May 2017).

[14] T. Kivimäki and P. Pasch, *The Dynamics of Conflict in the Multhiethnic Union of Myanmar. PCIA - Country Conflict-Analysis Study* (October 2009), 50-51.

[15] Ibidem, 92.

[16] Ibidem, 92-93.

process, a few significant events have to be considered. Besides the occurrence of Cyclone Nargis, there were massive protests all over the country in September 2007. This has been called the Saffron Revolution. The uprisings took place because of the sudden rise in the price of gasoline and energy. The government increased prices overnight and most people could not afford these fares. Throughout the whole country, protests took place. Monks, having the highest status in Myanmar's society, took on a big role. About 50,000 people marched in the streets. The response of the government was brutal. They violently beat the demonstrators, including monks, to stop the protests. Many people got injured or lost their lives. The United Nations stated that 31 people died, but some foreign accounts stated that 100 people died because of the crackdown.[17] Although government suppression of popular protests was not new for Myanmar's people, this was the first time that they witnessed military violence against monks.

The crackdown of the Saffron Revolution showed that even though the roadmap to democracy was continuing, the government still had the upper hand and was not afraid to use violence. It was amidst these circumstances that Nargis hit Myanmar approximately half a year later. It struck the country just before a milestone moment for the military government: the referendum for the adoption of the new constitution. When Nargis destroyed a huge part of the country on 2 May, the military faced a dilemma. The devastation was so dire that voting for the referendum in the cyclone-hit area was impossible. Therefore, the vote in these areas was postponed until 24 May. In central and upper Myanmar the vote would remain to take place on 10 May. However, the postponement did not make much difference for the people in the Delta region, as it was almost impossible to carry out any voting there due to the horrible living circumstances caused by Nargis.[18]

Thus, when Nargis occurred, Myanmar was in the midst of the roadmap to democracy. Was the political landscape affected because of the natural disaster?

---

[17] Ibidem, 145.
[18] Ibidem, 150.

3. Literature review

Although disasters are granted significant attention by geographers, sociologists and anthropologists; analysing them through the lens of international relations is rare.[19] As John Hannigan puts forward, there is 'the tendency to treat disaster and disaster response as essentially *non-political* in nature'.[20]

In the last decade, when analysing natural disasters and climate change, the focus has been primarily on the concepts of disaster risk reduction (DRR) and build back better (BBB).[21] Cyclone Nargis has also served as a case study for such research.[22] Although there has been limited emphasis on the political implications in these studies, some scholars have touched upon this topic.

Becker and Reusser, for instance, look at how the cyclone changed the vulnerability of the area regarding future natural disasters and if it influenced regime transition. They point out that a natural disaster challenges the regime with a demanding non-traditional security issue.[23] They conclude that in Myanmar there was a lower vulnerability towards disasters after Nargis.[24]

---

[19] J. Hannigan, *Disasters Without Borders: The International Politics of Natural Disasters* (New York: Polity Press, 2012), 7.

[20] Ibidem.

[21] Disaster Risk Reduction: 'Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) aims to reduce the damage caused by natural hazards like earthquakes, floods, droughts and cyclones, through an ethic of prevention.' Derived from: 'What is Disaster Risk Reduction?', UNISDR, https://www.unisdr.org/who-we-are/what-is-drr (accessed 28 April 2017); Build back better: The term build back better emerged after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and underscores that the post-disaster reconstruction process should be utilized to improve a community's physical, social, environmental and economic conditions to create a new state of 'normalcy'. Derived from: S. Mannakkara, S. Wilkinson, R. Potangaroa, 'Build back better: implementation in Victorian bushfire reconstructuion' *Disasters* vol. 30, no. 2 (April 2014): 268.

[22] See for instance: M. Shikada et al., 'Reaching the unreachable: Myanmar experiences of community-based disaster risk reduction', in *Community Based Disaster Risk Reduction*, ed. R. Shaw (Bradford: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2012); L. Fan, 'Disaster as Opportunity? Building back better in Aceh, Myanmar and Haiti', HPG Working Paper (November 2013); R. Few et al., 'Strengthening capacities for disaster risk management II: Lessons for effective support', *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* no. 20 (2016).

[23] Non-traditional security issues are understood here as defined by Mely Caballero-Anthony: Challenges such as climate change, infectious diseases, natural disasters, irregular migration, food shortages, smuggling of persons, drug trafficking and other forms of transnational crime. Derived from: M. Caballero-Anthony, 'Non-Traditional Security Challenges, Regional Governance, and the

Agreeing with Becker and Reusser, Wooyael Paik states that natural disasters constitute exogenous shocks to which political systems must respond. He confirms that post-disaster politics are a potential tipping point for political change. His focus is less on BBB and DRR, and more on the response to humanitarian aid by authoritarian regimes. Paik explains that, in the case of Myanmar, there existed a high risk to accept foreign humanitarian aid, since it could reveal the extent of the domestic struggle to the international community.[25] Thus, the military regime was not confident and stable enough to undertake serious action.

The focus of Paik's article moves more towards the political implications of natural hazards. Authors look further into the effect of natural disasters on the political landscape of a country are John Hannigan, Mark Pelling and Kathleen Dill.

Hannigan aims to connect disaster events with international politics. From his perspective, a natural disaster at first appearance is separate from politics, but the first instance it hits a country it evolves into a political matter. He argues that the 'global politics of disasters has consistently been downplayed compared to other aspects of disaster management'.[26] According to Hannigan there exist two versions of the relationship between politics and disasters: the moderate and the strong version.

The moderate version emphasises that one should never assume a cause and effect relationship between politics and disaster. However, disasters are not immune to politics, they do occur in a political space. Thus, researchers agreeing with this version, treat disasters as a space within which political activity occurs.[27]

The strong version claims that natural disasters are direct products of their surrounding social, political and economic environments.[28] Pelling and Dill, already mentioned above, are protagonists of this strong version. They see disasters as

ASEAN Political-Security Community (ASPC)', *Asia Security Initiative Policy Series* Working Paper no. 7 (September 2010): 1.

[24] S.L. Becker and D.E. Reusser, 'Disasters as opportunities for social change: Using the multi-level perspective to consider the barriers to disaster-related transitions', *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* vol. 18 (2016): 87.

[25] Ibidem, 457.

[26] Hannigan, *Disasters Without Borders*, 16.

[27] Ibidem, 12.

[28] Ibidem.

political events on their own and as potential producers of secondary political events: 'rather than approaching disasters as humanitarian crises, we treat them as the products of maladaptation between interlocking socio-environmental relations at local, national, international and supranational levels'.[29]

Pelling and Dill argue that natural disasters act as tipping points for political change. They have considered this by developing an analytical framework to look into this process. This framework of Pelling and Dill is tested in this thesis.[30] More information on this framework is outlined in the next chapter.

Thus, the connection between natural disasters and political change has not been actively researched yet. However it is important to understand these developments. It can give new insights on the effects of natural disasters. So far, their implications for political systems are almost given no attention in the literature.

Democratisation in Myanmar

Since the 2010 general elections, when retired military general Thein Sein became the first civil head of state, scholars have been actively researching the so-called democratic transition of Myanmar.[31] In academic literature, the question that particularly rises is if this transition can be considered democratic at all. Various scholars investigated what changed in Myanmar since the elections of 2010 and how this democratic transition came about. Examples of these scholars are Mary Callahan, Lee Jones and Damien Kingsbury.

Callahan emphasizes that President Thein Sein taking office in 2011 resulted in more opportunities for citizens, media, the opposition and NGOs.[32] However, she also argues that the military-as-institution would continue to play a significant role in the regions that are marked with struggles between ethnic groups. This would be

---

[29] M. Pelling and K. Dill, ''Natural' Disasters as Catalysts of Political Action'. ISP/NSC Chatham Briefing Paper 06/01 (London: Chatham House, 2006): 1-2.

[30] M. Pelling and K. Dill, 'Disaster politics: tipping points for change in the adaption of sociopolitical regimes', *Progress in Human Geography* vol. 1, no. 34 (2010).

[31] Along with 22 other former military officials, Thein Sein ended his military career in 2010 to lead the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) as a civilian. In the general elections that year, Thein Sein won 91,2% of the votes and became the first civilian head of state of Myanmar in 49 years. The USDP is viewed as a military-backed party, seeing that the leadership is dominated by former military officials.

[32] Callahan, 'The generals loosen their grip', 130.

possible because of the position that the leaders of the Tatmadaw designed for themselves through the democratisation process. Callahan points out that the military government took the full lead in this process, that their hands were not tied by popular protests, a defeat in a war or factional issues within the military itself. They were directing the democratisation process from a position of strength and thus also after the 2010 elections still kept the upper hand in Myanmar's political life.[33]

Kingsbury situates Myanmar's political changes within the literature on transitions from and subsequent democratisation of authoritarian regimes. He views the democratic turn as a result of an interlinked series of crises the military regime faced within a context of a weak economy.[34] According to him, 'it was the crisis of capacity that can be seen as the final part of the sequential crises'.[35] Agreeing with Callahan, Kingsbury also states that the Tatmadaw remained extremely integrated into the fabric of the state – even though there indeed was political change, it was the Tatmadaw who controlled the direction and pace of change.[36]

In his article, Jones also claims that the dissolution of the military regime was "dictated" from a position of strength.[37] Because of the roadmap to democracy, the military regime was forced to undertake serious steps: 'it reflected the army's desperate need to pacify Myanmar's highly mobilized opposition forces, amidst the collapse and near-bankruptcy of state institutions'.[38] Jones frames the military regime as peacemakers in a chaotic society and rejects several differentiating popular explanations. For instance that the democratic turn took place because of the fear for a popular protests, the impact of Western sanctions, the popularity of the NLD or concern about Chinese influence.[39]

---

[33] Ibidem, 120.

[34] D. Kingsbury, 'Political Transition in Myanmar: Prospects and Problems', *Asian Politics & Policy* vol. 6, no. 3 (2014): 354.

[35] Ibidem.

[36] Ibidem, 370.

[37] L. Jones, 'Explaining Myanmar's regime transition: the periphery is central', *Democratisation* vol. 21, no. 5 (2014): 783-784.

[38] Ibidem, 787-788.

[39] As emphasized in: M.B. Pedersen, 'The Politics of Burma's "Democratic" Transition', *Critical Asian Studies* vol. 43, no. 1 (2011); Callahan, 'The generals loosen their grip'; K. Yin Hlaing, 'Understanding Recent Political Changes in Myanmar', *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and*

Jones, Callahan and Kingsbury present a thorough explanation of the military regime, the process of democratisation in Myanmar and the changes after the 2010 elections. But, their focus is solely on political change in the post-2010 elections period. There remains a lack of in depth analysis on variables relating to the political change in Myanmar preceding this period.

CSOs and LNGOs and democratisation

When focussing on the impact of cyclone Nargis on the political transition of Myanmar, there are various issues that could be analysed. For instance, the effects of international pressure for change in Myanmar, on the economy, or on the position of the main opposition party, the NLD. However, here the focus is narrowed down to the effect of Nargis on the position of CSOs and LNGOs in Myanmar's political space.[40]

Various authors have emphasized the importance of civil society in democratisation processes. Graeme J. Gill points out several functions. First of all, civil society assures that the course of change stays on track towards democratisation. The CSOs and LNGOs continue to pressure the regime so that it does not experience any backsliding. They generate a high level of public discourse in political debates and discussion. Through this they educate a wider public but also contribute in building a pillar of post-authoritarian democratic life, according to Gill.[41] Furthermore, civil society creates the essential social and political infrastructure to generate a sustainable democratic system. Besides this, Gill clarifies what makes civil society forceful, and emphasizes that the most important

---

Strategic Affairs vol. 34, no. 2 (2012); L. Jones, 'The Political Economy of Myanmar's Transition', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* vol. 44, no. 1 (2014).

[40] CSOs are understood here as 'different forms of civil activism between the family and the state, including faith-based groups, but not private economy and political parties', agreeing with the definition given by Michael Lidauer, derived from: Lidauer, 'Democratic Dawn?', 88; LNGOs are understood here as 'groups operating independently from the government, delivering humanitarian and or development projects reaching beneficiary numbers in the hundreds, managing budgets above 100,000 and having salaried professional staff', using the depiction of: K. Wallis and C. Jaquet, 'Local NGOs in Myanmar: vibrant but vulnerable', Humanitarian Practice Network, September 2011, http://odihpn.org/magazine/local-ngos-in-myanmar-vibrant-but-vulnerable/ (accessed 30 May 2017); The majority of the LNGOs and CSOs that are discussed in this thesis are based in Yangon or in the Delta region, where Cyclone Nargis hit hardest.

[41] G.J. Gill, *Dynamics of democratisation: elites, civil society and the transition process* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 178.

component in this is organisation: 'if the essence of civil society is autonomous groups, one of the keys to group success is effective organisation'.[42]

Lidauer states that solely civil society cannot create democracy, but it is considered a condition of democratic consolidation.[43] Thus, in a democratic transition civil society plays an important role. In the case of Myanmar, Ashley South emphasizes that civil society plays a vital role at the local level, which contributes to democratisation from below.[44] Jasmin Lorch agrees with this and sees that civil society fills existing gaps in the welfare system in Myanmar.[45] However, at the time of her writing – in 2006 –, Lorch also states that this should not be misunderstood as if civil society had political negotiating power. They did not play any advocacy role and were obliged to stay away from politics. Therefore the civil society groups stayed very localised.[46]

Seeing that LNGOs and CSOs are significant actors in democratisation, this thesis focuses on the effects of the cyclone on the political agency of these parties. Through this, it is going beyond the assumption that the post-2010 elections period was the – only – significant moment of political change and a different scope is added to the investigation of the political change in Myanmar.[47] Above all, in this way a contribution can be made into the research field of natural disasters and political change, in this case Myanmar and Cyclone Nargis.

---

[42] Ibidem, 180.

[43] Lidauer, 'Democratic dawn?', 88.

[44] Ibidem, 94.

[45] She sees this happening for instance in self-help groups, informal development projects, culture and literature committees, in the Sangha and in Christian churches. Derived from: Lidauer, 'Democratic dawn?', 94.

[46] Ibidem, 95.

[47] Note that other significant events happened before 2010, such as the Saffron Revolution. However, this is not the focus of this thesis.

4. Theoretical framework

The framework of Pelling and Dill is at the core of this research. This analytic tool traces the impact of a natural disaster on a political system, emphasizing tipping points. They are primarily interested in the significance of the social contract for disaster politics with relation to citizen-state relations.[48] This particular social contract is challenged after a natural disaster.

According to Pelling and Dill there are two main claims on the broader influence of natural disasters on political systems that determine the direction and significance of change. The first claims that disaster produces an accelerated status quo. This means that the change is path dependent and 'limited to a concentration or speeding up of pre-disaster trajectories which remain under the control of powerful elites both before and after an event'. The second claims that disaster can catalyse a critical juncture. It creates an 'irreversible change in the direction or composition of a political regime'. [49]

In order to research these claims for specific case studies, the framework is applied to analyse the direction and significance of a natural disaster on a political system. For instance they are interested if new or existing social organisations are established and in what ways the state and other significant social actors respond. To find answers to these questions they state that a polity must be understood as a broad set of social relations. The distribution and implementation of rights and responsibilities pre- and post-disaster must be assessed. In this way, changes in the social contract can be traced.[50] The various steps of their framework are outlined in figure 1.

---

[48] Pelling and Dill, 'Disaster politics', 27.
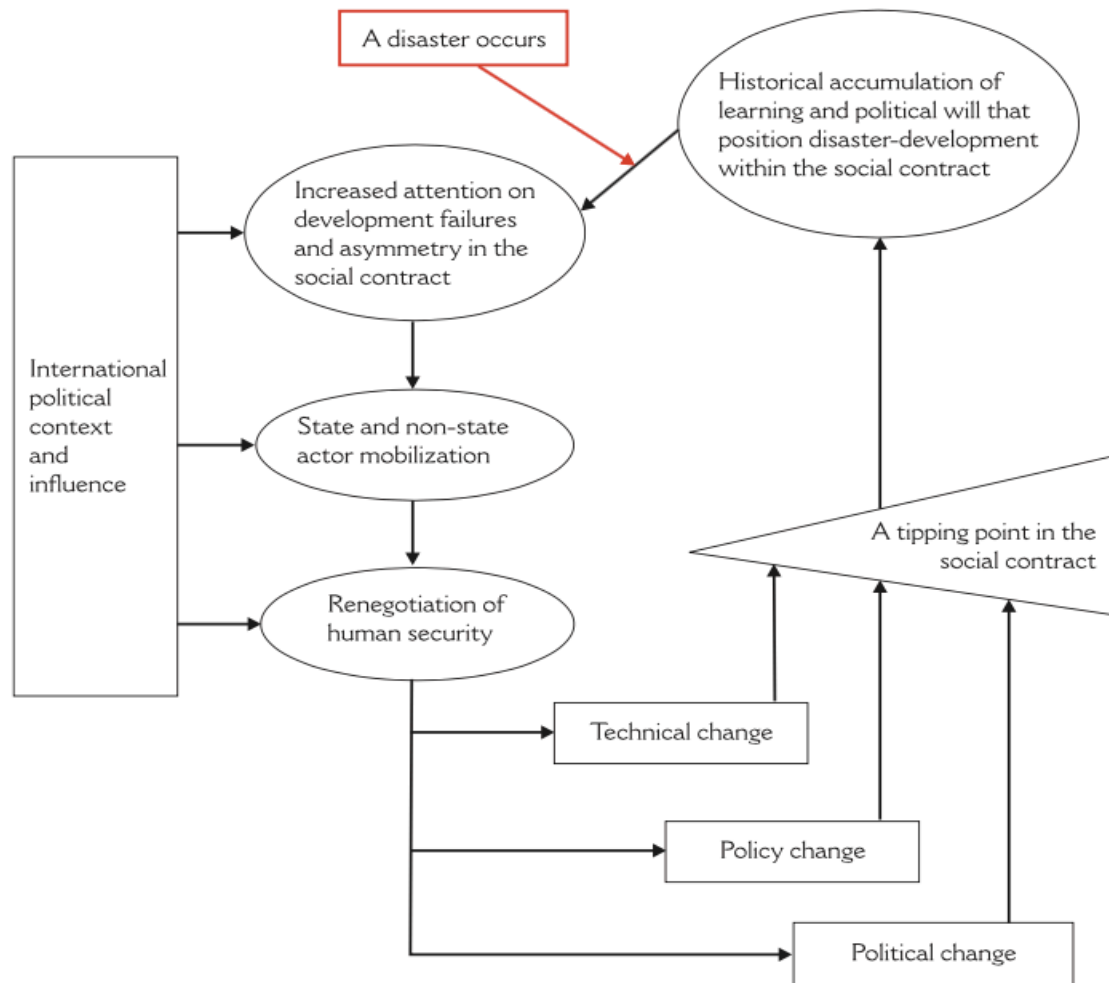[49] Ibidem, 22.
[50] Ibidem, 27-28.

Figure 1   The cycle of disaster and political change

A notion of path dependency can be traced here: once a disaster happens, there is a particular route that sets off. It is this route that Pelling and Dill aim to grasp through their model. In this thesis their framework is tested with the case of cyclone Nargis in Myanmar – can we observe an accelerated status quo or a critical juncture in the political system after the occurrence of Nargis?

There are no other analytic frameworks looking into the effects of a natural disaster on political change. Therefore this framework is the obvious choice to utilize when looking into the effects of Nargis on political change in Myanmar. It helps to reveal if Nargis had any significant effects on the on-going political transition, which other scholars looking into the political change in Myanmar may have side-lined too easily, as they all emphasize the post-2010 election period as the moment for political change.

Pelling and Dill also mention cyclone Nargis in their article. They state that the government's slow and limited acceptance of humanitarian aid from the international community shows how fear of political change can lead to the suppression of rights.[51] However, they only briefly mention Nargis and they solely touch upon the response of the government. There is no mention of the effects on the position of other actors in the social contract, such as LNGOs and CSOs.

---

[51] Pelling and Dill, 'Disaster politics', 22.

5. Methodology

This research uses the process-tracing roadmap of the framework of Pelling and Dill to analyse the aftermath of cyclone Nargis. Process tracing will help to 'uncover the steps by which causes affect outcomes'[52] and reveal if Nargis affected the social contract in Myanmar.

To carry out the process tracing, it is important to have a clear interpretation of the framework of Pelling and Dill. First off, the term social contract is understood in this thesis as:

> Social contracts typically offer some form of mutual benefit and impose some mutual obligations or constraints. Citizens who are party to these agreements, for example, explicitly or implicitly accept obligations or responsibilities (paying taxes, voting, obeying rules and regulations, etc.) in return for benefits and protection by a state (e.g., maintaining order, fostering citizen well-being, and providing for education and health services).[53]

It is thus the relationship between citizens and the state that is the subject of a social contract. The actors who are party to this agreement and their roles change over time. Pelling and Dill believe this is considerably the case in the aftermath of a natural disaster. As they put it: 'it is at this point that the rights claims that legitimate the institutionalization and distribution of security in the social contract (between the state and citizens and also between different non-state actors) are tested and can be renegotiated.'[54]

Secondly, it is of importance to clarify the links of technical change, policy change and political change in the framework. Pelling and Dill only shortly explain their interpretation of these links. They state that these links form the

---

[52] A. Dür, 'Measuring Interest Group Influence in the EU. A Note on Methodology', *European Union Politics* vol. 9, no. 4 (2008): 562.

[53] K. O'Brien, B. Hayward, F. Berkes, 'Rethinking Social Contracts: Building Resilience in a Changing Climate', *Ecology and Society* vol. 14, no. 2 (2009), https://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol14/iss2/art12/main.html (accessed 30 May 2017).

[54] Pelling and Dill, 'Disaster politics', 27.

institutionalization into policy and legislation.[55] However, nowhere in the article they provide a clear definition of these links. Therefore, it is briefly explained how these links are interpreted in this thesis.

Technical change is viewed as the changes that are made concerning the country's construction measures and rules after the disaster. So, are there any steps undertaken to improve the vulnerability of a country regarding preparedness for a new disaster? Policy change is interpreted as changes in the policy of a country. Here this can be, for instance, changed legislation. Political change is understood as the changes in the political relations in a country. This is where there could be a change in the position for certain actors in the social contract.

Process-tracing

The framework of Pelling and Dill serves as the process-tracing roadmap. The method of process-tracing identifies a causal chain that links independent and dependent variables. Process tracing directs the researcher to trace the process in a very precise, theoretically informed way.[56] Through examining various sources very closely such as historical, archival documents, interviews, transcripts and other sources; the researcher is capable of filling in the causal chain. [57] All of this results in a detailed and in-depth analysis of a specific event.

The link of the process-tracing map that is most important for this thesis is the link focussing on state and non-state actor mobilization. This link is extensively researched in chapter one. The other links are also important to consider, however this is not the main focus of this research. Here the focus is on the position of LNGOs and CSOs, not for instance on the human security[58] or the international political context and influence.

---

[55] Ibidem, 30.

[56] J.T. Checkel, 'Process Tracing', in *Qualitative Methods in International Relations*, eds. A. Klotz and D. Prakash (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 115.

[57] G.L. Alexander and A. Bennet, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (London: MIT Press, 2005), 7.

[58] As Pelling and Dill put it, human security emphasizes people's freedoms, values, rights and responsibilities. It is different from national security because every state provides human security in a different way. Derived from: Pelling and Dill, 'Disaster politics', 27-28.

Concerning the variables tested in this research, the dependent variable in this case is political change in Myanmar. The event of Cyclone Nargis represents the independent variable. The following hypothesis is tested in this thesis: the occurrence of cyclone Nargis created changes in the social contract of Myanmar. The hypothesis will be proved wrong if it appears that cyclone Nargis did not create any changes in Myanmar's social contract.

The hypothesis will be tested through a thorough investigation of available data. This data is gathered from various sources: scholarly articles and books on Cyclone Nargis and politics in Myanmar, mass media reports (newspaper articles and online news sources), press releases from the government and reports from (local) NGOs.

As Andreas Dür has pointed out, measuring influence – in this case the influence of cyclone Nargis – is difficult. However, it is not impossible. Dür notes that, 'analysing the impact of interest groups on political outcomes is not substantially different from other attempts at establishing causality. Progress on this question therefore is possible as long as researchers make a sustained effort'.[59] Since the method of process tracing alone will not be sufficient to retrieve a satisfactory conclusion of the impact of Nargis on the social contract of Myanmar, methodological triangulation – the combination of different methods in one study – is applied.

To measure the influence of Cyclone Nargis on the social contract and the political agency of LNGOs and CSOs in Myanmar specifically, interviews with those who were involved are analysed. There are various articles and reports available that are – partly – based on interviews.[60] These will be retrieved and serve as the starting point for crosschecking the findings of the process tracing analysis. In this way the process tracing method will be enriched with primary sources and inside perspectives on the effects of Nargis on the political space in Myanmar.

Unfortunately, the research also brings about difficulties. Most importantly, when using interviews to cross check the findings of process tracing, the goals and

---

[59] Dür, 'Measuring Interest Group Influence in the EU', 560.

[60] Such as: Human Rights Watch, "*I want to help my own people*"; Callahan, 'The generals loosen their grip'.

standpoints of the organisations undertaking these interviews have to be taken into account. The same is true for the interviewees. All the actors have their own agenda, or biases involved when answering questions.

For instance, the reports of Human Rights Watch (HRW) are used in this thesis to gain insights on personal experiences of the aftermath of Nargis. However, these answers are mediated by HRW. This has to be taken into account. It is through the analysis of these reports though, that personal insights on the experiences of Nargis can be retrieved. The process tracing findings will crosscheck these insights as much as possible in order to fill in the process tracing map as thorough as possible.

6. Mapping the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis

"Where are all those uniformed people who are always ready to beat monks and civilians? They should come out in full force and help clean up the area and restore electricity."[61]

One would expect that after a devastating cyclone hits a country, its government would undertake everything in its power to restore stability and provide humanitarian assistance. In Myanmar this was not the case. Whilst millions of people were affected by the cyclone, the response of the government was minimal and even disruptive. During the first days after Nargis, people were mystified by the few troops or government-related organisations on the ground.[62] Buddhist monks and LNGOs carried out much of the immediate humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Because of this, the boundaries of humanitarian space in Myanmar have been pushed forward tremendously.[63]

In order to gain insights into what happened to the political space of Myanmar after the event of Cyclone Nargis, this chapter looks into the developments during the direct aftermath focussing on the response of the government and the LNGOs and CSOs in Myanmar.

Mapping the response of the Myanmar government
As put forward in the introduction of this thesis, in 2008, the authoritarian military government of Myanmar did not provide space for other political actors than the military itself.[64] The moment Nargis hit the country, the political situation was anti-democratic and disaster risk management was solely a state-regulated construction.

---

[61] D.M. Seekins, 'The social, political and humanitarian impact of Burma's Cyclone Nargis', *The Asia-Pacific Journal* vol. 6, no. 5 (2008), http://apjjf.org/-Donald-M.-Seekins/2763/article.html (accessed 30 May 2017).

[62] Ibidem.

[63] Wallis and Jaquet, 'Local NGOs in Myanmar: vibrant but vulnerable'.

[64] This does not mean that there were no other actors that touched upon political issues. However, these parties needed to stay under the radar and find creative ways to carry out their work.

Almost seven days before the appearance of Nargis, the Myanmar government received a notice of the oncoming cyclone from The Indian Meteorological Department. However, no arrangements were made to evacuate the area or at least send out an adequate warning to the people living in the threatened area. A mentioning of a storm was indicated in the government-run newspaper, *New Light of Myanmar*, but it was greatly underestimated and did not worry people. As a Cyclone survivor told Human Rights Watch: 'There was some warning at 3 p.m. on Friday [May 1], but we didn't hear it on the radio, other survivors told me the next day. The SPDC knew it was coming but didn't tell anyone. [I think that] they don't like us, they look down on their own citizens, they don't care whether we're dead or alive'.[65]

The first response of the government was to declare the most affected regions as national emergency areas. They brought together a Natural Disaster Preparedness Central Committee, Prime Minister Thein Sein being the chair. The Ministry for Social Welfare was responsible for the overall co-ordination of the relief effort.[66] In Myanmar, the military government is the only organisation that is capable of responding to a catastrophic event. They have the command structure, international communications, manpower, resources and expertise to act.[67] However, they hardly put this into practice during the first days following Nargis.

The military regime continued to downplay the gravity of the natural disaster. Only four days after the cyclone hit Myanmar, on 7 May, Senior General Than Shwe stated that the situation was "returning to normal". Then, three weeks later, he declared that relief efforts had ended. A shocking statement, knowing that a month after Nargis, Médicins Sans Frontieres (MSF) was 'still discovering badly affected villages and areas in which people were living with the corpses of their

---

[65] As told by Saw Htoo Wah from Bogale, derived from: Human Rights Watch, "*I want to help my own people*", 19.

[66] Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, *Listening to Voices from Inside: Myanmar Civil Society's Response to Cyclone Nargis* (Siem Reap, 2009), 16.

[67] A. Selth, 'Even Paranoids Have Enemies: Cyclone Nargis and Myanmar's Fears of Invasion', *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* vol. 30, no. 3 (2008): 387.

relatives floating in the surrounding water and suspended in the trees'.[68] Moreover, at this time, tens of thousands of victims were still waiting for assistance.[69]

In the meantime, the international community was prepared to help with the relief efforts. 24 countries gathered a total amount of US$30 million within a week. However, during the first days after the disaster the government refused any financial support or humanitarian aid on the ground. They were slow with issuing visas to foreign specialists and allowing aid into the country.[70] When they were eventually granted access to Myanmar, restrictions were imposed on travel, transport and distribution.[71]

It was amidst of these circumstances that the international community responded with great awe. On 7 May, the French Foreign Minister, Bernard Kouchner, called on the United Nations (UN) to invoke the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) clause and deliver aid to Myanmar without the approval of the government.[72] This concept of R2P commenced in 2005 and meant that, when a government could or would not protect its civilians, the UN would intervene, despite violating national sovereignty.[73] Although R2P was not applied in the end, the consideration proves the complexity of the situation.

The governments' refusal of international (financial) assistance must be understood in the political context. Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar just before the referendum for the new constitution. Calls from the international community, and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon specifically, to postpone the vote were ignored. Although it is not known for a fact if the refusal of international aid and support had

---

[68] A. McLachlan-Bent and J. Langmore, 'A Crime against Humanity? Implications and Prospects of the Responsibility to Protect in the Wake of Cyclone Nargis', *Global Responsibility to Protect* no. 3 (2011): 42.

[69] Selth, 'Even Paranoids Have Enemies', 388.

[70] Ibidem, 387.

[71] Human Rights Watch, "*I want to help my own people*", 15.

[72] Author unknown, 'France Suggests Helping Myanmar without Government Backing', *Reuters*, 7 May 2008, http://www.responsibilitytoprotect.org/index.php/crises/128-the-crisis-in-burma/1628-france-suggests-helping-myanmar-without-government-backing (accessed 30 May 2017).

[73] Ibidem.

anything to do with the referendum vote, it is striking that only one day after the vote, the government opened up dialogue for international cooperation.[74]

The referendum, which was widely considered a sham[75], got an almost unanimous yes-vote. The military stated that 98.12 percent of the voters cast their vote and that 92.48 of them approved the new constitution.[76] Although it can be questioned how many people in Myanmar were aware of the content of the new constitution, the people in the cyclone-affected areas were, without a doubt, not concerned with the vote. It has been brought to the attention, that the referendum process only further complicated direct relief efforts. Humanitarian aid turned into a political matter. As an affected civilian told Human Rights Watch (HRW): 'I gave an advance vote and I received six cups of rice and some money in return. The village officials provided us with that'.[77]

Only one day after the vote in the cyclone-affected areas, on the 25th of May, the government agreed to establish the Tripartite Core Group (TCG). It consisted of Yangon-based diplomats from each member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), officials from the ASEAN Secretariat and experts on disaster management from each ASEAN country, three State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)[78]-appointed officials and three UN representatives.[79] After three weeks of ignoring international calls for cooperation and collective relief action, it seemed that the SPDC was finally willing to adhere to these requests. The TCG was appointed the official senior level in the hierarchy inspecting the relief and reconstruction programme in post-Nargis Myanmar. One of the goals was to establish dialogue with the SPDC to mitigate its inflexible and inadequate policies.[80]

---

[74] R.H. Taylor, 'Responding to Nargis, political storm of humanitarian rage?', *Journal of Social Issues in SE Asia* vol.30, no. 3 (2015): 6.

[75] 'No domestic or international election monitoring body was permitted to observe the referendum. Only a handful of foreign diplomats were permitted to observe voting at specified places'. Derived from: Human Rights Watch, "*I want to help my own people*", 63.

[76] Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar – what everyone needs to know*, 151.

[77] Human Rights Watch, "*I want to help my own people*", 66.

[78] The SPDC was the ruling military party in Myanmar at the time Nargis struck the country.

[79] A. Vicary, 'The Relief and Reconstruction Programme Following Cyclone Nargis: A Review of SPDC Policy', in *Ruling Myanmar: From Cyclone Nargis to National Elections*, eds. N. Cheesman, M. Skidmore and T. Wilson (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010), 211.

[80] Ibidem.

After the establishment of the TCG the conditions for foreign aid and the issuing of visas to foreigners were relaxed. However, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) were still restricted in many ways by the SPDC. The visas for foreigners still took a lot of time to gain, and if foreign-aid workers wanted to visit affected areas where their organisations were implementing projects, they needed official government permission.[81] Furthermore, when humanitarian aid made it into the country it was still the question if it would make it to the targeted location. As Tim Costello, head of World Vision Australia (NGO), remembers: 'it would be extremely helpful if we could get expats in because of their expertise in water and sanitation systems, but we just cannot get them in. They [the junta] won't trust us'.[82] Moreover, even though the military regime appeared to welcome more international interference, in practice they were still the ones who controlled all the whereabouts of incoming aid.

Mapping the response of CSOs and LNGOs

The response of the government in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis was strikingly minimal. The refusal of the government to welcome international support made the relief work a lot harder. However, without international assistance, experience or resources, the people in Myanmar started to provide their own humanitarian relief. CSOs, LNGOs and individuals raised money and initiated projects to improve the living conditions for the cyclone survivors.

The first responses to the natural disaster were by religious groups. Buddhist monks, Christian pastors, and Muslim imams from all over the delta region worked together in the first relief efforts. They enjoyed quite a high degree of agency, whereas the government was strict for the LNGOs and INGOs, the religious groups were mostly left alone. For instance, the Sitagu International Buddhist Missionary Center established emergency relief centres and clinics in the worst hit villages in the delta region, less than a week after the disaster. They donated aid to 1,344 monasteries in the region and provided them with cash, food, medicine, clothing, mosquito nets and other basic necessities. The monks of the Sitagu International

---

[81] Ibidem, 216.

[82] Human Rights Watch, "*I want to help my own people*", 27.

Buddhist Missionary Center are highly respected and thus experienced few problems when distributing aid in the region or when travelling.[83]

The various religious groups worked together, despite their differing backgrounds. This was also the case for the ethnic groups: 'we didn't care if people were Karen or Buddhist or Burmese, we made no distinction. Before Nargis, there was a lot of discrimination between religious groups, especially Christian, Muslim and Buddhist. When Nargis happened, no one could stay in the house. Everyone came out to work for the affected people and people did not want to stay alone. People don't see religion and race they just see human beings. These things came out, that spirit'.[84]

Next to the relief efforts of the religious groups, LNGOs and CSOs also organised themselves to support the victims. Most of the CSOs and LNGOs were mainly focussed on educational programs and trainings before Nargis and did not interfere with humanitarian work.[85] The immediate need of the people in the cyclone struck areas changed this. Myo Nyunt, a director of a major local relief organisation explained to HRW how he and his friends changed their existing education-focussed organisation into a humanitarian relief society:

> When Cyclone Nargis struck, there was no authority visible even in Rangoon, because there was so much damage, and it was clear that the authorities couldn't meet the needs of the people so they decided to stay away. This was alarming to the public—suddenly we found no soldiers and no local authorities on the street. People had to rely solely on themselves, but we had never found ourselves in such a situation. Many people rushed to the cyclone-affected areas to provide whatever they could. At that time, people were coming even from Mandalay and Chin State, far away. They would collect money and materials from their community and then bring it down in trucks. We had no experience of working in a group before—the authorities were always too suspicious. Before the cyclone, we offered educational programs and trainings, but we were not allowed to do humanitarian work. Cyclone

---

[83] K. Zwa Moe, 'Putting Compassion Into Action', *The Irrawaddy*, 9 May 2014, https://www.irrawaddy.com/from-the-archive/putting-compassion-action.html (accessed 30 May 2017).

[84] Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, *Listening to Voices from Inside*, 34.

[85] Human Rights Watch, "*I want to help my own people*", 46.

Nargis created the space for us to engage in humanitarian work, not the government.[86]

Due to their lack of being officially registered, it is hard to retrieve data on the actual amount of LGNOs and CSOs operating in Myanmar. However, a directory produced by the Capacity Building Initiative (CBI) documented 30 LGNOs in 2001, rising to 62 in 2004 and counting 86 in 2009.[87] Cyclone Nargis was a catalyst for much of the growth in LNGOs and CSOs. Many community and national organisations were set up to respond to the needs of the people.[88] Not only did this contribute to the number of LNGOs and CSOs, overall the organisations went through huge transformations in the post-Nargis period. These organisations went through an evolution in their structure, resources, stakeholders and professionalism.[89] As one worker of a CSO notes: 'we have changed our organisation and now work on a much more holistic level. We are engaged in different sectors. At an organisational level we are aware of the reality in the communities and are ready to give more based on our experience in relief and development. Our organisation has 14 different departments, and now we coordinate across departments much better'.[90]

Another example of a successful local initiative is *Athauk Apun*, a small group of local aid workers who established a micro-grant disbursal mechanism. In only two months they disbursed 350 grants worth US$700,000, plus US$200,000 in materials, to more than 320 local NGOs and community groups, reaching around 350,000 cyclone-affected individuals.[91]

Not only were the local organisations professionalised, there also emerged an increase in cooperation with INGOs. The government made it hard for LNGOs to register themselves officially, consequently these groups partnered with UN agencies. This provided them with more capacity and an extra level of protection by

---

[86] Ibidem, 45.

[87] Wallis and Jaquet, 'Local NGOs in Myanmar: vibrant but vulnerable'. Note that this directory only included organisations which had an office in Yangon. This does not represent the complete amount of organisations active in the country.

[88] Ibidem.

[89] Asian Development Bank, *Civil Society Briefs Myanmar* (Yangon, 2015), 3.

[90] Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, *Listening to Voices from Inside*, 26.

[91] Human Rights Watch, "*I want to help my own people*", 83.

being formally contracted by international partners.[92] This collaboration created more dialogue and trust among the local and international organisations. As one UN official notes: 'now there is increased dialogue and trust. Now dialogue and consultation are the rule more than the exception. Right now, we have some strong self-organized CSOs that are pro-actively thinking about the next projects'.[93]

After Nargis, the local actors were given training through which they were taught about structuring projects, obtaining donor funding and reporting back to donors. In this way the inexperienced local actors evolved into more professional development workers who could engage with international partners on a more equal footing.[94]

The government was still an actor who the LNGOs and CSOs had to deal with. Although this did not go without complications, some organisations noted that a level of cooperation existed. Before Nargis they did not work with the government in this way. As one employee recalls: 'we worked with the government. We informed them about what we were doing and providing in the village. Working with the government like this is a new experience for us'. Not only did their opportunities broaden to work together with the international community, but also their relation with the government changed after Nargis. [95]

The restrictions on humanitarian aid provided by INGOs had a significant impact on the development of LNGOs and CSOs in Myanmar. Not only did they appear in more quantity, their quality was also affected. Key issues changed for these actors in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, such as the interethnic cooperation, the professionalization of the organisations, improved community feeling, increased cooperation with international NGOs and increased cooperation with the government.

These changes in the political space for LNGOs and CSOs in the Delta region were not the same in the whole country though. As a senior aid official told HRW:
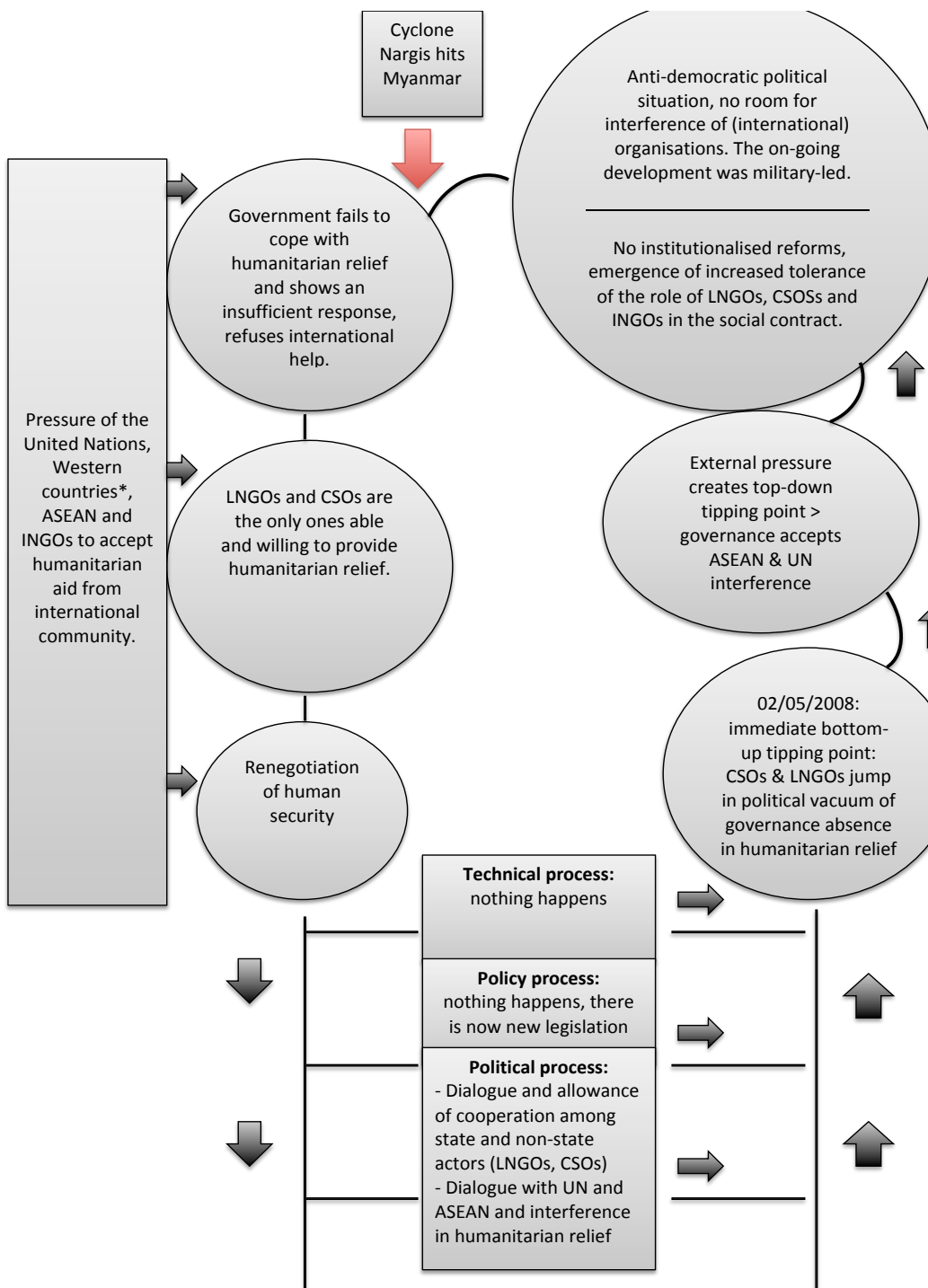
---

[92] Ibidem, 50.

[93] Ibidem.

[94] Ibidem, 51.

[95] Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, *Listening to Voices from Inside*, 27; as an employee states on the relationship with the government: 'we had no contact or relationship with government departments before Nargis'.

'we were all hoping that the Nargis experience would be the wedge to open a lot of things, but this hasn't happened'. International humanitarian aid experts have praised the humanitarian opening in the delta region and expressed their hope of building on what was achieved in the cyclone-affected areas throughout the rest of Myanmar.[96] Thus, they acknowledge that Nargis enabled more possibilities for the LNGOs and CSOs in the delta, but it had no spill over effect to other areas in the country.

---

[96] Human Rights Watch, "*I want to help my own people*", 9.

7. Understanding the effects of a natural disaster on politics through theory

The framework of Pelling and Dill is filled in here based on the findings of the process tracing of the happenings after Nargis in the preceding chapter. Did Nargis cause a tipping point and bring about changes in the social contract of Myanmar?

Cyclone Nargis hits Myanmar

Anti-democratic political situation, no room for interference of (international) organisations. The on-going development was military-led.

No institutionalised reforms, emergence of increased tolerance of the role of LNGOs, CSOSs and INGOs in the social contract.

Government fails to cope with humanitarian relief and shows an insufficient response, refuses international help.

Pressure of the United Nations, Western countries*, ASEAN and INGOs to accept humanitarian aid from international community.

LNGOs and CSOs are the only ones able and willing to provide humanitarian relief.

External pressure creates top-down tipping point > governance accepts ASEAN & UN interference

Renegotiation of human security

02/05/2008: immediate bottom-up tipping point: CSOs & LNGOs jump in political vacuum of governance absence in humanitarian relief

Technical process: nothing happens

Policy process: nothing happens, there is now new legislation

Political process:
- Dialogue and allowance of cooperation among state and non-state actors (LNGOs, CSOs)
- Dialogue with UN and ASEAN and interference in humanitarian relief

As the links of state and non-state actor mobilization show, the LNGOs and CSOs jumped into the gap the government left open in the aftermath of the disaster and provided humanitarian relief on the ground. Next to the fact that they were willing to do this, they were also the only actors able to provide this as the international community was shut off from the country.

Hereafter, it is exposed how the government and civil society work together – or not – and how this affects the social contract. In the case of Myanmar during the direct aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, no changes can be found on the technical and policy part. However, regarding the political area, there are changes visible. After Nargis, more dialogue developed among state and non-state actors. Increasingly, the position of LNGOs and CSOs became more political as they interfered more with humanitarian issues that the government did not target. Besides this, after the referendum on the 24th of May, the government allowed more intervention of the international community as they agreed to cooperate in the TCG.

These political changes did not turn into institutionalised changes though. CSOs and LNGOs were not adopted as institutionalised players in the political realm. Their existence and activities stayed unregulated and the people working in these organisations needed to watch their guard at all times. As Elaine Pearson, the deputy Asia director of HRW, states two years after the cyclone: 'Burma's generals have kept it [the country] shut for domestic critics, many of whom remain in prison for speaking out for fellow citizens in need'.[97] Even though the government allowed the LNGOs and CSOs to provide humanitarian assistance to some extent, the government still viewed them as threatening. In several cases they were targeted for harassment and lengthy prison sentences were issued.[98]

Despite these barriers, Nargis triggered a de-facto humanitarian relief response by LNGOs and CSOs, working alongside the government – and cooperating with them in various cases – and the international community. However, no tipping

---

[97] Author unknown, 'Burma: After Cyclone, Repression Impedes Civil Society and Aid – humanitarian space across country again narrowing ahead of 2010 polls', Human Rights Watch, 29 April 2010, https://www.hrw.org/news/2010/04/29/burma-after-cyclone-repression-impedes-civil-society-and-aid (accessed 30 May 2017).
[98] Human Rights Watch, "*I want to help my own people*", 44.

points for political change or institutionalised changes in the social contract can be traced.

     The control of the development of pre-disaster trajectories stayed in control of the powerful elite, in this case Myanmar's government. Even though they agreed to cooperate with the UN and ASEAN, the military kept the dominant position in handling the situation. For instance, relief goods were distributed from Burmese government stations – everything that aid organisations sent to Myanmar thus stayed under the controlling eye of the government.[99]

     When arriving at the end of the cycle, the question rises what was the new status quo post-Nargis? There were no institutionalised reforms, however after Nargis a higher level of tolerance for the role of LNGOs and CSOs in the social contract developed. They professionalized and were tolerated – although there continued to exist a thin line between tolerance and condemnation[100] – more than ever since the military rule after 1988. Besides this, through the TCG more dialogue between ASEAN, the UN and the Tatmadaw was established. But after all, these developments did not trigger political change, the powerful elite kept control of Myanmar's political space.

Evaluation of the framework

In the case of Cyclone Nargis, the contention of Pelling and Dill that natural disasters lead to political change does not hold. The natural disaster did not create a tipping point for political change, there were no institutionalized changes in the social contract and some links in the framework cannot be matched with events – such as the technical and policy process.

     Thus, in this case the framework of Pelling and Dill did not reveal a tipping point for political change. Through this, it can be stated that their model is not applicable to every case. It shows that it is complex to make generalist claims about events like this. It always has to be understood in its own context; after all, disasters are contextual by nature. A one-size-fits-all theory is not sufficient for such complex events.

---

[99] Vicary, 'The Relief and Reconstruction Programme following Cyclone Nargis', 212.
[100] Human Rights Watch, "*I want to help my own people*", 86.

The model could benefit from a more thorough understanding of the political system of the country in dispute. Especially when looking at the effects of a natural disaster on (semi-) authoritarian regimes. It can help to gain more understanding about why a certain tipping point comes about in a certain political system. Barbara Geddes, for instance, looks at how authoritarian regimes come to power, what makes them unstable and how they fall apart. Her theory helps to classify authoritarian regimes and understand in a more broad way why certain regimes act in a particular way.[101] When researching the effect of natural disasters on political change, a classification of the political system can improve the analysis of the context of the concerning country. More understanding of why a certain regime responds to a natural disaster in a certain way can come about in this way.

Embedding the research in the scholarly debate on political change in Myanmar
After testing the framework with the case of cyclone Nargis, this thesis agrees with the existing academic literature that Nargis did not have a significant impact on the political process in the country. Like Callahan, Jones and Kingsbury point out, in every step of the democratisation in Myanmar it was the military that was directing the process. As this research has showed, this was also the case during the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis.

The one thing that is greatly neglected in the literature on the political transition of Myanmar, however, is that after Nargis a lot changed for LNGOs and CSOs in the country. In this research it has been shown that because of Nargis the role of these organisations changed, they professionalized and increased their cooperation with international and domestic players. For instance, as stated in the HRW Report: 'the two years since Cyclone Nargis have seen an unprecedented influx of humanitarian assistance to the delta, with a visible presence of local and international aid workers and improved access to provide humanitarian relief'.[102] Before Nargis it was unthinkable that CSOs and LNGOs would carry out humanitarian

---

[101] For instance, military regimes are more likely to step down because of internal disputes, whereas personalist regimes are more likely to desert from power because of the death of the leader or because of external pressures. See: Geddes, 'What we know about democratisation after twenty years'.
[102] Human Rights Watch, "*I want to help my own people*", 8.

work, but Nargis enabled this. This development is side-lined in the literature, even though the literature on democratisation points out that strong CSOs and LNGOs are beneficial for building a democratic system.[103]

---

[103] See the literature review, starting on page 9.

8. Conclusion

This research aimed to analyse if Cyclone Nargis lead to political change in Myanmar. A significant emphasis was on the role of LNGOs and CSOs because of their important role in democratisation processes, as pointed out in the existing academic literature. Answering the research question, this thesis argues that Cyclone Nargis did not lead to (institutionalised) political change in Myanmar. Following the framework of Pelling and Dill it became clear that Nargis did not create any tipping point that lead to political change or institutionalised changes in the social contract. The military stayed in power and directed the process of political change in the country in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis.

Simultaneously this thesis revealed the shortcomings of the framework of Pelling and Dill and that their connotation that natural disasters lead to political change does not hold in the case of Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar. Nargis did have other effects though. The role for CSOs and LNGOs in Myanmar changed a lot because of the natural disaster. This has been side-lined in the existing academic literature.

Building up on this knowledge that LNGOs and CSOs were increasingly tolerated after Nargis, scholars can execute further research regarding this subject. For instance, it could be interesting to see how much has changed for these organisations since the Nargis aftermath. What did these organisations do with the space that opened up for them? And how are they organized nowadays? Seeing that there is now a democratically chosen government in parliament[104]; has this made a lot of difference for the organisation of LNGOs and CSOs?

Besides this, more dialogue has to be established between the social sciences and humanities when analysing the effects of natural disasters on political systems. More research has to be done in this field, preferably by combining the generalising element of social science theories and the focus on context and narratives of the humanities.

---

[104] In the general elections of 2015, the National League for Democracy (NLD) won a landslide victory in both houses of the Assembly and is ruling the country since March 2016. This is the first time after 54 years that the country is ruled by a President that has no ties to the military.

Overall, although Cyclone Nargis did not make any changes in the political system in Myanmar it was a tragic event for Myanmar's people. The only positive twist that can be traced is the enlarged power of civil society. Nargis did bring hope and interconnection among Myanmar's people, and eventually it is the people within the societies who are crucial in generating change. As activist Sein Win marks: 'I trust the power of the people, and Nargis showed I'm right'.[105]

---

[105] Author unknown, 'Old Dissident Sees Hope Growing in Myanmar Youth Successfully Defied Regime to help Cyclone Victims', *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 12 October 2008.

9. Bibliography

- Alexander, G.L. and Bennet, A. *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. London: MIT Press, 2005.
- Asian Development Bank. *Civil Society Briefs Myanmar*. Yangon, 2015.
- Author unknown. 'Burma: After Cyclone, Repression Impedes Civil Society and Aid – humanitarian space across country again narrowing ahead of 2010 polls'. Human Rights Watch. 29 April 2010. https://www.hrw.org/news/2010/04/29/burma-after-cyclone-repression-impedes-civil-society-and-aid (accessed 30 May 2017).
- Author unknown. 'France Suggests Helping Myanmar without Government Backing'. *Reuters*. 7 May 2008. http://www.responsibilitytoprotect.org/index.php/crises/128-the-crisis-in-burma/1628-france-suggests-helping-myanmar-without-government-backing (accessed 30 May 2017).
- Author unknown. 'Myanmar Profile'. *BBC News*. 2 May 2017. http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-12992883 (accessed 28 May 2017).
- Author unknown. 'Old Dissident Sees Hope Growing in Myanmar Youth Successfully Defied Regime to help Cyclone Victims'. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. 12 October 2008.
- Becker, S.L. and Reusser, D.E. 'Disasters as opportunities for social change: Using the multi-level perspective to consider the barriers to disaster-related transitions'. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* vol. 18 (2016): 75-88.
- Burma Fund UN Office, *Burma's 2010 Elections: a comprehensive report.* January 2011.
- Caballero-Anthony, M. 'Non-Traditional Security Challenges, Regional Governance, and the ASEAN Political-Security Community (ASPC)'. Asia Security Initiative Policy Series Working Paper no. 7. September 2010.
- Callahan, M. 'The generals loosen their grip'. *Journal of Democracy* vol. 23, no. 4 (2012): 120-131.
- Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies. *Listening to Voices from Inside: Myanmar Civil Society's Response to Cyclone Nargis.* Siem Reap, 2009.
- Checkel, J.T. 'Process Tracing'. In *Qualitative Methods in International Relations*, edited by A. Klotz and D. Prakash, 114-127. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Cheesman, N., Farrelly, N. and Wilson, T. *Debating democratisation in Myanmar*. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2014.
- Dür, A. 'Measuring Interest Group Influence in the EU A Note on Methodology'. *European Union Politics* vol. 9, no. 4 (2008): 559–576.
- Fan, L. 'Disaster as Opportunity? Building back better in Aceh, Myanmar and Haiti'. HPG Working Paper. November 2013.
- Few, R., Scott, Z., Wooster, K., Flores Avila, M. and Tarazona, M. 'Strengthening capacities for disaster risk management II: Lessons for

effective support'. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* no. 20 (2016): 154-162.

- Geddes, B. 'What we know about democratisation after twenty years'. *Annual Review of Political Science* vol. 2 (1999): 115-144.
- Gill, G.J. *Dynamics of democratisation: elites, civil society and the transition process*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.
- Hannigan, J. *Disasters Without Borders: The International Politics of Natural Disasters*. New York: Polity Press, 2012.
- Huang, R.L. 'Re-thinking Myanmar's political regime: military rule in Myanmar and implications for current reforms'. *Contemporary Politics* vol. 19, no. 3 (2013): 247-261.
- Human Rights Watch, "*I want to help my own people". State Control and Civil Society in Burma after Cyclone Nargis*. New York, April 2010.
- Jones, L. 'Explaining Myanmar's regime transition: the periphery is central'. *Democratisation* vol. 21, no. 5 (2014): 780-802.
- Jones, L. 'The Political Economy of Myanmar's Transition'. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* vol. 44, no. 1 (2014): 144-170.
- Kingsbury, D. 'Political Transition in Myanmar: Prospects and Problems'. *Asian Politics & Policy* vol. 6, no. 3 (2014): 351–373.
- Kivimäki, T. and Pasch, P. *The Dynamics of Conflict in the Multhiethnic Union of Myanmar. PCIA - Country Conflict-Analysis Study*. October 2009.
- Lidauer, M. 'Democratic Dawn? Civil Society and Elections in Myanmar 2010-2012'. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* vol. 2 (2012): 87–114.
- Mannakkara, S., Wilkinson, S. and Potangaroa, R. 'Build back better: implementation in Victorian bushfire reconstructuion'. *Disasters* vol. 30, no. 2 (April 2014): 267-290.
- McLachlan-Bent, A. and Langmore, J. **'**A Crime against Humanity? Implications and Prospects of the Responsibility to Protect in the Wake of Cyclone Nargis'. *Global Responsibility to Protect* no. 3 (2011): 37-60.
- O'Brien, K., Hayward, B. and Berkes, F. 'Rethinking Social Contracts: Building Resilience in a Changing Climate'. *Ecology and Society* vol. 14, no. 2 (2009). https://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol14/iss2/art12/main.html (accessed 30 May 2017).
- Paik, W. 'Authoritarianism and humanitarian aid: regime stability and external relief in China and Myanmar'. *The Pacific Review* vol. 24 no. 4 (2011): 439-462.
- Pedersen, M.B. 'The Politics of Burma's "Democratic" Transition'. *Critical Asian Studies* vol. 43, no. 1 (2011): 49-68.
- Pelling, M. and Dill, K. 'Disaster politics: tipping points for change in the adaption of sociopolitical regimes'. *Progress in Human Geography* vol. 1, no. 34 (2010): 21–37.
- Pelling, M. and Dill, K. ''Natural' Disasters as Catalysts of Political Action'. ISP/NSC Chatham Briefing Paper 06/01. London: Chatham House, 2006.
- Recovery Status Report, *Cyclone Nargis 2008: Rehabilitation in Myanmar*. 2010.

- Reynolds, A., Andrew, A. Stepan, A., Oo, Z. and Levine, S. 'How Burma Could Democratize', *Journal of Democracy* vol. 12, no. 4 (2001): 95-108.
- Seekins, D.M. 'The social, political and humanitarian impact of Burma's Cyclone Nargis'. *The Asia-Pacific Journal* vol. 6, no. 5 (2008). http://apjjf.org/-Donald-M.-Seekins/2763/article.html (accessed 30 May 2017).
- Selth, A. 'Even Paranoids Have Enemies: Cyclone Nargis and Myanmar's Fears of Invasion', *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* vol. 30, no. 3 (2008): 379-402.
- Shikad, M., Myint, U.T., Gyi, U.K.K., Nakagawa, Y. and Shaw, R. 'Reaching the unreachable: Myanmar experiences of community-based disaster risk reduction'. In *Community Based Disaster Risk Reduction*, edited by R. Shaw, 185-203. Bradford: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2012.
- Steinberg, D.I. *Burma/Myanmar – what everyone needs to know*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Taylor, R.H. 'Responding to Nargis, political storm of humanitarian rage?'. *Journal of Social Issues in SE Asia* vol.30, no. 3 (2015): 911-932.
- 'The new breed of documentary photographers'. *Verve Photo*. 8 August 2008. https://vervephoto.wordpress.com/tag/cyclone-nargis/ (accessed 1 June 2017).
- Trading Economics. 'Myanmar GDP'. Accessed 27 May 2007. http://www.tradingeconomics.com/myanmar/gdp (accessed 30 May 2017).
- U Khin Maung Win, H.E. 'Myanmar Roadmap to Democracy: The Way Forward'. Presentation at Seminar on Understanding Myanmar. Yangon, 27-28 January, 2004.
- Vicary, A. 'The Relief and Reconstruction Programme Following Cyclone Nargis: A Review of SPDC Policy'. In *Ruling Myanmar: From Cyclone Nargis to National Elections*, edited by N. Cheesman, M. Skidmore and T. Wilson, 208-253. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010.
- Wallis, K. and Jaquet, C. 'Local NGOs in Myanmar: vibrant but vulnerable'. Humanitarian Practice Network. September 2011. http://odihpn.org/magazine/local-ngos-in-myanmar-vibrant-but-vulnerable/ (accessed 30 May 2017).
- 'What is Disaster Risk Reduction?'. UNISDR. https://www.unisdr.org/who-we-are/what-is-drr (accessed 28 April 2017).
- Yin Hlaing, K. 'Understanding Recent Political Changes in Myanmar'. *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* vol. 34, no. 2 (2012): 197-216.
- Zwa Moe, K. 'Putting Compassion Into Action'. *The Irrawaddy*. 9 May 2014. https://www.irrawaddy.com/from-the-archive/putting-compassion-action.html (accessed 30 May 2017).