

# A “SURVIVAL” AND GRASSROOTS GOVERNANCE MODEL FOR POST-MILITARY REGIME GOVERNANCE IN MYANMAR

CHARLES DAVID CRUMPTON

## ABSTRACT

Crumpton was a Fulbright Scholar in Thailand in 2021-2022, which built on previous Fulbright Specialist experiences in Brazil and Thailand, and continued his five-decade global journey in responsive and inclusive local governance. The 2021-2022 Scholar Grant involved collaboration with refugee Myanmar scholars to visualize governance in post-military regime Myanmar. Their collaboration produced a vision of governance based on a grassroots perspective and supported by Myanmar and international experience in inclusive community-level planning and deliberative democracy.



**Keywords:** Myanmar • grassroots governance • deliberative democracy

Almost fifty years ago, I began a journey as an intern in my hometown’s budget office as part of the University of Georgia Master of Public Administration program that has since taken me across the United States, to South America, and most recently to Southeast Asia. On this journey, I engaged with and studied communities seeking to realize more responsive and inclusive local governance. This journey includes my “childhood” (my 20s and 30s) career in city management in six states of the United States of America (US). It also includes my doctoral research at Portland State University where I considered how public problem-solving on the local level often involves “engineering” intersectoral and inter-organizational governance solutions. It also includes two decades of applied research in eight states in the US focused on evaluating governance approaches to public problems ranging from inter-jurisdictional planning to the incarceration of illegal immigrant detainees, to responding to the criminalization of Americans suffering from mental health and substance abuse problems. Over the past decade, facilitated by a Fulbright Specialist Grant to the University of Brasília and the Federal University of Goiás in Brazil in 2015, and a second Specialist Grant to Khon Kaen University in Thailand in 2017, my journey in local governance expanded to include international and comparative inquiry. My 2021-2022 Fulbright Scholar experience with the School of Public Policy at Chiang Mai University in Thailand represents my journey’s most recent chapter.

The original plan was for my Fulbright Scholar Grant to be hosted by the University of Yangon in Myanmar for 2019-2020. This Scholar Grant involved collaborating with the university's faculty to enhance its public administration curriculum and perform public administration and governance-related research in the interest of contributing to the development of Myanmar's governance capacity and capability. With the arrival of COVID-19, my grant (like those of other Fulbright grantees) was delayed for more than a year. Then, on 1 February 2021, Myanmar experienced the agony of a violent military *coup d'état*. Fortunately, with the assistance of Fulbright's East Asia-Pacific Office, and through collaboration with the School of Public Policy at Chiang Mai University in Thailand, I was able to shift my Fulbright Scholar Grant experience to Chiang Mai. Since hundreds of thousands of expatriate Myanmar people reside in Chiang Mai Province, including many scholars and former government and business leaders who fled due to the *coup*, it was a fortuitous choice as a substitute location for my grant. My delayed and relocated Scholar Grant began in July 2021 and ended in March 2022.

My focus on governance in Myanmar dates to my Fulbright Specialist experience in Khon Kaen in 2017. At the College of Local Administration (COLA) my duties included lecturing and co-supervising a group of four masters and doctoral students from Myanmar. My roles as teacher and supervisor evolved into those of mentor and collaborator that led to my first visit to Myanmar in 2018. That visit led to a relationship with an international NGO, ActionAid-Myanmar, and first-hand experience with its efforts in grassroots governance-building in rural states and regions of Myanmar and its urban centers. The relationship with ActionAid-Myanmar developed into a collaboration that produced a variety of reports on its grassroots work in Yangon, Mandalay, and Chin, Kayah, and Kayin (Karen) States from 2018 to the present. My planned Fulbright Scholar Grant experience at the University of Yangon was a natural continuation of my growing engagement with governance-building in Myanmar.

The shift of my Scholar Grant to Chiang Mai University was facilitated by several helpful coincidences. With funding provided by Canada's International Development Research Centre, the School of Public Policy had plans to conduct a Summer Seminar for a group of inter-sectoral Myanmar scholars who had fled their nation due to the military coup. The School's leadership asked me to assist in designing and directing the seminar. The intent of the seminar was to focus on prospects for Myanmar's governance in a post-military regime future. So, not only did I have the good fortune of landing on my feet in a wonderful place like Chiang Mai, by happenstance my hosts there offered me an opportunity to do Myanmar-related work that both aligned with my original plans for the University of Yangon and fit the trajectory of my decades-long professional and scholarly interest and recent international work.

When I received information from the School of Public Policy regarding the backgrounds of my seminar fellows, I felt that my good luck had been transformed into an opportunity for me to learn more about the intersectoral challenges in Myanmar and share my experience and governance ideas with a group of serious changemakers. This group came from a variety of states and regions of Myanmar and included two former government employees from the energy and securities and exchange policy areas. Also included in the group were a development NGO worker, an analyst from a policy thinktank, and a journalist who previously worked for the *New York Times* and other international publications in several of Myanmar's conflict areas, including both the Rakhine State for coverage of the Arakan conflict with the Tatmadaw and the Rohingya refugee crisis. This group not only brought a commitment to governance change in Myanmar, but also inter-sectoral and diverse ethnic group and geographic understandings to inform my learning process and add substance to the seminar.

Beginning in June 2021, with help from my international research colleague in Maryland, Julia Roche, and in collaboration with my new colleagues at the School of Public Policy in Chiang Mai, I designed a seminar framework that focused on four conceptual areas: (1) peace, social stability, and reconciliation; (2) institution-building; (3) governance capacity-building; and (4) promoting the rights and interests of marginalized groups. Framed by these concepts over the course of four seminar sessions, the seminar fellows and I sought to answer four key questions: (1) What are Myanmar's governance priorities? (2) What actions are needed to address the nation's priorities? (3) What capabilities and areas of capacity must be developed or enhanced to address the nation's priorities? (4) How can Myanmar enhance these capabilities and capacity requirements on the national, state/regional, and local levels?

We also reflected upon a diverse set of related topics, specifically: centralization versus federalism versus localism in institutions of governance-building; moving beyond military authoritarianism or a hybrid (military/civilian) model of governance; building sustainability and resiliency into governance; the role of international interests; national institutions of governance; state and regional governance; urban governance; rural village and village tract governance; and international, national, state/regional, and local level NGOs.

To apply Myanmar expertise and experience and help to bring our consideration of this material to life, I was fortunate to have the assistance of three brilliant collaborators with extensive records of work in and about Myanmar: Mariana Cifuentes, Paul Taylor, and Ashley South. Their extensive – and unpaid – contributions were essential to the ultimate success of the seminar.

## FOCUSING ON “SURVIVAL” AND GRASSROOTS GOVERNANCE

The International Development Research Centre’s funding requirements called for the Myanmar fellows to produce two policy briefs based on their seminar experience. Drawing upon the evidence and alternative frameworks that we explored during the seminar, in their policy briefs, the fellows chose to offer a new vision for the future governance of Myanmar. The fellows’ first brief considered the confluence of the weakness of nation’s institutions of governance, how the military *coup* further weakened institutional capacity in areas such as public health, ways in which the COVID-19 emergency exposed this weakness and exacerbated the consequences for those in need, and the emergence of grassroots responses to compensate for a dire situation. The fellows framed these grassroots responses as “survival governance.” They focused their study on an urban neighborhood level response called the Yellow Flag Movement, which involved community responses to the healthcare and other needs of households experiencing cases of COVID-19. In the second policy brief, the fellows considered the importance of making government decision-making on the local level more responsive and inclusive. The brief proposed that the position of township administrator, which was an appointive government position, become an elective position.

After our seminar ended in September 2021, the seminar fellows and I agreed that we should pursue practical connections for our work. The fellows were particularly concerned that discussions about the future of Myanmar among the Myanmar political former government, academic expatriate elite groups in Chiang Mai, and the international community, would be dominated by an elite top-down perspective. Their fear was that this perspective would not adequately consider the “survival” and grassroots priorities identified as an outcome of the seminar and reflected in the policy briefs. So, from September 2021 until my grant ended in March 2022, the Myanmar Fellows and I explored alternative ideas for the future shape of governance that would privilege the needs and priorities of the least advantaged living in rural villages and poor urban neighborhoods of the nation.

The post-seminar workgroup that the fellows and I formed reflected on the evidence that we considered during the seminar. This led to a focus on the survival needs of families in the nation’s least advantaged villages and urban neighborhoods and the myriad ways this focus could be translated into governance processes and policy from the grassroots level to the national level. As we re-examined evidence for the 2011-2021 window of democratic experimentation in Myanmar, the workgroup directed attention to evidence upon which I had previously reported based on the nationwide work of ActionAid-Myanmar in hundreds of villages and village tracts regarding inclusive community planning that emphasized the empowerment of historically marginalized groups. We also examined re-

sults of other experiments in grassroots governance-building reported by the Asia Foundation, USAID, UNDP, and other sources. As we reflected on this evidence, we often returned to an emotive and powerful imagine: a Myanmar village or urban neighborhood mother, who as she prepares her family's evening meal, reflects upon the "survival priorities" of her family. These include basic factors of daily life including nutrition, healthcare, housing, income, employment, safety, and the multitude of micro variables associated with these concerns. The workgroup was determined to identify an approach to governance and policymaking that would privilege the concerns of Myanmar's village and urban mothers. The goal was to identify ways to introduce that approach to the anticipated "constitutional conversation" regarding the post-military regime governance of the nation.

In addition to the evidence regarding grassroots governance-building in Myanmar, the workgroup also considered the international discourse concerning deliberative democracy and deliberative systems. It also assessed other experience from Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands. For example, the workgroup reflected upon the case of Papua New Guinea and whether the "Melanesian Way" had influenced its constitutional conversation. In this case, the national governance-building project was visualized as a nation of villages that functioned as "village of villages." Beyond the romance of this image, the workgroup saw practical value in the idea of creating a national framing of governance that reflected village-level values and priorities. In March 2022, the workgroup applied evidence from Myanmar and the international literature to produce a report that may have an overly academic and burdensome title: *Visualising Governance Building in Myanmar: Introducing the Principles of Inductive Governance*. However, the group identified the word "inductive" as having important meaning suggesting it should be utilized as a teaching point in Myanmar's constitutional conversation. The workgroup's argument centered on the nation's future governance being built upon inclusive and deliberative governance at the grassroots level. Accordingly, Myanmar national policy should prioritize the needs of the nation's least advantaged and historically marginalized groups. In other words, the national governance and policy approach should be induced from grassroots processes and priorities. The workgroup's conceptualization of grassroots-driven governance processes and policymaking focused on the idea that those who best understand the needs at the grassroots level – villagers and urban neighborhood dwellers themselves – can facilitate inclusive participation in setting governance priorities that are ultimately reflected in national policy and administrative action. We visualized a governance structure that linked representative and deliberative processes from level to level, from every village, neighborhood, village tract/ward, and township ultimately to the state, region, and national capitals.

Beyond the importance of privileging the survival needs of Myanmar's least advantaged and structuring the nation's governance in more deeply democratic ways, the workgroup considered its proposed governance approach to have potentially practical value in overcoming some of Myanmar's most vexing and enduring problems. For instance, the workgroup believed that a village-oriented platform for public problem-solving could contribute to reducing or minimizing government-ethnic group and inter-ethnic conflict and support movement toward peaceful and stable governance solutions. It might offer an opportunity to do what John Rawls identified as necessary for the creation of an effective pluralistic society: find areas of overlapping consensus among groups with differing belief systems and societal objectives.

Of course, governance is more than inclusive and participatory processes of planning and priority setting. It requires an administrative approach that also reflects the values of the political process to responsively execute the priorities that emerge from it. As result, again drawing upon Myanmar's experience and international evidence, in addition to proposing a national "village of villages" governance approach to setting governance priorities, we also suggested how existing administrative resources might be redistributed and refocused to embrace the values of the new approach and provide administrative wherewithal to effectively operate. We also offered ideas regarding how additional administrative support can be found or produced to address existing administrative inadequacies. We recognized that introducing a new inclusive deliberative democracy/deliberative systems approach driven by village level priority setting at all levels of governance and in every state and region of Myanmar was not realistic. As a more realistic alternative, we focused on the most local levels of governance: villages, village tracts/wards, townships, and districts.

### **EPILOGUE: CONNECTING MANY DOTS**

In May 2022 I returned to Chiang Mai, again primarily with a Myanmar focus. By contributing to curriculum design and teaching one of the institute's first session courses, I am working with a man from Karen State, Saw Kapi, to establish a public policy and governance institute designed to train Myanmar's future political and administrative leaders. Our first cohort includes about 50, primarily Karen, students. The post-seminar workgroup and I reconvened and added new members, including a former news presenter for Myanmar's national broadcasting service. As I revise this essay to fit the vision for *Fulbright Chronicles*, the workgroup has decided to formally organize (it is deliberating on names for itself that include words like, "local governance," "advocacy," "initiative," and "research"). It is also pursuing the idea of organizing a forum for the

many expatriate Myanmar interests in Chiang Mai. The idea centers on identifying their separate and common priorities and opportunities for collaboration. In addition, the forum would offer an opportunity for the workgroup to promote the ideas that it has developed over the past year.

I have also received a visiting professor invitation by Chiang Mai University's Faculty of Political Science and Public Administration for 2022

***My continuing work in Chiang Mai regarding Myanmar and Thailand also connects dots with and reflects benefits of my broader Fulbright journey. [...] They have provided me with a firsthand understanding of both the personal enrichment to be realized as a Fulbrighter and the importance of the work that we do as we collaborate with students, colleagues, and citizens around the world.***

and 2023. My work will involve collaborating with faculty members on their research projects concerning comparative public administration, local governance, and Myanmar. I am continuing my five-decade journey in directions that are currently very important to me. I also will be able to build upon my recent Myanmar experience in other ways. For instance, I have developed a collaboration with Ajarn Patamawadee Jongruck in my new faculty that involves application of some of the ideas from my rural grassroots research in Myanmar and the work of the seminar fellows to her consideration of grassroots governance among Karen villages in the hills of Northern Thailand.

My continuing work in Chiang Mai regarding Myanmar and Thailand also connects dots with and reflects benefits of my broader Fulbright journey. Experiences that I have enjoyed as a Fulbright Specialist in Goiânia, Brasília, and Khon Kaen, as a Fulbright Scholar in Chiang Mai, as Fulbright Specialist peer reviewer, and as a student grant applicant reviewer for the Binational Fulbright Commission in Egypt, have provided me with a firsthand understanding of both the personal enrichment to be realized as a Fulbrighter and the importance of the work that we do as we collaborate with students, colleagues, and citizens around the world.

## NOTES

1. Visualizing Governance *Building in Myanmar: Introducing the Principles of Inductive Governance*, Chiang Mai University School of Public Policy. <https://spp.cmu.ac.th>, in press.
2. Rawls, J., (1971). *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
3. Rawls, J. (1993). *Political Liberalism*. New York City: Columbia University Press.



David Crumpton having lunch in a Myanmar food restaurant in Chiang Mai with the SPP Summer Seminar Fellows (left to right: Crumpton, Yay Chann, Hsu Myatt, Seng Pin and Wai Moe).

---

**BIOGRAPHY**

David Crumpton is a Senior Research Associate with the Institute for Governmental Service and Research at the University of Maryland, College Park, a Senior Researcher with the Center for Public Sector Study and Applied Research at the Federal University of Goiás in Brazil, a Senior Associate with the Southeast Asia Research Initiative at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, and a visiting professor in the Faculty of Political Science and Public Administration at Chiang Mai University, Thailand. He was a Fulbright Scholar in the School of Public Policy at Chiang Mai University in Thailand, August 2021 to March 2022. David has been active in Fulbright affairs in a variety of additional ways: He was a Fulbright Specialist in Brazil in 2015 and in Thailand in 2017. He has served as a peer reviewer for the Fulbright Specialist program and has assisted the Binational Fulbright Commission in Egypt in reviewing its student grant applications. He can be reached at [ccrumpto@umd.edu](mailto:ccrumpto@umd.edu)

---