Summary

This thesis studies the social and political activities undertaken by people and organisations in (or from) Myanmar during a time of profound socio-political change. I examine what type of activities Burmese organisations conducted under the banner of ‘civil society’, who they interacted with, and how they framed their agendas towards the outside world. At the start of my research in 2010, Myanmar (formerly Burma) was notorious for being the longest military dictatorship in the world, run by two consecutive military governments (1962-1988 and 1988-2010) that kept tight control on the political opposition and any form of dissent. At the end of my research in 2015, elections were won by opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her party the National League for Democracy, marking a new era. The country thus saw an unexpected and unprecedented process of political change, in which parts of the population experienced increased liberties, while others did not observe any tangible improvements in their daily lives.

This thesis examines how social and political activists inside and outside Myanmar adapted their views, agendas and activities to the changing situation around them. I describe how they engaged with various domestic and foreign actors, including local authorities and Western donor agencies, in this period of rapid change. My findings challenge the assumption held among many transnational human rights campaigners that Burmese civil society constituted a coherent, single-minded group of actors seeking to democratise the country by overthrowing the military government. Such views were influenced by vocal Burmese spokespersons abroad and the symbolic role of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, but failed to take into account many local dynamics due to limited access to, and information coming from inside the country.

The findings of my research suggest a diversity of Burmese civil society actors engaged in a continuous process of adaptation towards a changing domestic and transnational environment. The room to manoeuvre available to civil society organisations in Myanmar was determined not only by changes in military leadership, but also by the continuously shifting preferences of international solidarity activists and (largely Western) donor organisations. Meanwhile, civil society organisations that had operated inside Myanmar were increasingly able to influence international perceptions of the country, a process that sometimes led to clashes with civil society spokespersons who had previously dominated debates on Myanmar from ‘exile’. This continuous process of civil society positioning towards domestic and international actors is one of the main themes of this thesis, detailed in empirical chapters that are preceded by a discussion on the emerging concept of civil society in Myanmar under military rule.

In the Introduction I relate how I sought to answer my research question - *How have organised civil society actors framed their agendas and developed activities since the start of Myanmar's political transition process in 2010, and what has been the impact of their interactions with foreign supporters?* - in a context characterised by conflict, repression, and human rights violations. Given the severe restrictions on civil liberties under military rule and the limited access for foreign researchers, international researchers and practitioners up to the early 2000s tended to identify Burmese civil society spokespersons primarily outside the country (e.g. in Thailand, North America, or Europe). My multi-sited research, conducted both in Thailand and in Myanmar, served to identify and compare Burmese civil society activities both inside and outside the country. I also describe the challenges I encountered while trying to gather reliable information on activities inside the country, and how I sought to overcome distrust and secrecy in order to approach my respondents and ask them about their daily struggles and realities. Decisions on acceptable levels of risk when conducting research in authoritarian environments, I argue, are best taken in consultation with one’s prospective respondents, rather than through formalised ethical standards. By leaving out local views in the name of safety, we are denying voice to those who are best able to describe daily life under military rule, and miss out on important empirical insights from the ground against which we can test existing theories and claims on the role of civil society in repressive circumstances.
Data were collected during several intermittent fieldwork periods undertaken between 2010 and 2015 with a total duration of twelve months. In 2010 and 2011, I conducted participant observation and interviews with Burmese civil society actors of various ethnic backgrounds in Thailand and in Myanmar. From 2012 onwards, I made annual research visits to follow up with previously established contacts, who became more and more outspoken and active in various parts of the country. In 2010 I observed two trainings for young civil society actors based in Thailand, and in 2011 I participated in a British civil society strengthening project in Myanmar, which allowed me to explore interactions between Western donors and domestic civil society actors. In 2012 and 2014 I accompanied two civil society organisations during their field-based activities outside Yangon. Most quotes used in this thesis were obtained during in-depth interviews between 2010 and 2011, but I also draw from observations and follow-up conversations conducted between 2012 and 2015. Additionally, I interviewed a number of donor representatives in The Netherlands, Australia and Thailand, and spoke to some respondents who happened to visit Europe for advocacy purposes.

In chapter 1 I trace the legacy of repression and resistance to the British colonial period that lasted until 1948, and to the five decades of military rule starting in 1962. The British colonial administration drew arbitrary boundaries, favoured certain ethnic groups over others, and brought in Indians and other foreigners to occupy the highest positions in the country, leading to long-lasting distrust towards foreign influences and inter-ethnic tensions in (post)colonial Burma. The Burman nationalism and ethnic minority resistance against the central government that continued in the post-independence era provided the rationale for the eventual military takeover. The military neglected the country’s economy, restricted civil liberties, and cracked down on dissidents; yet pre-existing associations of various political, ethnic and religious orientation continued to operate in more and less visible forms. Under military rule, civic discontent emerged periodically in the form of public protest led by students and Buddhist monks, most notably in 1988 and 2007. A ‘democracy movement’ in exile gained strength after the crackdown on the 1988 student uprising, and became the main point of contact for the international community. Chapter 1 ends with a brief overview of the political liberalisation process that started under President Thein Sein in 2011, and which formed the context in which I conducted my research.

In chapter 2 I show how the concept of ‘civil society’ was introduced in Myanmar after having re-gained prominence in democratisation theory, and when Western INGOs and donor organisations started entering the country in the 1990s. The term ‘civil society’ was used to refer to a wide variety of actors that were united in their disapproval of the military government, but diverse in terms of their identities, views, or approaches to bringing about social and political change. A number of Western donors looked for local organisations to implement their programmes, which they found initially in the ceasefire areas of the ethnic states, and later also in central Myanmar. The occurrence of cyclone Nargis in 2008 further helped to strengthen transnational relationships, as local civil society actors were able to take the lead in humanitarian assistance efforts, and international aid budgets for Myanmar increased. The period between cyclone Nargis and the 2010 elections proved important for the emancipation of local civil society organisations, some of which were able to expand their political activities in the run-up to the elections. A small group of actors that managed to strike a balance between liaising with state actors and gaining popularity with Western donors became particularly influential. However, they encountered mistrust from other civil society actors who did not experience the same privileges. Simultaneously, the training and networking activities available to some sections of Burmese civil society contributed to the development of ‘urban educational elites’ functioning as transnational gatekeepers. They increasingly struggled to maintain ties with the broader population of Myanmar, especially in the rural areas, for whom political change brought little tangible improvements.

In chapter 3 I describe how, and to what extent, organisations that sought to bring about socio-political change from within the country managed to operate under highly repressive circumstances. Although in 2009 Myanmar had more political prisoners than ever before, civil society actors who did not openly challenge the military rulers managed to maintain, and even
increase space to operate by establishing a working relationship with local or central authorities. I analyse how they navigated within an uncertain and constantly changing environment, and show how this flexible approach allowed them to capitalise on new opportunities presented by the aftermath of cyclone Nargis, the announcement of the 2010 elections, the liberalisation process initiated by the Thein Sein government, and the increasing international engagement with actors inside the country. The ability to benefit from this increased ‘space’, however, proved highly conditional on personal characteristics of the actors involved, including their ethnic and geographical background, their public profile, and their personal relationship with the authorities. As a result of perceived differences in opportunity, civil society actors increasingly distrusted each other’s motives. Chapter 3 closes by arguing that perceptions of civil society as either a social force with no political impact, or a political force only interested in regime change do not do justice to the way non-state actors operate in an authoritarian context. In such complex contexts social and political goals are often intertwined, but may be tactically voiced or concealed depending on the situation, time and place. Organising oneself in Myanmar under military rule, moreover, was a risky undertaking in itself, regardless of the organisational agenda.

In chapter 4 I analyse how Burmese civil society actors framed the situation in Myanmar towards an international audience, and how this framing was influenced by transnational trends and agendas. While views on the proposed ways towards social and political change increasingly diverged, transnational advocacy efforts often required a unified ‘frame’, or portrayal of the situation and the proposed responses, in order to maintain international momentum and compete with other human rights causes. Political activists who were referred to as ‘the democracy movement’ called for a categorical rejection of the military-led ‘Roadmap to Democracy’, including the constitution of 2008 and the elections scheduled for 2010. They were increasingly challenged by other civil society representatives, who emphasised the need to maintain good relationships with the military government in order to enlarge humanitarian and political space. The 2010 elections provided an important opportunity for both sides to reiterate their message, with some calling for engagement with the formal political process, while others campaigned for an election boycott. In this process, Westerners who had supported the Burmese ‘democracy movement’ also became increasingly divided, although some donors continued to support both camps in the debate. As the military-backed government continued its political liberalisation process, however, the proponents of engagement gained international prominence, while those who continued to oppose the government lost some of their political and financial support.

In chapter 5 I examine how Burmese civil society actors interacted with Western donors, primarily from Europe, North America, and Australia. Given the limited funding opportunities from inside the country or even from elsewhere in Asia, many civil society organisations relied on Western donors for financial support. Compared to neighbouring countries such as Cambodia, such assistance was only scarcely available. Many donors had been convinced by the political opposition that funding should not be channelled to organisations inside the country, which they claimed could not operate without interference from the military government. The Myanmar government also imposed many restrictions on international donors who wanted to establish themselves in the country. As a result, donor assistance up to the late 2000s was primarily channelled to Burmese organisations in exile. Nevertheless, some donors managed to access the country after ceasefire agreements were reached with ethnic insurgent groups in the 1990s, after which the government opened access to these ‘ceasefire areas’. New instances of donor influx emerged after cyclone Nargis in 2008, and after the political liberalisation process that started in 2011. With this renewed donor interest, local civil society increasingly had to balance the (frequently changing) donor demands and agendas with the needs of their domestic constituencies. A significant proportion of the money entering the country, moreover, was taken up by large international organisations and other implementing partners, to the detriment of local actors who had long been working low-profile and with limited budgets.
Theoretically, I argue for a broadening of civil society theory beyond a neo-Tocquevillian focus on independent civic association as integral part of democratisation processes, and towards an acknowledgement of diversity, conflict, and adaptation to time and place. This corresponds to Gramsci’s notion of civil society as a site of societal contestation and a potential source of hegemony. Such an approach to civil society can help explain why actors that were previously thought to be aligned may later diverge on issues such as the rights of religious minorities, and why former opponents may later join forces, e.g. in Myanmar’s new political arena. I want to emphasise the importance of conducting in-depth, in country research in order to establish how civil society takes shape in any given context, rather than proclaiming its absence if its form does not correspond to theoretical assumptions. The emerging body of literature on civil society in authoritarian countries demonstrates that actors in these contexts often act outside the ‘public sphere’, seeking strategical alliances in order to further their socio-political goals. Such research, in turn, should not disregard the role of more vocal dissidents with an explicitly political agenda, even if they willingly or unwillingly position themselves further from actors operating inside the country, in the ideological or geographical sense (e.g. in exile).

This thesis also calls for more attention to the agency of civil society actors in authoritarian contexts, above and beyond the structural limitations that they obviously face. My focus on social navigation, room to manoeuvre, and individual capabilities serves to highlight what options remain available despite political restrictions and other structural obstacles such as poverty. I diverge from theories on covert everyday resistance, moreover, by focusing on actors with a more public profile who actively mediate between local needs and global trends. Foreign donors and political supporters also influence the structural circumstances in which civil society actors operate, while they in turn are influenced by the way local actors ‘frame’ the situation and request assistance.

This thesis applies theories on social movements, vernacularisation of human rights and transnational advocacy networks to the specific context of Myanmar. It diverges from previous social movements literature on Myanmar that focused largely on a few instances of public protest, but takes seriously the option that some domestic civil society activities may be in line with international human rights agendas. This thesis further contributes to the limited research that combines literature on social movements and civil society, and checks these theories against developments on the ground, rather than the other way around. This means that transnational action networks are viewed from a local rather than a global perspective. I also address domestic power relations by asking who benefits from certain ways of framing and priority setting, and whose interests may be underrepresented in transnational human rights campaigns.

After summarising my main findings with regard to the form and function of civil society under military rule, questions of representation, and processes of contestation on the transnational level, I end this thesis with some recommendations for donors and other foreign actors wishing to contribute to a vibrant civil society sector in Myanmar. Since donors and other ‘capacity builders’ are inclined to support actors whose shape and activities they are familiar with, their assistance may contribute to the establishment of a small educated elite with a disproportionate impact on decision making for a broader civil society. Donors wishing to expand their impact and reach ‘the grassroots’, however they may define it, should look beyond formal organisations and visible spokespersons that may act as gatekeepers between the local and the global level. When seeking to support civil society, it is important to acknowledge diversity and decide how to deal with potentially conflicting views or interests. By comparing these different views, a broader understanding of the situation and power struggles within a country may emerge, and serve as a basis for better-informed interventions.