Moderating polarised positions on questions of national identity and sovereignty: Deliberative surveys on federalism in Myanmar

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Abstract
Myanmar is in an important phase of its political transition. The opportunity for substantive federal reform, which is central to peacebuilding and democratisation, is present and being progressed through parallel elite level forums. However, these elite negotiations have serious limitations, as they fail to reach out to citizens, and contribute to polarisation and the perpetuation of extreme views regarding federalism. To address the absence of public deliberation on federalism in Myanmar, we organised five deliberative events based on the Deliberative Polling® methodology. This paper discusses some of the key findings and demonstrates how they can contribute to federal constitutional reform in Myanmar. It shows that when debating fundamental issues relating to identity and national sovereignty, public deliberation has moderation effects even in conflict-ridden deeply divided societies. Indeed, questions that related to the institutions associated with identity and religion had the highest quality of deliberation, opinion change and moderation. These more moderate and considered deliberated perspectives are of great value for dealing with the polarisation issue that Myanmar faces and demonstrate the potential of deliberative democracy tools to supplement and moderate electoral democracy and elite-driven constitutional change processes.

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Introduction

Myanmar is at a critical phase of its transition to a democratic federal union. It has been more than three years since the election of the National League for Democracy, with its commitment to establish 'genuine federalism', yet little has changed. Conflict is ongoing in some parts of the country and in 2017 the world's attention shifted towards its Rakhine State following a military operation that targeted that state's Rohingya people. An agreement on federalism, and associated constitutional change, remains the key to resolving longstanding civil conflicts and to establishing a shared identity by which a more inclusive and democratic union can be built.

To date, dialogue on federal constitutional reform has occurred mainly through two channels, the 21st Century Panglong Conference and the National Ceasefire Coordination Team, both of which are by invite only and include only elite stakeholders. Although important progress has been made in some areas, negotiators remain deadlocked over key issues. One is the right to secession. For some, federalism means self-determination and therefore incorporates the right to both join and leave the Union of Myanmar. For others (i.e., the military), federalism cannot be established unless the ethnic nationalities renounce secessionism. These two extreme opinions put federalism in a state of stalemate. How can Myanmar overcome this problem of polarisation? Are these extreme views representative? What do the citizens think about federalism issues? And how and why do their opinions change? Can public deliberation moderate extreme views?

There is an urgent need to tackle the above questions. Myanmar's political transition is at risk of succumbing to the trap of extreme majoritarianism, as the demographics and party system of the country are such that one political party, or one ethnic group, can dominate the reform process and dictate the terms of agreement (leaving aside, for now, the military veto potential). Indeed, historically this has been the case, and much of the internal conflict has been attributed as a response to 'Burmanisation', whether by the military or democratically elected governments, and a striving by ethnic nationalities for political equality (Matthews, 2001; Smith, 1991; Walton, 2013).

We organised five deliberative events based on the Deliberative Polling® (DP) methodology in August and November 2018. The practical purposes of these deliberation events were to promote greater mutual understanding and tolerance between different ethnic groups, and in particular, to find out what the public thinks about federalism. The intellectual aims of the deliberative events were to test whether deliberation promotes mutual understanding, leads to value change, and produces moderating effects. Our practical aim is to use these results to seed further local level deliberations as a means of reaching more moderate perspectives and developing compromise or consensus solutions to seemingly intractable issues, including those that relate to identity and national sovereignty. Public deliberation cannot itself overcome all issues, such as wide ethnic inequality, but it can confront the existing hegemonies that contribute to such inequality.

We aim to challenge directly the scholarly contention that deliberation in deeply divided societies may be counter-productive and lead to further polarisation. On the contrary, we found that in many instances, participants reached agreements, proposed compromises and changed their opinions in respect of others' preferences. Such opinion change occurred on issues relating to religion and national identity, as well as on less value-laden issues such as natural resource sharing and education policy. Even on the perennially thorny issue of secession, participants adjusted their opinions, reached agreements and made proclamations such as 'in the past federalism was about secession, today it will unite us'.

These more moderate and considered deliberated perspectives are of great value for dealing with the polarisation issue that Myanmar faces and conflict mitigation more generally. Our results demonstrate the potential of deliberative democracy tools to supplement and moderate electoral democracy and elite-driven constitutional change processes. These results show that the positive

effects of deliberation, such as moderation and constructive politics, can occur even in conflict-ridden deeply divided societies when debating fundamental issues relating to identity and national sovereignty.

Of course, we are aware that some sections of the military use a polarisation issue to help justify their role, in particular using the 'Muslim issue' to create an imaginary enemy that provides a source of legitimacy for the continuation of military domination. This practical (yet devious) way of delivering legitimacy is a great contrast to the normative notion of legitimacy this paper endorses, that is, that public deliberation can 'become *the* tool for constitutional legitimation' (Suteu and Tierney, 2018: 282). In our opinion, military use of polarisation and self-generated legitimacy is deeply problematic and unsustainable. We aim to make an experimental study of how public deliberation can bolster or certify legitimacy for constitutionalism. We think that a public deliberation, or public reason, is one small necessary step to confront this vexed issue.

The paper is structured as follows. The second section outlines the political context in which Myanmar needs public deliberation towards federal constitutional reform and the resolution of existing stalemates. The third section situates the research in the literature on deliberative democracy and its application in divided societies. This theoretical overview serves two purposes: to show how deliberative democracy theories inform and guide us in designing our deliberative events; and to show how we intend to engage and test some theoretical issues through our experimental study. The fourth section offers a brief overview of the design and implementation of five deliberative events including methodology. The fifth section provides the key outcomes of the deliberative events, and how those outcomes support or alter existing theories of constitutional change and deliberative democracy. We conclude, in the sixth section, by considering the potential and the shortcomings of the approach for the expansion of a deliberative approach to constitutional reform, and the theoretical implications.

Ethnic conflict, stalemate, and the need for a new form of public deliberation

Myanmar is selected as a case study because current processes towards federal constitutional change are in serious stalemate and there is an urgent need to search for alternatives. One alternative is to introduce public deliberation into political and social life. Myanmar combines several features that make the injection of deliberative methodologies both necessary and potentially transformative.

Firstly, Myanmar is a deeply divided society where political cleavages and conflicts are built around ethnic identity. In the main, these ethnic conflicts and political cleavages are between the Bamar (or Burmese) majority and the other ethnic nationalities. The Bamar comprise around two-thirds of the population and dominate political, social and military institutions. According to the 1982 citizenship law, there are seven more major 'ethnic nationalities' (also known as 'national races') each comprising numerous smaller groups (see Table 1). Although these categories are highly contentious (see for example Cheesman, 2017), they are reflected in both state and non-state institutions. Each major group has their own political parties and ethnic armed organisations (EAOs), and at one point or another, each has been in conflict with the state (Breen, 2018b; Smith, 1991; Taylor, 2009).

Currently, Myanmar is quasi-federal (Breen, 2018b), comprising seven 'ethnic states', seven (nominally Bamar) 'regions', and six ethnic 'self-administered areas'. However, these arrangements do not satisfy the demands of ethnic nationalities, many of whom hark back to the 1947 Panglong Agreement as the country's founding myth and its supposed promise of ethnic quality

Table 1. Eight major ethnic nationalities of Myanmar*.

Ethnic group	Approximate proportion of total population (%)
Bamar	69
Shan	8.5
Karen	6.2
Rakhine	4.5
Mon	2.4
Chin	2.2
Kachin	1.4
Karenni	0.4

Notes: *based on the 1983 census data (Government of Burma, 1986), which is the most recent official data on ethnicity. However, the figures (and classifications therein) cannot be considered reliable and should be treated as estimates.

and federalism[1] (Walton, 2008). Ethnic nationalities have long complained that that the state over-all has implemented a Buddhist and Bamar-centric nation-building agenda, which has contributed to conflict and genocide (see Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar, 2018: 4–5; Matthews, 2001; McCarthy, 2006; Walton, 2013). In this condition, Myanmar offers us a suit-able case to address one critical missing issue in the literature on deliberative constitutionalism, that is, how public deliberation shapes constitutional debate and design in a state rife with internal conflict, and whether deliberative democracy can work in deeply divided societies.

Secondly, the mostly elite-driven constitutional reform process which Myanmar is currently undergoing is deeply problematic and requires a new form of public deliberation. Currently, both the 21st Century Panglong Conference and the National Ceasefire Coordination Team are non-inclusive invite-only highly structured elite-based negotiations that provide little opportunity for cross-ethnic exchange (outside of ceasefire coordination amongst EAOs) or the involvement of laypersons and civil society (International Crisis Group, 2015, 2016; Tønnesson and Nilsen, 2018; Walton, 2017). Participants tend to formulate positions among their own group (political party, EAO, etc.) and come to the negotiating table with pre-determined and largely inflexible positions (see for example transcripts of speeches published in Myanmar News Agency, 2016; Tønnesson and Nilsen, 2018; Transnational Institute, 2017). The Transnational Institute (2017: 36) points out that 'the present Panglong-21 and Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement have become more about pro-cess and control than dialogue and reform on the issues that have long fuelled conflict and injustice in the country'. In some instances, the working committees established by the Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee are required to keep discussions secret (see Kyi, 2017: Item 4(J)), while regional dialogues planned by some EAOs have been halted by the military (Nyein, 2018). Under these conditions, compromise and genuine public opinion are hard to come by. Therefore, it is criti-cal to see whether and how public deliberation can overcome some, if not all, problems associated with elite negotiation and open a new channel for the constitutional reform process.

Thirdly, public deliberation is a novel way to overcome the stalemate on federalism in Myanmar. Federalism is the basis of its constitutional reform agenda, which means that the decisions about political structures and institutions are related to ethnic identity and questions of national sover-eignty. Ethnic nationalities argue for a form of ethnofederalism, where regional boundaries are drawn in order to recognise ethnic homelands, and for control over local resources (Lian, 2012; Sakhong, 2005, 2010; Smith, 2007). Bamar political leaders, especially those from the military, have traditionally opposed federalism claiming it will lead to the disintegration of the Union (Breen, 2018a; Smith, 2007; Steinberg, 2012; Williams, 2017). In particular, the issue of secession

remains the major issue preventing agreement (Breen, 2018a). The military representatives in the above-mentioned forums have been insistent on gaining an explicit commitment to non-secession from the ethnic nationalities. However, the ethnic nationalities contend that such a commitment is not necessary, that the objectives of the current constitution already cover this, and that federalism should be implemented in such a way that the ethnic nationalities seek collaboration, rather than secession. This is where the dialogue stopped – 'some groups could not pledge non-secession from the Union, thus, we could not agree to principles of groups having their own state constitution nor self-determination' (U Zaw Htay, spokesperson for the State Counsellor, cited in Nyein, 2017; see also, Aw, 2017; Lynn, 2017; Mang and Lwin, 2017; Shan Herald Agency for News, 2017; Tønnesson and Nilsen, 2018). Public deliberation can reshape and deepen federalism debates to find one way to go beyond these stalemates.

Fourthly, federalism has been resisted because of the tendency for electoral democracy in deeply divided societies to degrade into a form of extreme majoritarianism (e.g., Horowitz, 2000 [1985]; Lijphart, 1977). Public deliberation, together with the protection of minority rights, is one critical approach to addressing this potential tyranny of the majority. Both the 2010 and 2015 elections have been dominated by one major Bamar political party – in 2010, the Union Solidarity and Development Party won 80% of the elected parliamentary seats in the lower house, while in 2015, the National League for Democracy won 77%. These super-majorities are compounded by the reservation of 25% of the seats for the military, which is also Bamar dominated, and the first-past-the-post electoral system, which exaggerates electoral majorities (Breen, 2018b: 161–166).

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, we must acknowledge several limits of public deliberation. For one, the military has an effective veto right over constitutional change and it has thus far been inflexible regarding potential change (Harding, 2017). In addition, the judiciary and constitutional court are theoretically independent, but practically influenced by the military (Crouch, 2018). There are effectively three autonomous governments – the military, the democratically elected government, and the EAOs (Callahan, 2007). The power of the gun, rather than public reason, has dominated politics. Further, some ethnic groups (notably Rohingya) are not recognised as citizens (Cheesman, 2017). Others do not participate in the elite deliberations as their organisations have not signed ceasefire agreements (International Crisis Group, 2016). Indeed, until after 2010, discussion of federalism was effectively banned. These factors have contributed to what is, in our observation, a substantial knowledge and deliberative capacity gap. Still, the partial political liberalisation and democratisation in Myanmar offers an opportunity to insert public deliberation on federalism into political and social life. Therefore, it is important to see whether public deliberation can be introduced and whether and how public deliberation can be developed into a part of civic infrastructure, in particular, whether a new power of public deliberation can develop and expand despite hostile forces against deliberative democracy and deliberative constitutionalism in Myanmar.

Application of deliberative democracy in deeply divided societies

In the early 1990s, democratic theory took a deliberative turn and there is a growing literature on theories of deliberative democracy (Cohen, 1989; Dryzek, 2000, 2005; Elster, 1998; Fung, 1993; Habermas, 1984, 1996). Deliberative democratic theorists stress the capacity, right, or opportunity of citizens who are subject to a collective decision to participate in deliberation about its contents. This normative principle offers a fresh approach to address one serious problem in constitutionalism's building and design, that is, politicians, political party leaders, lawyers, and political scientists often dominate the process of constitution-building, excluding ordinary citizens and creating a question of legitimacy (see Elster, 1998).

Deliberative democratic theory provides the normative prescriptions for the establishment and improvement of deliberative institutions. Deliberative institutions should ensure equal distribution of the power to make collective decisions and equal and effective opportunity for participation in processes of collective judgment. Deliberative democracy should structure decision-making so that the force of communicative influence is maximised while the impact of power and wealth on decision-making is minimised or even blocked. Communication – argument, challenge, demonstration, symbolisation and bargaining – should ensure that arguments and statements are factually true, normatively right and expressively sincere (or truthful). Deliberative institutions should ensure that communicative power has been converted into state power and that all persons affected have had the chance to influence decisions (Habermas, 1984, 1996). The design of our deliberative events aimed to meet the above normative requirements through providing fair and balanced briefing materials and trained facilitators who moderate group discussion to ensure all participants are free from social pressure and fear, and engage in sincere and equal discussion.

However, there is still an important debate about whether deliberative democracy can work in deeply divided societies, because their conflicts tend to be identity-based and so based on fundamental values, rather than reason (Dryzek, 2005: 219–222; Ugarriza and Caluwaerts, 2014: 2–3; Young, 2002). O'Flynn (2006) argues that local level deliberation helps to build cross-cutting cleavages from the bottom-up and increase the extent of inter-group trust. Sunstein (2000, 2003), however, finds that group discussion in most citizen juries leads to and deepens polarisation. Miller (2006) argues that deliberation might contain a bias against minorities. Further, in deeply divided societies, there is often a lack of inter-group trust, no commitment to reciprocity and significant ideological polarisation, which may merely increase once groups agree to deliberate (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996). Can public deliberation work in reducing polarisation and moderating extreme views in a deeply divided society such as Myanmar?

John Dryzek's (2005) seminal work on deliberative democracy in divided societies offers a fresh approach to contentious issues in divided societies (for further discussion on this issue see He, 2013, 2015). For Dryzek (2005), deliberation can be effective if it occurs in a 'semi-detached' sphere and is not associated with issues of identity and national sovereignty, otherwise it will lead to further polarisation. If the deliberations are not directly linked to political decisions, the contest for power is less likely to prevent people from openly changing their minds. The design of our deliberative events followed this recommendation in working within civil society to test the idea of whether Dryzek's semi-detached method can achieve opinion change.

Dryzek (2006: 154–157) argues that contending discourses (sets of concepts, categories, and ideas that provide ways of understanding the world) underlie many of the world's conflicts. These discourses can, however, open the way to greater dialogue across state boundaries and between opposing factions in societies divided by ethnicity, nationality, or religion. The argument is that engagement among discourses that is not geared toward building sovereign authority or making political decisions can help to resolve many of the most intractable conflicts. The design of our deliberative events followed this recommendation by ensuring that a multitude of ethnic discourses and their ethnic groups are present so as to test whether such dialogue can achieve a certain level of consensus on some of the most intractable conflicts in Myanmar.

Dryzek (2005, 2006) suggests that deliberation should be focused not on values or sovereignty, as the 'deadly contest for sovereignty' inhibits people from opposing factions from making concessions. Instead, deliberation should focus on specific *needs* – such as the need for education or for adequate sustenance. The design of our deliberative events, however, did not follow this recommendation because we contest this proposition. The issues on national identities and the boundaries of federal polities related to sovereignty were chosen because they are the most contentious issues.

We were eager to find whether participants are open to others' perspectives and change their opinions on national identities and sovereignty issues.

James Fishkin's (2006, 2009, 2011) DP offers a new methodological advance on constitutional matters. Through institutional design for public deliberation, Fishkin (2009) aims to improve the quality of deliberation. In particular, his process negates or minimises the pressure for consensus, which is one source of the polarisation effect observed by Sunstein (2000, 2003) regarding citizen juries. Fishkin applies DP to constitutional revision issues in Mongolia (Fishkin, 2018), but not to divided societies. Inspired by Fishkin's innovative approach, we applied the DP method to federal constitutionalism in Myanmar. However, we chose to modify the DP method.

O'Flynn (2006) argues that there should be greater interplay between laypersons ('ordinary citizens') and elites' deliberations. Joint deliberations provide a link to, and influence of, decision-making. To this end, we modified the DP method to include both laypersons and elite stakeholders in the public deliberations. We aimed to find out whether both laypersons and elites moderate their extreme views, and whether the presence of elites has an undue influence on the preferences of laypersons.

Further, deliberative democracy is now expanding into the area of constitutionalism (Levy et al., 2018). Deliberative constitutionalism examines how deliberation shapes constitutionalism, in particular how judges, ordinary citizens, legislators and others deliberate about constitutional issues and norms. It also examines how constitutionalism shapes and affects deliberation. However, deliberative constitutionalism remains 'abstract and largely unmoored from any particular legal and constitutional tradition' (Levy et al., 2018: 2); it lacks the empirical study of how deliberative constitutionalism can work in divided societies. This paper helps fill this gap by examining how deliberation can play various roles in constitution-making processes in a deeply divided society.

In summary, being informed and guided by the above theorists, we applied a deliberative survey approach to see how effective it may be to helping resolve the conflicts over federalism and the rights of ethnic nationalities, while also building inter-group trust and a common base from which to negotiate. We experimented with different types of participants, and different topics of deliberation, including several that directly addressed questions of identity and national sovereignty.

The design and implementation of five deliberative events

Our deliberative surveys are based on the DP methodology invented by Fishkin (2006). It requires participants to complete two identical surveys – before and after moderated deliberation (Fishkin, 2006). It has been highly praised as setting the gold standard for civic participation (Mansbridge, 2010). Equality and impartiality are integral to the DP methodology. DP requires the application of rules for deliberation and the use of balanced briefing materials. These materials are designed to provide factual information and cover arguments for and against each position without favouring one perspective. Materials are independently reviewed to ensure impartiality. These design features mitigate researchers' biases and ensure that opinions given by participants in the deliberations and surveys are genuine and not merely the answers that participants think the researchers are hoping for.

Notwithstanding we did make some variations to the DP methodology, for practical and experimental reasons. DP traditionally works with a random selection of the public. However, we are aware that random selection processes would prevent many minorities from being selected, thus marginalising their voices, and we wanted to trial the methodology with the elite level. Also, we were unable to randomly select participants for logistical, political and financial reasons. Our approach aimed to ensure discursive representation, rather than statistical representation. While

random selection does avoid selection bias, our strategy is a deliberate choice. We aim to work with civil society groups to create a public sphere and public debate on contested federal issues, to challenge a hegemonic position and, ultimately, democratise the discourse on federalism in Myanmar.

Currently, the number of the participants in the elite peace forum is set by the framework for national dialogue produced according to the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA).[2] However, because several significant EAOs did not sign the NCA, some major ethnic nationalities remain unrepresented. The Wa, for example, were allowed as observers only but later walked out in protest (Nyein, 2016). Many other small groups are also not included, while there are not seats for civil society representatives. Further, the elite peace forum has been a venue for speech-making, not for dialogue, with many delegates leaving immediately after making their presentation (Walton, 2017: 106–107). We aimed to promote public deliberation as a supplementary venue for furthering federal constitutional reform (which is not subject to these deficiencies of representation and deliberation) through recruiting as many ethnic groups as possible, including civil society, and structuring deliberations to ensure equality of opportunity. In our events, participants from ethnic groups that did not identify with one of the major ethnic nationalities were our most highly represented category (29% of the total number of participants).[3] Small ethnic groups, many of which have already been excluded from representation in the elite peace forums, have legitimate discourses that can be voiced and recognised in deliberative forums. In this way, we achieved a diversity of discourse representations, which we believe is more representative than that of the current elite peace forum.

There were 193 participants in our deliberative events, of which 166 returned both completed surveys. All statistical analyses in this paper related to those 166 only. Ethnic identity was recorded in line with the eight official categories prescribed by the government. Each event had a mixture of different ethnic groups, with between five and eleven groups represented at each poll, to ensure discursive representation, and we held one event with a majority of Bamar participants to address their prior statistical underrepresentation. Participants who selected the 'other' category identified with small groups such as Lahu, Kadu, Sha-ni, Palaung, Wa and Jingpho, which may or may not be categorised within one of the eight official categories. We also recorded respondents' year of birth, education level, gender, ethnicity and religion, and event feedback.

We held five events, three in Shan State (two in Lashio and one in Taunggyi) and two in Sagaing Region (Sagaing and Monywa).[4] We deliberately selected locations where a mixture of different ethnic groups could be recruited as participants. Two events involved mostly local elite participants, namely office bearers from political parties, EAOs and civil society organisations (CSOs), including several delegates from the 21st Century Panglong Conference. Three events comprised mostly laypersons, identified and recruited by local CSOs. Laypersons are ordinary citizens who are not experts in, do not work in, or are not otherwise formally involved in political or peace-making discussions, or related decision-making processes. In our case they comprised builders, teachers, engineers, students, etc. Although they were recruited using the networks of local CSOs, most had not previously participated in activities organised by the given CSO and none of the CSOs were political or peace-focused organisations.

We selected four topics which would be the focus of the deliberative event and the survey. These were national identity and religion; federalism and secession; the basis of the boundaries of constituent units (states, regions and self-administered zones); and the division of powers and equality. The resource materials and an introductory lecture covered each of these matters to ensure a basic level and shared understanding of key concepts (such as federalism and its different kinds) and the reasons for and against various alternatives. Participants were provided with a series of statements in which they could agree or disagree on scale of 1 to 5. We also asked questions to ascertain how the deliberations affected inter-group relations, perceptions of trustworthiness and knowledge. Questions are available in Appendix 1.

Each event was supported by the work of volunteers from the Politics and International Relations School at the University of Mandalay. In total 23 volunteers participated over the five events, performing roles as moderators, note-takers, translators, and finance support. One-day training was held with the volunteers prior to the event covering each role as well as a general session on federalism and Myanmar. The role of moderators is particularly important. They were required to facilitate deliberations and ensure equal and fair discussions. Training was designed so that moderators would ensure that: each participant had an equal opportunity to participate so as to prevent one or two people from dominating small group discussions; rules of deliberation were abided by, including the giving of reasons and civil debate; and that they did not (seek to) influence the outcomes of deliberations (e.g., by giving their own opinions). Each event was held in collaboration with a local CSO, which managed logistics and recruited participants according to given parameters, with overall programme coordination undertaken by the Tampadipa Institute.

The discourse quality of the small group sessions was coded by the note-takers and analysed by the researchers. The approach followed the methodology of Steenbergen et al. (2003), who developed the Discourse Quality Index (DQI). The discourse quality (as measured by the DQI) could then be related to the extent of opinion change and to compare different groups. The survey responses were coded and then the mean of each question for both before and after surveys was compared using a paired-samples *t*-test. Confidence levels of 0.05 and 0.15 were used to test for statistical significance. This enabled both the degree of opinion change (difference in mean) and the extent of moderation or polarisation (difference in standard deviation) to be identified. The mean for different ascriptive categories (e.g., ethnicity and gender) on both before and after surveys was also tested using a one-way analysis of variance test. This enabled the statistical significance (at 0.05 and 0.15 confidence levels) of any differences between groups to be identified, and a direct comparison of average responses and changes of each group. A further comparison involved a paired-samples *t*-test using two groups – Bamar and non-Bamar (see Appendix 2). The key results are the change in mean to each question and the change in the standard deviation. These are available in Appendix 1. Full survey results, plus aggregated DQI scores, are available as supplementary data.

Key findings

The results demonstrated that the deliberative survey methodology (as a variation of the DP methodology) can work successfully on issues of deep-seated conflict related to identity and national sovereignty in Myanmar's deeply divided society. Our deliberative process generated opinion change, compromise positions and a convergence of opinion on both political and ideological questions. This occurred across both elite stakeholders and laypersons. There were some instances where opinions polarised further, which are discussed below, but to most of our questions, participants' responses converged.

The deliberations generated an apparent level of consensus, as evidenced by the report-back sessions, even when privately (as demonstrated by survey results), participants did not always agree. This demonstrates both the value of moderated cross-ethnic deliberation and the survey-based approach that removes the public or peer pressure element, and power relations, when expressing opinions. For example, at one event, a participant reported-back from their small-group and challenged the large group to object to the place of Buddhism in the constitution. Only one person raised their hand in objection. However, the survey results show that in fact, around one-third of the participants objected, while a further one-third remained neutral.

National identity and religion

As discussed above, Dryzek argues that deliberation cannot and should not address issues of identity and other fundamental values. However, we found issues of national identity and religion to be of most interest and engagement across groups among all the topics. Both matters were subject to considerable discussion, and questions regarding secularism and the role of Buddhism and the state scored highest on the DQI (averaging 9.26 out of a maximum of 15 across all groups and locations).

  After deliberation, there was little support for any relationship between Buddhism and the state. In particular, the level of support for Myanmar being a secular state saw a highly statistically significant increase, and a change of 4%,[5] while opinions also converged (moderated) (Appendix 1, Question 11). At the same time, the support for Buddhism having a special place in the constitution dropped (by 6% on average) and again, opinions converged (by 7%). This is particularly significant given that 74% of participants identified as Buddhist. However, support for secularism among Bamar participants dropped slightly (yet overall Bamar participants still preferred secularism). Further, the event which had a Bamar majority saw a smaller increase in support for secularism as compared to the other events.

  On questions of national identity, discussions were animated. Most agreed that the constitution and institutions of the state should recognise ethnic identity and the multiethnic nature of the state, but that the identity of Myanmar citizens should be ethnically neutral. Participants complained that the symbols of the state (such as the national language, flag, and the name of the country) were ethnically-biased. They believed that the symbols of the state should be revised so as to make Myanmar identity more inclusive. Indeed, the second biggest change of opinion regarded whether Myanmar should have a single shared identity (support for which increased by 11%). The results also saw a high level of moderation (21%) (Appendix 1, Question 23). Related questions (16, 19, 27 and 31) had broadly consistent results. As shown in Figure 1, as support for Buddhism in the constitution decreased, so did support for a single shared identity (because an identity based on Buddhism is inherently exclusive of non-Buddhists, who comprise around one-third of the population).

Federalism and secession

The question of whether Myanmar should have federalism is perhaps the most fundamental in this case. Yet it was also the question on which participants most converged (moderated). The average distance between participant responses almost halved from one survey to the next, while the overall level of support for federalism increased by around 10% (see Figure 2). This occurred for every ethnic group. Notably, five Bamar participants did not support federalism in the first survey, but after the event four of those had shifted to strongly agree, and the other shifted from strongly disagree to neutral (Bamar are the ethnic group traditionally less supportive of federalism). By the second survey, only one person out of 166 disagreed with the statement that Myanmar should have federalism.

  The deliberative quality of discussions about secession was low (averaging 7.33 out of 15). It has been a taboo topic but is central to Myanmar's political transition. Nevertheless, the survey results were informative. The opinion that federalism will lead to secession, which is held by many in Myanmar's military, had the third biggest change (from among 33 questions) (Appendix 1, Question 9 and Figure 3). The average level of agreement with the idea that federalism will lead to secession fell 6% and participants significantly moderated. The change was highly statistically significant. Similarly, after the second survey, there was less support for the view that most ethnic
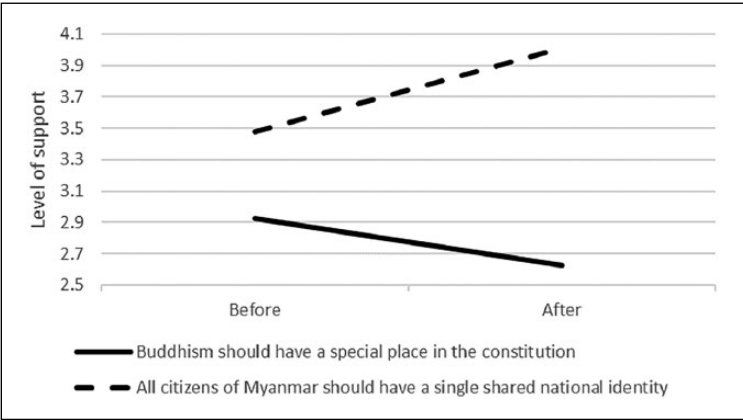
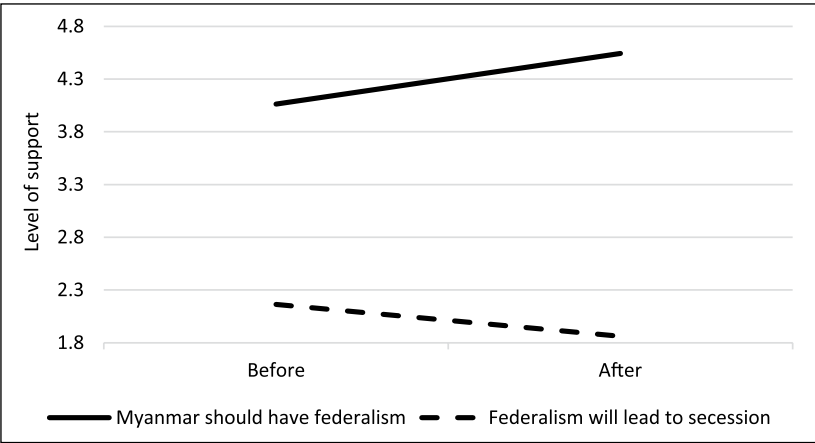**Figure 1.** Before and after support – religion and national identity.

Figure 2. Before and after support – federalism and secession.

nationalities want an independent state (i.e., the results were highly coherent). Further, although the topic of secession was not subject to as much deliberation as other topics, it was repeatedly raised throughout each event. For example, most of the concerns about new self-administered zones or states and regions related to secession.

The basis of states, regions and self-administered areas

The basis of states, regions and self-administered areas was one of the most surprising, yet fruitful, areas of deliberation in each event. After hearing about the importance of individual ethnic identities, and the demands for recognition of those by the state, participants shied away from seeking their institutionalisation in the structures of the state. Simply put, there was a tendency and shift towards preferring that states and regions be based on economic and geographical factors ('territorial federalism'), rather than ethnic identity ('ethnic federalism'). Similarly, there was resistance to the proliferation of self-administered zones.
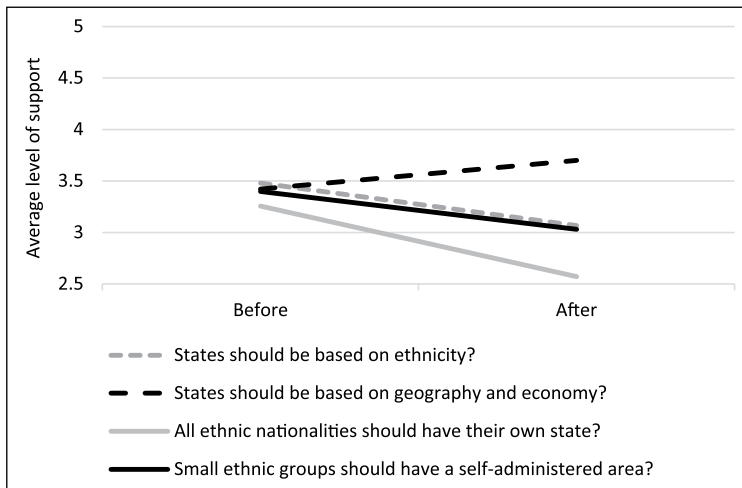
Figure 3. Support for ethnic or territorial approaches to federalism – before and after event.

Participants were concerned about secession risks and the marginalisation of small minorities in ethnic states. But they also came to have a greater appreciation of the potential benefits of federalism beyond ethnic autonomy – for regional development, for democratisation and for the economy. Support for states and regions based on ethnicity dropped (8%) to be around neutral (Question 2); support for states and regions being based on geography and economic criteria increased (6%) from around neutral to overall support (Question 32); and, support for all ethnic nationalities having a state and for small ethnic nationalities having a self-administered zone dropped substantially (14% and 7%, respectively). All were highly statistically significant (at 0.05 confidence level). As displayed in Figure 3, support for territorially-based states increased in an inverse way to three indicators of support for ethnically-based states and self-administered zones.

The question about whether existing (Bamar) regions should be merged to form one Bamar state elicited considerable discussion, but not a convergence or moderation (Question 8). One participant, during the report-back sessions argued that if people cannot agree on merging Bamar regions then the Shan State should instead be split (which would achieve objectives associated with the proposed merger, such as improved representation for ethnic nationalities in the upper house of parliament). This suggestion received a round of applause and is indicative of the kind of constructive politics that can emerge under such approaches.

The powers of states, regions and self-administered areas

The final small group session, and series of survey questions, related to the division of powers and questions of equality. The two main areas of deliberation concerned natural resources, and education and language. We expected ethnic nationalities to prefer that states and regions control natural resources and education, and use local languages. However, after deliberation, ethnic nationalities increasingly supported the use of the Burmese language in schools and as a national language, and supported central government control over the revenue from natural resources. Participants argued that the central government was 'more professional' and that redistribution was needed to promote equality. Further, the use of Burmese as a national language was said to be important for economic reasons.
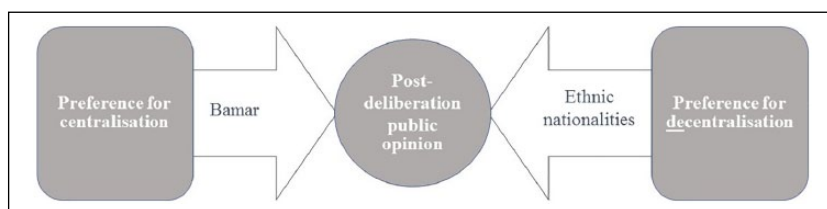
Figure 4. Conceptual model of preference convergence following deliberation.

Conversely, among Bamar participants and at the Bamar majority event, participants shifted towards preferring more control for states and regions, and less for the central government. In other words, non-Bamar ethnic nationalities shifted towards centralisation and Bamar to decentralisation, which is counter-intuitive given the history of conflict and mistrust, but vindicates the method and its conflict resolution potential. Significantly, although some questions that initially appeared as though participants were moving in opposite directions (polarising), or that showed no overall statistically significant results, were indicative of such convergence between different ethnic nationalities, and a moderation of extreme views.

Specifically, the opinions of the Bamar moved in the opposite direction to that of the other ethnic nationalities (as a combined average) on seven out of 33 questions. However, in five of these seven instances, these two groups' opinions came closer together (see data in Appendix 2). The two questions on which there was further polarisation did not relate to centralisation or decentralisation.[6] Further, in three other questions fundamental to the expression of a preference for decentralisation or centralisation (natural resource management and education), the Bamar' opinions shifted far more substantially towards decentralisation than did those of the other ethnic nationalities.[7] This overall tendency is illustrated in Figure 4.

The difference between types of participants and deliberative quality

The key differences between different ethnic groups have been mentioned above, mostly differences between the majority Bamar and the minority ethnic groups. However, there were many similarities between Bamar and Shan, who are a local majority in three of the five survey locations. Otherwise, more often than not, there were no statistically significant differences between the different ethnic nationalities and overall, there was a reduction in the significance of differences between ethnic nationalities. Further, the space for smaller minorities to prosecute their perspective may have served an important function by countering certain ethnonationalist discourses that seek to privilege major ethnic groups in particular areas, by drawing attention to the internal diversity and the near-impossibility of creating and maintaining large monoethnic institutions.

Also, each location had a different mix of participants. In Questions 1 (regarding federalism) and 23 (regarding identity), the laypersons group changed more substantially, whereas natural resource control (Question 15) and secession (Question 9) and trust in Bamar saw far bigger changes among the elite level. But overall, the composition of the events (or type of participant) did not make much difference, and both elites and laypersons changed their opinions on key issues. This gives us confidence that similar results would be achieved in different locations and with different samples. Of course, a deliberative forum in an active conflict zone may have some substantive differences on particular issues (at least initially) while most of our elites were local rather than national elites, the latter of whom may be more fixed in their perspective. However, the commonalities across our experiments are striking and appear replicable in other contexts.

For education, the higher the level of education participants had, the more likely they were to support federalism. A higher level of education was also correlated with support for secularism and disagreement with Buddhism having a special place in the constitution. Unfortunately, the more educated were less optimistic about the future of Myanmar. But otherwise, education did not appear to be a major factor. This reveals one issue we have with our approach, being a built-in selection bias. Like DP, participants must agree to attend and so there is self-selection, which may be interest based. DP tries to overcome this by providing monetary and other incentives for participation. We provided a modest honorarium, yet still most participants were already supporters of federalism, which may not be reflective of the broader population. However, we expect that the opinion change may be more representative, noting that the changes were very similar across groups and locations. So, for example, the results of a fully random telephone survey could be adjusted in accordance with the changes observed in the deliberative survey and therefore provide a more genuine indication of public opinion.

As mentioned, and contrary to theory which cautions against using deliberative techniques on questions of identity, the highest degree of discourse quality was regarding issues of religion. Discourse quality was at its lowest when groups discussed secession, which is not surprising given the sensitivity of this issue. Otherwise, discourse quality was similar across topics and could not be specifically related to opinion change. Further, we closely observed the deliberations and did not find any heated debate or disrespectful behaviour. The rules of deliberation were read at each table prior to commencing small group work and enforced by the moderators. It is our observation that participants felt safe to express their opinion and open to taking on others' perspectives. For example, one Muslim participant, who has also been involved in the 21st Century Panglong Conference, remarked to us that 'this is the least injurious way to have these kinds of discussion'. This person hoped that such an approach could be used more broadly. These observations and our discourse quality coding was reinforced by the evaluation of the participants themselves. Participants rated the deliberation highly, with 94% agreeing that participants provided rational reasons to support their views, and more than 66% disagreeing with the statement that their group was dominated by a small number of people (with another 15% neutral).

Conclusion

The deliberative approach to the resolution of critical issues underpinning the conflict between the Bamar-dominated state (military and executive government) and EAOs, as well as the social conflicts between the different ethnic groups more generally, shows considerable promise and has important theoretical implications. The experiments have shown that a deliberative approach is an effective way to facilitate opinion change among both laypersons and elites, at least at the local level, regarding fundamental issues such as national identity and the structure of the state, even in deeply divided societies. It can also moderate the opinions of both laypersons and elites (that is, reducing the differences within and between groups) and has considerable conflict resolution potential.

The opinion changes following deliberations were modest but important. Overall support for federalism and secularism increased significantly, with up to half the participants becoming more supportive following the deliberative events. Further, although the recognition of ethnic identity was deemed to be important, participants turned away from ethnic federalism, where all states are based on one ethnic group, to territorial federalism, which promotes ethnically neutral states that are based on geographical continuity and economic development. Similarly, the preference for the central government to maintain a role in the management and distribution of natural resources and associated revenue, and in education, was a particularly important finding.

The results of our deliberative experiments can help to improve the quality of the federalism debates in Myanmar. Currently, the many heated debates on how to establish federalism in Myanmar do not reflect what people would want after deliberation. For example, some parties and EAOs advocate for one ethnic state per ethnic group; and many ethnic groups still hark back to the 1947 Panglong Agreement, which does not fit well with the contemporary conditions of Myanmar. The benefit of deliberation is that it can address an unsolved problem and counter the false claims that often underpin such advocacy. The challenging issue for our project is to utilise the result to reshape the public debates and impact daily talks around kitchens or streets on federalism issues. We will work with local CSOs, media and officials to disseminate the results to a wide audience and to develop further deliberative events.

The results engage with and modify existing theories of deliberative democracy. Contrary to Sunstein (2000, 2003), we found that more often than not, the outcomes were a moderation of extreme opinions and convergence between previously divided groups, however modest. Out of 33 questions, on only two did the Bamar and the non-Bamar ethnic nationalities further polarise. This can be at least in part attributed to the use of a survey, which reduced pressure for consensus. Contrary to Miller (2006), we found that the opinions of minority groups often prevailed, irrespective of whether they were a majority or minority of a particular event. Notably, all our events were in Burmese, the majority language. We believe that the role of moderators was critical to ensuring equality during deliberations. Our findings support the contention of Dryzek (2005, 2006) that a semi-detached approach provides an appropriate setting for preference changes, but not that deliberations should be focused on needs rather than fundamental questions of sovereignty and identity. Some of the biggest shifts (and most lively discussions) occurred on such matters. Also, we concur with O'Flynn (2006) – and not Dryzek – about the composition of deliberative events. We found that the presence of elite stakeholders did not have an undue influence on deliberations, that they too changed their minds and that they can provide an important avenue for developing a communicative power and influencing decision-making.

However, the results show that the participants did not improve inter-group trust level. This should not be too surprising, given the long history of the subject matter, and the short timeframe (i.e., one-day) for deliberation.[8] Further, as argued by Levy (2018), in a deeply divided society (or 'conflict society'), goals such as identity transformation and the development of inter-group trust may be too ambitious. mutual respect of different identities and a liberalisation of attitudes are more likely to be achieved and to be sufficient for reaching a durable constitutional settlement. Our results reinforce Levy's conjecture. Indeed, participants discussed the institutional manifestations of identity and religion, becoming more tolerant and understanding of others' perspectives, while not seeking to transform anyone else's identity or subordinate their religion. This focus on identity as it relates to institutions only may be one way that such potentially contentious issues can be addressed in deeply divided societies.

Notwithstanding, opinion changes are likely to be more substantial if certain methodological changes and improvements were made. Generally, these would include ensuring a more representative sample of participants and allowing for a longer period of time for deliberations and between completing the first and second surveys. There is also a selection bias inherent to our approach because people who are interested in federalism are more likely to agree to attend. A fully randomised approach would go some way to addressing this. Alternatively, further refinement of the discursive representation approach may be able to deal with this problem.

A deliberative approach should also be linked to decision-making, while maintaining semi-detachment. To an extent, our experiment achieved this by the inclusion of elites (in this case, participants in the national-level 21st Century Panglong Conference) but more remains to be done. A deliberative mini-public may be effective in isolation, but the future research programme needs

to link those outcomes into national level processes. This is a matter to which we must turn in our next research programme. Nevertheless, our experiments with deliberations on federalism in Myanmar show that, under the right conditions, deliberation works, even when addressing matters of identity and sovereignty in a deeply divided society.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. A kind of federal system was originally established at independence (1948). It followed from the 1947 Panglong Agreement, between independence hero Aung San, on behalf of the Bamar, and representatives of three other major ethnic nationalities (Chin, Kachin and Shan) who gave up claims for a separate state and agreed to join a union with the Bamar in return for 'full autonomy in internal administration' among other matters. However, the Panglong Agreement was vague and did not address the interests of several other major ethnic nationalities. Nor did its implementation meet the (varied) expectations of the participants themselves (Walton, 2008). It did not take long for members of the Karen to take up arms against the state. Others quickly followed. In 1962, in the face of growing conflict, the military seized power and abolished the federal system. Conflict continued largely unabated, despite periodic attempts to negotiate ceasefires or repress dissent. The current 2008 constitution was introduced as part of a 'managed transition' to democracy. It incorporates many important federal features, such as ethnic states, a bicameral parliament and a division of powers. However, there is still widespread dissatisfaction. The military has retained a central role in the governance of the state, while the ethnic states and self-administered areas have low levels of autonomy. In 2015, the National League for Democracy was elected with a mandate to reform the constitution and establish 'genuine federalism'.
2. A total of 700 delegates comprising 75 from each of the government and the parliament, 150 from the military, 150 from ethnic armed organisations and 50 additional nominees (Walton, 2017).
3. Officially, most of these groups are recognised by the government as being constituent of one of the major eight ethnic nationalities. However, we gave the individuals a choice to identify with one of these major groups, or to specify their own ethnic identity. Also, several participants identified as belonging to an ethnic group that is not recognised by the government.
4. We had also planned an event in Karen State; however, due to inclement weather, an additional event was instead held in Lashio, Shan State.
5. A percentage change of 10% indicates that up to around 50% of the participants changed their opinions.
6. One related to secularism. The change here was marginal and is discussed above. The other question regarded state constitutions and the polarisation is a result of secession fears.

7. Question 12, central control over education saw the Bamar support drop by 0.15 compared to 0.06 for ethnic nationalities; Question 15, central control over natural resources saw the Bamar drop by 0.44 compared to 0.26 for ethnic nationalities; and, Question 29, state and region control over natural resources saw Bamar support increase by 0.15 compared to 0.02 for the ethnic nationalities.
8. In contrast, in one experiment, two and half days of deliberations on the Tibet autonomy issue improved mutual trust between the Han Chinese and Tibetan students (He, 2010).

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Appendix 1. Survey questions and results.

Number	Question	Before	After	% change^	Moderation^^	% change^^^
1	Myanmar should have federalism**	4.0633	4.5422	9.6	0.43	41
2	States should be based on ethnicity**	3.4789	3.0663	−8.3	−0.08	−7
3	All states and regions should have equal powers	4.2259	4.1988	−0.5	0.08	9
4	All ethnic nationalities should have their own state**	3.2560	2.5723	−13.7	−0.05	−4

(Continued)

Appendix 1. (Continued)

Number	Question	Before	After	% change^	Moderation^^	% change^^^
5	Myanmar is a Bamar state	2.0301	1.8554	−3.5	0.14	11
6	States and regions should have their own constitutions	3.8193	3.8434	0.5	0.02	2
7	Small ethnic groups should have a self-administered area**	3.3976	3.0301	−7.4	−0.07	−6
8	All the existing regions should be merged to form one Bamar state	2.5181	2.2892	−4.6	−0.05	−4
9	Federalism will lead to secession**	2.1627	1.8614	−6.0	0.17	14
10	Most Bamar are trustworthy*	2.4367	2.5843	3.0	0.04	3
11	Myanmar should be a secular state*	3.8042	3.9880	3.7	0.18	14
12	The Union government should have responsibility for education	4.0813	3.9940	−1.7	0.06	5
13	Most ethnic nationalities are open to reason**	3.7620	3.6566	−3.2	0.07	7
14	Myanmar is federal now	2.0693	2.1355	1.3	0.04	4
15	The Union should collect and distribute equally the revenue from natural resources**	3.9458	3.6325	−6.3	−0.10	−10
16	Myanmar is a multinational country	4.4819	4.4940	0.2	−0.01	−2
17	Most ethnic nationalities want independence*	4.2410	4.0663	−3.5	−0.14	−14
18	Schools in ethnic states should teach in local language(s)	3.7711	3.6928	−1.6	−0.04	−3
19	'Ethnic nationalities' is an appropriate term for non-Bamar groups	3.1566	3.0120	−2.9	−0.06	−4
20	There should be equality between all ethnic groups in Myanmar regardless of size	4.3855	4.3675	−0.4	0.10	13
21	Most ethnic nationalities are trustworthy*	3.7229	3.5783	−2.9	0.11	11
22	Buddhism should have a special place in the constitution**	2.9277	2.6265	−6.0	0.09	7
23	All citizens of Myanmar should have a single shared national identity**	3.4759	4.0090	10.7	0.25	21
24	States and regions should have responsibility for law and order	4.1466	4.0994	−0.9	−0.11	−16
25	Most Bamar are open to reason	3.0783	3.0301	−1.0	0.07	7

Appendix 1. (Continued)

Number	Question	Before	After	% change^	Moderation^^	% change^^^
26	Self-administered areas should have the same powers as states and regions*	3.6325	3.3343	−6.0	−0.14	−14
27	Myanmar is a Bamar country	1.9759	1.8434	−2.7	0.10	8
28	There should be equality between all the state and regions in Myanmar regardless of size	4.1687	4.1988	0.6	0.02	2
29	States and regions should control their natural resources, independent of the Union government	3.1988	3.3133	2.3	0.00	0
30	It is inevitable that Myanmar will become federal	3.9759	4.0181	0.8	0.02	2
31	Myanmar should recognise that different ethnic groups have different identities	4.2048	4.1928	−0.2	0.03	4
32	States should be based on geography and the economy**	3.4217	3.7000	5.6	0.10	9
33	I am optimistic about the future of Myanmar	3.9277	3.9600	0.6	0.02	2

Notes: *statistically significant at $p = 0.15$; **statistically significant at $p = 0.05$; ^as a proportion of the scale of possible answers (1 to 5); ^^difference in standard deviation from the mean between first and second surveys; and ^^^change in standard deviation from the mean.

Appendix 2. Type of change associated with opposing trends in opinion change between Bamar and non-Bamar ethnic nationalities.

Question	Average change		Type of change
	Bamar	Ethnic nationalities	
3. All states and regions should have equal powers	0.088	−0.070	Convergence
6. States and regions should have their own constitution	−0.156	0.091	Polarisation
11. Myanmar should be a secular state	−0.044	0.269	Polarisation
13. Most ethnic nationalities are open to reason	0.111	−0.185	Convergence
18. Schools in ethnic states should teach in local language(s)	0.088	−0.140	Convergence
20. There should be equality between all groups in Myanmar regardless of size	0.200	−0.099	Convergence
28. There should be equality between all states and regions regardless of size	0.177	−0.025	Convergence