

2016



# The Importance of Think Tanks in Myanmar's New Democratic Government and its Society

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This paper is part of a series of Myanmar foreign policy analysis papers emanating from the joint Capacity Building and Research Cooperation project on foreign policy initiated by MISIS and the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI). The project is kindly supported and funded by the Norwegian Foreign Ministry.

The opinions expressed in this article are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of MISIS or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Myanmar. (September, 2016)

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank the academics and researchers listed below for their substantial and significant contributions to this paper and their untiring efforts in reviewing and revising it:

Mr. Malcolm Hanney, to whom the policy recommendations are credited along with his role as an irreplaceable reviewer of the paper,

Mr. Edward Ziwa Naing, for helping out with almost all of the resources related to think tanks in Myanmar and for being a personal mentor and,

Mr. Khin Maung Lynn, for providing the idea for this paper and overseeing it to the end.

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## Executive Summary

When Myanmar returned to the regional and global stage with significant democratic reforms starting in 2011, the intellectual capacity of the country began to shape itself in accordance with the political landscape. One concept that took root was that of the think tank: an independent body of dedicated researchers that can provide the Myanmar government and public with policy advocacy and recommendations that may be beneficial for the country. This paper focuses on important insights that think tanks can bring to the table when government is making policy decisions that will affect the country as a whole. The paper will also consider how we can establish a unique type of think tank that combines both the traditional Eastern and Western models of think tanks.

This paper provides a detailed explanation of what a think tank is and should be, as well as including a section on the different impacts of think tanks in society. An overview of the background to and basic fundamentals of think tanks and their contribution to society was deemed necessary to set the context for the specific points made for think tanks in Myanmar.

This paper also addresses the challenges that independently funded think tanks faced in the years of democratic transition when Myanmar was still under what might be characterized as a quasi-military government. The risk of think tanks becoming lobby groups is also highlighted in this paper. In addition, by carrying out intensive desk research, we have identified and examined a certain trend that applies to think tanks both in Myanmar and around the world.

What the new government of Myanmar can and should consider is provided in policy recommendations specified in the paper. What it needs to know is this: think tanks and the researchers they employ constitute one of the links the government needs to access the thoughts and opinions of its people and refine those into concrete and factual policies that can be implemented.

Effective think tanks provide policy recommendations that have gone through established and rigorous review based on research that has been conducted thoroughly and intensively. Furthermore, the government can decide whether a think tank is useful or not and provide it with funding based on projects. With the increasing availability of contacts and resources in Myanmar, Myanmar think tanks are in a fine position to utilize these networks to write meaningful policy papers for the country.

Myanmar's new democratic government has a tremendous task ahead of it. Through think tanks, it has an opportunity to establish itself as a government that listens to the opinions and voices of its people. This paper hopes to provide a thoughtful and timely contribution to a civilian-based government structuring its policy for the benefit of its people.

## **The importance of think tanks in Myanmar's new democratic government and its society: history, role and characteristics of think tanks**

The term think tank originated in the post-World War II period. However, organizations with purposes and structures similar to those of think tanks have existed since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Early and prominent internationally-recognized think tanks or “brain boxes” include the American Enterprise Institute (1943) and the Heritage Foundation (1973). Originally, think tanks were Western research centers modeled on academic institutions and set up to advise governments on military affairs. Today the nature of think tanks is no longer restricted to military intelligence and includes many other aspects of society including political strategy and economic, technological, and social policies.

Think tanks in the modern era can be described as independent organizations that perform both research and advocacy. They are usually funded by government or advocacy groups, or indeed even businesses. Think tanks are designed to provide ideas and innovations for solving problems and forming policies. They have the ability to influence policy-making by stimulating debate and proposing creative solutions. Some think tanks are “non-profit” and many are supported by revenue from relevant research material.

The key roles of a think tank are to influence the policy-making process of relevant governments and to establish evidence-based knowledge on various subjects affecting different communities. Think tanks influence the policy-making process by initiating public debate and discourse to expose new ideas to the general public, and by presenting competing analyses and different points of view.

Think tanks have taken and been given the roles of advocacy and raising public awareness. With the growth of public issues related to the ripple effects of globalization, governments need insightful, concrete, and evidence-based analysis—thus the increasing popularity of think tanks and their role in the modern era.

According to Rohinton Medhora, the President of the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI), a think tank is “the business of pushing for change through ideas and networks” (De Boer, 2015).

The world-renowned Brookings Institution’s founder, Robert Brookings, has stated that the work of think tanks should be “free from any political or pecuniary interest.” However, his idea of what think tanks should be and the reality of how they actually are differ (Judis, 2014).

With changing world trends and a surplus demand for access to information, the exchange of information is crucial for world politics and the global community as a whole. Think tanks are catalysts for the sharing of information and huge databases among non-governmental organizations.

In the West, people have been encouraged and allowed to think “out of the box” and new ideas have generally been appreciated. It is a strong cultural aspect of Western society that individuals are mostly free to express personal opinions. This aspect of Western culture is conducive to the foundation of a healthy, functioning think tank. On the eastern side of the globe, having a different idea or thinking differently from the teacher has historically and culturally been considered disrespectful behavior. Similarly, questioning the teacher is often perceived as an act of rebellion. But as mentioned above, globalization and a changing world order have made the East and West more uniform than ever before. The culture and approaches of think tanks have changed along with the process of globalization.

The East is becoming more and more appreciative of new ideas, innovative solutions, and the possibility of alternate views. As globalization takes the world by storm, many countries in the East have begun to practice democracy. The democratization process is arguably one that requires institutions like think tanks which allow people to voice opinions and point out flaws in the system and improvements that can be made. Think tanks tend to have the characteristics that define democratic institutions: they promote innovative thinking and free thinking.

Modern think tanks can be classified as “civic-minded groups” that stand for and promote the public life of democratic countries. They can also help facilitate the democratization process of newly democratic countries. The transparency that think tanks provide can also help the government and the people form a mutual understanding on the country’s policy.

The characteristics of a think tank (in a general sense) include a focus on policy, a sense of public purpose, the expertise and the professionalism of its staff, and the research analysis of the organization communicated through publications, conferences, seminars and workshops.

Although think tanks mobilize their resources to influence government policy, the government can also make use of think tanks to reach out to the people. Think tanks can be the extension of the administration in a very informal way to influence public opinion.

In a country where relations between the government and the public have been seriously damaged, the public will undoubtedly have a sense of mistrust. In such cases the public will almost certainly have no faith in associations affiliated with the government and may well believe that think tanks are a government’s attempt to test public opinion. To a certain extent, this is true; governments may try to utilize think tanks for propaganda purposes, but think tanks are responsible for formulating research and analysis based on the evidence and distinguishing facts from fiction and assumptions. The sole purpose of a think tank is to provide evidence-based research with facts to give a general audience a clear image of an actual situation. Think tanks may be closely associated with government related organizations but nevertheless must produce rational research papers in order to maintain their reputation.

Many think tanks do not disclose information about their funding and many commentators have consequently criticized think tanks for producing biased opinions and having ulterior motives. The counter argument has been that information on fund providers should be disclosed to avoid political approaches and pressure. On a related note, some governments have attempted to buy the “influence” of think tanks in order to increase their sphere of soft power. Indeed, more recently, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many private companies as well as



foreign governments have attempted to “influence” Western think tanks through funding. The funding of think tanks is thus usually disclosed to avoid political bias (Lipton, 2016).

On the issue of society, think tanks are one of the means for promoting public awareness and informing the general audience on policies affecting their lives in the academic sense. Think tanks can be used as a vehicle to promote public awareness and discussion of various sensitive issues.

### **Impact of Think Tanks**

The impact of think tanks can be seen in their two main functions of policy research and policy advocacy (de Boer, 2015). Moreover, in assessing the impact of think tanks, it is important to understand the conditions that have helped to facilitate these two functions. These conditions include the freedom of information and expression. In a way, a high degree of democracy is required in the governing regime of a country to accommodate think tanks in carrying out their functions. However, due to the differences in the types of democratic government in the world, the effectiveness of think tanks varies according to location. Therefore, there can be divided perspectives when assessing the impact of think tanks in the Western and Eastern models of culture, society and government.

It is no coincidence that think tanks in the West are better at “pedaling influence” to the government through their policy research and advocacy than those in the East. In the West, democracy is embedded in the political culture, creating a free and open condition for think tanks to exercise “free-thinking” (Abelson, 2014). Moreover, given the media exposure accompanying issues that are raised by the think tanks, relevant stakeholders with different perspectives can be attracted to engage in public debate. Such exchanges can allow the government to test and verify the popularity and practicability of the think tank’s ideas. This system has given governments the confidence to introduce new policies that are innovative yet radical. For example, when Margaret Thatcher’s cabinet in 1983 and 1987 adopted the idea for UK privatization reform proposed by the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS), they gained the support of the public (and thus had a lower policy and implementation risk) by working together with various think tanks (James, 1993). Think tanks in the West have been quite

widely celebrated for their influence over governments through original and innovative ideas and thus have continuing freedom to express them.

Unlike think tanks in the West, think tanks in Asia are not provided with an environment in which they can follow the Western model of “influence pedaling.” They are often established as a “bridge” to the government, deliberately limited to be different from their Western prototypes. The bridge model can be described as a strategic cooperation between think tanks and government, with the former aligning its priorities with the latter’s needs (Stone and Bank 2005). For example, the top ten think tanks in China are either official or semi-official, meaning that their agendas are generated or controlled by the government’s need on specific issues (Nachiappan, 2013). Many observers in the West see this as a form of democratic deficit, which greatly undermines the innovative and originality aspects of a good think tank (Nachiappan et al., 2010). However, in the East, think tanks view their connections to the government as a currency for political influence (Nachiappan, 2013) and the government views think tanks as means to getting its preferred policies on the table. Therefore, despite its undemocratic features, the “bridge” version of the think tank, as well as its impact, is more favored in Asia.

On the other hand, the impact of think tanks in other Asian developing countries has cast Myanmar in a different light. Think tanks in Myanmar are still waiting for the new democratic government to create a new political and social culture—specifically to usher in a greater tolerance for the democratic elements necessary for think tanks to carry out their functions effectively (Leftwich, 2008). This delay is a consequence of the long period of direct top-down military rule and the concentration of power in the hands of a few. This historic narrative allowed the government to publicly dismiss democratic values and encourage old traditions and self-censorship to consolidate its absolute power over the people (Young, 2005). Therefore, we may only be able to determine whether the nature and impact of think tanks in Myanmar trends towards “influence pedaling” or a “bridge” function when there is a consolidated new political culture in the new government. Myanmar may also have its own new form of think tank: a combination of serving as a bridge between and pedaling influence to the government and the people.

## Think Tanks in Myanmar

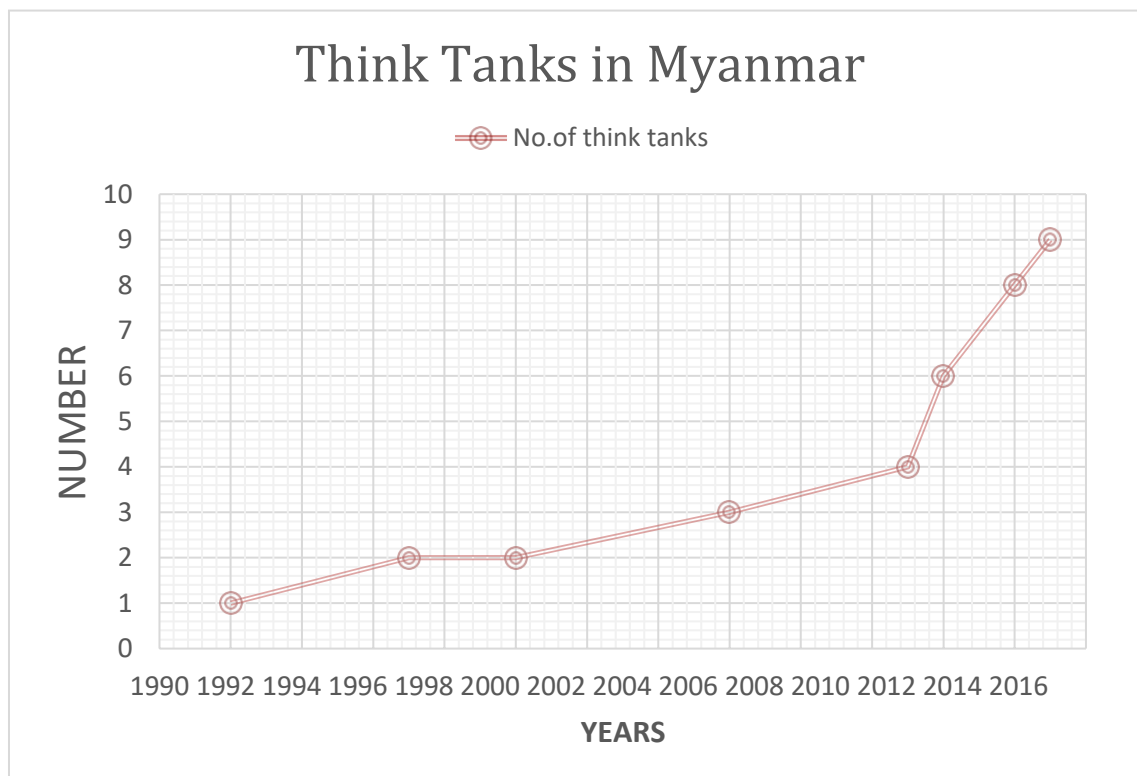
The concept of the think tank is relatively new in Myanmar. The first independent research agency in Myanmar, Myanmar Survey Research, was founded in 1981 but only formally established in 1995 (Myanmar Survey Research, 2013). The Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS) was founded by then foreign minister U Ohn Gyawin 1992 under the government of that time, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). It was the first government funded think tank as well as being the first actual think tank in Myanmar.

After the turn of the century, numerous think tanks started forming. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Myanmar has undergone a regime change that has the country slowly opening its doors to the rest of the world. The effects of this shift towards democracy are still being felt today. The significance of this change in relation to think tanks runs deeper within academic circles (Lwin, 2016). Many think tanks established near the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were either fully or partially funded by the military government. As such, many of the conventional roles of Western think tanks did not apply in Myanmar. The juntas that ruled Myanmar wanted an institution akin to a think tank to lend their words more weight, especially at meetings with fellow ASEAN members (MISIS is also a member of the ASEAN ISIS Network), which might reasonably be viewed as an example of abuse by government of the soft power that think tanks have. However, the scenario during President U Thein Sein's civilian government from 2011–16 can be seen as a sharp contrast to the junta's approach. Not only were policy changes implemented on the economic front for the benefit of the people, but numerous changes were also made to the structure of the education system (Rieffel, 2012). Such changes allowed the formation of institutions such as the reestablished MISIS (independent of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), the Myanmar Development Resource Institute (MDRI) and later the National Economic Social Advisory Council (NESAC), which was dissolved when President U Thein Sein's administration ended. All of these think tanks were either fully or partially government funded and founded by Presidential Notifications.

Despite these great changes in the political landscape of Myanmar, think tanks sponsored by influential parties besides the government have until very recently been limited, with

perhaps one notable exception: Myanmar Think Tank, an associate company of Myanmar Survey Research, was established in 1997 but has only recently become more active. The Parami Roundtable Group, Myanmar Development Institute (MDI), and many more, are recent examples of privately funded think tanks, with the latest (MDI) being funded by the Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), a Korean aid organization.

It is difficult to estimate the progress of think tanks in Myanmar. On the one hand, following the U Thein Sein administration's efforts, the number, impact and popularity of think tanks have all risen. On the other hand, as mentioned above, this rise does not necessarily or automatically contribute to the quality of think tanks or to the social well-being of academic researchers who are still left out of the fold (Lwin, 2016). Under the junta, most government funded think tanks consisted of government staff and advisors and people with connections to the government. However, in the more recent years of Myanmar's democratic transition, a number of genuine think tanks, funded by interest groups not related to the government, have established themselves in Myanmar. With a new civilian government now elected, this number will no doubt increase.



Data taken from survey.

The Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS) has been ranked 51<sup>st</sup> among 95 think tanks in the Southeast Asia and Pacific region according to the 2015 Global Go To Think Tank Index published by the University of Pennsylvania. MISIS itself is now only partially government-funded: that is to say, it is now able to look to other partners and interest groups willing to help in actual evidence based research. With help and funding from international organizations such as NUPI, MISIS is restructuring itself to be an efficient think tank and a good research institute complying with international standards and producing quality papers to advise government policy making. The partnership with and funding from NUPI will allow both parties to extend the breadth and depth of research in many areas concerning Myanmar and the international scene.

## Think Tanks in Asia in 2015

700  
600  
500  
400  
300  
200  
100  
0

484

641

Cambodia	10	Philippines	21
Hong Kong	12	Sri Lanka	14
Thailand	8	Taiwan	52
Vietnam	10	Pakistan	20
North Korea	2	South Korea	35
Laos	3	Bangladesh	35
Bahrain	4	Singapore	30
China	435	Malaysia	18
		Indonesia	27
		Japan	109
		India	280
Number of Think Tanks in Countries where Democratic Governance is Weak		Number of Think Tanks in Countries where Democratic Governance is Strong.	

The chart uses data taken from McGann's "2015 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report", The Think Tank and Civil Societies Program, 2015, and Freedom House rankings for democracy from their site "<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2016>"

\*Note, as Myanmar is still in a tentative stage of a quasi-democratic government we have decided to leave it out of this chart. The full table of think tanks in Southeast Asia and other tables are available in McGann's original report.

\*The chart uses only Asian countries in the southern and eastern part of Asia as data.

## **Evaluation of Think Tanks in Myanmar**

There is no doubt that think tanks in Myanmar are increasingly important and successful in helping different academics and stakeholders to network through regional cooperation. However, they still lack the financial and human resources to carry out their functions as effectively as they would wish. In spite of having the basic resources such as buildings and core research staff, they still lack the connection to the media that would allow them access to the information and exposure that is needed to formulate their ideas and market them to the government and the public. In a way, the passive role of the media, created by an inherited fear of challenging the government, is a factor at the heart of the limited effectiveness to date of Myanmar's think tanks. And it still remains relevant—a consequence of the remaining presence of elements of the old political culture, notwithstanding the new government. Until a new political culture is firmly established, both the media and think tanks will remain vulnerable.

Myanmar still lacks a culture of track-recording along with the necessary transparency within and among different government ministries. Furthermore, the education system still reinforces somewhat “conventional thinking.” However, the new government plans (with additional investment and revised policies) are intended to address current deficiencies. Think tanks in Myanmar should take a leading role in undertaking proper research and seek to influence the government's policymaking process effectively and constructively. Related expertise and professionalism will be in high demand during Myanmar's transition process and this is where Myanmar will need much assistance.

The fact is that both think tanks and the democratic government are still new phenomena in the country. As an increasingly democratized country in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Myanmar needs to develop its democratic credentials and components. Think tanks are no doubt one of the essential high-priority needs of the country. They will support the new government in formulating better domestic and foreign policy through research and general publications. The reform process will be much enhanced if think tanks can provide ongoing quality research, input and advice on the government's policies. Therefore, there is a pressing need for the new government to create a new political

culture to accommodate democratic elements so that think tanks can carry out their functions effectively and thrive in Myanmar.

### **Survey on think tanks in Myanmar**

To aid the research component of this paper, we conducted a small survey on existing and potential think tanks in Myanmar. The targeted institutions were limited due to a lack of information, and not all of them were responsive to the approach. We sent out a standard questionnaire to 15 think tanks and potential think tanks in Myanmar, and we received back six responses which are shown in the table below.



Name	Established	Nature	Structure	Interests	Visions	Events held (Annually)	No. of research papers produced	No. of researchers	Collaboration
Center for Economic and Social Development (CESD)	Late 2012. U Myint is Chief Board of Directors	Public	35-40 office staff. 8 Board of Directors. 8 Patrons.	Macroeconomic reform/ labor and social policy/ food security and rural development and governance	Contribute to Myanmar's transformation towards a democratic, developed and dignified society	10 events/year	4 papers per year	20 local researchers	International and Domestic
Mote Oo (potential think tank)	2013. Thai/Burma border publishing house.	Private	No Charter. No board of directors. 18 staffs	Educational sector. (to write/ publish books) for adult learners	Promote social change via provision for non-formal adult education	No events yet.	No Papers	Experts on relevant fields. No permanent researcher yet	With similar rural and urban
Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business (MCRB) (potential think tank)	Established in 2013. Joint initiative of the Institute for Human Rights and Business & the Danish Institute for Human Rights. Current Chairperson – Vicky Bowman	Donor funded/ Public and NGO	No Charter. 3 year program (6 donors) and 2 annual meetings. 12 office staffs	Responsible Business & Particular Business/Human Resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Donor funded organization</li> <li>- Continued development partner funding</li> <li>- Winding down MCRB work</li> <li>- Handing down <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Multi-stakeholder</li> <li>- Fee-based service model</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	15/ per year (funded/ hosted/ co-hosted)	1 sector wide impact assessment 1 Pwint Thit Sa Report 1 Briefing Paper (land, civil society, indigenous people) and translations	No full-time researcher. Temporary field researchers. Mixture of research and outreach and capacity building	Centre for Development and Ethnic Studies

Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS)	Re-established in 2013. H.E U Nyunt Maung Shein	Government	9 Staff. 21 Members	Foreign Policy/ Regional Peace and Security/ Development	To follow development in the world and study on international and regional issues from different point of views. To analyze the possible consequences of future prospects to submit to policy makers	3 to 4 main events	10 disclosed annual reports	No permanent researchers. In the process of building a team of researchers in collaboration with Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI)	Member of the ASEAN ISIS. Signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOUs) with international counterparts.
National Enlightenment Institute	Founded in December 2012. 2 founders. KoKyaw San Win Chairman	Private	5 Board of Directors. (Reforms by the end of the year). 8 staff	Public Policy for Economics and Governance sector. Capacity Development in private sector. (Esp. in Political Science and Career Development)	Upgrade knowledge. Wider space and social Responsibility	Less than 15 events (training programs, seminars, forum, workshops and camps)	One research paper minimum per year	4 researchers	With CSOs. Associations/ Local Governments/ Local Parliament for some events depending on the features of the program
Parami Roundtable Group	Think tank under the Parami Energy Group. (2012)	Private	Board of advisors. Dr. Myo Thant. Daw Tin Tin Htwe, U Tin Cho, U Aung Myint and Dr. Khin Ohne Thant	Economics. Regional integration & sustainable development	Capacity Building. To integrate Myanmar regionally/ globally	Av. 4 seminars	One perspective	3 Researchers	Domestic and Foreign organization

## Policy Recommendations

Like many other important and influential institutions, think tanks in Myanmar should be well governed. Here are some suggestions for how the government of Myanmar could support and monitor such influential institutions through relevant Ministries:

1. While all think tanks have the two main functions of policy research and policy advocacy, historically there have been different think tank models in the East and in the West. Think tanks in the West have generally been influencers and policy advocates, whereas in the East they have more frequently served as “bridges,” creating a strategic cooperation between think tanks and government, with the former aligning its priorities with the latter’s needs.

Myanmar does not need to have either an exclusively Eastern or Western model of think tank. Myanmar think tanks should be encouraged to be hybrid organizations—able both to lobby and influence government policy and to function as a mechanism through which government can test its own policy proposals and thinking.

2. Myanmar think tanks now have access to a wide range of domestic and international policy experience and research expertise and also close links with many academic institutions with excellent and complementary research capabilities. Myanmar ISIS, for example, has a local presence built upon the expertise of its members, close links with government, universities and other key stakeholders, and a growing team of research associates and interns with strong backgrounds. Internationally, it has a strategic partnership with the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) and many other regional and global think tanks, e.g. ASEAN ISIS members, IISS, Asia Institute, and many more. Supported by these networks and relationships, Myanmar ISIS has growing capabilities in research and policy development.

Myanmar think tanks should be encouraged to work closely with domestic and international organizations, (including but not limited to universities and other research institutions) in

developing their research and policy development capabilities.

3. Myanmar think tanks need both human and financial resources to ensure high standards and quality of research and the ability to contribute effectively to government policy development.

The Myanmar government will need to continue the provision of financial support to key Myanmar think tanks. Such financial support may, however, be in the form of core funding and/or project specific. Myanmar think tanks should be encouraged to seek third party funding and not become solely reliant on government funding.

4. Myanmar government resources are limited and Myanmar think tanks need to be mindful of providing value for money and maximizing the long term benefit of their work for the country and its citizens.

Myanmar think tanks should liaise closely with government departments to ensure that policy research is focused on those areas that are most critical to Myanmar, its government and its people.

5. Research by Myanmar think tanks needs to be of a high quality and rigorous. However, in formulating and implementing policy, the Myanmar government needs access to concise papers highlighting key issues and recommendations.

Myanmar think tanks should be encouraged to provide concise papers and/or summary papers (and not usually exceeding 4 pages) – focusing on key issues and recommendations for policy and implementation.

6. There may be a danger of a number of misguided, poorly managed, and poorly funded think tanks turning into lobby groups and/or engaging in inappropriate political activity.

Myanmar think tanks need to be independent of government and in their approach to research. On the other hand, they must also be sensitive to political considerations and they must not engage in political activity –particularly of a party-political nature.

7. Think tanks and government may benefit from ongoing cooperation in terms of staff development.

Think tanks should be encouraged to consider, from time to time, the acceptance of seconded staff from government and indeed to consider temporarily assigning their own staff to government.

8. There needs to be clarity between the government and think tanks in terms of both funding arrangements and protocols.

Service level agreements with clear mutual objectives and expected outcomes should be put in place for all government funding of Myanmar think tanks.

## Conclusion

A general trend to note with think tanks in Myanmar is the fact that the demise of the military junta and the rise of democracy directly correlates with the increased popularity and effectiveness of think tanks. President U Thein Sein's government, despite being a vehicle of military power, was nonetheless a civilian government. As such, the president and many of his close aides came to the realization that they needed people with specific academic knowledge to help them make better policies for the country. As democracy has evolved, so has interest in the Western construct of think tanks. Human resources and the scarcity of valid and precise information and facts are crucial and limiting factors for Myanmar's next generations. With the new democratic government in place, Myanmar can look to international and domestic think tanks for policy formulation and advice and the related influencing of public opinion based on quality data and research undertaken by scholars and prominent specialists and professors. Think tanks can most definitely assist Myanmar and its society by providing evidence-based research, analytical skills and sound policy input to the government and the people.

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