Informal Settlements and Migrant Challenges in Yangon

L'habitat informel à Yangon et les défis des migrants

Helene Maria Kyed

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Introduction

> People automatically look down on Hlaing Thayar. So, I never give my address to friends, because if I say I live in Hlaing Thayar, the look on people's faces changes. They think that all people living here are thieves and criminal people. So, I just say to people that I live in Tha Mine. (Interview, 25-year-old woman, March 2017.)

These words from a 25-year-old woman capture a general sentiment of being "securitized" (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998) among poor informal migrants in Hlaing Thayar, Yangon's most populous and fastest growing township with an estimated population of 700,000.[1] The township has a very large concentration of informal settlers, that is, of people who are not registered or who live on unregistered land. Much of its growth is caused by rural immigration, which has markedly increased since the end of military rule in 2011. Hlaing Thayar is infamous for high levels of crime and insecurity. When I first moved to Yangon in early 2015 to do research on security and dispute resolution, many people told me that it was

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too dangerous for me to go to Hlaing Thayar. If I went, I should stay on the main road or only visit the two private gated communities that are located next to the main road. Most people from the inner city, I was told, do not dare to travel to the outskirts of the township, let alone stay there at night. Insecurity, people told me, was due to the many squatters, "strangers" and informal settlements[2] that exist in Hlaing Thayar.

While there is insufficient official data to prove that Hlaing Thayar's informal settlers are particularly dangerous and criminal, popular opinion and rumors sustain ideas about them and the outskirts of the city, more generally, as "security threats" and as undesirable. City government authorities share this sentiment. They portray informal settlers or squatters (*kyue kyaw* in Burmese) as obstacles to urban development and security, and they have no coherent plan for integrating and improving the conditions of the many poor rural migrants who are now settling in Yangon.[3] Instead, evictions and threats of evictions constitute the main tool by the authorities to address the squatter and migrant situation. Such practices have roots in the time of the military regime where forced resettlements and evictions were commonplace. In general, there is a historically embedded tendency to view all informal dwellers as strangers rather than as legitimate residents of the city. Despite the change to a democratically elected government in 2016, when Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) took power, little seems to have changed in the government's hard-liner approach towards poor migrants and informal settlers. In June 2017, police drove out 4,000 squatters in one township and destroyed their houses to make way for new high-end developments. A year earlier the NLD chief minister of Yangon declared that there would be no tolerance towards squatters. Frequent smaller-scale evictions are also happening in Hlaing Thayar and other townships.

These perception and responses make life even more insecure for the many poor newcomer migrants, who are struggling to find jobs and tenure security. While Yangon has become a city of hope and expectations for poor rural populations, due to the many new foreign investments and developments since the transition began in 2010, the generation of new jobs is insufficient to accommodate the many migrants who now come from the rural areas (on this movement to Yangon see Matelski & Sabrié 2019, this volume). In addition, property values have skyrocketed, and the supply of affordable housing and space is inadequate to meet the new demands of internal migration (Forbes 2016: 198). Consequently, many newcomers live under dire conditions as tenants in poor hostels, or as informal settlers on the fringes of the city where they have no legal access to services and documentation. Indebtedness is extremely high. According to city authority figures from 2016, around 400,000 people are now squatters in Yangon (Myint 2017), but the number is likely much higher.[4] They face a constant fear of eviction. Poor rural newcomers and other informal settlers are simultaneously securitized and criminalized, which reflects that urban planning and economic development seem to disadvantage rather than benefit the poor, as Matelski and Sabrié (2019, this volume) argue.

This article explores in more depth the challenges and survival strategies of poor informal migrants in Hlaing Thayar as well as looks into the city authorities' attitudes and actions towards informal settlers. The main argument of this article is that the government's "securitization" of informal settlers is not only legitimizing harsh evictions, but also reinforcing informal settlements as crime zones with high levels of mistrust and frequent social disputes. As I illustrate through empirical examples, the lack of tenure security and constant threats of eviction are creating high levels of mobility and feelings of insecurity among informal settlers, which in turn are creating the grounds for crime, social disputes and lack of social cohesion. Mistrust between neighbors and criminalization by city authorities are inhibiting the development of viable forms of self-organization that otherwise could substitute for the lack of official government services, protection and recognition. Thus, rather than curbing insecurity, the government's hardliner approach is creating more insecurity and inhibiting self-organization, which is here understood as the act of organizing by oneself or by a group without the involvement of an external agency.[5] Another consequence is the predominance of informal rather than formal governance, which is strengthening the role of local powerholders, including state officials, who both help sustain as well as exploit the informal settlers.[6] There is a widespread informal economy driven by local "big people" (*lue kyi* in Burmese) who benefit from illegal land sales and informal fees for issuing documentation to the poor migrants. This co-exists with more benevolent, yet not conflict free, forms of assistance from relatives, social networks, political parties and religious leaders.

Drawing on Buzan et al. (1998) and Wæver (1995) I apply the concept of securitization to convey a politicized and discursive construction of certain objects and issues as security threats that must be acted upon. Securitization is a way of representing and transforming particular issues in such a way that it makes them exceptional and of great importance to survival—i.e. existential. This legitimizes the use of extraordinary measures, outside of the normal bounds of political procedure. Security here becomes a self-referential practice, and according to Buzan et al. (1998: 24) "it is in this practice that the issue becomes a security issue—not necessarily because a real existential threat exists but because the issue is presented as such a threat". Similarly, in Yangon, I suggest, informal settlers—often referred to as "squatters"—are portrayed as *per se* security threats, without there being any real evidence that they constitute a threat to the city. Based on this securitization the informal settlers are evicted though harsh security measures, without any consideration of their rights and the poverty situation and livelihood challenges that they face. This securitization is informed by historical legacies that convey newcomers as undesirable and potentially threatening "strangers" as well as by new economic interests that favor high-end urban development. The poor and "informal people" (Bayat 1997) are seen as being in the way of such developments, and the securitization of them by city authorities (and other urban dwellers) makes them easily removable and disposable.

The article's insights are based on field research in Hlaing Thayar during January-March 2017, as well as drawing on observations from earlier research.[7] Three

wards (out of twenty wards in Hlaing Thayar) were selected for interviews. The focus was on informal settlements within these wards. There was a deliberate effort to choose different kinds of informal settlements and forms of residency, in order to capture the variety of migrant challenges and coping strategies. Interviews were conducted with newcomer migrants and longer-term informal settlers living in hostels, including hostel owners (most of whom are also migrants), in rented houses, and in houses on land that had been informally purchased. Twenty-eight interviews were conducted with migrants and informal settlers with a balanced representation of gender and age. To get the perceptions of local government and ward leaders, interviews were also conducted with three ward administrators, five household leaders, two ward police officers, two Buddhist monks and one Christian pastor. Five interviews were, in addition, done with international experts working on urbanization and migration in Yangon and one interview was held with a high-ranking city government official. Thus, the article is based on forty-six interviews. All interviews were semi-structured and took the form mainly of open-ended, extensive and long conversations of up to three hours, and were characterized by several repeat visits to a selected number of migrants in order to build trust.

After providing a brief background on the history of migration in Yangon and Hlaing Thayar, I explore how the city government authorities in Yangon, at different levels, perceive of and approach the situation of increased migration, especially regarding informal settlements. This is followed by an analysis of the challenges the informal migrants face in the everyday and how they deal with their insecure situation in various informal ways. In the conclusion, I reflect on the influence of Myanmar's political and economic transition on the flight of Yangon's poor migrants and informal settlers. I argue that economic liberalization informs current forms of securitization, which means that evictions and lack of inclusion of the urban poor, and the forms of informality these produce, are motivated by economic interests and capital, rather than by politics as during the military regime. Finally, I discuss the immediate and potentially long-term effects of securitization for the stability and evolving urban order of Yangon.

A Brief History of Migration in Yangon and Hlaing Thayar

Since 2012, Yangon's population has grown by a little over one million, from 4.9 million in 2012 to just over 6 million in 2017. With a 2.6 percent population growth rate, it is expected to double by 2040 (Thin Thin Khaing 2015: 3). Migration from the rural areas accounts for 81 percent of the growth (Department of Population 2016: 142), which can be directly related to the political and economic transition that began in 2010. Since then Yangon has seen a lot of new businesses and industries, which work as important pull factors for rural dwellers to migrate to the city, in addition to education and civil society activities (see Matelski &

Sabrié 2019, this volume). According to the 2014 census, approximately 800,000 migrants arrived in Yangon between 2009 and 2014, and this number is growing every day.[8] The majority of migrants are from the Bamar majority, followed by ethnic Rakhine and ethnic Karen from the Ayeyarwady Delta (UNDP 2015). The majority today live on the fringes of the city, in the peri-urban areas bordering the farmland areas which mark the outer limits of Yangon city. Hlaing Thayar is a strong example of this. It has expanded rapidly since 2008 due mainly to economic and environmental migrants, fleeing from a combination of environmental disasters like Cyclone Nargis or soil erosion, and economic hardship brought about by stagnating rural wages, landlessness and seasonal unemployment (Forbes 2016: 197). The rapid migration has not been accompanied by available formal housing and formal allocation of land by the government. Instead, most migrants settle informally. In such areas, on the fringes of the city, an estimated 60 percent live below the poverty line, compared to 34 percent for Yangon as a whole (World Bank 2014: 23). Urban poverty is therefore unevenly distributed, which is related to both historical relocations and to contemporary pressure on the inner city, as new business developments are unfolding. While the economic and political transition has clearly influenced the increase in rural migration to Yangon, due to economic opportunities and increased freedom of movement, the high level of informalization in places like Hlaing Thayar, in terms of housing and livelihoods, indicates that urban developments are biased towards the wealthier classes (as in many other Southeast Asian countries and beyond) (see Simone 2017; Matelski & Sabrié 2019, this volume). However, efforts to divide the city between poor and wealthy areas also have historical roots.

Overall, the history of migration and urbanization in Yangon is one of forced government removal, especially from the city center, as also evident in other Southeast Asian countries (Gibert & Segard 2015; Blot 2014 referenced in Matelski & Sabrié 2019, this volume). This has also led to continuous city expansion, with the opening of an increasing number of townships outside the city center. Both politics and population pressures informed these forced removals. The first major "squatter clearance" in the inner city took place in late 1950s to early 1960s. At that point, the number of informal settlers had reached 300,000, due to an influx of migrants because of the political instability and conflict in the rural areas after Independence. People were moved to townships that at the time were on the periphery of the city, but which today are part of the inner city. They were given land plots, but few adequate services. In the late 1980s to early 1990s, the military government made another round of evictions of an estimated 450,000-500,000 people from the inner city to six new townships that the government established on the fringes of the city. Hlaing Thayar was one of them. In the late 1980s, it was established as an industrial zone and in 1993, it became a residential area as a result of the inner-city relocations. This relocation was more directly politically motivated than the first one, as it came right after the 1988 political uprising and military crackdown on political dissent: many squatters lived around monasteries and other public sites that had been staging points for the protests. As Simone (2017: 11) argues, this

eviction was also intended to "break webs of neighborhood relationships", which could challenge the regime. Only about a fifth of the relocated persons were given land plots (Forbes 2016: 211-213), but these did not come with housing or any basic infrastructure and services, like electricity, drainage and sanitation (interview, YCDC, 31.01.17), so people had to themselves designate and organize their housing. Many of the plots were in low-lying areas with high risks of flooding.

Hlaing Thayar township lies in north Yangon, on the other side of the Hlaing River that divides the inner city from the rural areas of Yangon region. It has a lot of industries and next to the river there are two larger gated communities for the wealthier classes, but the rest of the township houses lower-income residents and many informal settlers.[9] According to interviews, the people who were relocated to Hlaing Thayar in the early 1990s perceive themselves to be natives of Hlaing Thayar today. Some of these first comers have formal land tenure, household registers and access to services like electricity, but others have remained informal settlers for all the years they have lived in Hlaing Thayar. Since the end of military rule, the township has become more densely populated and has expanded considerably, mainly informally, into surrounding farmland areas, due to the high influx of poor rural migrants. Today the newcomer migrants live either in the expanded informal settlements, in poor hostels owned by other migrants, or mixed with people who are migrants from previous periods. Others squat on public lands. These types of informal occupation have in turn given way to new cycles of government evictions inside the township. For instance, in January 2014, 4,000 huts built by squatters were demolished under orders from the regional government (Irrawaddy, 14.03.14 in Forbes 2016: 220). Interviewees also spoke of smaller evictions by ward and township authorities, including 10-50 households at a time. These evictions are, however, futile because squatters re-erect their structures in other areas of the ward or township (see also Forbes 2016).

The cycles of squatting, evictions, and migration sustain livelihood uncertainty and create high levels of mobility inside townships like Hlaing Thayar. This situation is worsened by the lack of any coherent urban plan to address the migration challenges and by unclear land ownership and management, which in addition reflect the negative attitude of city authorities towards the informal settlers and newcomers. The next section explores government attitudes and (in)actions.

Contested Urban Plans
and Securitization of Informal Settlers

There is no doubt that the rapid population growth of Yangon is testing the coping capacity of the government to deal with service provision, infrastructure and housing. Although foreign investments are coming in, including a plethora of international agencies that want to influence urban planning, there is also a lack of public finances to cope with the challenges. Many interests and priorities are at stake, and in general, this has led to a lack of consideration for poor rural migrants

and informal settlers in particular. Urban planning is a politically controversial matter and a continuous battlefield between different overlapping authorities. The same applies to land management.

Technically the Yangon City Development Committee (YCDC), a kind of municipal government, which since 2013 includes elected people's representatives, has the responsibility for urban planning and the administration of urban public land, including the repair and demolition of formal and informal settlements (Forbes 2016: 200; UNDP 2015).[10] In reality, however, the governance of Yangon city has four overlapping authorities, which are not always able to coordinate. Apart from the YCDC, there is the Regional Government with an elected body and chief minister, the Union Government and the General Administration Department (GAD). The GAD is the principle manager of the country's public administration and falls under the military-run Ministry of Home Affairs, and therefore also the Union Government.[11] The GAD has administrative offices at district and township levels. Below these are elected ward administrators and household leaders who have to provide information and respond to directives from the GAD township offices (Chit Saw & Arnold 2014: 2-3; Kyed et al. 2016). The YCDC has a separate office at township level, but has no representation inside the wards, which means that authority within the wards falls under the GAD. The ward administrators register residents and handle daily ward affairs. They resolve disputes and issue recommendation letters for residents to obtain jobs, access services and to enter public schools (Chit Saw & Arnold 2014: 2-3; UNDP 2015: 48).

According to a higher-ranking YCDC official, the YCDC has little *de facto* decision-making power. Labor divisions are overlapping between the different tiers of government. At township level, the GAD is supposed to respond to the YCDC office, but the lines of command are unclear (UNDP 2015: 60). In practice, the GAD also *de facto* administers land at the ward level, even though the YCDC principally has this mandate. In addition, the YCDC has no law enforcement role, so dealings with informal settlements depend on decisions of the regional government, and on the help of the police (interview, YCDC, 31.01.17).

Complications particularly arise when townships like Hlaing Thayar expand, informally, into farmland areas. The YCDC area covers the whole city, but outer farmland areas are governed by the Regional Government and the GAD. This means that when the city informally expands into farmland areas, it moves beyond the YCDC's territorial borders, and into the Yangon region government's jurisdiction. In addition, the Ministry of Construction, which used to manage urban land in the past, has also not transferred all land to the YCDC, likely because it still wants to influence new construction projects and investments (YCDC interview, 31.01.17). In Hlaing Thayar, this lack of coherent land management is creating a rather chaotic situation where land is sold and leased in various informal and uncoordinated ways. The results are multiple land regimes and a shadow economy in which both public and private actors are participating. During the research several examples of this were found, both in the interior of Hlaing Thayar township and on the outskirts. Several powerful local actors were involved, who

take advantage of the unclear land management situation and the informal settlers, as I return to below.

Urban planning is likewise a controversial area, where the different authorities cannot agree. The YCDC and the regional government have made different plans on city expansion in the form of new housing and infrastructure, but they have not been willing to approve each other's plans (see Kyed 2017 for details). When the new NLD government took power in 2016, it announced that it would not accept the two (disconnected) plans but needed to review them. There have also been controversies over lack of transparent contracting of companies and insufficient government funds (Consult Myanmar, 21 February 2017).[12] Importantly, none of the disputed plans addresses the question of informal settlements. Although the regional government and the YCDC have proposed the building of affordable housing, there is lack of available public finances and private investors who would invest in affordable housing. This makes the proposal unrealistic for informal settlers, who will not be able to afford any new housing opportunities without the government also providing loans. Instead, in some areas, the construction of new housing has led to the demolition of informal settlements, which then leaves people to squat elsewhere (Forbes 2016: 206).

There is no doubt that the question of informal settlers and settlements is politically difficult. Not only is there a lot of public resentment against informal settlers, many government officials believe that providing tenure security to informal settlers will result in a massive new influx of migrants to the city, once word gets out that the city is accommodating them. This reflects a low consideration of urban poverty, coupled with a clear prioritization of profit-making projects that focus on high-end housing and business developments. Poor migrants and informal settlers are not understood as poor residents in need of assistance or as potentially positive assets for the economic growth of the city. They have no legal rights and there are no policies specifying compensation when people are evicted, let alone when they lack legal documentation for residency (Forbes 2016: 203-204).

Instead, informal settlers are criminalized, in the sense of being portrayed as people who do illegal business. A general perception of YCDC and regional government officials is that informal settlers cannot be tolerated and that many among them are "gangsters" or "professional squatters" who make a business from renting and selling illegally occupied land. There is a strong perception that if the government formalizes the informal settlements or allocates land to the informal settlers, they will simply sell the land and squat in other areas. An YCDC official at the township level in Hlaing Thayar said about the informal settlers in an interview:

> No, these people are actually not homeless. They are very greedy people, who want to get other people's land for free, and then they build a house and try to get the land. These people are clever people. They never work hard, and they are just waiting for opportunities. Some of them had their own land before [from previous relocations] but they sold it out. (Interview, male YCDC official, 4 April 2017.)

These views seem to be shared by the new NLD government when we look at the harsh actions taken since it got into power. In May 2016, just after the new NLD chief minister of Yangon assumed office, he announced a squatter clearance plan and promised to take punitive action against those illegally residing on public and privately-owned land. Any future squatters would have no rights to benefit from relocation plans. Local authorities and police were ordered to make lists of the squatters in townships like Hlaing Thayar, and to arrest those who refused to be put on the lists. Based on these lists, the regional government would draw a distinction between the "legitimately landless" or those squatting in need of housing, who would be moved to tented camps outside the city limits and eventually given jobs, and the "professional squatters" or those squatting for commercial purposes (like renting out land to subtenants), who would be evicted for good. Part of the plan was also to clear out criminal elements in townships like Hlaing Thayar. This reflects the overall securitization of informal settlements, which were represented as havens for criminals and gangs, and as security threats to the rest of the city. A 100-day crackdown on crime was launched just after the clearance plan was announced, which reinforced police patrols in collaboration with local ward leaders (McPherson 2016). However, in the end, the clearance was not executed, because there was lack of financing and no viable plan for resettling the "legitimately landless."

Nonetheless, smaller and large-scale evictions have been happening on the ground since 2016. In June 2017, for instance, the NLD government authorized a forced slum clearance in northeast Yangon's Hlegu township to make way for new high-rises, hospitals, parks and a golf course, in an area with approximately 4,000 (mostly bamboo) houses (Coconuts Yangon, 12.06.2017; Myint 2017).[13] Around two hundred police officers coordinated with local authorities and hired over 1,000 civilian workers to destroy the houses and evict the occupants, using chainsaws, machetes, axes and crowbars. This led to protests by some informal settlers, which gave way to violent clashes, several police arrests and one injured police officer. The eviction came with no alternative housing options. In fact, a government official said to the media that the settlers would not get compensation because they had illegally squatted on government owned land. The city authorities accused the squatters of having deliberately settled to get compensation, because they knew of the coming construction project (Coconuts Yangon, 12.06.2017; Reuters 12.06.2017). This accusation ignored that some evictees had lived on the land for many years. One of the evicted persons, a former resident of Hlaing Thayar, said to the media that she had bought the land a few months before the eviction from a local villager, because of insecurity and rising rental prices in Hlaing Thayar. She showed the media a document with the land price, which had been issued by an administrative official, so she believed it was legal (Myint 2017).

In Hlaing Thayar smaller evictions also occur frequently. Ward leaders said that, after the chief minister's announcement in 2016, the YCDC and the GAD had ordered them to remove any new squatters and destroy their houses, even though formally the ward leaders do not have this authority. If the squatters do not

comply, the ward leaders must go to the township office for help. Reflecting this hardliner approach, the township level official of the YCDC said in an interview: "we have a motto: if you see a tent, destroy the tent" (interview, 4 April 2017).

These negative images fail to acknowledge the poverty trap that most newcomers and informal settlers from previous forced relocations face in the everyday, which forces them to reside informally. According to my study into the histories behind informal settlements in Hlaing Thayar, which is confirmed by Forbes (2016), those making a business out of informal settlements are not the poor migrants, but some local leaders and other powerful persons in the wards and at township level, including some YCDC officials and political parties.

For instance, one informal settlement in Hlaing Thayar was previous farmland, which YCDC staff had sold informally to businessmen and political party members at a low price. The latter then parceled out the land and sold it on to newcomer migrants, without any formal titling, just informal contracts or landslips. In another ward, land designated for a nursery school, which used to be farmland in the past before the YCDC took it over, was sold out to a plastic factory and to newcomer migrants by the original farmer, in collaboration with lower-ranking YCDC staff and political party members. The GAD at township level did not officially recognize this, but also did not take any action against it, leaving the new "owners" with no formal registration, although they had paid for the land plots. The same occurred in the neighboring ward where YCDC land designated for a playground and park area was never developed due to lack of funds. Squatting occurred frequently, and the YCDC destroyed several houses but gave up in the end. Finally, the original farmland owner sold out the land to four contractors, who divided the land into 56 plots and sold them illegally. The previous ward administrator supported this sale, informally. None of the new landowners have formal titles, only informal selling/buying contracts. There were also several examples where the one hundred household-leaders, who work as assistants of the ward administrators, divided and sold off parcels of public land in smaller plots, which then post-facto were informally recognized by the ward administrator for a share of the sale.

These examples show how powerful local actors, including city government officials, are taking advantage of the unclear land management situation. However, at the same time, they are informally accommodating the high demand for housing by the newcomer migrants. This gives the migrants a place to stay but leaves them in a precarious situation without official titling. Next, I address the challenges faced by the migrants and informal settlers in the selected wards in Hlaing Thayar. I will also discuss in more depth how local "big people" benefit from informal assistance to migrants.

Everyday Insecurity: Living as Informal Settlers

In Hlaing Thayar the number of people squatting on public lands is estimated by the YCDC at township level to be 20,000 or approximately 2.5 percent of the population, but this does not include those who are unregistered and informal settlers, for instance renting houses and rooms in hostels or occupying land re-sold by private actors. In addition, numbers are not updated regularly, and new migrants arrive daily. In one of the studied wards, the ward administrator keeps informal counts of newcomers. He said that there are 30,000 unregistered residents and 70,000 registered persons in his ward, which gives a much higher percentage of informal settlers—i.e. around 30 percent—than the YCDC estimates.

The informal settlers that were interviewed clearly desired formal housing and land titling, but it was unreachable for most of them because real estate prices are rising, the land titling process is expensive and difficult, and because, as noted earlier, the government does not make tenure available. Thus, the vast majority are forced to settle informally or rent small rooms in one of the many hostels that have popped up in Hlaing Thayar. Informal settlers also highlighted economic insecurity and daily survival, including lack of access to electricity, scarcity of clean water and indebtedness as big challenges. The majority do not have formal factory jobs, because they lack the required skills and official documentation. This compels them to take low-paid, casual and informal jobs, with no stable incomes. Residing in informal settlements makes it even more difficult to get access to formal documents, like ID and household registration. They must obtain documents through informal channels, which costs additional fees, because they have to bribe or pay "tea-money" to local officials, for which they often must borrow more money.

This situation positions informal settlers in serious poverty as well as debt traps. Most of the interviewees have high debts, because they have to take informal loans with high interest rates to pay for rent, hospital bills, official documents for schools and jobs, and sometimes even just for daily survival (see also Save the Children 2016). Interest rates are as high as 30 percent, and many times the borrowers have to take new loans from other people just to repay the interest. Without legal documents the informal settlers cannot apply for low interest loans, for instance from NGOs that do micro-credit programs (see also Denney et al. 2016: 1-2). Although there are loan sharks, the majority borrow from other informal settlers in the nearby neighborhood or from family members. The inability to repay loans creates conflicts, including violent clashes, which sometimes means that the borrowers move to other locations.

In general, high mobility characterizes the life of the informal settlers. Mobility is not only due to the failure to pay rent or repay debts but is also caused by evictions and constant fear of evictions, as well as the continuous search for less insecure tenure and better housing. Newcomers especially, but also other residents, tend to constantly move between different hostels, rental houses or settlements on different informal plots. For instance, a 56-year-old man, Tin Oo, and his wife, who have ten children (three are now married), lived in five different places in

Hlaing Thayar since they moved there from North Okkalar township, closer to the city. They are originally from Ayeyarwady region but moved to Yangon for better economic opportunities and education, after Tin Oo's parents passed away a little over ten years ago. When I meet them, they are renting a small house with two rooms, right on a swampy area that floods in the rainy season. The land is officially owned by the YCDC and was planned as a public park and playground, but this plan never materialized, and now it is an informal settlement. When the family came to Hlaing Thayar, they first rented land in another ward and built a house there, but then they were thrown out, because the landowner wanted to sell the land, as land prices had gone up. Then they rented another house, but the rent was too high for them to afford, so they moved to another rental house, but they were told to find another place because the owner wanted to sell. At this time, Tin Oo heard about this piece of land (owned by the YCDC) where they live now, and that people were beginning to occupy it by themselves and build houses without government permission. He too went there and began to build a house, but before it was finished the ward administrator together with the police came at night to destroy all the houses. There were about 50 houses that were destroyed, and people were evicted. After this the old farmland owner (from before the YCDC owned the land) made a deal with the ward administrator and sold out the land in smaller plots. Some Hlaing Thayar residents bought these small plots of land, but without official papers, while other plots were sold, also informally, to people who do not live in Hlaing Thayar, but who built houses on the plots to rent out. Tin Oo now rents one of these houses which is owned by a person from Ayeyarwady region.

However, they only have four-month rental contracts, because they know that the land is not legally owned, and they fear eviction. They don't want to stay in this place, because it is complicated and not safe, Tin Oo says, and adds: "this land has no security. We can be evicted whenever" (interview, January 2017). The area is crowded, because the owners reduced the size of the plots. It is close to the sewage, and there is a lot of noise from people who are drinking. They do not have a household certificate for this place, because it is illegal, so they have to use their certificate from the first place that they lived in Hlaing Thayar. They want to move to a safer place, but they cannot afford to, so if they are evicted, they will have to move to a similar (unsafe) place. Their economic situation is very difficult. One of their daughters, who is single and lives with them, pays the rent and provides for her parents and younger siblings. She sells cosmetics. Tin Oo used to work at a rice mill across the bridge towards the inner city, but he is now too old to work. Sometimes the daughter cannot pay for the rent, so they have to borrow money. Tin Oo and his wife now hope that their younger children who are studying will get a good job, so they can find a more secure place to live. This story is not extraordinary. There was a widespread notion in Hlaing Thayar that mobility is part of everyday life. This also applied to the many newcomers who live in informal hostels.

While hostels are a cheap option, living there also means overcrowded and dire conditions. Many hostel rooms resemble small prison cells, divided from

each other by thin walls. The tenants told me and my co-researchers that there is a lot of noise, quarrels, and disputes. Neighbors complain about the hostels and look down upon those who live there. People tend to move in and out of hostels, because of the dire conditions or because they cannot pay their rent on time. For instance, one young couple from Ayeyarwady region, who are Karen, had stayed one month at a hostel, but the husband had only managed to get casual labor for two days. If he did not get more work, he would not be able to pay the rent and would have to move somewhere else.

Another reason for mobility is that when problems arise over rent, debt or neighbor quarrels, the informal settlers have no secure place to go to settle the matters. Because they are not officially registered, many neighborhood leaders do not give them protection or help to settle their matters. Consequently, there was a general sense that if there was a problem, for instance with the hostel owners or the local authorities, people would simply move to another place, rather than try to resolve the problem.

Securitization of informal settlers by the government is clearly one of the root causes of mobility, related to fear of evictions and lack of protection by local authorities. Simultaneously, this very mobility perpetuates insecurity in Hlaing Thayar, which ends up reinforcing the government's view of the informal settlements as crime zones. For instance, both the residents and local authorities believe that mobility is breeding crime, because constant shifts in residency allow gangs and individual newcomers to roam freely and to easily escape prosecution if they cause problems or crimes. They also said that mobility causes social problems and tensions, including mistrust between neighbors. Ultimately, this situation causes not only fear of crime and social disputes among informal settlers, but also lack of social cohesion, in the sense of an absence of active efforts to self-organize as groups to secure protection and improve livelihoods. Next, I address these issues more in depth.

Lack of Protection and Social Cohesion

Quarrels between neighbors and within families, related to alcohol, and disputes and fights related to moneylending cases are the most common problems in the informal settlements, according to the ward leaders. Police officers also said that there is a higher incidence in Hlaing Thayar of rape, murder, fights with knives and thefts than in other parts of Yangon. Among these authorities, there was a strong tendency to blame the newcomer migrants and informal settlers for Hlaing Thayar's reputation as a crime zone. A ward police officer believed not only that lack of employment resulted in crime, but also that crowded and densely populated spaces breed criminal minds. The ward leaders believed that Hlaing Thayar had become a hiding place for criminals, because in the informal settlements, the authorities are unable to register and regulate residency and mobility. These per-

ceptions co-existed with a general lack of protection of the informal settlements, which reinforces a criminalization of these spaces and their residents.

Many migrants and informal settlers, especially single women and widows, themselves fear and are victims of crime. The women interviewed fear to walk outdoors at night, and they stay inside their houses or hostel rooms when they are not at work. This insecurity is reinforced by a notion that the informal settlers and newcomers cannot get help from any authorities, not even the ward leaders, when they face crimes and are involved in disputes. Although they know that they can report cases to the police, they fear to do so, because they know that they reside illegally, and often do not have the right documents. Women especially fear to report crimes because they feel unprotected and fear that the perpetrators will seek revenge (see also Than Pale 2018). When asked what they would do if they were robbed, the majority of the informal settlers said "nothing" and that they had nowhere to report. In general, they felt left to their own devices. Because the informal settlers are viewed as illegal by the city authorities, many ward leaders do not allow them to register locally and do not take responsibility for them. Most of the interviewed informal settlers said that they did not have one hundred household leaders and that they were not welcome to bring disputes and crimes to the ward office. One man, who owned a household plot on illegally sold YCDC land, said about this lack of recognition by the ward leaders:

> We applied to be on the household list with the ward administrator, but he said to us: "even if there is a burglar or robber who comes to you it is not our concern. Your place is illegal." [...] My niece went to the ward administrator to get a recommendation letter to get a job, but he refused. So, we asked the ward administrator how we should live, and he said: "it is not our concern. Your kids can collect shit. If there is a robber, we will not resolve it." (Interview, 53 years-old man, January 2017.)

Although the police said that they will receive complaints from anyone, irrespective of whether they have legal documentation and residency or not (interview, ward police, February 2017), they do not play a proactive role in the informal settlements. While police patrols are done in formal settlements, those living just one or two streets down in the informal settlements said the patrols never reached their area. Some of the informal settlers believed that the police were too afraid to enter their areas, while others believed the police simply did not care. A one hundred household leader also said that he was too afraid to enter the squatter areas after 10pm, "because you never know who is a good and a bad person there" (interview, middle-aged man and one household leader, March 2017).

Not all the ward leaders were equally hostile towards the informal settlers. Their attitudes ranged from signs of sympathy towards them, often combined with a pragmatic approach to keeping peace in their areas, to ignoring their existence. For instance, I met a one hundred household leader who said that he has informally taken responsibility for those informal settlers who are in his area and that he resolves disputes for them if they ask him to. He does this to try to keep peace in his section of the ward, where there is a large informal settlement. This is not,

however, official at the ward administrative office. Other one hundred household leaders said that they do not allow migrants to squat, but they also do not evict them: "we just forget about them and sometimes close our eyes and ears, as long as they do not break any rules." (Interview, group of one hundred household leaders at ward office, February 2017.) In another ward, the ward administrator had established temporary household leaders for the informal settlements, to keep informal registers and to inform the ward office about issues and problems in the areas. Here the ward administrator also accepts to resolve disputes if the informal migrants ask him to and if they can show some form of ID or documents from a previous legal residency. However, the informality of these arrangements means that the informal settlers can never be sure of protection, because such protection depends on the attitude of individual leaders.

One significant consequence of the lack of protection by the authorities is that the informal settlers rely on individualized forms of self-protection, which for the majority of interviewees involves sticking to oneself and keeping heads low. There was no evidence of collectively formed security or protection groups among the informal settlers. Instead, interviewees told us that the best way to avoid problems and crimes was to stay inside their homes and avoid mixing and speaking too much with others. The best way to live peacefully was to not complain and ask for help and not to be inquisitive about neighbors. Residents feared getting into quarrels if they did not follow these modes of conduct. One man who rents a bamboo house in an informal farmland place said:

> We take care of our own place and I tell my son to go and come on time so that he will not meet the criminals. We are also afraid of the fights and the quarrels, because if there is a case there is nowhere to go with the complaint. If we hear about a quarrel, we just close the door and our ears. (Interview, man of about 40 years old, February 2017.)

Statements like this one reflect not only a fear of crime, but also mistrust in neighbors.

One female resident shared a similar position:

> I carefully close my door at night, because it is difficult to guess how people are. If you think someone is honest, they might abuse you. So, I hardly ever visit my neighbors. People are not good. If someone is in a good economic situation, people are jealous and if someone is in a bad economic situation, people insult them. Sometimes, when I wear gold, the neighbor tells me that "Aww… you can't wear gold. You do not need to pay for your living?" The neighbors are not good, and I don't want to make close relations with them. Sometimes, they want to borrow money from me, but if I cannot do that, they become very angry. (Interview, 25-year-old woman, March 2017.)

This kind of situation conveyed in the quote above was seen by interviewees as caused by the insecure environment, the lack of legal protection, and the high levels of mobility, which also means that neighbors seldom know each other well

and that it is difficult to build trust. Low trust and isolation were particularly common in the informal settlements with the highest population turnover and tenure insecurity. In those informal settlements where residents had bought illegal land and where there was some stability in the duration of their residency there was more interaction between the neighbors. Here the residents helped each other with donations for funerals and religious ceremonies. There was also slightly more trust among neighbors who came from the same rural area and ethnicity, but this did not imply any form of collective self-organization as such. Simultaneously, there was little evidence of ethnic or religiously based tensions and forms of discrimination, except for the Muslim residents.[14]

While the Karen and Rakhine interviewees, who constitute the largest ethnic minorities in Hlaing Thayar, said that they did not feel discriminated by other ethnic groups due to their ethnicity, the Muslim interviewees said that they felt particularly isolated, discriminated and afraid.[15] Unlike the other groups, this insecurity was not due to mobility and tenure insecurity, but to their religious identity. The Muslims who live in Hlaing Thayar are spread out in smaller clusters or in single households and came during the forced relocations in the early 1990s, which means that many of them have formal tenure titles from this period. Despite this, the Muslim interviewees felt very insecure and tried just to keep their heads down so as not to draw any attention from neighbors. Neighbors would greet them, but not interact with them. If they got into a dispute, say over fencing or a land plot, they would be afraid that the resolution would be biased towards the non-Muslims. The children could not get ID, because of their religious identity, and thus it is impossible to obtain formal jobs. Hostel and house owners would not rent to Muslims, the Muslim interviewees told us. In addition, for about two years, the Muslims have been prohibited from praying in public at the mosques in Hlaing Thayar, which are *de facto* closed. Some believed that the closure of the mosques was based on a decision by the township administration, in order to prevent religious tensions. There was a general sense that the situation for Muslims was worsening in Hlaing Thayar. A plausible explanation is the surge in anti-Muslim sentiment in Myanmar in general, which is spearheaded by radical monks, who argue that the Muslims constitute an existential threat to the nation and to Buddhism (Schissler, Walton & Phyu Phyu Thi 2017). This general securitization of Muslims has been increasing since the violent conflict and exodus of Rohingya Muslims from Rakhine state in 2016 and 2017, although the Muslims in most parts of Yangon, including Hlaing Thayar are not from the Rohingya group, but descend from the Indian Muslims who came to Yangon during colonial rule. In Hlaing Thayar there have been no open clashes with Muslims[16], but the anti-Muslim sentiment of the rest of the country nevertheless furthers an environment of mistrust, insecurity and lack of social cohesion, which also prevails among informal settlers more generally, but which tends to be worse among Muslims (see also Simone 2017: 10).[17] Thus while the securitization of informal settlers is generalized across ethnicities, the Muslims are securitized irrespective of whether they live informally or not.

Irrespective of the differences between groups, however, is that securitization supports an informalization of everyday life where lack of documents and protection is perpetuating insecurity. Simultaneously, this is creating particularly informalized ways of coping and surviving among the informal migrants. I address this topic next, showing that despite different examples of mutual informal help, there is a tendency for coping strategies to be highly individualized as well as work to boost the informal powers of ward leaders.

Informal Coping and Survival Strategies

As Forbes (2016: 233) notes, the informal settlements on the periphery are like a "city within the city" with their own informal economy. Much of the employment is generated by the informal settlement itself, including electricity, water distribution, moneylending, vending of small produce and informal real estate brokers and landlords. For instance, one interviewed woman who rented a bamboo house in an informal settlement made a living from having three newcomers rent a small spot inside her tiny house. Those who have some economic means get electricity from their own generators. Others buy electricity from other informal settlers who make part of their living from having a large generator with wires connected to surrounding households.

When newcomers try to get jobs and a place to stay, they mainly rely on connections to relatives or fellow villagers who already reside in Hlaing Thayar. Some hostel owners also said that they help newcomer tenants to get jobs, although only informal jobs, by spreading the word in their networks of kin and people from hometown villages. Indeed, the survival and protection strategies of informal settlers involve the activation of networks of kin, friends and neighbors. However, in general, these strategies are individualized and do not take the form of any stable or enduring form of collective self-organization. Usually there is also some kind of financial income involved in helping others, whether through moneylending, selling of electricity or access to legal documentation. This informal economy also creates tensions and, sometimes, social disputes.

As regarded security protection, very little evidence was found of collective organization around survival and of the establishment of informal leadership among informal settlers. There were two minor exceptions to this, both of which occurred in informal settlements where people had informally bought land. In one area, the new landowners were in the process of forming a social group, which had also tried to collect donations to build cement roads, but they were struggling because those in the hostels could not pay. In another similar area, there was a self-organized "elder" (*ya mi ya pha* in Burmese), a kind of neighborhood advisor. Neighbors came to him for advice and help. For example, when someone needed to go to the hospital, he helped to call a taxi. He had also taken the initiative to collect signatures in order to apply to the YCDC for access to electricity, which however failed. He also resolved marriage and neighborhood disputes at his house. The neighbors

chose this individual for the job, because he does not drink and is calm. He was not elected formally, just by informal agreement. In fact, the elder had to be careful not to show to the ward leaders that he took on this role. His wife said:

> He did not take official responsibility, because we are landless people and we do not know when we need to move from here. He only deals with issues right here [in the informal settlement], because he is afraid that if he deals with outsider people, there might be a complaint to the ward leaders and then he would get into trouble. (Interview, female resident, 63 years old, January 2017.)

Thus, there are real risks involved in self-organization. Instead, the informal settlers in general try to get by and improve their tenure and livelihood situation by engaging various "native" ward leaders, landowners, religious leaders as well as political parties. These actors assist the newcomer migrants and settlers in informal ways to get access to registration papers and land, while they are also benefitting in terms of small incomes and power from the informal status and insecurities facing the informal settlers. Overall, this leads to the prevalence of different forms of informal governance. Despite the fact that the informal settlers are well aware that they cannot get formal access to public services because they reside on illegal land, there is nonetheless a small hope that one day the government may recognize their areas. The religious leaders, along with some ward leaders, play an important role in supporting this hope, as I address next.

Protection and Support from Religious Leaders

Religious organizations and leaders, Buddhist as well as Christian, provide both direct and indirect help to some of the informal settlers. Whereas the Christian pastors provide mainly material support to obtain education, jobs and food donations, the Buddhist monks also provide crucial protection, not only spiritually but also against potential evictions. The role of the latter is particularly important in furthering the tenure security of the informal settlers and is supported by the high standing of monks in Myanmar in general.

Because of Buddhist beliefs in merit, there was a widespread notion among even the poor migrants that it was shameful to receive food or other material support from the Buddhist monks. Instead, they regularly donated rice and money to the monks. Donations give merit, which Buddhists believe can improve present and future life conditions. In addition, the informal settlers as well as the land brokers believed that the presence of monks and Buddhist monasteries in an informal settlement could help protect the area, not only from crimes, but also from government evictions. A monastery gives an area some layer of recognition and is a way of civilizing the territory in a symbolic way.

In one ward there were two new monasteries located right inside an informal settlement area. They were small, but it was clear that they were expanding with new cement buildings. This was in an undeveloped YCDC area that had been sold by the original farmer, in collaboration with a political party. A monk from

Ayeyarwady region headed one of the monasteries. It was built with donations from the monk's followers in Ayeyarwady and from the farmer who had sold the land. First, the farmer had called the monk and established the monastery. Then they called the Ayeyarwady people to buy the land, the monk said, and added: "before we built this monastery people did not dare to build a house, but after we built it people also built their houses." (Interview, monk of about 40 years old, February 2017.) The monk claimed that the monastery land is now legally approved from the ward administration to the regional government level, even though it is on illegal land. This gives a sense of security to the informal landowners and tenants. The settlers there believed that the government authorities would be much more reluctant to evict them, because there is a monastery. Some even hoped that maybe one day this could mean that their area (and thus their informal land ownership) would lead to formal recognition. This is because government authorities, one settler said, have a lot of respect for the monks, and they may be afraid to get bad merit if they evict the people. Another Buddhist land plot owner, who lives next to the monastery, said:

> If there is a monastery, it gives a good guarantee for living land. People trust more to buy land in that area. If there is no monastery the people will think it is an illegal place and will not buy. It is also another reason that it is more peaceful here, because people cannot easily quarrel in front of the monastery. And we can easily donate. It means we are less afraid of eviction, because we are on religious land and we are like religiously registered. This has reduced our fear. (Interview, male resident around 60 years old, February 2017).

The monastery also provides food daily for the people over 80 years of age, and the monk has organized the construction of a cement road to improve conditions when the area floods in the monsoon season.

The other monastery in this informal settlement is run by Rakhine monks, as the area has quite a large number of Rakhine residents. This monastery was initially built with donations from one of the land investors, the sister of the head monk, who is a wealthy engineer. She bought some of the land from the farmer, most likely to resell it, or to rent out houses to migrants. The head monk said that he chose this area to help the poorest. When newcomers come from Rakhine, the monastery provides them with shelter until they find a job. It can house 20-30 persons. The plan is now to build a computer and training center for the young people to prevent them from getting into criminal activities – an issue the monk sees as a major challenge in the area.

The monks from both monasteries defined themselves as defenders of the informal migrants, and in interviews, they criticized the government for not recognizing that they had bought the land. The monks do not see the people who live near the monastery as squatters, but as citizens too. Simultaneous, the monasteries protect the informal investors and land brokers, who are more likely to sell (illegally) to the migrants if the monks are there to protect them. Thus, while the monasteries

give the new "landowners" protection and hope of formal tenure, they are also sustaining the informal economy within which more powerful actors benefit.

Hopes of Recognition:
Illegal Land Ownership and Local Power Brokers

Getting official tenure security is something the newcomer and poor settlers see as out of their reach. They know that government land is not for sale and even if it was, they cannot afford it. The large-scale eviction that happened in northeast Yangon in June 2017 also clearly testifies that it is risky for people to buy public land illegally. Irrespectively, the interviewed informal settlers in Hlaing Thayar still hoped that if they bought land illegally in large groups, they could one day get formal tenure. As one female tenant in a hostel on informally settled land said: "the affordable housing flats are for the rich people to make a business. They buy them and sell for a higher price. So many people here wait to buy illegal farmland, and then they hope that one day it will be legal, because they know that it is not legal (interview, female resident of about 30 years old, March 2017). In fact, those who had been able to afford to buy land illegally considered themselves among the lucky migrants. Even though they only had an informal contract, and thereby still risked eviction, this was the better option. Informal landownership contracts were seen to somewhat protect the owners from eviction, especially in areas where there were many informal land plots clustered together (and even better if there was a monastery). However, this sense of security and protection is simultaneously reliant on the activation and support of powerful actors.

At least in some places the strategy of buying illegal land has led ward leaders to tacitly recognize or at least tolerate the residents. They do not remove the owners and they provide them with recommendation letters. Yet this always comes at a price, because when the new (illegal) landowners are tolerated, it is usually because a ward leader has been involved informally in a sale, providing stamps and papers for a fee. Simultaneously, it is never a complete guarantee against eviction, as the papers do not carry legal weight higher up in the system. There were also examples where political parties supported the informal settlers with informal tenure and land sales, with the tacit approval of the ward leaders. For instance, the former ruling party housed an informal settlement with 40 households, which was hidden behind the party's main ward office. The party had given land to newcomer migrants to establish these households after the 2008 Cyclone Nargis. Another opposition party had also been involved in supporting (and benefitting) from a large land sale of YCDC land by the previous farmland owner. A third smaller political party, connected to the previous military regime, has 20–30 offices in Hlaing Thayar alone. It operates as a kind of "shadow power" by engaging a high number of "spies" or informers on the ground and is apparently also involved in house rentals. To what extent these parties are supporting the migrants as a strategy to obtain votes in the future is unclear, as many informal settlers do not make it on to the electoral lists due to lack of official residency. There were no examples

where the current ruling party, the NLD, was involved, although this party won the vast majority of votes in 2015 in Hlaing Thayar. It is highly likely that the other parties engage with the informal migrants more to establish future powerbases than to immediately gain votes (see also Simone 2017: 12). Simultaneously, they get financial incomes from rental and informal land sales to migrants, akin to the ward leaders. This involvement of local power brokers provides a kind of backing to the informal migrants when it comes to informal land ownership, but it does not provide them with any stable security. In addition, the informal economy of this situation creates disparities between those migrants who can pay and those who cannot. The same applies to obtaining various documents.

Informal Economy around Documents

There are many strategies and a widespread informal economy around obtaining legal documents to get jobs, attend schools and so forth. However, those with some financial means and connections do better than those who do not have these. Some borrow National Registration Cards (NRC—the main ID in Myanmar) from friends to get work at factories or use the household certificates of family members or friends who live in formal places in Hlaing Thayar. The friend or family member takes the informal settler to the ward administrator and tells him something like: "this is my niece and she now stays with me." This way, friends provide guarantee for the informal settlers. Some one hundred household leaders and brokers also get fees to help with documents, and some factory managers have lending businesses that are organized around providing work documents.

Hostel owners in informal settlements also help their tenants. Although they cannot get the tenants on any official list, they can negotiate with the ward administrator for a smaller fee to get recommendation letters, as long as the tenants have an NRC. One hostel owner said that when her tenants need recommendation letters, she takes them to the ward office, pays 1000 kyats (0.8 USD) and then she guarantees for them. In another hostel, where the tenants are Rakhine, the hostel owner's sister (which we later found out was not a biological sister, but an acquaintance), who is also Rakhine and who lives in a legal place, just opposite the hostel, helps the tenants. She puts the tenants on her guest list and then they can get recommendation letters. They pay 2,500 kyats per person to the "sister" for this service.

Although the ward leaders all denied taking any fees from informal settlers, they did openly say that they provided recommendation letters as long as they got some form of legal address. It is clear from this and from Forbes' (2016) research that ward leaders are part of the informal economy around documentation, but at the same time, this means that they are also supporting the survival strategies of the informal settlers and newcomers. This is nonetheless producing differentials between those people who have more and those who have fewer financial means and connections.

Conclusion

The many poor newcomer migrants who arrive to Yangon daily are facing major challenges, together with the already large population of informal settlers. Although the economic growth of Yangon, especially since 2012, acts as an important pull factor to the city, the migrants benefit minimally from urban developments. They live a life of informality, with little or no access to formal jobs and stable incomes, public services, tenure security, and legal documentation. Many are trapped in debt cycles, and although they do get help from kin, fellow villagers, and sometimes from religious leaders and local big men, such support is unstable, fraught with mistrust, and nurtures an informal economy that sometimes creates social disputes. This situation contributes to lack of social cohesion that, along with unstable incomes and the high mobility of informal settlers and newcomer migrants, is perceived to create the grounds for crime in wards with large informal settlements such as Hlaing Thayar.

These urban developments, characterized by a wide spectrum of informal (unregistered, partly illegal) activities are very similar to other mega-urban areas of Southeast Asia, which also, as described by Kraas (2007: 18), are characterized by high influx of migrants, lack of urban planning implementation, rudimentary infrastructure in the urban fringes, and mass un- or underemployment. Displacement, evictions and relocations are also major challenges in other Southeast Asia cities (ibid.). However, as Simone (2017) argues, Yangon is a latecomer in joining the group of Southeast Asian cities, due to the many decades of military rule and a much more recent transition to an accelerated economic liberalization, including the influx of foreign investors. A core characteristic of Yangon when compared to other Southeast Asian cities is, as Matelski and Sabrié (2019, this volume) argue, exactly the accelerated speed of urban changes.

The transition since 2010 to a large extent accounts not only for the increased migration from the rural areas, but also for the conditions under which current forms of informality and displacement arise. These are conditions which are driven by capital and market-led urban growth, leading to inflated land and rental prices, increased pressures by foreign investors, amplified demands for high-end services for tourists, businesses and a rising middle-class, territorial expansion of the metropolitan system, and the peripheralization of poor and working class residents (Simone 2017: 1-2; see also AlSayyad [2004: 15] on the link between urban informality and globally driven liberalization). While, as Simone (2017) notes, informality is not new in Yangon, as people during the military regime also had to rely extensively upon local, self-organized provisioning systems due to the poor urban services, infrastructure and labor markets, the forms of informality today are more provisional and insecure, as people are unsure what to expect of the changes. In addition, land speculation is increasing and there are many more urban residents and foreign investment interests in play.

Importantly, we need to understand the current situation of newcomer migrants and other informal settlers, as well as the kinds of informality they live in, as the

result of a partial democratic transition. While political changes have decreased political oppression and surveillance by the government and led to a much higher freedom of movement and flow of information, goods and people, which also result in more people coming to the city, these developments are not matched by wealth distribution and popular inclusion in urban development planning. Instead, the new urban order is dominated by economic investment interests, reflected in the predominantly elite- and top-down driven urban planning processes, which are under pressure from foreign and national investors to make way for high-profit making projects (see also Matelski & Sabrié 2019, this volume). These interests have also led to new waves of evictions, which draw historical comparison with the military regime's tactics against the urban poor, but which are now not politically motivated, as in the past, but driven by capital. Through a combination of the historical legacy of military tactics of population displacement and current market liberalization, the urban "informal people" (Bayat 1997) are now being securitized, not as politically dangerous, but as undesirable, "matter out of place" in areas intended for urban renewal and high-end investments (see also Becker & Müller [2013] for similar securitization in Mexico City).

As I have shown in this article, the majority of newcomers and informal settlers in Yangon are not intent on living illegally but strive to get formal jobs and tenure. Rather, informality and illegality are reinforced by a process of government securitization, which does not recognize poor newcomer migrants and other informal settlers as legitimate and desirable residents of the city, but as "strangers", potential criminals and obstacles to urban development and stability. This legitimizes evictions and threats of evictions.

In the remainder of this conclusion I wish to reflect on the question of what the Yangon authorities' securitizing approach to newcomer migrants and informal settlers may mean for the future stability and evolving urban order in Yangon. To address this question, it is necessary to look at both the immediate consequences and the potential longer-term effects of this securitization.

One immediate consequence in townships like Hlaing Thayar, is that the securitizing approach is creating constant fear of eviction, high levels of mobility, and an informalization of livelihoods, which is in practice reinforcing the notion that informal settlements are crime zones. In this sense, rather than curbing crime and social disputes in Hlaing Thayar, securitization is contributing, even if unintentionally, to rising crime, insecurity and a widespread informalization of governance. While the informal practices of local big men, including ward and township level leaders, are somewhat supporting the survival and coping strategies of the informal settlers, these are also sustaining an informal economy of support networks, which are unstable and not equally accessible for all informal settlers. Tensions and social disputes also arise from this informal economy, for instance around moneylending and illegal land sales. While more well-established actors, like local leaders, farmland owners and political parties are, as Simone (2017) also notes, engaging in various activities like land speculations, similar to other places of Southeast Asia (McGee 1991 referenced in Simone 2017), the majority of Hlaing

Thayar residents do not have "the means or the desire to participate in such incrementalism" (Simone 2017: 12). This is caused by a mixture of politics, poverty (including indebtedness), infrastructural deficits (ibid.) and, as I have argued by government securitization.

Currently, there is no evidence to suggest that the securitizing approach will result in open political unrest and uprisings. In fact, as Matelski and Sabrié (2019, this volume) account for, protests by marginalized, evicted groups in the form of demonstrations have only occurred in a few places, at a much lower scale than in other Southeast Asian countries, and they do not have any broad-based participation, but involve a select group of people (Blot 2014 and Fauveaud 2012 referenced by Matelski & Sabrié 2019, this volume). The insecure situation, likely combined with the very recent history of military oppression of political dissent along with high levels of mobility, is rather reducing the likelihood of any kind of collective organization among (and thus threat from) the informal settlers. There are hardly any examples of even establishing social groups and self-organized assistance, which means that the informal settlers by no means constitute a strong political force or movement that could count as an actual "security threat". In this sense, as Buzan et al. (1998) note, securitization is a politicized and discursive construction rather than a real threat. Having said this, securitization could have longer-term repercussions, especially if evictions become more frequent without any viable alternatives for the informal settlers. As already seen, the June 2017 evictions led to counterattacks on security forces and to a critique of the NLD government by those who were bulldozed. Among these people, there is a growing disillusionment with the new political leadership, who many hoped would improve their livelihood conditions. In the short-term the NLD will unlikely suffer consequences, because informal migrants cannot vote. However, if the current trend continues, and as the migrant population grows, evictions are likely to become more and more confrontational and violent. Those who can vote generally do not view informal settlers favorably, but these voters will take notice if evictions become increasingly frequent and violent. This could eventually lead to political pressure on the government to find more accommodating solutions.

More problematically, the government's securitization of a very large and steadily growing population of informal and poor migrants can also risk developing into what Beall, Goodfellow & Rodgers (2013) define as "civic conflicts", which are found in other urban settings of the world. Civic conflict is specifically urban and involves more or less spontaneous and reactive violence that forms in response to feelings of powerlessness, socio-economic exclusion or spatial marginalization. It can take place among groups in society (in the form of gang warfare, ethnic or religious violence, crime), or between society and the state (e.g. riots, terrorism, state violence) or be a mixture of these. Systemic discrimination and neglect embedded in governance institutions is central to civic conflict. There is no evidence yet of a development towards civic conflict in Yangon, but some of the underlying conditions that create such conflict are evident in places like Hlaing Thayar. Currently, there is still much available room for improving the

conditions of informal settlers and for framing the perceptions of migrants, not as strangers, but as viable assets to the city's development. However, this would require that the conditions under which informality and securitization are being produced are changed, and that the urban order becomes more democratic, and less driven by capital.

Notes

1. The other townships in Yangon vary in size between 25,000 and 350,000, which means that Hlaing Thayar is substantially more populous than other townships (UNDP 2015: 11).

2. This article uses a broad definition of informal settlements, based on a United Nations definition: areas where groups of housing units have been constructed on land that the occupants have no legal claim to, or occupy illegally, and: unplanned settlements and areas where housing is not in compliance with current planning and building regulations (unauthorized housing) (UN 1997).

3. The ward leaders, the media and the government officials, including the country's *de facto* leader, Aung San Suu Kyi use the word *kyue kyaw* which is the most common word for informal settlers and squatters (people do not use the specific term for informal settler which would in Burmese be *ta yar ma win nay taing thu* as this is a very broad term that also includes foreigners and people without ID). According to a ward administrator in Hlaing Htayar, *kyue kyaw* is the general term for both people who squat and who occupy land illegally. They also use two other specific terms in Hlaing Thayar, namely *see pwarr ye kyue* (စီးပွါးရေးကျူး) for so-called business squatters, who are people who occupy land that has been sold informally, and *oak su lite kyue* (အုပ်စုလိုက်ကျူး) for a group of squatters who settle in an illegal place, however not for business purposes. Both these categories fall under the general term *kyue kyaw* (ကျူးကျော်). The term is not, according to our respondents a derogative or discriminatory term, but it does indicate poverty and an economically deprived situation, along with settling informally or illegally.

4. Another study from 2012 holds that ten percent or a bit over 500,000 people are squatters (Gomez-Ibanez et al. 2012: 9) and Forbes (2016: 207) suggests that up to three times this number live in some informal way with no tenure security.

5. My use of the concept of self-organization is to simply convey the collective organization by people themselves to deal with everyday matters and to get access to rights. I do not engage with theories of self-organization taken from the natural sciences and systems theory, which refer to the ability of a system to spontaneously arrange its components in a non-random manner (see for instance Portugali [2012] who uses self-organization theory to analyze urban systems and Barros & Sobreira [2002] who explore the decentralized process underlying the development of squatter settlements in Latin America, also through an understanding of these as subsystems).

6. Following Hufty (2011: 405) I use a very broad definition of governance that is not confined to the political steering of society by formal government or state (as in common political science definitions) but refers to "the processes of interaction and decision-making among the actors involved in a collective problem that lead to the creation, reinforcement, or reproduction of social norms and institutions."

Governance is about decision-making processes, conflict resolution, social norms, and institutions as inherent to social life, irrespective of whether there is a state or not. "Thus, governance does not presuppose vertical authority and regulatory power as the concept of 'political system' and the traditional idea of 'politics' do. It refers to formal and informal, vertical and horizontal processes, with no a priori preference" (Hufty 2011: 405).

7. Two researchers from Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation (EMReF), Lue Htar and Nang Sapphires Win, participated in data collection. I am deeply indebted to their assistance, including translation and discussion of research results.

8. This figure covers those who moved to Yangon between 2009 and 2014 (Department of Population 2016). The figure is therefore likely higher at the time of writing (2018) and may also be higher given that many informal settlers, among the new migrants, were not included in the census, according to Ye Mon (2016).

9. Research was not done inside the gated communities, and thus this article does not cover insights into how these different residents view and relate to each other.

10. The YCDC also has other responsibilities: operation and maintenance of urban infrastructure (roads, bridges, drainage, markets, public housing); garbage and waste collection, water supply and sanitation; management of public spaces (including parks and street lighting), and public health in relation to food (UNDP 2015).

11. At the time of writing, in Janyary 2019, the NLD government decided to remove the GAD from the Ministry of Home Affairs in order to ensure civilian governance of the GAD.

12. According to personal communication with an international expert in Yangon, the different international agencies (Japanese, Korean, EU etc.) are also competing internally over the different urban plans, which favor their own countries' ongoing investment plans in Yangon

13. In 2015 under the previous chief minister, a smaller part of the same area was bulldozed, and thousands of dwellers fled to the next village (Myint 2017).

14. The Muslims in Myanmar do not constitute one singular group, but people with different origins and many sub-groups, including some members of other ethnic minorities, like the Karen, the Chin, the Kaman, and the Kachin who follow Islam (Berlie 2008: 13). According to Berlie (2008), the largest group of Muslims in Myanmar are those with Indian origin (from present day Bangladesh, India and Pakistan), who came both before and during British colonial rule (in 1881, 14 percent of Yangon were Muslims [ibid.: 37]). Other larger groups are the Arakan Muslims (also called Rohingya) who live in present-day Rakhine state, Muslims originating from China and other smaller groups. In Yangon there is a mixture of Kaman, Chinese and Indian Muslims, in terms of origin (Berlie 2008: 38).

15. It was very difficult for our research team to interview the Muslim households. The members of the Muslim households feared to speak openly and on a second visit to one household, we were told by the household members that they were afraid to speak with us, because the neighbors would suspect them of getting help from outside people and this could create tensions.

16. It was not possible to get any population counts of the number of Muslims in Hlaing Thayar, as the ward leaders do not have proper registers and also because the 2014 census data on religious and ethnic identity has been kept back by the government still today. So, the research could only rely on observations. Only in one informal

settlement in the three researched wards were a few Muslim households found. Interviewees said that this was a general pattern, but that there was one ward where there was a larger concentration of Muslims and where there was also a mosque. However, fieldwork was not conducted there.

17. It should be noted that this may be different in wards with a majority of Muslim residents, where forms of mutual protection and solidarity between Muslims may ease their situation. In the wards covered by this research, there were only a few, dispersed Muslim households. However, as Simone's (2017: 10) fieldwork in a majority Muslim township in 2016 shows, Muslims are now struggling to prove their belonging to the city.

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Abstract: This article explores the challenges and survival strategies of poor informal migrants in Hlaing Thayar township, which has the largest concentration of informal settlements in Yangon. Based on interviews with informal settlers, local leaders, and city authorities in early 2017, I show that the informal settlers rely on loose networks of relatives and on local ward and religious leaders to cope with the challenges they face. However, this does not lead to any stable form of self-organization. Constant threats of evictions and securitization by city authorities are creating high levels of mobility and feelings of insecurity, which also cause social disputes and lack of social cohesion. Simultaneously, the informal settlements sustain an informal economy and informal forms of governance by local "big people" (*lue kyi*), including some government officials, who benefit from illegal land sales and from providing legal documents, like household registers and land papers to the informal migrants. A core argument of the article is that the securitization of newcomers and informal settlers by the government

is perpetuating rather than curbing insecurity in Yangon's informal settlements, which could, if not reversed, lead to deeper instability.

L'habitat informel à Yangon et les défis des migrants

Résumé : *Cet article explore les défis et les stratégies de survie des migrants informels pauvres dans le* township *de Hlaing Thayar, qui possède la plus importante concentration d'habitations informelles à Yangon. En me basant sur des entretiens effectués avec des habitants de ce quartier informel, des chefs locaux et avec les autorités municipales au début de l'année 2017, je montre que les habitants de ce quartier informel dépendent de leurs réseaux familiaux lâches et des chefs du quartier ou religieux pour affronter les défis auxquels ils sont confrontés. Ce n'est cependant pas un facteur de stabilité dans l'auto-gestion. Des menaces perpétuelles d'éviction et la sécurisation par les autorités municipales accroissent la mobilité et le sentiment d'insécurité des habitants, facteurs de conflits et d'un manque de cohésion sociale. Parallèlement, l'habitat informel maintient une économie informelle, ainsi que des formes de gouvernance non officielles par des « chefs » (*lue kyi) qui incluent des agents gouvernementaux bénéficiant des ventes foncières illégales mais aussi de documents officiels aux habitants de ce quartier informel. L'argument majeur de l'article est que le gouvernement perpétue la sécurisation des nouveaux arrivants et des habitants des quartiers informels de Yangon au lieu de la limiter, ce qui va mener, si rien ne change, à une plus grande instabilité.*