**Title: A decade of democratic and structural turbulence: Myanmar’s subjective well-being trajectory, 2014-2024**

**Background**

Global conflict is escalating, with over 100 countries engaged in some form of external conflict in the past 5 years, affecting 1 in 8 individuals(Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024; Raleigh & Kishi, 2024). Conflict disrupts peace and has significant economic, health, and psychological implications that reverberates across socioeconomic identities and transcend borders (Kóczán & Chupilkin, 2022; Raleigh et al., 2023; Charlson et al., 2019).

Conventional psychological research on well-being is typically conducted in Western countries during relatively peaceful times. This temporal and geographical bias suggests that current psychological knowledge may not capture the full spectrum of human experience and may not generalize to increasingly prevalent conflict and wartime settings. As an example, the “happiness pie chart” model suggests that life circumstances play a very limited role in individual well-being, and well-being is primarily a function of genetic predispositions and personal effort (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2021). Based on this popular theoretical model, it would lead to a counter-intuitive hypothesis that large-scale war and conflict may have a minimal impact on people’s well-being.

The work that our team has done in the years have gathered evidence to show that war and conflict, the most drastic disruption of life circumstances, indeed have hampered humans’ ability to live their lives. This effort is made possible because 1) our shared desire to do the best science at we can, 2) the injustice that we observe in research and in the world broadly where the suffering of civilians from war and conflict is rampant but forgotten, and 3) the institution that is UofT, particularly PWB Lab, allows us to conduct this line of research safely and freely.

**What do we know about subjective well-being in war/conflict settings so far**

*Syrian Civil War.* One of the first PWB studies on this topic centered in the Syrian conflict, which started in 2011 as part of the Arab Spring protests, and quickly escalated to years long of armed conflicts between the then Assad government and opposition forces (Cheung et al., 2020). Between 2008 and 2015, the absolute prevalence of negative affect increased by 41.4%, and the average life satisfaction score dropped by 5.15 (range 1–10). ﻿During the conflict, Syrians were 5-times less likely (OR = 0.20, 95% CI 0.17–0.23) to report having social support compared to before the conflict. Sex and age differences in well-being trend were small. The overall decline in well-being was also observed regardless of whether they were directly exposed to conflict.

*Russian Invasion of Ukraine.* Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the War in Ukraine has become the deadliest conflict in Europe since its last war in World War II. Similar to the Syrian study, we examined the well-being trajectory in Ukraine and Russia from before to after the invasion. Ukrainians experienced the 11th steepest life satisfaction decline worldwide (120 countries) in 2022 yet became the most hopeful about their life. Conversely, on the offensive side, Russians saw increase in both life satisfaction and hope following the Invasion. These results suggest that while the life satisfaction of some segments of the population was more vulnerable in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, the decline in life satisfaction was a widespread phenomenon shared across Ukrainian society.

*War in Afghanistan.* Having established that populations engulfed in prolonged war and conflict, we wondered if the end of a war would necessarily translate to improved subjective well-being for an embattled population. For this, we turned to the War in Afghanistan which commenced in 2002 following the 911 terrorist attack in New York, in the US and the US’s military actions to combat terrorism. Our study surveilled the well-being trends in Afghanistan from 2018-2019, 2021 following the US government withdrawing its remaining personnel from the country, and 2022 when the country was once again under the Taliban control (Stutzman et al., 2025). We found that the average life satisfaction of Afghans did not drop in 2021 from before the US withdrawal. However, after the withdrawal and reinstatement of the Taliban government, the life satisfaction of Afghans dropped by 1.24 units (0.91 SD). Almost all respondents reported a life satisfaction score below 5 in 2022. In fact, under the renewed Taliban regime, Afghanistan experienced the lowest life satisfaction score in recorded history (over 170 countries since 1946). While almost all segments of the Afghan population saw a decline in subjective well-being in the wake of Taliban reclaiming power, the most disadvantaged groups (i.e. women, people with elementary education or less, and the poorest quintile) experienced the sharpest drop in how they evaluated their current life, compared to their best possible life.

A few insights came to mind after revisiting these studies.

* Drastic changes in life circumstances (starting of a war and conclusion of a war without prudent planning) could result in enduring changes in subjective well-being of the affected population, even in the presence of the usual protective factors (e.g., better social support, being female, and high income and education levels).
* Context matters a lot. The impetus of every war is different. Developing an understanding of the historical, cultural, and political context of the countries/ settings were the conflict took place is essential for well-being researchers to conduct the study.
  + Example: Geographical differences in subjective well-being due to exposure to conflict, allegiance to certain political groups
* Studying individual conflicts offer us the opportunity to tease apart the common well-being impacts of conflicts, while highlighting the some of the forgotten conflicts happening in the world.

**Myanmar: a fledgling democracy in struggle**

This time, we turn to the other side of the Eurasia continent and looking at a conflict is soon becoming “a forgotten crisis” (*As Crisis in Myanmar Worsens, Security Council Must Take Resolute Action to End Violence by Country’s Military, Address Humanitarian Situation, Speakers Urge*, 2024; Htet et al., 2024).

Since its independence from the British Empire in 1948, Myanmar has been oscillating between parliamentary democracy and autocratic ruling of the military, the Tatmadaw. The Saffron Revolution, a nation-wide movement against the military regime, in 2007 ushered in a new constitutional era for the country to slowly establish a civilian parliament where the military junta retained substantial power. In 2011, the first president in this transitional period, Thein Sein, carried a series of political reforms such as loosening media censorship, freeing political prisoners, and strengthening international relations, sanctioning pro-democratic parties for elections. National League for Democracy (NLP), the largest opposition party founded and led by Aung San Suu Kyi, regained its political party status and claimed a sweeping victory at the parliamentary by-election in 2012 and the national elections 2015. Following their bitter defeat of its shadow party in the National Elections in November 2020, The Tatmadaw launched a coup d'état on February 1st, 2021 in which the democratically elected officials, including President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, were deposed and detained and the results of the last National Elections were declared invalid. Nation-wide protests the military junta by civilians, professionals, opposition party, and ethnic minorities erupted subsequently. In response, the military junta has resorted to indiscriminate attacks and restricted civilian access to essential resources. By late 2021, at least 1,500 people were killed and 8,000 people killed by the military. This heightened political tension has given rise to over thousands non-state resistance groups (e.g., military arm of the exiled government and ethnic minority armies) which combat the military junta, engulfing the country in extreme violence since.

The year 2024 marked the most devastating year for civilians, with at least 1,824 civilians killed and over 40% of the deceased being women and children (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025b). By the end of 2024, 3 years since the violent turnover of the democratic government, more than 19.9 million people or one-third of the population relying on humanitarian assistance (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2025). Furthermore, over 3.5 million people have been displaced across the country and another 71 thousand moving across country borders (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025a). These are underestimates of the suffering of the Burmese people as the country was prone to natural disasters (e.g., typhoon and floods) (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2024)and the near-crumbled healthcare systems as the result of the coup (Paddock, 2022).

Unfortunately, the empirical evidence of the mental health and well-being consequences following the coup d'état is scant. In my co-authored work published in The Lancet Regional Health – Southeast Asia, we estimated from nationwide population-based survey that a third of Myanma adults had post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, or depression in five months following the coup (Fan et al., 2024). Another study, using a non-probability adult sample, estimated the rate of probable depression, anxiety, and both were about 60% (Saw et al., 2023). The most recent study was based on a selected sampled of young girls and women from disadvantaged communities in country 2.5-3 years since the coup (September 2023-January 2024). Over 80% of the respondents reported at least one conflict-related stressors (e.g., displacement, disruption of education, separation from parents, injury, death of family members) and such as exposure put them 2.5 times more likely to develop any depression symptoms (Pearson et al., 2025). The lack of long-term studies once again illustrated how Myanmar has slowly faded in the international news and international research communities. Furthermore, the psychological consequences of war and conflict extend beyond development of mental disorders.

Set against this historical and theoretical backdrop, we will investigate the short and long-term consequences of conflict on population well-being in the Myanmar Civil War, using data involving **over 2.7 million global citizens and three international databases of peace and conflict.**

Given the growing severity, evolving geopolitical concerns, and escalating international scope of these conflicts, the proposed research will draw on data before and during the conflicts and 12,800 Burmese participants to

1. document the trends of subjective well-being (SWB) in Myanmar as well as neighboring countries in the past decade,
2. segments of the Burmese population most impacted by the coup de tat and subsequent civil war, and
3. estimate the changes in SWB attributable to the conflicts using multi-level models

**Methods**

Nationally representative data will be drawn from the Gallup World Poll (GWP), which annually surveys an average of 1,000 adults from each of 150 countries and territories since 2005. We will contextualize the well-being trajectories in Myanmar with international data. SWB will be measured using a standardized item asking about the quality of life on a continuous scale from *the worst possible life* to *the best possible life*. Country-level well-being data will be matched with the annual *Global Peace Index* and *Fragile State Index* which offer country-level peacefulness and vulnerability indicators, and the *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data* will provide sub-country geo-located conflict events that point to the most embattled regions. This integration will enable a dynamic assessment of peace and conflict. We will further conduct analyses stratified by age, gender, socioeconomic status, fundamental needs (e.g., food and shelter), and political attitudes from GWP to identify characteristics contributing to well-being disparity within the population.

**Variables (years of available data)**

**Main Outcomes – Evaluative well-being**

*Life Satisfaction.* Subjective evaluation of life currently, on a continuous scale from *the worst possible life* (0) to *the best possible life (10).*

*Hope.* Subjective evaluation of life five years from now, on a continuous scale from *the worst possible life* (0) to *the best possible life (10).*

**Secondary Outcomes – Affective well-being**

*Smile or laugh.* Whether respondents smiled or laughed a lot yesterday.

*Enjoyment.* Whether respondents experienced enjoyment during a lot of the day yesterday.

*Worry.* Whether respondents experienced worry during a lot of the day yesterday.

*Sadness.* Whether respondents experienced sadness during a lot of the day yesterday.

*Anger.* Whether respondents experienced anger during a lot of the day yesterday.

*Stress.* Whether respondents experienced stress during a lot of the day yesterday.

**Sociodemographic variables**

*Age [WP1220] (2012-2024):*

*Marital Status [WP1223] (2012–2024):*

*Education Level [WP3117] (2012–2024):*

*Income Quintile [INCOME\_5] (2012–2024):*

*Household income in international dollars [INCOME\_2] (2012–2024):*

*Religion [WP1233/WP1233 Recoded] (2012–2024)*

* *Rationale: As a Buddhism-majority country, Myanmar has a track record of persecuting and endangering the Muslim minorities.*

### *Urbanicity [WP14](2012-2024):* Do you live in a rural area or on a farm, a small town or village, a large city, or suburb of a large city?

**Living necessities**

*Shelter [WP43]* (2012–2024): Have there been times in the past 12 months when you did not have enough money to provide adequate shelter or housing for you and your family?

*Food [WP40]* (2012–2024): Have there been times in the past 12 months when you did not have enough money to buy food that you or your family needed?

**Political variables**

*Approval of head of state [WP13125] (2014-2020):* Do you approve or disapprove of the way the leader/head/President of this country is handling his/her job as leader/head/President?

*Confidence in national government [WP139] (2014-2024)*: In this country, do you have confidence in each of the following, or not? How about national government?

*Confidence in honesty of elections [WP144] (2014-2024):* In this country, do you have confidence in each of the following, or not? How about honesty of elections?

*Approval of national leadership [WP150] (2014-2024):* Do you approve or disapprove of the job performance of the leadership of this country?

*Confidence in local policy force in city of area [WP112] (2014-2024):* In the city or area where you live, do you have confidence in the local police force, or not?

*Confidence in the military [WP137] (2015-2020):* In this country, do you have confidence in each of the following, or not? How about the military?

*Confidence in judicial system [WP138] (2012-2024):* In this country, do you have confidence in each of the following, or not? How about judicial system and courts?

**Corruptions**

*Perception of corruption in businesses [WP145] (2012-2024)*: Is corruption widespread within business located in this country or not?

*Perception of corruption in country [WP146] (2014-2024):* Is corruption widespread throughout the government in this country, or not?

**Prosocial Behaviors**

*Donating money [WP108] (2012-2024):* Have you done any of the following in the past month? How about donated money to a charity?

*Volunteering [WP109] (2012-2024):* Have you done any of the following in the past month? How about volunteered your time to an organization?

*Helping strangers [WP110] (2012-2024):* Have you done any of the following in the past month? How about helped a stranger or someone you didn't know who needed help?

**Civil Society**

*Intention to move to another country [WP1325]:* Ideally, if you had the opportunity, would you like to move PERMANENTLY to another country, or would you prefer to continue living in this country?

* Like to move to another country\* Like to continue living in this country\* (DK)\* (Refused)\*

*Satisfaction with freedom to choose [WP134]:* In this country, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with your freedom to choose what you do with your life?

**Country-level Factors**

*Total number of conflicts by region.* It includes conflicts from state-based violence, non-state violence, and one-sided violence. Data are provided by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program.

*Total number of deaths from conflicts by region.* It includes death resulted from state-based violence, non-state violence, and one-sided violence. Data provided by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program.

**Timeline**

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