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Interfacing State Fragility and The Global Drug War: Opium in Afghanistan and Myanmar

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Abstract

Afghanistan and Myanmar are countries in the Golden Crescent and the Golden Triangle, respectively. These two regions have been cited to be the loci of most opium production in the contemporary world. Aside from opium, these two countries also share a history of political conflict and instability. In 2021, both countries experienced yet another political upheaval when the Taliban took over the Afghan government and the Myanmar military once again staged a coup. With these, many indices have characterized the Afghan and Myanmar states to be fragile. This paper intends to draw insights from interfacing state fragility and drug policy to situate the place of opium in the larger conversation about political dynamics in Afghanistan and Myanmar. Touching on the role of the Taliban and the Tatmadaw and their place in the two countries' political history along with the policies and politics related to opium, the paper reflects on how international pressure and domestic concerns animate the enduring difficulty of dealing with opium cultivation and the persistent challenge of state fragility.

Introduction

In 2021, amid the global pandemic, two countries underwent political upheavals. In February, Myanmar's government was taken over, yet again, by the Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces) and since then, democracy in the country is again at a backslide (Paddock, 2022). Few months later, in August, the Taliban launched an offensive and took over Afghanistan, sparking renewed debates about culpability, failures, and deepening challenges (Agarwal, 2021). Decades of conflict had animated the histories of these countries. In many ways, the Afghan and Myanmar states had been regarded as weak—fragile—owing to the many challenges they face surfacing questions of legitimacy and efficiency.

Broadly defined, fragility figures when a state lacks the capacity to perform functions and move the country to development and what accounts for state fragility could be understood by looking at weak institutions, poverty, violence, corruption, conflicts, among others (Osaghae, 2007).

Many indices that measure state fragility have consistently characterized Afghanistan and Myanmar to be fragile. One example is the Fragile State Index that frames state fragility within four dimensions: cohesion (security related, factionalized society, etc.), political dimension (legitimacy, public service, human rights, etc); economic dimension (development related); and social aspects (external interventions, demographic matters, etc) (Fund for Peace, 2024). In this fragility index, Afghanistan is at the 6th place and Myanmar on 12th among 179 countries in terms of having high level of state fragility in 2023, placing both in the index's "high alert" list (Fund for Peace, 2024).

Aside from state fragility, another similarity runs between the two countries: the cultivation of opium. Myanmar is within what has been referred to as the Golden Triangle and Afghanistan is cradled within the Golden Crescent. These two regions have been cited as the major loci where much of illicit opium circulating across the world originates (UNODC, 2020). With the long history of conflict and instability in Myanmar and Afghanistan, observers have linked opium to the persisting challenge of finding peace in these two countries (Bodetti, 2017).

Research questions, objectives, and argument

This paper takes into consideration the political landscape and state fragility as the larger context within which to reflect on drug policy in both Afghanistan and Myanmar. In comparing the ways in which illicit drug trade interplays with politics and state-building in these two countries, I mainly ask: how do we nuance state fragility in Afghanistan and Myanmar from a comparative lens and how do opium economies affect state-society relations?

In order to address the questions, this paper narrates the enduring notion of state fragility in Afghanistan and Myanmar especially in relation to the Taliban and the Tatmadaw as dominant political forces that have been in place in these states' political affairs for decades. These accounts are woven within a broader contextualization of the illegal drug policies in these two countries in light of the international drug control regime (IDCR) that have birthed a global drug war. In many ways, the paper seeks to consider illegal drugs and the challenges of illegal drug policy as aspects to look at to further understand the complexity behind Afghanistan and Myanmar being framed as fragile states.

This paper broadly argues that illegal drugs and illegal drug policy—i.e. on opium—brought conditions prompting the Taliban and the Tatmadaw to navigate both international and domestic pressures. While both regimes have sought to implement prohibitionist policies throughout their rule, the continuing cultivation of opium in these two countries remain to be a major challenge to the state. This brings the need for the Taliban and Tatmadaw to handle the international pressure of ending illegal drug cultivation along with providing alternative development and also dealing and accommodating with domestic concerns. These ultimately make it difficult for Afghanistan and Myanmar to escape the state fragility conundrum.

Conceptual framework

The comparative account presented in this paper is grounded on the concepts of the fragile state and the existence of the IDCR. In regard to state fragility, there have been many concepts that emerged attempting to capture the complexity of contemporary statehood owing to the growing challenges being experienced worldwide. From looking at states as weak to even assessing it as failed, the notion of a fragile state gained traction to describe conditions relative to the lacking capacity of a state to perform functions and move the country to development. While being widely used, the notion of state fragility remains to be contested and debated (Saeed, 2020; Carment & Samy, 2023).

The scholarship on fragile states account that the concept emerged in the 1990s with roots as far back to the Cold War when there were concerns about developing countries (Brock, Holm, Sorenen & Stohl, 2012). Since the emergence of the concept of the fragile state, there have been increasing interest in using it both in academic discourse and within development organizations as evidenced by its prevalence in comparative politics, international affairs, national security and development programs (Grimm, Lemay-Hébert, & Nay, 2014). Initially conceived to account for weakness of the state, the concept of state fragility had expanded and had been continuously nuanced.

In this paper, understanding state fragility by looking at state authority, state legitimacy and state capacity is followed. As elaborated by Grimm (2023), state authority largely refers to the condition where the state is able to effectively use physical violence within its territory and fragility figures when there is violent conflict (one-sided, intra or inter-state, or otherwise). State legitimacy pertains to the state having the capacity to get the support of the people and fragility is seen when there is gross human rights violations, suppression of press freedom, and extra-judicial persecutions of people. State capacity relates to the already mentioned characteristic of fragile state having the limited capacity to provide the basic needs of the people.

In determining state fragility, it has been noted how it is externally assessed through the use of indicators and indices (Saeed, 2020). Indeed, in many ways, the 'invention' of state fragility could be critically understood to be politically motivated as it emerged in the context of liberal ideas exerting standards upon the developing world (Grimm, Lemay-Hébert, & Nay, 2015) especially with the complication of state fragility being tied to larger conversations of security and development (Grimm, Lemay-Hébert, & Nay, 2014).

As the concept of the fragile state figured in development interventions in the last decades, so too have the emergence of the IDCR being influential in the politics and policies related to illegal drugs. The rise and development of the IDCR started in the early 20th century with the many international conferences held to discuss global policy on illegal narcotics, initially concentrated on opium (Foster, 2000; Kim, 2020; Collins, 2021). These efforts would lead to the signing of several United Nations (UN) agreements and statutes that laid the groundwork for the definition and policy recommendations related to psyschoactive substances and narcotics. These conventions include the 1961 UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, the 1971 Convention on Pyschotropic Substances; and the 1988 UN Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (Collins, 2021; Gootenberg, 2021). Another key player that moved the development of the international drug control regime would be the United States (US) when during the presidency of Nixon, the Americans would launch the global campaign against illegal drugs, birthing the popular term "drug war" (Gootenberg, 2021).

Building on the conversations on the fragile state (also considering the critiques) and the rise of the IDCR, the paper compares the cases of Afghanistan and Myanmar by tracing the political development of the two countries in relation to the Taliban and the Tatmadaw with attention given to opium policies. While there have been many works that dealt with the case of Afghanistan and Myanmar separately, there are few that are done comparing the cases. This paper attempts this venture and hopes to illustrate the complexity of the interplay of illegal drug policy and state fragility.

While understanding the concept of state fragility as a political invention is instructive in demonstrating the imbalance in international

affairs, it is also illustrative of the importance of considering the external pressures being wielded upon states that are being categorized as fragile. It is within this reflection that this paper anchors the need to look at the wider international context of Afghanistan and Myanmar. With understanding fragility being externally assessed, there is an importance underscored in the literature on state fragility that calls for a more nuanced account of domestic concerns especially when interventions are being carried out (Nay, 2013). The same has gone for conversations related to the translation of the goals of the IDCR in the contexts of states being deemed to be hotspots of illegal drug production, such as the case of Afghanistan and Myanmar. Critical appraisals of the IDCR have pointed out its ineffectiveness and inconsistencies (Idler, 2021; Hallam & Bewley-Taylor, 2021) which also speaks to the ways in which the international pressures would exert influence to local situations complicating conditions in already fragile states.

Outline of the paper

The paper proceeds in two main parts. The first part contextualizes Afghanistan and Myanmar. In the contextualization, the Taliban and the Tatmadaw are tackled in relation to their rise to power in the two countries. Then, a general sketch of the scale of opium cultivation in the two countries are presented in relation to the broader geographical and political context of the Golden Crescent and the Golden Triangle. This part begins the presentation of the ways in which the IDCR has shaped the ways Afghanistan and Myanmar came to be seen in relation to opium and illegal drugs contributing to markers of state fragility. This section would then lead to the second major part of the paper that deals with the politics of illegal drug policy as it intertwines with governance, and hence, state fragility.

Opium and Political Conflict: Contextualizing Afghanistan and Myanmar

The political instability being experienced in Afghanistan and Myanmar spans a long history characterized by unrest and competing challenges posed by external and internal forces. At the forefront of conversations are the ruling regimes that have been instrumental in this long and complex story. For Afghanistan, it relates to the Taliban, a regime that rose from the ashes of the Soviet invasion and the Cold War. For Myanmar, the military force of the Tatmadaw that rose to power after the end of British colonialism and continues to remain politically significant.

The Afghan state emerged in 1921 and within a few decades of sovereign rule, the emergence of the Cold War had impacted the country. A critical point in the brewing conflict happened from 1979 to 1989 when the country, after starting to distance itself from the USSR was invaded by the Russians. The Soviet - Afghan War would be the context in which various groups, called the Muhajeedin, would engage in guerilla warfare (PBS, 2021). After the USSR left Afghanistan, the country was plunged in a civil war with various factions competing for power. In 1994 under the leadership of Mohammad Omar, a newly formed group, Taliban, rose to prominence after the group was able to pacify unrest in the region of Kandahar (Borthakur & Kotokey, 2020). In 1996, the Taliban was able to seize control of the capital, Kabul. As the origins of the Taliban was in the Islamic schools and the traditions of the Pashtun ethnolinguistic group, the Taliban policy of reorganizing political and social life in Afghanistan hinged on strict interpretation of Islamic law and nuances of Pashtun culture (Borthakur & Kotokey, 2020; Terpstra, 2020; Johnson & Mason, 2007; Marsden, 2008).

Similar to the Afghan experience, Myanmar, then in the early 20th century still known as Burma, experienced much political upheaval. Myanmar (name changed from Burma in 1989) was plunged in the Pacific War when Japan invaded the country and within this time, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) led by Aung San was formed in 1942 and fought Japanese rule. In 1948, Burma gained independence. Amid the challenge of finally gaining independence, Aung San was assassinated in 1947 by nationalist rivals led by U Nu (BBC, 2018). Contrary to the path taken by Afghanistan, U Nu joined the Non - Aligned Movement during the Cold War. Furthermore, while Islam became a major point of struggle that united the people of the Taliban, Buddhism became the tinderbox that lighted the end of U Nu. U Nu's promotion of Buddhism as state religion was rejected by military factions leading to his ouster in 1962 led by General Ne Win (BBC, 2018). While Socialism became a flashpoint of rejection that ignited the rise of ethnic and religious groups in the Afghan civil war and the Soviet-Afghan War, socialism became part of Ne Win's campaign as he sought to usher the "Burmese way to Socialism" (BBC, 2018; Kyaw, 2020). With the military's victory came the decades long process of entrenching the Tatmadaw. Since their ascent to power, the Tatmadaw had been instrumental in important aspects of politics in the country such as in the realms of selecting candidates during elections, and in having a decisive voice in selecting other leaders in government (Maung, 2014; Steinberg, 2021).

Opium cultivation in Afghanistan and Myanmar

Opium, like Afghanistan and Myanmar, has a long and complex history. Accounts suggest that the first use and cultivation of opium poppy date as far back to the second millennium BCE in the Mediterranean. Research inquiries have noted opium as an article of trade as early as this time appearing in Egypt and Cyprus. When the Europeans came into contact with Asia, opium also figured in the burgeoning global trade. Opium had shifted to becoming a major trading commodity when colonial powers such as Britain imposed trade monopolies. By the turn of twentieth century, however, colonial empires began shifting in trajectory and the emergence of the IDCR began (Kim, 2020; Collins, 2021).

Despite the existence of the IDCR, the continued circulation of illegal narcotics, including opium, persisted as a global dilemma. In 2021, amid the global pandemic, the UNODC World Drug Report had noted that 7,930 tons of opium were processed globally (UNODC 2022). Much of illicit opium have been identified to still come from two regions in the world: the Golden Crescent and the Golden Triangle. The two wider regions have had significant impact to the global illicit drug market, but have also in turn been shaped by larger global dynamics. The Golden Triangle, for example, had been underscored to have illustrated the challenge posed by illicit traffic of drugs and its corrosive impact to the social stability and economic development complicates the politics in the region (Chalk, 2000). The same discourses and political developments also animate the history of the Golden Crescent. Kreutzmann (2007) had mentioned that the conditions in the Golden Crescent are also influenced by international drug syndicates and in turn, opium from the Golden Crescent affects the regional power dynamics.

Discussing the ways in which illegal drug policy and opium cultivation interplays with state fragility in Afghanistan and Myanmar necessitates looking at the scale of opium cultivation in these two countries. The UNODC had consistently flagged these two countries as the major sources of opium circulating in the world, the number one source of which alternating between

the two. In 2023, Myanmar overtook Afghanistan as the top source of Opium (UNODC 2023). This largely owes to sharp decline in opium production in Afghanistan after the policy of the Taliban to decisively ban opium production in the country (UNODC 2023). As for Myanmar, data from the latest country survey of the UNODC shows that since the military takeover in 2021, opium production had increased 33% (UNODC 2022).

The Global Drug War and the context of Fragile States: Opium and governance in Afghanistan and Myanmar

As noted, the scale of opium cultivation in Afghanistan and Myanmar within the context of the Golden Crescent and the Golden Triangle grew throughout the decades since the independence of the two countries. But the opium situation did not exist in a vacuum, isolated from the political conflicts experienced in the two countries.

Afghanistan and the Golden Crescent came at the forefront of opium production beginning in the 1970s and this was also attributed to the growing conflicts experienced by the countries in the Golden Triangle (Robins, 2021). Myanmar during this period underwent political struggles after the power grab in the 1960s and the Tatmadaw was consolidating political legitimacy. After the coup, the military created the Burma Socialist Programme Party in 1962 beginning the decades rule of the Tatmadaw (McCarthy, 2010). Within these efforts, the military-led government enacted a New Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs Law in 1974 after some interventions from the UN for the government to have policies to tackle the opium situation. Within these efforts, the government adopted a work plan with the UN to curb the cultivation and circulation of opium (Sassaroli, 2022). However, this particular effort eventually grew ineffective especially with the corruption and growing unrest in rural country sides (Kramer, 2015). The local context of having insurgent groups in opium cultivating areas also brought complicated responses from the Tatmadaw (Meehan, 2015).

While the Tatmadaw tried to respond to international pressure, the context of the Soviet -Afghan war and poverty in Afghanistan in the 1970s had significant impact on the ways local Afghan farmers began to turn to opium as a source of income. This happened in a gradual pace. In the 1930s and 1940s, opium production in Afghanistan was allowed by the government through licensing (Mansfield, 2016). When the IDCR unfolded and the US began its war on drugs, there became a growing concern regarding opium cultivation in Afghanistan. The international community began censuring Afghanistan in relation to opium (Mansfield, 2016; Robins, 2021). However, the eruption of the war with the USSR exacerbated the disarray in the government and the continuing war effort opened the opportunities and need for opium. In the 1990s, when the Taliban took hold of the government, there was a continued increase in opium cultivation attributed to the complicity of some Taliban leaders benefiting from corruption. In many ways, the opium trade became consolidated under Taliban rule since "in some cases the local Taliban leadership simply tolerated drug production and trade, being unwilling to challenge powerful local interests. In others, Taliban commanders were, or became, more actively involved in trading opiates and taxing production, processing and transport" (Mansfield 2016, 108) .

We can surmise that the largescale opium cultivation in the Golden Crescent and the Golden Triangle (consequently in Afghanistan and Myanmar) was taken as a serious concern once the IDCR developed and UN conventions arose. As the Global Drug War unfolded, there have been insinuations of the ways in which the US through the Central Intelligence Agency had used the

pretext of the drug war to intervene and at times become complicit to the opium and heroin trade (McCoy, 2000). This presents the complexity of the IDCR and the continuing debates surrounding it. As seen in the ways the Taliban and the Tatmadaw had to contend with the challenge, the ways in which this complicated international context intersects with the domestic concerns also leads to the further importance of unpacking state fragility considering its persistence and link to illegal drug policy.

Looking at the development of the political situation in Afghanistan and Myanmar with the rise of the Taliban and the Tatmadaw, we see tensions in the ways the illegal drug situation would also figure in the policies of the governments given that the IDCR had also emerged. Thus, understanding the interplay of international and domestic contexts surfaces the impact of the IDCR and the notion of state fragility. Here, there is wisdom in the insights and grounding from the scholarship that looks at states in relational terms and underscoring the state-in-society perspective. Jessop (2008) makes a compelling theoretical elaboration on state in relational terms when he argued for the importance (if not necessity) of understanding the state in relation to other actors in society such as other social institutions, the economy, civil society, and even international organizations. Furthermore, Migdal (2001) in developing a "state—in—society" approach had reminded scholars to understand the complex relationship between state and society. We could therefore understand the state not as a fixed entity but an amalgam of the ongoing and intersecting struggles among the elements of the state and the various sectors in society. This struggle is mediated by a multitude of factors as well.

In tackling the ways in which the Taliban and Tatmadaw enacted policies regarding opium cultivation in Afghanistan and Myanmar, it is important to underscore how the broad IDCR had exerted expectations for countries to curb illegal drug cultivation, production, and circulation. The IDCR as exemplified by UN conventions had in fact been taken up by the governments in Afghanistan and Myanmar. Both countries are signatories to the 1961, 1971, and 1988 conventions (UN 1961, 1971, and 1988). Despite this context, opium cultivation remains prevalent in the two countries. This is further complicated by the continuing political conflicts as seen in the resurgence of the Taliban and the Tatmadaw in 2021. Thus, in many ways, we can look at opium as a prism through which we can demonstrate the complexity of the politics in Afghanistan and Myanmar under the Taliban and the Tatmadaw. Opium, as mentioned, is in fact among the first psychoactive substance to be a topic of global conversations toward prohibition (Richards 2002; Kim 2020; Collins 2021). It is thus not entirely surprising that in the pursuit of Taliban and Tatmadaw to legitimize their regimes, they also sought to have prohibitionist policies despite accounts that they also in some respect benefitted from the income generated from the opium market. This unfolded amid the developing notion of state fragility in policy and academic circles since the successful curtailment of drug trades also became interpreted as manifestations of state strength and legitimacy (Mansfield, 2016).

Myanmar and the intersecting issues of the global drug war, democratization, and state legitimacy

Amid the global drug war, one way of situating the conversation in the case of Myanmar is by considering the ways in which the democratization efforts and ethnic conflicts (See Walton and Thein, 2023) created conditions of state fragility and their links to illegal drug policy. While the Tatmadaw held a strong grip on power, they are not without any challenges. Well into the decades of military rule, the Tatmadaw would face a series

of protests in 1988 amid the growing economic hardships experienced by the people. The military regime faced the protests with an iron fist (Egreteau 2009). From the struggles of the 1980s emerged the opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and the newly formed National League for Democracy (NLD) that sought to demand change in government. Even though the NLD won the elections, the Tatmadaw staged a military junta that lasted until well into the 2000s (Steinberg, 2021). The Tatmadaw would slightly open for democratic reforms leading to a new constitution in 2008. However, the constitution mandated that the military would have assured parliamentary seats signaling how in many ways the NLD had limited successes in consolidating democratic transitions (Swe, 2021). In 2015, Aung San Suu Kyi would become the de facto leader of the country as state counsellor. It appeared that Myanmar was on the road to democratization, but waves of controversy erupted with the Rohingya crisis (Selth, 2018) to which Suu Kyi was cited to have remained mum (Lee, 2014). In 2020, the NLD would again win in a landslide victory, cementing Suu Kyi's position, albeit her tarnished reputation owing to the Rohingya crisis. In 2021, after raising allegations of electoral fraud, the military staged a coup and took power once again (Paddock, 2022). It was thus in 2021 that once again Myanmar earned the attention and concern of the world.

As the Tatmadaw's and even the democratically elected leader's legitimacy was continually challenged against the backdrop of democratic values, the ways in which economic challenges brought poverty also heightened ethnic conflicts. It has been noted by scholars (e.g. Meehan, 2011) that the cultivation of opium in agricultural areas of Myanmar has also impacted ethnic politics and instability owing to the rise of armed groups that challenged the state. Especially in the aftermath of the 1988 uprisings and the coup that reestablished strong military rule, the tense context led to the rise of insurgent groups that also utilized opium cultivation and the income being generated by the drug trade. The government in Myanmar, being highly fragile in the 1980s to 1990s, paved the way for shifting strategies to accommodate the complexity of drug trade and find military solutions to ethnic opposition forces. Drug trade figured in rent and patronage politics as it became tools to buy loyalties and fracture possible alliances between insurgent groups and pro-democracy movements. In a sense, the insurgent groups as proxy state actors also aided in providing legitimacy to the Tatmadaw in using force. Within this context, the ways the government in Myanmar seems to vacillate in dealing with the opium trade in the country and the Golden Triangle since they also found themselves benefiting from it through political concessions (Meehan, 2011).

For prohibitionist policies, there have been attempts by both insurgent groups and the state led by the Tatmadaw to contribute to ending or at least limiting opium cultivation. However, the complexity of politics in Myanmar also brings forward a variegated way of implementing opium bans. As noted by Meehan (2015), the policy of banning opium could be seen as both fortifying or further fragmenting the state due to the variations and differing levels of government interventions related to the opium trade. With this, the state in Myanmar leverages the opium trade in order to pacify conflicts in the Shan region (Meehan, 2011 and 2015). It has been noted that the "Tatmadaw's policy of prioritizing security over drug-related concerns has allowed criminal groups and drug syndicates to operate relatively freely in a situation rife with ethnic tensions and conflict, weak governance, and conflicting international geo-political interests" (Kramer, 2015, p. 3). Furthermore, there needs to be a consideration of the lives and livelihoods of the farmers involved in the opium cultivation and trade (Luong, 2020). The case of Myanmar's prohibitionist policies

highlights the value of looking at the domestic context and the ways the global affects the local.

Afghanistan and the intersecting issues of the global drug war and the global war on terror

In the case of Afghanistan, the impact of the opium traffic in the Golden Crescent was seen to cause a "retreat of the state" (Pandit and Basu, 2012) especially during the period of the US-led efforts of democratizing the country during their political and military intervention. As in the case of Myanmar where non-state actors such as insurgent groups exacerbated the challenge posed by the opium trade, the presence of armed militia groups, drug cartels, and terrorist cells also challenged the ways the Afghan state navigated its opium policy. The intense economic globalization that also heightened illicit drug trade emanating from the Golden Crescent had undermined efforts to curtail the traffic and the corruption of some Afghan officials also fueled the tolerance, if not encouragement for the trade to persist (Pandit and Basu, 2012). In many ways, opium had, in the description of Mansfield (2016), undermined Afghanistan throughout its history.

After a few years of control, the Taliban-led Afghan state would be engaged in another major conflict when in 2001, the September 11 attacks ignited the US Global War on Terror. As Afghanistan was reported to collude with Al Qaeda, the country became a target of intense military intervention (Terpstra, 2020). The US started importing its democratic ideals to Afghanistan while also engaging in a war with them. Thus, the ethnic ties that fueled the early Mujaheedin were reactivated, and the chaos continued. After decades of intervention, the US would withdraw from Afghanistan and finally in 2021, the final troops pulled out. Shortly after, the Taliban once again seized Kabul. The new Taliban however, promised reforms (Ameyaw-Brobbey, 2023), but it remains to be major point of contention as the new takeover reignited concerns about security and instability (Sakhi, 2022).

In terms of opium prohibition, the Taliban had two episodes of strong policies that sought to end cultivation in the region. These policies were carried out amid the overlapping pressures of the global drug war and the global war on terror. The first was in 2000 and the next when they reclaimed Kabul in 2021 (UNODC, 2023). In the 2000 ban, religious reasons were cited when the Taliban leader denounced opium as anti-Islamic (Robins, 2021). Amid the sanctions placed on Afghanistan due to the implication of the regime coddling terrorist cells and leaders, Mansfield (2016, 123) notes that "the Taliban's decision to ban opium production during the 2000/1 growing season has to be considered within the context of the regime's isolation at the time and its broader efforts to improve its political and economic position, both regionally and internationally." Taliban implemented their policy of banning opium through violence and harsh measures including public punishments, exercising coercion and threats, and forced destruction of poppy fields (Farrell & Thorne, 2005). While showcasing the strength of the state in imposing a policy, the ban had also impacted the lives of the farmers and the communities that built their livelihoods around opium. As mentioned by the UNODC (2023), many of the farmers indeed acceded to the policy and planted other crops, but the shock of the shift and decline in income brought issues of alternative development and livable sources of income to be flashpoints of contention (UNODC, 2023). It is thus not surprising that many scholars had raised the point that extreme measures could be successful in the run up, but counterproductive in the long term as such could also drive up the prices of opium in the market making it seductive to circle back to its cultivation (Chouvy, 2010). In the case of Afghanistan, the complex domestic

issues built around economic challenges (brought also by sanctions from other countries), political conflict, and lack of comprehensive alternative livelihood programs make it difficult to have meaningful and long-lasting policy to address the widescale opium cultivation in the country (Felbab-Brown, 2017).

After 2021: Opium and politics in Afghanistan and Myanmar

The 2021 political events in both Afghanistan and Myanmar had garnered international attention for several reasons. One prominent concern relates to the persisting prevalence of state fragility in these two countries. As the literature on state fragility notes, both international and domestic conditions animate the ways in which we can make sense of a state being fragile. As political conflict continues to figure in both countries, state legitimacy pose as a major challenge for the regimes. As the Fragile State Index (Fund for Peace, 2024) shows, Afghanistan had a spike in its score for the period of 2021-2023. From a score of 102.1 points in 2021, it soared to 105.9 in 2022, then to 106.6 in 2023. In 2024, Afghanistan showed an improvement with a score of 103.9. Meanwhile for Myanmar, 2021 posed a score of 93.8 which significantly rose to 100 points in 2022. In 2023 to 2024, the score seemed to have remained in plateau with 100.2 in 2023 and 100 for 2024.

The sudden increase from 2021 to 2022 scores for both countries is expected given the tensions that happened after the 2021 takeovers of the Taliban and the Tatmadaw. The drop in the points for Afghanistan for 2024 poses an interesting research question worthy of future exploration. Perhaps we can find clues to the ways the Taliban had dealt with opium upon there resurgence to power and after taking over the government. The UNODC (2023) had noted that in 2023, opium production in Afghanistan had significantly decreased after the Taliban announced their policy of banning opium in 2022. The decrease is significant, posing a 95% drop. While the UNODC report detailed the policies of the de-facto administration led by the Taliban in relation to banning illegal drugs, the international body remained cautious in inferring and outright mentioning whether the policy would be effective in the long run. The 2023 Afghanistan Opium Survey further notes that the ban had posed important challenges to opium farming communities. As the literature on opium policies have noted, the need to find alternative sources of livelihood is paramount.

In relation to the decrease of opium cultivation and circulation in Afghanistan, and to an extent the Golden Crescent, the UNODC in its 2023 Southeast Asia Opium Survey had noted that there is a steady growth in the production of opium in the Golden Triangle, and thus also in Myanmar. Several reasons could explain this steady increase. One of which is the decline of production in Afghanistan which may have inadvertently created a higher demand. While the earlier decades showed that the decrease in opium cultivation in the Golden Triangle provided the impetus for the rise of production in the Golden Crescent, the reverse trend is being seen in the period following the 2022 Taliban policy. The increase in opium cultivation in Myanmar is also inferred by the UNODC to have been undergirded by the continuing economic problems that the country experience. The Tatmadaw's efficiency and actual commitment to handle the opium cultivation situation remains to be a research endeavor worthy of pursuing. However, as the country's history had shown, the policy of the military regime is important to consider especially given that they have had policies in the past that pursued prohibition. Furthermore, the continuing problems faced by the Tatmadaw in relation to insurgent groups with the shadow economies ties to opium and its

attendant issues of corruption, clientelism and violence needs more updated research and reflection to cover the aftermath of the 2021 coup. What we can infer from trends in state fragility and opium cultivation for 2021-2023/2024, however, lends credence to the main objective of this paper which posits the value of interfacing state fragility and the drug policy influenced by the global drug war and the international drug control regime.

Conclusion

In comparing the case of Afghanistan and Myanmar, this paper sought to reflect on the notion of the fragile state in relation to illegal drug policy as it discussed how the regimes in the two countries, led by Taliban for the former and the Tatmadaw for the latter, navigated the complexity of handling opium cultivation. Looking at opium in the context of state fragility in Afghanistan and Myanmar was premised on two reasons: one, the countries are located in the Golden Triangle (in the case of Myanmar) and the Golden Crescent (in the case of Afghanistan), regarded as the regions where most opium in the global illicit drug market originate; and two, considering opium places the discussion into a nuanced understanding of how the IDCR provides another metric for assessing state fragility.

Characterizing Afghanistan and Myanmar as fragile states contends with the emergence of the concept of state fragility and the ways in which countries are assessed against certain indicators. One way of looking at state fragility is by considering state authority, state legitimacy, and state capacity. As mentioned, fragility is sensed against these categories when authority is undermined by instability and violent conflict; legitimacy when statehood is contested; and capacity when there the state fails to provide the basic public goods to the people. Throughout Afghanistan's and Myanmar's long and complex history, there have been episodes when such figures of fragility were seen. From persisting insurgent and violent conflicts, questions to the legitimacy and policies that underpin the regime, to the pervasive poverty. This poverty and all other modes of fragility, in one way or another, come together in the politics of opium cultivation and the responses of the Taliban and the Tatmadaw.

Since the character of being fragile is assessed from outside the domestic context of the state, to understand state fragility and illegal drug policy would also benefit from looking at the interplay of international forces (as seen in the various international norms, the IDCR as well as intervention efforts) and the domestic contexts. While the history of Afghanistan and Myanmar along with the rise and resurgence of the Taliban and the Tatmadaw had points of similarities, they also had several divergences. The same goes for the illegal drug policy. While both countries are nestled in the regions of highest opium production and faced with the similar international pressure, the local contexts of the two countries also bring nuanced differences in the ways prohibitionist policies played out. This only goes to show how the notion of state fragility and drug policy remains to be tenuous and contested as local conditions would always bring unique conditions and outcomes.

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