The 2014 nationwide census in Myanmar – the first since 1983 – enabled the key socio-economic data required for planning and development purposes to be updated. Regional population figures are the essential basis for all socio-economic analyses, while the figures for Myanmar’s 330 townships are a very good starting point for spatially differentiated comparisons (Kraas/Spohner 2015). The total population figure of 51,486,253 includes estimated figures of 1.09 million in Rakhine State, 69,753 in Kayin State and 46,600 in Kachin State (census findings 2014; MoIP 2015b). The slight gender imbalance (24,821,176 males (48.2%) compared with 26,598,244 females (51.8%)) reflects the fact that more men than women are labour migrants living in neighbouring countries.

The most populous areas are Yangon Region (7,360,703 inhabitants; 14.3% of the population), Ayeyarwady Region (6,184,829 inhabitants; 12.0%), Mandalay Region (6,165,723 inhabitants; 12.0%), Shan State (5,815,384 inhabitants), Sagaing Region (5,320,299 inhabitants) and Bago Region (4,863,455 inhabitants), followed by Magway Region (3,912,711 inhabitants), Rakhine State (3,188,963 inhabitants), Mon State (2,050,282 inhabitants), Kachin State (1,689,654 inhabitants), Kayin State (1,572,657 inhabitants), Tanintharyi Region (1,406,434 inhabitants) and Nay Pyi Taw Capital Region (1,158,367 inhabitants; 2.3% of the population). Chin State (478,690 inhabitants; 0.9%) and Kayah State (286,627 inhabitants; 0.6%) have the lowest population figures (all figures: MoIP 2015a: 3). Three areas of population concentration stand out on the map of the total population distribution: the area around Yangon, until 2005 capital of Myanmar in the south, close to the sea, Mandalay, the last capital of the Myanmar kings before the arrival of the British colonial powers, and Nay Pyi Taw, the country’s new capital. While Yangon officially has 5,211,431 inhabitants – which makes Yangon, according to international urban standards (Kraas 2007), an emerging megacity – Mandalay follows with 1,489,271 and Nay Pyi Taw with 1,160,242 inhabitants (MoIP 2015b).

POPULATION DISTRIBUTION AS A HISTORICAL LEGACY

This bipolarity mirrors the country’s history: during the era of the Burmese kingdoms, the centre of political power, population and the economy lay inland in the dry zone, the region to the north of present-day Pyay that extends across Bagan and Mandalay to Shwebo. Accordingly, most of the historical capitals were located in Central Myanmar. The Mon empire in the south in the area around present-day Mawlamyine, Thaton and Bago was, by comparison, a sparsely populated region until the early 19th century. According to different historical sources, Burma’s population in pre-British times was estimated roughly at 3-3.6 million to 17 million (as carefully analysed by Richell 2006: 8-15). Three of the sources (Burney 1795 (to be corrected: Burney 1842), Yule 1826 and Alves 1855, quoted after Richell 2006: 9) have produced similar estimates – ranging from 3 million to 4.2 million inhabitants in ‘Burma Proper’, i.e. with the exception of the Mergui Peninsula, Arakan and the Upper Chindwin – which were ‘all largely drawn from the sultan records assembled by the Burmese kings in 1783 and 1826’ (Richell 2006: 9).

This concentration of the population in the centre of the country radically changed when the British colonial powers gradually seized control of what was then Burma in the three Anglo-Burmese Wars (1824-1826, 1852-1853
Burma thus came under the rule of the British Raj as a province of India. Much of the population shifted towards the coast or migrated to the new and up-and-coming economic region being developed under British rule along the coast. A second new population centre also emerged: after the British moved their capital from Moulmein (now Mawlamyine; capital city from 1826-1852), the port of Rangoon was massively expanded. Within a few decades, the British had developed the Ayeyarwady delta and transformed it into the ‘rice bowl’ of Asia. By the 1930s, 40,500 km² of land had been cleared and integrated into the colonial economy with a new transport network, irrigation systems, settlements and trade centres (Kraas 2016b). The railway line between Henzada and Bassein was completed by 1915; from here, rice from the western delta was shipped to Rangoon (Nishizawa 1991: 21). Employment, investment and consumption opportunities sprang up in abundance (Furnivall 1957, Nishizawa 1991: 11-13), and as rice exports from the delta boomed, Burma became the world’s largest rice exporter.

Territorial development and the processing industries were extremely costly and labour-intensive and required a very large workforce. This led to a massive population shift from central Burma to the delta region: by 1901, around 10% of Burma’s four million people had migrated to the Ayeyarwady Delta (Adas 1974). The British also brought in hundreds of thousands of workers from India and Malaya. By 1901, 297,000 Indians had arrived, with around 70% initially concentrated in Rangoon, which became the British Burmese capital in 1852 (Kraas/Yin May/Zin Nwe Myint 2010). Indians thus made up more than 51% of the urban population. Between 1852 and 1937, around 2.6 million Indians migrated to Burma, partly on a seasonal basis during the winter months at first. However, from the 1880s, growing numbers moved into the new settlements and cities in the Ayeyarwady Delta, where they became farmers and land owners and steadily established themselves in urban trade (Cheng 1968: 124-130, Aung-Thwin/Aung-Thwin 2012: 207).

THE CENTRE-PERIPHERY DIVIDE AND BIPOLAR POPULATION DISTRIBUTION IN THE CENTRAL LOWLANDS

With an overall average population density of 76 inhabitants/km², the population of Myanmar today is concentrated in the historic ‘heartland’ of central Myanmar and the Mandalay agglomeration as well as in the Yangon agglomeration and the Ayeyarwady Delta (MoIP 2015a: 3). At the level of the states and regions, Yangon Region (716 persons/km²), Mandalay Region (206 persons/km²), Ayeyarwady Region (176 persons/km²) and Mon State (167 persons/km²), Nay Pyi Taw Capital Region (164 persons/km²) and Bago Region (123 persons/km²) have the highest population densities, followed by Magway Region (87 persons/km²), Rakhine State (87 persons/km²), Sagaing Region (56 persons/km²), Kayin State (52 persons/km²), Shan State (38 persons/km²) and Tanintharyi Region (32 persons/km²). Kayah State (24 persons/km²), Kachin State (19 persons/km²) and Chin State (13 persons/km²; MoIP 2015b) have the lowest population densities.

Looking at the population densities based on the land area of the 330 townships, the divide is striking. In the extensive central lowlands of the Ayeyarwady River and Sittaung River, the Ayeyarwady Delta and intermittently along the coast, densities generally range from 100 to 500 persons/km². The figures are substantially lower in townships in the mountain regions of Chin State, the north-western Sagaing Region, Kachin State, southern and eastern Shan State, Kayah State, northern Kayin State and in Tanintharyi Region, with fewer than 10 persons/km². In contrast to other countries in Asia, the inhabitants in the more densely populated central Myanmar are – apart from the two largest urban agglomerations of Yangon and Mandalay – distributed fairly evenly, mainly due to the fact that most people are farmers and thus living mostly in rural villages.

The highest densities are reached in the townships in urban areas, particularly Yangon and Mandalay, with values ranging from more than 5,000 to a maximum of 49,377 persons/
km². The areas around Mawlamyine and Sittwe along the coast and around Nay Pyi Taw, Bago, Monywa, Pyay, Hinthada, Taunggyi, Kalay and Mogok inland also stand out.

In a comparison of density values for the (extensive) administrative units with those obtained from the LandScan calculation, which is based on analysis of data from high-resolution satellite imagery (LandScan 2013TM, Landsat 8 Data Archive), the population centres stand out to an even greater extent. The map based on satellite imagery clearly shows Myanmar’s bipolar settlement structure, with two main population centres – one in Central Myanmar in the quadrant to the west and south of Mandalay, and the other extending from the Yangon agglomeration with the adjacent Ayeyarwady Delta to the northwest, west and southwest. Two settlement ribbons running along a north-south axis and linking these two population centres are also clearly discernible. The western ribbon is broad and extends along both banks of the Ayeyarwady River, while the narrower but more densely populated eastern ribbon mainly runs to the west of the Sittaung River. The map also clearly shows the extent to which the north-south Bago Yoma forms a barrier between the two ribbons, which do not converge until they reach Bago in the south and Nay Pyi Taw in the north. It is easy to spot the settlement areas around Sittwe and Mawlamyine, which extend from the coast far inland, and the narrow settlement belts which mainly run north to south along the upper Ayeyarwady River, across the basin at Puta-O and Machanbaw, around Kalay, from Hopin to Myitkyina, from Pyin Oo Lwin to Muse, from Kyatpyin to Mogok, from Loikaw to Kalaw and Taunggyi, south of Mawlamyine to Thanbyuzayat and Ye and around Dawei. The small settlement areas or isolated towns occasionally found on the peripheries, such as Hakha, Kengtung and Ann, also stand out. And finally, the map clearly shows the vast scale of the uninhabited areas where there are no significant human settlements or development.

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