

DOI: 10.1355/sj35-1k

Everyday Economic Survival in Myanmar. By Ardeth Maung Thawngmung. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2019. xxxii+276 pp.

The story of Myanmar is often told through a state-centric and conflict-based lens, neglecting the participation of ordinary people. While scholars like James C. Scott have looked at the everyday politics of subjects, these are largely limited to their everyday resistance. Ardeth Maung Thawngmung's *Everyday Economic Survival in Myanmar* fills this gap through its focus on ordinary people's coping strategies, particularly in surviving precarious economic conditions. She argues that these everyday acts, or what she prefers to call "coping strategies" (p. xvi), not only destabilize Myanmar's politics, but also have the potential to bolster its authoritarian structures and slow down the country's reform efforts.

Through narrating her own experiences in the preface, Ardeth Maung Thawngmung explains the significance of studying the coping strategies of the non-elite population to understand the larger socio-political and economic forces in Myanmar. Her positionality and experiences offer readers a brief background of the seemingly unchanging economic situation in Myanmar since the 1960s. This is followed by a brief sketch of the history of independent Myanmar in the introductory chapter. Based on her extensive data, Ardeth Maung Thawngmung then outlines the 'LPVE' (Loyalty-Passive Resistance-Voice-Exit) framework—an adaptation of Albert Hirschman's *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* (1970)—as the theoretical framework that guides her interpretation and analysis of people's everyday economic survival strategies in response to their economic circumstances. First, these responses accommodate structures of power (Loyalty); second, they are indirect and uncoordinated, and occur frequently (Passive Resistance); third, they serve as an escape from "oppressive actions and policies" (p. 11), or temporary/permanent emigration (Exit); fourth, they resist or address injustice (Voice). She refined the LPVE framework further by adding three subcategories—self-enhancing,

self-defeating, and promoting resilience—as the outcome of these strategies on society. The LPVE framework, as such, is helpful in order to understand how people’s social, psychological, political and economic responses to their economic conditions may have an impact on individuals and the larger structure.

Chapter 1 then outlines the different intersections of identity that may shape one’s coping strategy; namely, gender, ethnic and religious orientations, regional differences, and class status. With these set in the reader’s mind, the author goes on to explore the various strategies in chapters 2 to 6, with each chapter detailing specific strategies by means of ‘thick description’. Chapters 2 (“Living Frugally”) and 3 (“Working on the Side”) outline mainly self-defeating strategies that many ordinary people undertake in order to survive the everyday. Chapter 2 is particularly refreshing as it offers a novel take on strategies such as selling assets, pawning, and borrowing (pp. 59–63), and the implications they have on one’s economic circumstances.

In detailing the everyday strategies of individuals, Ardeth Maung Thawngmung also looks at collective approaches—both internal and external—as a means of coping with their precarious living conditions. By highlighting these social coping strategies, Ardeth Maung Thawngmung also highlights the moral economy embedded in many Myanmar communities. At the same time, she situates the professionalization of humanitarian work and the involvement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that may further rupture local networks and ties. The social coping strategy is also partly explained by the psychological coping strategies addressed in chapter 5 (“Boosting Morale”), where the author looks at the role of religion, illegal lottery, palm reading, astrology and fortune-telling in “changing one’s moods or perspectives on life” (p. 144). Finally, chapter 6 (“Accommodating, Resisting and Exiting”) addresses these coping strategies as not only acts that resist the status quo but also as ones that accommodate and support the political regime.

The strength of this book lies in its comprehensive approach to understanding various forms of coping strategies among the non-

elite population in Myanmar. As a product of extensive research including over 300 interviews conducted with various groups between 2008 and 2015, the LPVE framework successfully encapsulates the social, political, economic and psychological forms of coping. It presents a typology that can also be applied to a study of everyday coping strategies of ordinary people in other parts of Southeast Asia. Moreover, the book offers a novel take that moves beyond everyday resistance by looking at how these coping strategies have political implications for the state. Ardeth Maung Thawngmung's work provides a different but much needed vocabulary to articulate the experiences of ordinary people in Myanmar as they attempt to survive their precarious economic conditions.

While the extensiveness of ethnographic data is admirable, it is unclear at times what the implications of the coping strategy are on the politics of the state. Although Ardeth Maung Thawngmung attempts to situate these strategies in the LPVE framework at the end of each chapter, the impact on state politics remains ambiguous vis-à-vis its apparent benefits or costs to the individual. In addition, one cannot help but wonder at the normative notions attached to, particularly, self-defeating and self-enhancing strategies. Many of these coping strategies, such as the role of Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) in rendering aid for everyday survival, while hindering reform efforts in the country, fill the gap left by the state. For instance, instead of relying on the Myanmar state, many of these CBOs provide financial assistance to poor members of the community or construct infrastructure like roads by collecting financial contributions from the local community. However, this places a burden on those who are economically constrained. Moreover, CBOs "discourage criticism as a sign of disloyalty" (p. 116), which further reinforce patron-client relationships instead of promoting democratic norms. What then is the alternative to such coping strategies, since they only slow down reforms, and is there a way out of this conundrum, particularly in developing countries like Myanmar where the state and society depend on NGOs or international organizations to supply

public goods? It is important to examine this in order to understand how best to move forward with the reform efforts of the country.

Overall, this is an impressive work that is accessible and valuable not only for academics interested in Myanmar but also for humanitarian organizations and political and policy analysts who may find the ordinary person's everyday experiences important in informing their work. This book offers a great contribution to the study of the everyday in Myanmar, especially since understanding of the country is often eclipsed by the failures of its leaders and the authoritarian regime, by underlining the agentic potential of ordinary people in influencing the country's politics.

Nursyazwani Jamaludin

ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace, Singapore 119614; email: nursyazwani_jamaludin@iseas.edu.sg.

REFERENCE

Hirschman, Albert. 1970. *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*. Boston: Harvard University Press.