

## *Book Reviews*

*Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule.* By Christina Fink. London and New York: Zed Books; Bangkok: White Lotus; and Dhaka: University Press, 2001. 16 illus., xv, 286 pp.

In the field of area studies, Burma/Myanmar studies occupies a small niche carved out by a pioneering generation of scholars whose “watch” dated back to the 1950s when the fledgeling state was regarded by many observers as a promising example of economic growth and democratic rule. A small group of second-generation Myanmar watchers emerged in the 1970s though very few book-length works were published during Myanmar’s twenty-six-year socialist era. The collapse of the one-party socialist regime in September 1988 in a whirlwind of protest and demonstrations followed by a military coup led to a renewed interest in Myanmar and spawned a new generation of Myanmar specialists and an upsurge of writings on the country; many of them partisan and strongly opinionated.<sup>1</sup> Christina Fink represents this generation who brought a fresh, oftentimes contentious, perspective to the field long dominated by the orthodoxy of the greying old “Burma hands”.<sup>2</sup> The majority of the books and articles on Myanmar published in the last dozen years, after the military regime refused to honour the results of the 1990 general election were highly critical of the regime and its policies. Fink’s book is no exception. The fact that the author’s sympathies lie with the loosely structured movement for liberal democracy in “Burma” is further attested by the glowing comments, displayed on the back cover, from three leading proponents of the movement: Aung San Suu Kyi (icon of the movement), Josef Silverstein (representing academia), and John Pilger (representing the Western media). Nonetheless, this study is not just another piece of regime-bashing polemic. It

is a well-documented study of a subset of a polity struggling to come to terms with a military regime that conflates regime security with national security, harbours deep suspicion against pluralism and holds in contempt what it perceives as “party politics”.

In the Introduction, the author claims that the book “offers an overview of Burma’s recent history, and considers how people in government-controlled areas ... have felt compelled to live their lives in ways that help perpetuate military rule” as well as on “how, at times, they have resisted” (p. 5). In general, the author, a Berkeley-trained anthropologist, manages to fulfil her promise by skilfully weaving the stories of her interviewees into a narrative that vividly illustrates the “living silence” of those individuals, families, and even communities living in the umbra and penumbra of the overwhelmingly powerful regime.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the regime’s policies and tactics to deter, pre-empt, and neutralize dissent as well as to exercise societal control and maintain order are also elaborated. In the same context, different survival and coping strategies contingent upon the circumstances facing the subjects are also well delineated. In highlighting those aspects that are usually submerged in most writings on Myanmar politics, the book stands out among the literature on contemporary Myanmar. However, the author’s pondering on “how Burma’s *political conflicts* might be resolved in the future” (ibid., italics are mine) in the concluding section comes out as an audacious attempt to tackle highly complex and controversial issues in a short essay that could not hope to do justice to the problem at hand.

The first two chapters on historical legacies and the socialist era (1962–68) covered well-trodden territory. Here, the author attempts to portray Myanmar’s political backdrop in the unfolding drama revolving around what she identifies as “two key political issues today”, that is, “the restoration of democracy and the resolution of political rights of ethnic nationalities” (p. 14). The two chapters set the scene for others that follow and provide continuity regarding the significance of the military’s role in the politics of Myanmar.

The third chapter covers the tumultuous period from signs of rising discontent (early 1988), through the truncated popular upheaval (August–September 1988), to the aftermath of the May 1990 election,

which saw a failed attempt by militant monks to boycott the military. The author presents this chapter called “Breaking the Silence” as the penultimate chapter for her chronological narrative, which ends with Chapter 4 entitled “Military Rule Continues”, probably because she regards the May 1990 election as the last possible turning point for the democracy movement following the imposition of military rule.<sup>4</sup> Chapter 3 contains revealing personal accounts of activists and other individuals caught up in the complex dynamics that replaced the stasis characterizing the preceding socialist era. To explain the failure of the 1988 popular uprising, Fink cites four factors: the lack of unity and coordination among the multitude of “strike committees”; public fatigue and disenchantment brought about by prolonged disruption of services and food shortages; the “marked lack of participation of the armed ethnic organizations”; and the loyalty of the troops to the regime (pp. 62–63). One sobering revelation to those who tend towards political interpretation of societal actions (and non-action) is the observation made by the author that during the election campaign “[e]conomic issues were a key concern” of the electorate (p. 68).

Chapter 4 covers events up to 2000 by summarizing significant developments in the body politic during the decade that followed the military’s decision to continue ruling the country as the “Tatmadaw Government”, while managing the transition to “disciplined democracy” with their own rules of the game.

Chapters 5 to 10 focus on different segments of Myanmar society in a variety of institutional settings, teasing out the trials and tribulations of individuals, families, and communities, again based on interviewees’ anecdotes. In Chapter 5 she demonstrates how conformity (to the regime’s norms) is fostered in Myanmar families through a sort of “collective amnesia” over problematic events and issues. Her observation that the “collective effect of almost every family protecting its own members is that challenges to military rule are generally not promoted or valorized except ... when it looks as if real change is imminent” (p. 105) should be familiar to those studying societal responses to authoritarian or totalitarian rule. In relation to such behaviour, instances of shifting values among both the rural and urban populace are also highlighted in

the narrative. Under such circumstances one could not but expect tensions within the family “as various members have chosen different ways of responding to the ongoing political crisis”, with the author positing that “whenever there is a dramatic change in the political situation, family relations are invariably shaken up as well” (p. 118).

In describing how communities go with the “flow” in Myanmar (Chapter 6), Fink illustrates how obedience (to authority) has become a habit under the military regime, which has apparently taken advantage of the traditional cultural traits supporting such behaviour. She argues that community life is pervaded by a “climate of fear” (p. 127 ff.) and that due to the “state’s intrusion into virtually every aspect of people’s lives”, it has become “increasingly difficult to identify spaces, ideas and traditions that aren’t swallowed up or twisted by the regime” (p. 138).

In Chapter 7 the depiction of life inside the military relies on the testimonies of deserting soldiers and dissenting ex-soldiers. As such, one may wonder about the robustness of her sweeping observations like the one which asserts that those “below the rank of captain are generally dissatisfied with military rule, middle-ranking officers are sitting on the fence, and the generals are fully committed to continued military rule” (p. 155).

Chapter 8 describes the trauma of the political prisoners and how they tried to cope with the realities of prison life.<sup>5</sup> The author also writes about the post-release trauma as well and the attendant difficulties of re-integration into family and community.

Chapter 9 looks at the ebb and flow of tensions between politicized students and the authorities. Fink laments the shortcomings of the country’s formal education system and examines the improvisations and alternative routes pursued by youth in acquiring an education.

Chapter 10 examines how today’s artists, writers, poets, filmmakers, and musicians have worked under strict rules of censorship and the security imperatives of the powerful state apparatus. Instances of artistes circumventing the rules and regulations through clever use of innovative forms and content and the audience “reading between the lines” (p. 200) may illustrate, to those who agree with the author’s observa-

tions, how adversity breeds creative solutions in the same spirit that characterized the artistic community in Eastern Europe under communist rule.

In Chapter 11, the author looks at how Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar became mixed up with magic at the grassroots level as people tried to rationalize their problems and maximize their life chances as well as to escape from the harsh reality facing them. Discriminatory practices against minority religions are also documented and the apparent exploitation of religion for political purposes is described.

Dwelling upon the external dimensions of Myanmar politics, Chapter 12 touches upon how neighbouring states, regional states, and Western powers have reacted differently in their relations with the military regime. Attempts made by pro-democracy lobbies, human rights advocacy groups, and dissident Myanmar expatriates to impose punitive measures against the regime, to force corporate withdrawals from Myanmar, and to boycott those companies willing to do business with the regime are briefly described in this chapter. The contentious issue of humanitarian assistance and its impact on the politics of reconciliation rounds up this chapter on the internationalization of Myanmar's politics.

The concluding chapter tries to resolve the two "key political issues" set out in the opening lines of the first chapter (see above). However, to this reviewer neither the allusion to the Philippines' apparent success nor the short account on the whys and wherefores of restoring "civil society" in Myanmar<sup>6</sup> seem to throw much light on the myriad and intertwined problems of achieving unity, stability, justice, and equality by way of establishing a viable democratic regime in the multi-cultural and multi-religious Myanmar.

All in all, this book is a valuable addition to the growing research literature on contemporary Myanmar. Its strength lies in its solid empirical grounding and fair assessment despite the author's close association with the democracy movement. One small quibble is the absence of any reference to the work by the last Myanmar president, the late Dr Maung Maung: *The 1988 Uprising in Burma* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1999). Notwithstanding the fact that

it was written from the perspective of a leading member of the *ancien regime*, it is still useful to get the story from the “other side” of the democracy divide. Overall, Fink’s account is very much a story told by dissidents and anti-establishment figures and most of the sources cited are those not known to be favourably disposed towards the regime. Though the story is about the “people in government-controlled areas” (p. 5), “most” of the interviews (of over “150 people”) “were conducted outside” Myanmar (p. 7). Given the sensitivity of the regime to the topics covered in this study, one may argue that it cannot be otherwise. Nevertheless, it begs the methodological question raised by a reviewer of a recent book on refugees in Thailand, who argues that these sources “provide a strong but predictable commentary”, that is, the “work’s main sources ... could not have produced anything *but* the reading and interpretation that are presented” (*italics in original*).<sup>7</sup>

## NOTES

1. Even the use of the name, whether Burma or Myanmar, reflects the political stance of the author concerned. Those who question the military regime’s legitimacy refuse to accept the regime’s changing of the name to Myanmar in 1989.
2. See, for example, Donald Seekins, “Burma-Myanmar’ Research and Its Future”, Conference Report, *IILAS Newsletter* 30 (March 2003): 21.
3. In this context “umbra” refers to those who are regarded as dissidents and anti-regime activists by the regime itself, whereas “penumbra” encompasses those not in the first category but still felt constrained in one way or another.
4. The current regime going by the name of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) was reconstituted in November 1997 from the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) that took over state power in a coup on 18 September 1988. In the context of the thrust of the book’s arguments the two may be regarded as synonymous.
5. The government refuses to explicitly acknowledge the existence of political prisoners, insisting that they were all convicted under criminal charges. However, in the last year or two, implicit acknowledgement has been forthcoming from the regime in the context of “talks” with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (beginning in October 2001) and in interactions with the current Special Rapporteur for the United Nations Commission for Human Rights.
6. The inapplicability of the EDSA (Epifanio de los Santos Avenue) revolution is self-

evident but in the context of putting voice to those having to practise living silence, the need to expand the political space through empowering civil society is a point well taken.

7. Maitri Aung-Thwin, review of *Fear and Sanctuary: Burmese Refugees in Thailand*, by Hazel J. Lang (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 2002), *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 24, no. 3 (2003): 620.

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