

***Living Silence in Burma: Surviving under Military Rule.* By Christina Fink. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009. Softcover: 300pp.**

The adjective that best describes Christina Fink’s revised and updated book, *Living Silence in Burma*, is compelling. Fink’s narrative — at once readable and scholarly — tells the story of the Burmese people and their struggle for survival in a way no other scholar or student of Burma/Myanmar and its contemporary history has accomplished. Fink’s factual account of events and circumstances leading up to and lingering after the democracy movement of 1988, gives voice to the silence emanating from Myanmar. Fink describes this silence as the reluctance of the people to speak out in a climate of repression and insecurity that has instilled fear and passivity. The fear that their words or actions may harm their families imposes a silence on the people of Myanmar, and this, the author argues, ultimately constrains the country’s growth and development.

The author makes it clear from the outset that while the “military” and the “people” are often mentioned as separate categories, the reality is more complicated, compounding the problem of breaking the silence. While noting that the difficulty of speaking up on political and social issues is not unique to Myanmar, Fink’s interviews with people from all walks of life tell the story of how military rule has affected peoples’ voices. Chapters One to Five give an overview of Burma/Myanmar’s modern history, with a focus on political movements from colonial times to the present day. Here, Fink gives the historical context of how the Burmese have retreated into “living in silence” to protect their families and to survive. Chapter Five, entitled “The Than Shwe Years — 2000 and beyond” is a new addition. Chapters Six and Seven describe how families and communities conform and “go with the flow” in the face of constraints, to promote collective well-being. This is natural, Fink notes, as parents everywhere try to protect their children from harm. Noting that this gives an “interesting twist” to the Asian values debate, Fink observes that the result is not collective well-being but continued insecurity (p. 33).

There are, however, instances when people do speak out. Ironically, it is in the institutions where speaking out puts them most at risk that these instances occur. Chapters Eight and Nine describe the awakenings that can take place whether one is in the military or in prison. Chapter Ten elaborates on how the need for

an educated workforce runs into tension with the regime's priority of preventing anti-government protests. Fink describes the emergence of a two-tier system, where the officer corps and their offspring are provided with every opportunity to improve their educational qualifications and achievements while the larger civilian population's education is held "hostage to political quiescence" (p. 200). Chapter Eleven describes how the artistic community has adapted its creativity to the circumstances. Chapter Twelve highlights an important part of the Burmese psyche — their religious and spiritual life. The regime, ordinary people and opposition activists alike use "numerology, astrology and the advice of fortune-tellers to try to cheat fate and ensure success" (p. 266). Chapter Thirteen looks at international actors, their role in Myanmar's political situation, and the impact of their policies and actions on the country and its population. The final chapter offers a note of hope on how Myanmar's dilemma may be resolved, particularly the two key political issues — democratization and national reconciliation — that Fink describes as necessary for a new, transformed Myanmar.

Perhaps this is the best feature of Fink's study: the note of hope and optimism she infuses into her narrative, even when describing moments of despair. In this updated edition, Fink cites many instances of positive change. The number of international NGOs allowed to operate in the country has increased, especially after Cyclone Nargis struck in May 2008. The regime has allowed more local health and community organizations, paving the way for more effective social work. Media sources have increased, albeit under strict censorship. Compared to ten years ago, many more young people now have the opportunity to study and work abroad. Fink highlights the potential of Myanmar's civil service to contribute to the country's development, particularly in sectors such as health, education and social welfare. There are people in the country truly dedicated to making Myanmar a better place, but they need resources, capacity and a conducive policy environment for realizing this vision. Fink argues that empowering civil servants, social workers and professionals is vital if change is to come from within.

The author recommends that foreign governments and international organizations should consider engaging a broader range of actors in dialogue, not just the opposition and the regime. She makes it clear that national reconciliation includes addressing the political rights of the ethnic nationalities, one of the two prerequisites

for lasting peace in the country (the other being democratization). She does not deny that the task ahead will be easy, cautioning that in the short and medium term “there could well be instances of political violence and communal tensions” (p. 274) but when change eventually comes to Myanmar, its people could confidently take their place in the international community, silent no longer.

MOE THUZAR is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore.