

Myanmar/Burma: Inside Challenges, Outside Interests. Edited by Lex Rieffel. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2010. Softcover: 212pp.

Most volumes of collected essays on Myanmar fall into two broad categories: those firmly rooted in academic inquiry, and the second aimed more at a general or policy oriented audience. Lex Rieffel's new volume, *Myanmar/Burma: Inside Challenges, Outside Interests* is clearly in the latter category. The product of a conference held in Washington D.C. in late 2009 and funded by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, this book comprises twelve chapters by prominent analysts on a range of contemporary issues.

Part One contains very strong essays by Myanmar scholars Kyaw Yin Hlaing and Maung Zarni on the theme of reconciliation. Kyaw Ying Hlaing analyses the “three main political forces” in the country, namely the military, the main opposition group led by Aung San Suu Kyi and her party the National League for Democracy (NLD), and the disparate ethnic opposition. He concludes that “(t)he (November 2010) election is unlikely to turn Myanmar into a democratic country immediately ... (a) the present moment, no one knows for sure how the new government will deal with the opposition. Future political changes will depend on the new boundaries for political space set by the elected government and, in turn, on the ability of opposition groups and civil society organizations to exploit these opportunities” (p. 49). Maung Zarni's illuminating account of “track-two” mediation efforts he undertook in 2004 as a prominent Western-based anti-government activist, is buttressed by a detailed analysis of the challenges of peace building in Myanmar. Zarni's efforts included a trip to Yangon to meet the then Prime Minister Lt. Gen Khin Nyunt, a process he refers to as “Peacemaking Without a License”, because of the criticism he received from exiled Myanmar political groups. Although his efforts were ultimately derailed when Khin Nyunt and his military intelligence faction were purged in late 2004, this detailed account contains rare inside views of tension within the military regime over how to address political reconciliation. As Zarni states, “It is hard to see any efforts at reconciliation having any impact on the conflict landscape of Myanmar, however creative or imaginative or powerfully supported they may be, as long as the regime views national reconsolidation as simply the restoration of a national unity that never existed, with the military as the ultimate unifier” (p. 67).

Kyaw Ying Hlaing and Maung Zarni's chapters are complemented by Michael Vatikiotis' "Three Scenarios for Myanmar's Future", which he formulates as "Status Quo (Splendid Isolation), Partial Transition (Economic Reform and Transformation), and State Collapse (Everything Changes)". Vatikiotis argues that partial transition is the most likely scenario, but wisely observes that "the one most likely to hinder the country's engagement and integration with Southeast Asia is continuance of the status quo" (p. 109). David Dapice's excellent analysis on the rural economy, a seldom analysed but crucial sector of state neglect, makes depressing but compelling reading, and is one of the book's strongest contributions. Dapice's full report "Assessment of the Myanmar Agricultural Economy", from which his chapter is drawn, is important reading for any policy analyst or academic working on Myanmar. Xiaolin Guo's lively first-hand account of border trade between Myanmar and China is entertaining and illuminating, particularly her analysis of Chinese migration from Yunnan Province to Upper Myanmar.

Part Two is taken up by external perspectives, particularly the role of India, China, ASEAN, the Myanmar-North Korea relationship and the policy position of the United States. Thai scholar Pavin Chachavalpongpun's chapter "The Last Bus to Naypyidaw" is one of the most trenchant, sharply drawn critiques of the failure of ASEAN's Myanmar policy. Pavin looks especially at the approaches by Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand, but concludes that the organization's collective approach has been responsive but not proactive, muted instead of audibly principled, and too gullible in hoping that the Myanmar regime would become a more palatable and constructive regional partner. Pavin contends that ASEAN "is confronted with two options: either give up on Myanmar or quickly jump on the last bus, driven by the United States, to Naypyidaw" (p. 169) to revive its moribund Myanmar policy.

The chapters by Gurmeet Kanwal on India-Myanmar relations, Li Chenyang on Chinese and Indian policies, and Termsak Chalermpananupap on ASEAN all provide sound strategic analysis. The book concludes with the congressional statement of US Under-Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, Kurt Campbell from October 2009, which was not a radical departure from two decades of US policy stasis, but has signalled an important shift in Washington's engagement with Myanmar. To date, this policy has yet to provide any discernable returns on its recalibration.

There is no strong argument in the book that bridges the purported "inside challenges and outside interests", and Rieffel's

introduction is long on descriptive history but short on insightful analysis. Despite the broad sweep of topics, the book has glaring omissions. The analysis of the lead-up to the November 2010 elections is cursory, and it is surprising that there is nowhere a mention of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), the long nurtured organization the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) created to contest the elections, and which is now the ruling party after the elections in the new era of Myanmar's military-parliamentary complex.

This book is well worth acquiring for the insights of its strongest components, but as a whole it falls short of effectively tying together the complexity of challenges modern Myanmar presents for the world.

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