

***Burma/Myanmar: Where Now?* Edited by Mikael Gravers and Flemming Ytzen. Thailand: Nordic Institute of Asia Studies Press, 2014. Softcover: 447pp.**

Five years ago, a repressive junta controlled Myanmar with an iron grip. All observers considered the Southeast Asian country an unlikely case for political reforms. Much to the surprise of analysts, however, things changed in 2011, and since then the country has entered a period of dramatic reform. In *Burma/Myanmar: Where Now?*, Mikael Gravers and Flemming Ytzen attempt to guide readers into understanding Myanmar's rapidly changing transition.

The editors offer six good reasons for readers to browse the book: learn facts about the country, its history and diversity, its ongoing transition, its primary actors, and understand the discrepancy between optimistic expectations and stumbling blocks on the ground, and where and how to learn more.

Though the editors do not posit any unifying theme for their volume, many chapters emphasize the role of fear as one of the most influential factors in shaping modern Myanmar politics and the ongoing transition in particular. When it comes to the junta's decision to begin the transition, the editors and some contributors highlight the critical role of their fear of revenge from democratic forces (pp. 33–37, 150) and concern for China's influence in the country (pp. 100–3). The volume argues that the military leaders' fear of potential instability springing from the continued reforms means that "the military is not yet ready to give up the constitutional prerogatives" (p. 418). There are provisions included in the Constitution for the purposes of ensuring the military's continued role in determining the pace of reforms. They include the reservation of 25 per cent of parliamentary seats for military appointees, the military's control of key ministries and even the military's right to seize power again. The military's fear of state disintegration and the ethnic minorities' fear for their cultures are also cited as a major factor in an endless cycle of ethnic insurrection and state repression (p. 150). Ardeth Maung Thawngmung observes that Myanmar "shares the concern of illegal immigration, anti-Islamic sentiments and fear of radical Islam movements with other countries in the region" (p. 337) through the influx of "illegal immigration" into western Myanmar needs to be taken account of in order to address one of the most heated identity issues in Myanmar's transition: the status of Rohingya Muslims (pp. 329, 337). Marie Ditlevsen claims

that the current government and some foreign actors, such as the United States, express concerns that a few business players, such as the military and its cronies, will end up dominating the economy (pp. 126, 363)

The volume is divided into four parts: political transition; identity conflicts and peace-building; the economy; and prospects for future change. Twenty-one authors — ranging from journalists to consultants, to human rights campaigners and academics — contribute more than two dozen predominately short chapters. After a very brief introductory chapter, the volume begins with a photo essay that provides visually stunning images which explore themes of cultural practices, spirituality, the tragedy of war, poverty, disease, the daily struggle to survive and ongoing peace efforts.

Some chapters provide useful overviews of crucial issues. For example, the chapters examining the formal structure of state power (pp. 72–85) and the fundamentals and challenges to Myanmar's economy (pp. 341–61) provide what the volume promises its readers: facts about the country and its complexity. In his article “Ethnic Diversity, Multiple Conflicts”, for instance, Mikael Gravers deconstructs successive regimes' designation of 135 national races as registered indigenous (or original) groups of Myanmar. Ethnic categorizations are social-political constructions and often umbrella terms covering a broad array of sub-groups. The name ethnic “Chin”, for instance, encompasses about sixty sub-groups/clans. According to Gravers, some groups reject “Chin” ethnic category because it derives from Burmese, preferring instead “Zo” (p. 149). The historical presence of other ethnic groups (notably the Rohingya) also problematizes successive regimes' criteria of identity designation.

Ashley South's update on the peace process (pp. 250–55) is another important piece that warns that the lack of strategic direction and donor-driven agendas of international involvement in ethnic peace negotiation process could play into the government's hand. Veteran journalist Bertil Lintner's (pp. 95–106) framing of the reforms as part of the Myanmar military's confidential “master plan” to reduce its reliance on China and engage the United States is one of the most compelling chapters in the volume.

The eclectic nature of the volume, however, entails some major weaknesses. Firstly, and most notably, is the issue of topical imbalance. There is no dedicated chapter on the armed forces despite the editors' acknowledgement that the military remains the most powerful institution in the country (p. 35) and understanding its preferences is “the single dominant question that permeates

every debate on Burma's future" (p. 417). The book, however, gives this important topic short shrift *vis-à-vis* other issues such as identity politics.

Another major weakness is that the chapters are theoretically uninformed. Contributors, including the editors, conveniently employ key concepts from political and social sciences as if there were no prior scholarly works. Without citing Andreas Schedler, for instance, one of the editors applies the concept of "electoral authoritarianism" to locate Myanmar's model of transition in the middle of two different categories: Taiwan, South Korea, and Indonesia on the one hand, and Cambodia, Malaysia and Singapore on the other (p. 36). In charting Myanmar's way forward, the editors predict that in the future the country may start to resemble neighbouring Thailand, arguing that the country will be more prosperous but more unequal (p. 421). However, the chapter fails to engage with scholarship on Thai politics and address key questions of whether Myanmar will take on the other Thai characteristics such as "coup trap" or "semi-democracy".

Thirdly, sweeping claims without supporting evidence are rampant throughout the volume. In the chapter titled "Peacebuilding in Myanmar", Charles Petrie and Ashley South assert: "Critical to the success of this peace process will be the role that is played by various actors in the country's civil society" (p. 223, also pp. 87, 93). Since the authors do not support this argument with any evidence, the assertion becomes a mere recommendation or a normative assumption of the authors or editors. Similar assertions made elsewhere in the book, such as that the current government, and President Thein Sein in particular, may have distanced themselves from business cronies (pp. 126, 363) are empirically untenable.

In short, this volume provides an informative overview of key issues that Myanmar has faced in its modern history, especially in the period after the country embarked on its transition in 2011. Unfortunately, it falls short in terms of its analytical rigour.

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