

***Myanmar: The Dynamics of an Evolving Polity.* Edited by David Steinberg. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2015. Hardcover: 376pp.**

In November 2015 national elections will take place in Myanmar. These elections, upon which both much hope and trepidation are hoisted, will bring down the curtain on the quasi-civilian government of President Thein Sein. An administration intermediating between fifty years of overt military rule, and something yet to be determined, it lays down an uneven and highly contested legacy.

Reflecting on this legacy, and against the uncertainties ahead, comes this new collection of essays, *Myanmar: The Dynamics of an Evolving Polity*, edited by the venerable Myanmar watcher, David Steinberg. The product of a conference held at Johns Hopkins University in October 2013, the book suffers somewhat from the unavoidable dilemma of such works in staying relevant in the face of fast moving events. That said, most of the chapters attempt to observe matters from above the immediate fray. Steinberg contributes an introductory and concluding essay in an effort to bring coherence to the proceedings.

Among the stand out papers in this collection, few match that of Andrew Selth, who writes of the long road ahead for Myanmar in reforming what he decisively labels the “coercive apparatus” (p. 13), by which he means not just the army, but the intelligence community and the too-often overlooked police forces. Underlining the point that the Thein Sein administration is as yet merely quasi-civilian, Selth reminds the reader that 80 per cent of current government ministers are from the armed services (including the President himself), as are thirteen of fourteen Chief Ministers of Myanmar’s states and regions. Selth’s chapter goes beyond static analysis to propose a number of practical measures to encourage Myanmar’s security apparatus to move beyond merely protecting the ruling regime. These include the rationalization of Myanmar’s intelligence agencies, the creation of coordinating and oversight mechanisms and the reorientation of the mission of the security services in favour of the “more liberal atmosphere” of what could ultimately be a “genuinely elected civilian government (p. 21).

Taking up the vexed and critical issue of land, and of economic rights and freedoms of Myanmar’s farmers more broadly, is Christina Fink. In a splendid chapter that locates the current issues against Myanmar’s long and unfortunate history on this front, Fink stresses

the need for land tenure security for current land holders (the state owns the freehold of all agricultural land in Myanmar), as well as mechanisms to deliver justice and compensation to the victims of past and current land confiscations. Noting that such mechanisms have been employed in other countries in the region, Fink also uses their example to emphasize the productive potential of granting farmers complete production freedoms over what, how and when they produce. At present such freedoms are greatly circumscribed in Myanmar, “preventing farmers from being able to achieve food security and improve their incomes” (p. 262). Finally, and again reflecting the time honoured lessons from elsewhere, Fink champions the virtues of smallholder farms, astutely concluding that such farms “can be highly productive, and they can do more to reduce poverty than agribusinesses” (p. 260).

Separate chapters by Yun Sun and Jurgen Haacke respectively examine Myanmar’s relations with China and the United States. Yun Sun writes of a China attempting to repair and recalibrate its hitherto diplomatic dominance, via a mix of “implicit coercion and explicit inducement” (p. 285). With respect to the United States, Haacke cites the US State Department as suggesting that Myanmar’s reforms function as “a demonstration [to other authoritarian countries] of the benefits that can accrue to a nation that pursues a progressive path to change” (p. 313). Haacke warns, however, that disappointment could follow: “political stasis or even regression in Myanmar toward and beyond the 2015 elections would stand to expose the Obama foreign policy doctrine as ineffective, likely followed by a deterioration of bilateral ties” (p. 313).

Moe Thuzar and Tin Maung Maung Than jointly contribute an impressive chapter that attempts to map “realities” to expectations regarding the economic component of Myanmar’s reform narrative. This chapter documents the significant reform measures pushed through by the economists and advisers around President Thein Sein, as well as the setbacks, delays and the hard road ahead. Their chapter is profitable reading for all those keen to know the true economic situation of Myanmar, from ground level and all the way to the policy mandarins. Similarly, in the realm of economics, Lex Rieffel documents the changing intellectual basis of Myanmar’s reforms. Tracing a line from early post-war thinking to the current government’s twenty-year “Myanmar Comprehensive Development Plan”, Rieffel rightly observes that “muddling through seems the most likely result” (p. 211).

Martin Smith and Ashley South contribute chapters that attempt the difficult but critical tasks of reviewing the state of ethnic politics, and what might be optimistically labelled the “peace process”. Both note the role that contests over natural resources play in conflicted areas, and the social and environmental damage wrought by extractive industries. South adds to this the damage to peace from a lack of strategic direction from international aid donors, and of the temptation of the latter to “provide funding channeled through government structures — an easier approach than seeking out appropriate local partners on the ground” (p. 183). Noting that Myanmar is as yet “at the beginning of a time of change, not at the end” (p. 138), Smith concludes (p. 152) with a message that might be usefully employed to round off the entire volume under consideration here:

The warnings from history are very clear. Peace success will very much depend on following through with genuine political, ethnic and economic reforms in the coming years if the cycle of grievance, conflict, and militarization are to be ended.

As the title of this volume suggests, Myanmar is evolving. Precisely into what is not yet clear.

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