

BOOK REVIEWS

***The Female Voice of Myanmar: Khin Myo Chit to Aung San Suu Kyi.* By Nilanjana Sengupta. Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Hardcover: 383pp.**

In *The Female Voice of Myanmar*, Nilanjana Sengupta has produced a wealth of historical, social and intellectual background for the events we see unfolding in Myanmar today. Using the voices of four prominent women, the author takes the reader on a journey through Myanmar's political history since the end of the colonial period. The result is a rich amalgam of life at the intersection of political, intellectual and religious thought among the opposition movements under a succession of governments.

The book's first voice, Daw Khin Myo Chit, was a prolific literary author whose work extended from the late colonial period through the Ne Win era. Her observations of life, political thought and religion — meticulously researched and analyzed by Sengupta — provide a window into the origins of the country's political opposition movement, as it proceeded from the anti-colonial movement through the Japanese occupation and then splintered into a number of competing political groups that eventually brought the end of elected government in 1962.

Ludu Daw Amar provides the second voice. Stalwarts of the Mandalay political opposition during the post-colonial period, she and her husband published an anti-establishment journal (*Ludu*) that was highly critical of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League government. Together, their writings chronicled the political ferment of the 1950s and 1960s and the various voices of the times. Quintessentially Burmese nationalists, they formed a part of the country's communist movement. Their lives and literature

illustrated the level of political intolerance that existed during the U Nu government and then blossomed under Ne Win.

Both Daw Khin Myo Chit and Ludu Daw Amar were part of Aung San's generation and their lives intersected with his in various ways, a fact which bridges them with Aung San's daughter in later years. When Aung San Suu Kyi was released from detention in 2002, Mandalay was one of her early destinations to pay homage to Ludu Daw Amar and other opposition supporters.

The third voice is Ma Thida, who began her literary career as a protégé of Aung San Suu Kyi during her early political years before the 1990 elections. She served on Daw Suu's political campaign, chronicling their travels around the country. Ma Thida's association with opposition political activity earned her several years in prison, which produced yet another chronicle, this time of the conditions in Myanmar's notorious prisons. Also trained as a medical doctor, Ma Thida has pursued dual careers. Today, she is the head of the Myanmar chapter of Pen International, a prominent literary association, as well as a practising physician.

The fourth and strongest voice is that of Aung San Suu Kyi, a prolific writer, whose works provide a voluminous roadmap of her political, religious, social and other views. Sengupta explores them in detail, set against the background of events in her life. The author's analysis suggests that even a surface perusal of Suu Kyi's writings would reveal a great deal about how she may approach her current role as national leader. However, Sengupta probably should have resisted the impulse to speculate on Daw Suu's contemporary political role. Diverging from her reliance on the literary record of her subjects, the author suddenly gives voice to the speculative views of distant observers (pp. 330–31) who question the National League for Democracy (NLD) leader's motivations and attitudes towards her party and her own political role, thereby dismissing, as many did, the eventuality of an overwhelming NLD victory in the 2015 elections and Aung San Suu Kyi's role in achieving it.

On the whole, I would recommend this book to those who are relatively recently arrived to the analysis of Myanmar's political transition and have yet to delve into the country's complicated history. While it would probably be difficult reading for the casual observer, interested more in tourism than analysis, for those reporting on current events in Myanmar it should be required reading for several reasons.

First, it gives meticulously documented historical context for current events in Myanmar. Second, it provides a unique perspective on the role of women in Myanmar political life, which is particularly important for grasping the social complexities of Aung San Suu Kyi's ascendancy in a male-dominated society. Third, it explores the social prejudices conditioning relations between the Bama majority and other ethnic and religious groups. And finally, it provides English speakers rare access to a wealth of Burmese language material. *The Female Voice of Myanmar* makes a superlative contribution to English language literature on Myanmar.

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