

BOOK REVIEWS

***Caretaking Democratization: The Military and Political Change in Myanmar.* By Renaud Egreteau. London: Hurst & Co, 2016. Hardcover: 193pp.**

In *Caretaking Democratization* the French scholar Renaud Egreteau adds his voice to the growing body of literature on Myanmar's recent political transition. Egreteau already has a considerable number of publications on Myanmar under his belt, not least on the role of the military in the country's politics and the role of the national-level parliament since reforms were introduced in 2011. As such, it is not surprising that, like other academics, Egreteau sees endogenous rather than external factors as key to the "pacted" transition he says we have witnessed in Myanmar (p. 15). The title of the book clearly conveys the thrust of Egreteau's argument: namely, that when compared to the period of direct military rule that preceded it, the period between 2011 and early 2016 is one in which the military limited its interventionism in Myanmar politics to that of the "guardian" army. The Tatmadaw, the official name for the armed forces, remains the "last resort decision-maker" in the post-SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) hybrid system. For Egreteau, Myanmar's transition from military rule is a *sui generis* case (p. 3).

The book consists of six substantive chapters. In the opening chapter, Egreteau contextualizes the recent transition with reference to Myanmar's political history. His discussion shows that the "pacted" transition, which is also described as a "loose settlement" (p. 32), was sought by the military leadership, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy as well as ethnic leaders who were willing to compromise to move politics forward. As Egreteau explains, the transition was long planned by the military and can

be re-traced at the very least to the 2003 political roadmap to a discipline-flourishing democracy on which the then military regime embarked in the aftermath of the renewed detention of Suu Kyi if not to the early days of the State Law and Order Restoration Council. The importance of the role of wider social elites and political entrepreneurs as drivers of political transition has arguably been the focus of more detailed work published elsewhere. Nevertheless, Egreteau similarly maintains that “the ‘Third Force’ has participated in the shaping of the ‘environmental conditions’ necessary to the bargaining of a loose ‘pact’ once the SPDC was disbanded in 2011” (p. 36).

Chapter two describes the broadening of socio-political space under President U Thein Sein. Attention is given to the 2010, 2012 and 2015 elections and the expansion of civil society. However, Egreteau concentrates not only on the positives, and hence does not fail to mention either the disenfranchisement experienced by several groups or the issue of religious extremism. Drawing strongly on his previous work, Egreteau then examines the role of legislators in a revived parliamentary setting. Chapter three contains very interesting data and analysis on political parties and even key legislators. Egreteau notes that there has been some reliance on foreign funds for urgent parliamentary capacity building. Beyond noting external influences, he also outlines the problem of internal divisions and splits experienced by political parties.

Setting out the current pattern of military intervention in Myanmar politics, Egreteau looks at political violence, political fragmentation and ethnic and communal conflicts. He also devotes particular attention to the role of the military in legislative affairs. In his view, the Tatmadaw wants to maintain “direct policy influence” without having to rely on “a political proxy” (p. 91) and without having to indulge in party politics. He points out that while the military has a veto over matters of constitutional change, the armed forces do not have the same leeway to block normal legislative business. Egreteau does not view the military as an obstructionist force in parliament. Although he rarely positions himself explicitly as far as normative judgements are concerned, he notes that the armed forces being a “fully independent and unaccountable policy actor” in parliament is problematic (p. 92).

The Thein Sein administration understood that the realization of its wider political and economic ambitions depended on overcoming the country’s longstanding ethnic insurgencies. Egreteau thus examines the achievements of the “peace process”. The account

is succinct but arguably leaves interesting issues unexplored such as the internal dynamics within the various armed ethnic groups or wider difficulties experienced in relation to the October 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. Similarly, Egreteau offers the reader only a brief, albeit useful depiction of Buddhist revivalism.

Egreteau's explanation as to why we should expect continued military intervention into Myanmar's politics is two-fold. First, he highlights the factionalism and "splittism" that historically has been part and parcel of the personalization of politics in Myanmar. Second, he suggests that Myanmar's geostrategic position — given its borders with India and China in particular — will remain of concern to the military. In his view, these enduring concerns "may not only slow down the incremental process of military withdrawal from state politics, but also hinder the prospect of rapidly establishing a fully functioning parliamentary democracy" (p. 115).

Egreteau offers a suitably scholarly account of Myanmar's political transition. The range of interviews on which his analysis draws is impressive. One of the hallmarks of Egreteau's writings in general is that he carefully embeds his empirical discussions both conceptually and theoretically. *Caretaking Democratization* follows this approach. This is why the book is valuable not only to Myanmar specialists, but also to political scientists who want to know how Myanmar's political transition fits in with broader insights and debates. At the same time, it is a pity that Egreteau decided to play it safe in places. For instance, although the book makes much of the "pacted" transition, the author does not cover the relationship between President Thein Sein and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi after 2011. Egreteau is perhaps at times also somewhat short on detail. However, given the limitations of space, this book is not meant to cover everything and readers can consult the numerous references for further information. Although some might see the book's primary original contribution as being limited to Egreteau's account of the role of the bicameral Union Parliament and key individual players within, this book still makes for an excellent read overall. It certainly deserves to be read in full by those taking an interest in Myanmar's recent political transition.

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