

***Unravelling Myanmar's Transition: Progress, Retrenchment, and Ambiguity Amidst Liberalization.* Edited by Pavin Chachavalpongpun, Elliott Prasse-Freeman and Patrick Strefford. Singapore: NUS Press, 2020. Softcover: 307pp.**

Unraveling Myanmar's Transition, edited by Pavin Chachavalpongpun, Elliott Prasse-Freeman and Patrick Strefford, has the value of offering nuanced critical insights into Myanmar's democratic transition while charting potentially fruitful research directions for the future. The first three sections of the book—consisting of three chapters each—respectively cover Myanmar's political landscape, the challenges facing its political economy, and the country's social-cultural issues. The fourth and final section comprises two chapters addressing the Rohingya crisis.

In the first chapter of Section 1, Aung Tun examines the various opportunities and challenges that the National League for Democracy (NLD) administration faces in the coming years. Holding a parliamentary supermajority can be both a plus and minus for the NLD, especially in ensuring that democratic reforms continue unabated. In Chapter Two, Yoshihiro Nakanishi examines the often tenuous relationship between the NLD and the Myanmar military (*Tatmadaw*) by focusing on the transition from the previous military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) government (helmed by former General Thein Sein) to the NLD government. Nakanishi astutely observes that for Myanmar to move forward in its democratization process, the two political enemies will have to work hand in hand despite their long-standing mutual animosity. In Chapter Three, Moe Thuzar and Pavin Chachavalpongpun discuss the challenges facing Myanmar's foreign policy since 2015. This chapter provides an interesting overview of Myanmar's continued neutrality in the great power rivalry between the United States and China. On the one hand, Myanmar cannot discount America's economic influence on the country's development even if it is uncomfortable with America's emphasis on its human rights record and pace of democratization. On the other hand, Myanmar's relationship with China is fraught with geopolitical and geostrategic considerations, especially in its pursuit of peace with domestic ethnic armed groups, some of which benefit from China's tacit support.

In Section 2, Fumiharu Mieno argues in his chapter that much remains to be done to restructure Myanmar's corporate and financial system. To galvanize Myanmar's economy, Mieno recommends a concerted effort to develop a knowledge economy with a labour force that is able to understand the importance of a stable, functioning and reliable financial system. In the following chapter, Bo Bo Nge's examination of Myanmar's urban real estate landscape unearths a host of structural failures and systemic ineffectiveness pervading the industry. The volatility of property prices and the cost of land development have been largely due to the flow of illicit funds into the property sector, creating undue stress on the country's banking system. Climate change and environmental governance is an important area of assessment when discussing the economy. As such, the chapter by Marjanneke J. Vijge and Adam Simpson examining the implementation of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative to "promote open and accountable governance of the extractive industries sector" (p. 137) is commendable. Noting that many companies in the extractive industries sector have military ties, civil society organizations (CSOs) in Myanmar find it very difficult to gather basic information that will assist them in gaining a better understanding of the areas in which they can be involved in. The need for more equitable representation of Burmese and ethnic organizations also highlight this failure of CSOs and citizens, which does not bode well for the prospects of regulatory reform in Myanmar.

Kickstarting Section 3 is Patrick Strefford's analysis of development assistance, which focuses on how foreign aid is disbursed. Strefford's assessment of the Donor-driven Aid and Donor Capacity Deficit in Myanmar highlights that while aid and assistance has increased over the years, there are still huge challenges, especially the lack of aid received from the government of Myanmar as well as a slowdown in foreign aid over the years. Patrick McCormick's discussion on ethnic education in Myanmar clearly demonstrates the complexity of sustaining ethnic identity through language education. While some communities have successfully ensured the relevance and continuation of their ethnic identities, other ethnic groups struggle to maintain the teaching of their mother tongues. For the latter, their efforts are hampered mainly by the lack of native-speaker teachers as well as the elevated importance of

Burmese as the national language. Matthew J. Walton's coverage of the Buddhist religio-political landscape is a worthy addition to the volume given the increasing religiosity in Myanmar over the years. Walton's chapter contextualizes rising Buddhist-Muslim tensions in Myanmar against the emergence of Buddhist activist groups such as 969 and MaBaTha. In particular, the NLD's lack of response, especially to the alleged attacks, abuse and discrimination against non-Buddhist communities, highlights the party's failure to evince any moral conviction to mitigate the denigration and marginalization of religious minorities since assuming power in 2015.

Section 4 on the Rohingya crisis begins with Shae A. Frydenlund's study on the plight of Rohingya women. An excellent read, this chapter explains the double marginalization inflicted on these women—that is, of being a woman in a patriarchal, gendered society and a Muslim in a deeply religiously-divided country—and how it perpetuates their invisibility in society. Last but not least, the chapter authored by Elliott Prasse-Freeman and Kirt Mausert explores the historiographies of the Rakhine and Rohingya, elucidating once again the difficulties in assigning an appropriate genealogical identity that is equitable to all. What this chapter demonstrates is how the cycle of rejection, hatred and marginalization of the Rohingya continues to foment a sense of deep antipathy among the broader Myanmar public that will, unfortunately, be difficult to mitigate.

The contributors to this edited volume offer much depth of analysis to a variety of issues and concerns that continue to dominate Myanmar society even as the country struggles to democratize under the NLD. While much of the first section deals with a recap of the general political landscape of Myanmar since the 2015 elections, the book progresses to examine the various issues facing Myanmar's political economy. It then looks at the various socio-cultural issues that have plagued Myanmar society over the years, before assessing the Rohingya crisis. This is, unfortunately, a very tired subject that will never see much progress, unless the Rohingya community is officially recognized as part of Myanmar's ethnic mix. Overall, this edited volume opens more research opportunities for other scholars. The military coup in February 2021 has certainly put an end to Myanmar's democratic transition. This tragedy will surely have an unprecedented and chilling effect on all the years of hard work

in re-building Myanmar's socio-political and economic landscape. While the elections in 2020 underscored the deep support the NLD commands with Myanmar's citizens, this latest crisis has stymied the arduous process of democratization that the country has embarked on in the last couple of years. Nevertheless, the party's leadership transition and its post-Aung San Suu Kyi future is probably the pre-eminent issue for scholars and political pundits to examine.

FELIX TAN THIAM KIM is Deputy Director, Implementation in the Strategy Office at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Postal address: 42 Nanyang Avenue, Administrative Building, Level 2, Singapore 639798; email: felix.tantk@ntu.edu.sg.