

***Everyday Justice in Myanmar: Informal Resolutions and State Evasion in a Time of Contested Transition.* Edited by Helene Maria Kyed. Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press, 2020. Softcover: 367pp.**

Myanmar's legal framework has featured centrally in many analyses of the country's transitions, mainly because the 2008 Constitution established the parameters of power sharing between the military and elected civilian government. Given that the February 2021 coup (through which the military re-asserted full control of the country) has been—wrongly—justified as constitutional and that the nature of post-coup politics will be determined by constitutionally-defined parameters, Myanmar's macro-legal framework will continue to draw focus from academics. Beyond the Constitution, however, little attention has been given to other workings of the country's legal and judicial processes, particularly the informal norms and practices through which the vast majority of Myanmar citizens pursue everyday justice.

This is precisely the focus of *Everyday Justice in Myanmar: Informal Resolutions and State Evasion in a Time of Contested Transition*, edited by Helene Maria Kyed. Through ten village/ward-level case studies from rural and urban settings across the country, the book provides the first ethnographic account in decades of how ordinary citizens think about and seek justice, making it a valuable resource for understanding an understudied aspect of Myanmar's pronounced legal pluralism. While not representative, the cases provide a rich empirical substantiation of the deep split between the formal but seldom-used state justice forums and the preferred informal local forums that draw from a diverse mixture of past and present legal traditions.

As laid out in the comprehensive introduction by Kyed, four main themes emerge from the case studies, each of which illuminates particular aspects of everyday justice and provides general insights into the local-level political and social dynamics prevalent in areas of the country during the transition. The first is the widespread preference for local and informal dispute resolution mechanisms, typically relying on third-party community leaders from the village/ward administration, ethnic organizations and religious groups for mediation. These operate outside the formal legal system and often focus on reaching consensual agreements and compensational justice. The second major theme is the evasion of the state system, as citizens intentionally minimize contact with the formal state

and its legal mechanisms, which are seen as costly, confrontational and biased towards those with powerful connections and financial resources. While motivations for this vary to some extent across contexts, the unifying thread is a general distrust of the Myanmar state and its authority, which continues to be associated with military rule even during the power-sharing period. The third is the centrality of cultural norms, social harmony and religious-spiritual beliefs, in which restoring social relations and avoiding public and visible escalations of conflict are the prioritized objectives. Notably, however, the avoidance of confrontation and punitive measures can compound the vulnerability of socially disadvantaged groups. Fourth is the importance of identity politics in the pursuit of local everyday justice. Specifically, deeply entrenched ethnic and religious identities continue to play a central role in facilitating access to community justice or contributing to exclusion from it, particularly in mixed villages and wards where a significant portion of the population does not share the identity of the local community leaders that often mediate the processes of everyday justice.

Myanmar's partial opening in 2011 enabled collaborations between local and foreign universities that were unthinkable before the transition. This book, which primarily features anthropologists from the University of Yangon in Myanmar and Aarhus University in Denmark, is a prime example of what can come from such partnerships. The case studies are based on participant observations, interviews and informal conversations through extended stays and/or multiple visits to the field sites over a five-year period. The research focuses deliberately on depth over breadth, with contributors clearly exercising restraint in making more generalizable inferences from their observations. This approach provides highly detailed insights into the ideas and ideals of everyday justice, and allows readers to draw some inferences about the social frameworks within which that practice plays out across the varied sites.

The diversity of these sites greatly enriches the book. Some—for instance, the chapter on informal justice brokers in urban Yangon (by Elizabeth Rhoads) and another on marginalized residents of an urbanized ward in Mawlamyine (by Pohl Harrisson)—cover contexts that may be familiar to readers. Other contexts, however, have been less studied. Several chapters draw from Kayin (Karen) State's urban and rural areas, including a mixed Muslim/Buddhist village (by Than Pale) and another where Buddhist and animist beliefs substitute for formal state justice (by Knakkegaard Richthammer). Further chapters are situated in a rural area of the Naga Self-Administered Zone

near the Myanmar-Indian border (by Lue Htar, Myat The Thitsar and Kyed), as well as a village in the Pa-O Self-Administered Zone where customary law and the presence of multiple armed actors complicate the pursuit of justice (by Mi Thang Sorn Poine and Nan Tin Nilar Win).

The chapters are of consistently high quality in terms of both empirical richness and relevance to understanding Myanmar's legal pluralism. *Everyday Justice in Myanmar* will therefore be a valuable resource for scholars with that particular focus. Its potential to provide insights on a broader set of questions around democratization, state-society relations and identity politics becomes quickly apparent. However, and as a reader from beyond legal studies, I found myself frequently wishing for more explicit engagement with those questions. The contributors cannot be faulted for this. In fact, the book's generally conservative approach, whether in avoiding interpretive overreach or in being transparent about its lack of geographic and demographic representativeness, is commendable. Nonetheless, a concluding chapter that explicitly situates the relevance and implications of these case studies in the broader study of Myanmar's (now tragically stalled) transition (in perhaps the first steps towards bridging those literatures) would have been appreciated by the many readers who are likely looking to connect those dots anyway.

KAI OSTWALD is Assistant Professor in the School of Public Policy & Global Affairs and the Department of Political Science at the University of British Columbia, Canada. Postal address: 1855 West Mall, Vancouver BC, V6T 1Z2 Canada; email: kai.ostwald@ubc.ca.