

***Winning by Process: The State and Neutralization of Ethnic Minorities in Myanmar.* By Jacques Bertrand, Alexandre Pelletier and Ardeth Maung Thawngmung. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2022. Softcover: 247pp.**

In 2011, the eclipse of direct military rule in Myanmar rekindled hopes for an end to the ethnic conflicts that have plagued the country since its independence in 1948. A reform-minded government, led by a cohort of retired generals, launched peace talks with a multitude of ethnic and rebel actors. Ten years later, however, the military seized power again, sweeping aside the peace process and all other attempts at reconciliation, which led to a resurgence of war.

*Winning by Process* probes into the dynamics of that decade of peace parleys (2011–20). The book seeks to make sense of the complex process of negotiation that took place during the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) semi-civilian administration formed in 2011 and the subsequent National League for Democracy (NLD) government sworn in after the 2015 elections. It is a timely addition to the literature that combines the expertise of three well-established authors in the fields of ethnic studies and Southeast Asian politics. The authors' aim is to move beyond dominant and classic explanations of how to end civil wars: neither by military means, nor by reaching a political solution, but, they argue, by "winning by process" (p. 11).

The main contribution of this book is more conceptual than empirical. Many readers will already be familiar with the arguments about the extraordinarily complex ethnic structure of Myanmar's political landscape, the entrenched politicization of ethnicity inherited from colonialism (p. 41) or the reification of identity (p. 59). Despite solid findings derived from extensive, ethically grounded fieldwork conducted between 2014 and 2020 (some 174 interviews, plus focus groups and the qualitative observation of peace talks), Myanmar-watchers will not find any new or startling evidence about the much disputed, if not derided, peace negotiations run by both the USDP and the NLD. Rather, what is novel and compelling here—for political theorists and students of Burmese politics alike—is the original theoretical model designed by the authors.

Powerful actors in civil wars, they contend, can use a range of tools, strategies and methods to control and manipulate the process of negotiation, and ultimately still make political gains,

minimize concessions to their opponents and avoid the use of lethal force. In short, warring actors—especially the state—can still “win” in a stalled political process. They can do so in three major, interconnected arenas of negotiation: formal talks between the state and its opponents (the pompous peace meetings known as the Union Peace Conferences under the USDP, and the 21st Century Panglong Conferences under the NLD); state institutional structures (legislatures crafted by the 2008 Constitution which provided new avenues for claiming ethnic representation); and the theatre of war.

As the authors demonstrate, all three arenas offer spaces for both the military and Myanmar’s governmental agencies to deploy five main “winning” strategies, which are discussed in Chapters Three through Seven. First, *locking-in*, or the setting of procedures, agenda and participation rules by the dominant actor, such as the state. Second, *sequencing*, or the introduction of steps to be taken by all to move the process forward (or stall it if benchmarks are not met). Third, *layering*, or the pluralization of actors and spaces of negotiation, making the process more complex by adding layers of inter-ethnic dialogues. Fourth, *outflanking*, or the state’s efforts to bypass key opponents and engage directly with their supporters and neutralize their elites. Lastly, *outgunning*, or the use of coercion and targeted attacks against selected minority groups as a violent form of pressure.

This framework allows readers to better comprehend what appears to be political gridlock in long-standing conflicts. In a situation of stalled talks, a process can still unfold, whereby power continues to be accumulated by the state. This model is especially useful for challenging the popular belief that “divide and rule” tactics have been the core winning strategy employed by the Myanmar military against the country’s ethnic minorities (p. 179). Instead, this tool kit of five core strategies and approaches to negotiation allowed the state to expand its reach after 2011 in ways it could not under earlier ceasefire policies in 1963 and 1989–91.

The authors have aptly situated their analysis of the last decade of political opening and peace talks within Myanmar’s longer history of civil-military relations and ethnic conflicts. In addition, by bringing the state back in, the authors also challenge the idea of Myanmar as a failed or fragile state (p. 178), arguing the heavily militarized Myanmar state has been highly successful in extending its power and control by exploiting the negotiation process in the 2010s. In doing so, it has weakened its ethnic opponents, reduced

the autonomy of ceasefire groups and shaped public and policy institutions in line with the 2008 Constitution. And it did so even under the democratically-elected NLD administration, when Aung San Suu Kyi spared no efforts to recentralize the state while increasingly relying on the support of the Bamar majority (p. 73).

This pattern lasted until the February 2021 coup. Ironically, as the authors point out, the latest military takeover has derailed this winning strategy and triggered another cycle of violence. Now without any space for negotiation, the state and military rulers have reverted to a losing strategy. The armed forces are no longer in position to “win by process”, and are instead bogged down in a violent conflict where ethnic armed organizations have joined hands with resistance forces from the country’s Bamar-dominated areas.

Wisely, and concretely, this book provides insightful guidance for understanding both past and future attempts to negotiate peace in Myanmar, as well as how to conduct war and build a state in true Tillyian terms. Easy to read and free of typos (except the awkward “Arakhine” on page 100), it offers a particularly bold and innovative conceptual framework that students of ethnic and civil conflicts in Southeast Asia and beyond can utilize for their research and teaching.

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