

***Crafting Parliament in Myanmar's Disciplined Democracy (2011-2021)*. By Renaud Egreteau. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2023. Hardcover: 320pp.**

Because of the post-coup crisis in Myanmar, in which there appears to be very little prospect of the military junta withdrawing from power anytime soon, one might query the timeliness of a book that takes a relatively optimistic stance on the country's recent experiment with parliamentary democracy. But Renaud Egreteau reminds us that every iteration of a parliament in Myanmar reproduces certain trends from the past while opening up new forms of representation. *Crafting Parliament in Myanmar's Disciplined Democracy* closely scrutinizes the country's latest (and most interesting) experiment at representative parliamentary democracy, the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Assembly of the Union), as it existed between its formation in 2011 and its dissolution in 2021.

It can be difficult to understand the form and trajectory of Myanmar's historical parliaments through a comparative lens, and to some extent this book struggles to find the right theoretical hook. Instead, Egreteau chooses an eclectic approach. Engaging relatively older literature from the 1970s onwards, he situates the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw within the wider typological literature on parliaments of similar countries as well as Myanmar's past legislatures. By doing so, the book draws on a vast array of studies on representation and parliamentary functions as well as the challenges of creating legislatures in post-authoritarian settings. Although these are a useful set of conceptual tools, they do not completely allow the book to make a broad theoretical claim as to what made Myanmar's most recent parliament unique—or even why it emerged in the first place. Nevertheless, the book's main strength is Egreteau's conviction that the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw was not just a rubber-stamp institution. During the period under review, he contends, it performed many of the aspects that one might expect of parliaments in functional democracies: rigorous debate, scrutiny of issues and attempts to address policy challenges through solid legislation.

Crafting Parliament in Myanmar's Disciplined Democracy begins with a history of the parliaments that existed in Myanmar between independence and the 2010s, including the unicameral Pyithu Hluttaw (People's Assembly) that lasted from 1974 to

1988, and the earlier bicameral assembly composed of the Pyithu Hluttaw (Chamber of Deputies) and Lumyo-su Hluttaw (Chamber of Nationalities). It explores how they functioned and how they inherited (and reinvented) architecture, displays and rituals from British colonialism. The latest parliament reproduced a bicameral assembly that included a Pyithu Hluttaw (House of People's Representatives) and a Amyotha Hluttaw (House of Nationalities). That said, there were few substantive remnants of the past in the post-2011 parliamentary iteration, except for the continued dominance of the Bamar majority over ethnic minority groups. Although comparisons are made between those past parliaments in Myanmar and their more recent counterpart, they are somewhat superficial and, in many ways, the legislature that opened in 2011 was clearly a novel experiment.

The book digs into the details of how the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw was established, the mechanics of how it worked and how lawmakers went about their daily activities. It is perhaps overly detailed, in fact, but Egreteau is able to convince the reader of the high degree of professionalism and seriousness of members of parliament (MPs). Less convincing, though, are the claims that because many of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw's structures revived elements of Myanmar's earlier parliaments, they represent the routinization of a parliamentary practice that will survive the country's current state of emergency and influence future iterations of parliamentary representation.

The main chapters explore representation, lawmaking and oversight. They show that there was a significant difference in the style and performance between 2011 and 2016, when the military-aligned Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) held a majority in parliament, and 2016–21, when parliament was dominated by the pro-democracy National League for Democracy (NLD), the party of Aung San Suu Kyi. Egreteau shows that USDP legislators were determined to pass a large number of laws over a very broad policy landscape. The reader is left with a clear impression that (initially) the USDP and, by extension, the military were committed to a rules-based, legal environment that could entrench the reforms that they were enacting. Egreteau does not go as far as to offer an interpretation of the USDP's motives or what they might reveal about the military's intentions, but he leaves no doubt that they were eager to legislate. Although the result was often poorly crafted laws, the volume of legislation was significant. His interpretation

is again generous on the NLD's record. Under a NLD majority between 2016 and 2021, parliament was considered, by some, to have been relatively ineffective, but Egreteau shows that it clearly tried to clean up, modify and improve the laws that the USDP had passed, not least to eliminate overlaps, inconsistencies and other errors. Put differently, the NLD-majority parliament worked to improve the quality, not quantity, of legislation.

Other chapters, however, offer up a more modest record. NLD parliamentarians had a degree of eagerness to scrutinize legislation, ask questions and conduct investigations, but they had limited success. Echoing some other commentators, Egreteau notes that the MPs could only exercise a limited amount of independence, despite the pro-democracy pretenses of the NLD's leadership. He also notes its unwillingness to confront past mistakes, redress historical injustices or demand accountability.

Crafting Parliament in Myanmar's Disciplined Democracy includes a diverse array of information and statistics, some of which may be surprising. For instance, the reader might expect to see that the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw was over-represented by educated men from the Bamar-majority, yet they may not be fully aware of its ethnic diversity and the presence of business executives. Perhaps also surprisingly, the book shows how military delegates were experienced and that some of them were rather keen on performing their duties. Egreteau argues that while they were disruptive during the NLD majority period after 2016, they did not show signs of wanting to suspend parliament and launch a coup.

At times, the volume of detail can be a little distracting and somewhat superfluous. Although it is not always clear why some of the information was included, it certainly shows the meticulous data gathered by Egreteau during his many field trips to Myanmar. The book was written during the late stages of the NLD's civilian rule and while it takes into account the February 2021 military coup, it sometimes reads as though the parliamentary era is still underway.

Nevertheless, Egreteau clearly shows why it is important to understand Myanmar's experimentation with parliamentary democracy and, by extension, that its record was actually better than what some commentators might now think in light of a military coup that put an end to that experiment. Perhaps he concludes on too optimistic a note, but Egreteau does show that a benchmark

has been set for parliamentary representation in Myanmar and that because certain democratic norms were socialized between 2011 and 2021, the military junta, when it gets around to holding an election, may struggle to revive a parliament that toes the line. All in all, *Crafting Parliament in Myanmar's Disciplined Democracy* is the authoritative work for understanding the difficulties and achievements of Myanmar's decade-long dalliance with parliamentary governance.

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