

***New Answers to Old Questions: Myanmar Before and After the 2021 Coup d'État.* By Aaron Connelly and Shona Loong. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2024. Softcover: 181pp.**

Despite continuing to suffer significant losses on the battlefield, Myanmar's military junta plans to conduct national elections in 2025, the first since the November 2020 ballots that preceded and prefigured the February 2021 coup. Coordinated attacks by ethnic resistance groups beginning in October 2023, known as "Operation 1027", have shifted momentum in Myanmar's conflict, compelling analysts and policymakers to reassess the military's hold on power. Using its influence, China has pressured the junta and armed resistance groups to engage in ceasefire talks while Western states have incrementally expanded their sanctions on the military and its business interests in a perfunctory effort to encourage political dialogue.

As of late 2024, the conflict's fate is still far from obvious: the Arakan Army, an ethnic militia, is making noteworthy gains in Rakhine State while junta forces are losing strategically important territory along the border with China in northern Shan and Kachin States. It is unclear how the State Administration Council (SAC), the junta's formal name, reckons it can hold elections when it does not control most of the country, making it extremely doubtful an election can be a durable off-ramp for the conflict. Nor are the military's aerial bombardment, torture and other forms of barbarism likely to crush the nationwide resistance.

In their timely new book, *New Answers to Old Questions*, Aaron Connelly and Shona Loong offer a concise and authoritative account of the major fault lines that have torn apart the country since independence in 1948 and culminated in the 2021 coup. In this retrospective and future gaze on the crisis, Connelly and Loong focus their analysis on three main dynamics: "the armed forces and the state", "the centre and the periphery" and "Myanmar and the world".

The authors explore Myanmar's fraught history to uncover deep-seated social and political forces that continue to shape the current conflict. For example, they demonstrate how British colonial administrators effectively entrenched ethnic divisions by filling the ranks of the colonial army with ethnic minorities to suppress uprisings by the Bamar majority (p. 66). Following independence,

the country's Bamar-dominated national government failed to take ethnic minority grievances seriously, setting the country on a path to violent conflict (p. 70).

The 2021 coup has exposed Myanmar's historic fault lines so extensively that it created a unique opportunity to conclusively address them. Chief among them is the role of the armed forces in politics (p. 18). Despite the immense human tragedy of the ongoing conflict, the authors argue that a new generation of leaders may realize the Myanmar people's collective hopes for fundamental national transformation if the international community acts before it is too late (p. 27).

This argument is largely borne out by the evidence Connelly and Loong provide over the course of the book's four chapters. However, by presenting three accessible axes to make sense of Myanmar's numerous conflicts, the authors oversimplify certain dynamics of political contestation. For instance, by depicting the "relationship between the armed forces and the state"—the focus of the first chapter—as a contest between the military and the National League for Democracy (NLD), they conflate the party with the state. The authors simultaneously argue that "the *primary* contest between the Tatmadaw [the country's armed forces] and the NLD has been over the much narrower issue of the armed forces' role in politics" (p. 29). Yet, in portraying the NLD as the single most important opponent of the armed forces, the book overlooks the contributions of many other actors in the broader-based national opposition to military rule in the 2000s.

The rationale behind this choice is unclear, for the authors could just as easily have focused more broadly on the relationship between the military and civil society. Elsewhere, they lament that "Reporting has focused on the contest between the military and the NLD, to the neglect of ethnonational movements that have had ambivalent and complicated relationships with both successive juntas and their opponents" (p. 71). Thus, Connelly and Loong clearly grasp the difficulty of conveying a succinct narrative for general readers, a challenge they mostly overcome.

One might also question the authors' arguments about why the military launched the February 2021 coup. According to Connelly and Loong, the military's decision to prevent the NLD from maintaining power following the 2020 elections was because of its inability a decade earlier to create a governing system that could genuinely protect its political and economic interests (p. 30). This claim is

tenuous. Despite the NLD's concerted attempts to reform the 2008 Constitution and despite the NLD increasing its share of seats in parliament at the 2020 elections, the military still retained 25 per cent of all parliamentary seats, controlled three of the most powerful ministries—home affairs, border affairs and defence—and because of the 2008 Constitution, maintained its impunity to generate enormous revenues from illicit business networks. Therefore, it is not clear how the coup served the military's long-term interests. Certainly, it furthered military chief Min Aung Hlaing's personal ambitions for political power, but as time will tell, it may come at the cost of the military's survival as an institution.

Despite these occasional limitations, the authors have achieved an impressive degree of balance and nuance in a remarkably concise format, and the book offers a meaningful contribution to the debate over the coup and the country's future. Scholars and general readers alike will find the book essential for understanding how Myanmar's history continues to shape the country's overlapping conflicts.

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