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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF MYANMAR

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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF MYANMAR

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*This book is dedicated
to my father*

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Preface

Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) has been isolated from the world since 1962 when the military took over civil power for the second time. Soon after the military coup, an inward-looking self-reliant policy of isolation in the form of “The Burmese Way to Socialism” was declared as the official policy and guideline for the future development of the nation. Under the Burmese Way to Socialism, all the enterprises in foreign trade, domestic wholesale and even retail trade, banks, industries, forestry, fishery, mining, as well as hospitals and schools were nationalized.

Moreover, the medium of instruction in schools and universities was changed, almost overnight, from English to Burmese in 1964. University staff members were asked to write textbooks in Burmese. As a result, some compulsory textbooks in Burmese were published during the 1970s. Most of them were translated from old textbooks in English. This meant that most of them were out of date, especially in the field of social science. Besides, there were never enough books due both to lack of competent staff as well as incentives. Then in 1981, English was again introduced as the medium of instruction at the tertiary education level. By then the economy was facing a severe shortage of foreign exchange. Consequently, university libraries were unable to buy sufficient number of textbooks, references, and journals in the English language. At the same time, a large number of competent and foreign-trained university staff skilled in the English language had left the country as they could no longer make a decent living as a university teacher. Simultaneously, promising university teachers were not permitted to go abroad for their doctorate degrees. This meant that there was

neither enough foreign exchange to buy books nor enough competent staff to write or translate them into the English language.

In my personal opinion, the lack of books on the post-war economy of Myanmar in the English language is particularly acute. To date, there is not a single textbook on the economic development of Myanmar whose content encompasses the entire post-war period from 1948 to 2000. There is thus a great need for such a publication.

Nevertheless, it is with some trepidation that I undertook this project. First of all, while it is true that there is as yet not a single study on the economic development of Myanmar covering the entire post-war period, there are a number of excellent studies by eminent Myanmar economists as well as Burma scholars from abroad that cover different periods and/or various aspects of development. Thus, even if the only contribution that I can hope to make is to, as it were, bring them together under one roof there is still the question of whether justice can be done in recasting bits and pieces of their works according to my own understanding. In this regard, it needs to be emphasized that my main contribution is one of assemblage and structuring around a central theme — the economic development of Myanmar — and that most of the material in this study has been presented in more or less appreciative and/or critical tone in one form or another. Thus, the development process in Myanmar recounted in this book is neither of my making nor to my liking, but what I am offering is the reality as it appears to me.

Secondly, although I try to be as objective as possible, there is always a nagging thought (doubt) as to whether the Myanmar intelligentsia and especially people in the administrative hierarchy will believe the sincerity of my purpose and see things in the correct light. In this connection, I would like to plead to everyone to see history the way Susanto Zuhdi, the director of history at the Ministry of National Education of Indonesia, saw it. Referring to the previous regime, when history books were written mainly to serve the interests of rulers, he said, “This is dangerous. A state should not restrain the writing of history. We want to encourage people to write their version of history.” He added further that “History is no longer

about a justification of facts. It should generate dialogue to allow different interpretations. We want to educate the public that different versions of history are normal” (*Nation* [Bangkok], 27 October 2001).

Thirdly, in trying to present the past I do not know if I can persuade people from all walks of life to overcome at least some of their prejudices and biases so that they may come to see the reality in Myanmar as objectively as possible.

It is not the intention of this book to give an exhaustive historical account and an analysis of post-war economic development in Myanmar since 1948. The intention, rather, is to consider the broad range of factors that have affected major developments and the economic growth of the country at different periods in its history, and the policies and measures adopted by various governments to tackle them. I have also tried to present the major developments in Myanmar between 1948 and 2000 simply and clearly.

Last but not least, a few words need to be said about the limitations and constraints of this study. I strongly feel that a full-fledged holistic approach is required for a well-rounded account of developments over the past fifty years or more. However, because I lack expertise in subjects other than economics, a holistic approach could only be taken in a very limited manner. This is the first limitation. The second limitation concerns the paucity, reliability, and accessibility of data on Myanmar’s economy, a limitation compounded by the fact that a major part of this study was undertaken during my brief sojourn in Bangkok. This explains why, for the comparative analysis of development trends, in some instances an approximate year or period is used instead of specific ones.

In spite of all the limitations mentioned above, it is hoped that students, academics, businessmen, and especially policy-makers will find the present book useful.

Myat Thein
1 October 2001

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