

Book Reviews

Myanmar (Burma) since 1962: The Failure of Development. By Peter John Perry. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007. 222 pp.

Peter Perry's *Myanmar (Burma) since 1962* is a great addition to the literature on a relatively unknown topic that has been studied by only a small number of observers and a deeply polarized research community. This book analyses how and why Burma's development has failed miserably since the military rule in 1962. Specifically, Perry looks at rice, mining, and timber — the three resource sectors that have been mismanaged and misappropriated by the military regime. Perry envisions “a modest re-focusing on and re-emphasis of resources, their use and distribution” and “a hope and trust that soon the development of Burma's resources will be on the basis of fair shares for all rather than privileges of the few.”

A geographer by training, Perry provides a different perspective to understanding the roots of Burma's economic crisis by looking at the connection between geography, history, and policies and practices of the military. His “integrative” approach, although neither new nor revolutionary, is a major contribution to a field that has been predominantly occupied by historians, economists, political scientists, and anthropologists.

The book is based on the analysis of secondary resources (e.g., fieldwork-based materials, magazines, newspapers, and publications by various international organizations on their respective areas of expertise), and is sometimes illustrated by the personal narratives of Perry's own students over the course of his teaching career.

Consequently, Perry was able to compile impressive amounts of information and interpretations on the subjects and develop a coherent analysis of interrelationships among colonial policies and practices, resource exploitations, military repression, insurgencies, and illegal trade. This reliance on secondary materials may, however, disappoint long-time observers of Burma who are expecting original studies and new discoveries. Needless to say, the book provides a good overview of Burma's developmental policies since 1962 and will be a great resource for policy-makers, activists, humanitarians, and students interested in Burma, Southeast Asian affairs, and development studies.

The book is organized into eleven short chapters. The first chapter sheds light on why Burma has featured very little in the geography discipline and development studies — a major factor that motivated the author to embark on this project. Perry then provides a list of theoretical approaches and briefly states how they apply or do not apply to Burma's situations. None of these theories, such as the "historical-empirical" approach, "bottom up/alternative" approach, "radical dependency", "state capitalism", "resource curse", and "sustainable development" are fully explained to non-specialist readers. In addition, the lack of further elaboration of these theories in later chapters leaves the reader to wonder whether resource management in Burma could enhance or transform our existing knowledge about development in authoritarian and Third World countries. To what extent is Burma's experience similar to or different from other "resource curse" countries? The choice of not situating Burma in broader theoretical and comparative contexts inadvertently undermines Perry's intent to raise the profile of Burma in development studies.

Chapter two focuses on the limitations of scholarship and research in Burma since 1962. The regime's hostility toward academic researchers and foreigners, unreliable official data, and unrecorded data from the black market are issues that have continued to confront and challenge analysts on Burma, including the author.

Chapter three details the historical contexts that have given rise to military rule in 1962. The author convincingly demonstrates that Ne Win's government, which was in principle based upon socialist ideologies and democratic centralism, was in practice an authoritarian government that "offered little to producers and took everything for the state and its military and civilian officials" (p. 27). Chapter four offers numerous perspectives from previous studies on how individualism (a component generally associated with Buddhism), astrology, and authoritarianism have impeded the process of socio-economic and political development in Burma. Perry's position remains ambiguous since he does not provide compelling evidence to either affirm or oppose these arguments.

Chapters five and six cover the history of the rice industry, and Ne Win's policies and practices on the agricultural sector and their consequential impacts on rice production, distribution, and export. Several components of rice production such as procurement practices, land tenure, credit, and inputs (chemical fertilizer, irrigation, etc.) are also discussed. Perry demonstrates that the rice industry in general has suffered as a consequence of low procurement prices, restrictions on producer choice and trade, shortages of inputs and consumer products, lack of access to low-interest loan, poor infrastructures, and uncertain land tenure. These practices also resulted in smuggling and an informal rice market.

Some topics such as procurement and credits receive greater attention, whereas others such as land tenure and labour are given only a superficial treatment. Thus, many important issues such as equity and the distribution of land ownership; the level of indebtedness; availability of non-farm employment; relationship between the size of land ownership and rice outputs; and the widespread practices of mortgaging, renting, and sale of lands despite official prohibitions remain unexplored. Perry addresses the issues of tax and land reform with ambiguous language and lack of concrete policy stance. He writes, for example, "the connection between the tenurial situation and contracting exports is unproven and probably

now beyond detailed scrutiny, but its likelihood as a significant but secondary cause is a reasonable evaluation” (p. 9). It is not clear whether his proposed “formal consolidation of land reform” refers to abolition of state ownership over lands (which is manifested in the state’s claims over farmers’ produce) or the redistribution of land (which would be an impractical proposal since the average individual land holding in Burma is already small).

Chapter seven focuses on the history, production, and management of the teak and timber industry under Ne Win. According to Perry, the low priority given to conservation and management, poor infrastructure, and the problem of territorial control in insurgent areas resulted in the sector’s decadence, deforestation, and illegal production and trade on a large and growing but unrecorded scale.

Chapter eight features the conditions of minerals, gem and jade, oil and gas, and metals during Ne Win’s period and uncovers similar problems found in the rice and timber industries. Perry contends that the potential for these industries has been thwarted by the nationalization of the mineral and oil industries, outdated refineries, low-quality management and labour, hostility toward foreign investment, and poor infrastructures. Official statistics were under-recorded because the government was unable to control illegal production and trade, especially of gems and jade, in insurgent-controlled areas.

Chapters nine and ten discuss economic activities under Ne Win. These chapters include responses by retail businesses and consumers toward problems associated with shortages, identify those who either benefited or were denied benefits from the so-called “socialist” economies, and assess the general welfare of the populations through education, health care, and infrastructure services. Particular attention is given to smuggling, illegal trade, corruption within different ladders of bureaucracies, and military hierarchies.

Chapter eleven gives a brief overview of ethnic armed resistance in Burma and the emergence of drug trade in insurgent-controlled areas. The last two chapters consist of updates on situations since 1988, particularly the “economic liberalization” which the author describes

as “pragmatic, fragmented and short term economic change” (p. 159). Perry shows how policy changes since 1988 have affected rice, mining, and timber sectors and the welfare of the general population. He also elaborates on the debate over whether international community should “engage” or “isolate” the military junta and gives a modest forecast on the future of Burma. His suggestions for dealing with the regime that has become repressive, isolated, and xenophobic, however, are broad and simplistic. The author offers no new concrete and workable plan to break the current deadlock in Burma except for a desire to end authoritarian practices: “My tentative answer would include: less government — the end of totalitarianism; localization of government openness, abandonment of surveillance and secretary; partnership” (p. 184).

Overall, the discussion on the rice industry is strongest. Due to the lack of nuanced analysis and researched materials, the section on teak and timber is the weakest. In addition, because Perry devotes a disproportionate portion of the book to the rule of Ne Win rather than on current situations, issues that are worthy of comparison remain unanalysed. The level, scale, and scope of corruptions have increased since Burma opened its door to foreign investors in the late 1980s. A rising gap between the haves and the have-nots is a new alarming phenomenon that did not exist under the rule of General Ne Win. Department stores are sprouting; once empty shelves are now replaced by canned food, western accessories, and electronic goods that are only available to those who can afford them. Unfortunately, Perry does not provide any suggestions as to how Burma’s natural resources could be promoted or developed in such a way that they might become sustainable and environmentally friendly.

All in all, although the book does not offer any new insights for Burma specialists, its comprehensive coverage gives a good overview and understanding of Burma’s development policies and their consequential impacts on the population, society, and environment. In this aspect, Perry succeeds in bringing the reader’s attention to “the ineptitude and incompetence in resource management and

distribution” that has been destructive and that has deprived most of the population of access to wealth (p. 3). Perry’s wish that “Burma’s resources will be on the basis of fair shares for all”, however, will remain unfulfilled for quite some time.

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