

***Promoting Human Rights in Burma: A Critique of Western Sanctions Policy.* By Morten B. Pedersen. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007. Hardcover: 291pp.**

The scope of this study covers much more ground than the title suggests in that it delineates the whys and wherefores of the ongoing contest between the military regime and its liberal democratic opponents in shaping Myanmar's political and socio-economic landscape. The author contends that sanctions do more harm than good in fostering democracy and respect for human rights in Myanmar. Most members of the so-called democratic opposition who see regime change through tighter sanctions as the only way to achieve justice, peace and prosperity in Myanmar vehemently disagree with Pedersen's contentions and their ideologically driven attitude means that they will miss valuable insights and lessons contained in the author's comprehensive survey of the historical, socio-cultural and structural dimensions of the Myanmar "conundrum". Ironically, far from being an apologist for the regime, the author is rather critical in pointing out the generals' weaknesses and failed attempts at state-building and modernization despite their overwhelming control of power and resources (pp. 7–12, 149–64).

Chapter two provides a comprehensive account of the evolution and stagnation of the West's human rights policy whose core strategy entails "promoting democracy [and human rights] by isolating the military regime" (p. 3) thereby "denying it international legitimacy, aid, trade, and investment" (p. 22) based on the assumption that the "military's stranglehold on power can be broken by denying it external reinforcement and that all human rights concerns in the country ... are hostage to democratic reform" (ibid.). Championed by the United States since the violent September 1988 coup, sanctions have waxed and waned in response to perceived regime intransigence and episodes of harsh repression or minor concessions (pp. 63–65). The sanctions debate intensified in the early 1990s and also became conflated with the incarceration of the leader of the opposition, democracy icon and Noble Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and her political role in Myanmar. Myanmar's membership of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and closer ties with China further raised the tempo of debate. This chapter provides a good overview of the controversial issue albeit by following a well-trodden path. One wishes that there was more on the roles of ASEAN and major regional players China and India.

The following chapter focuses on regime priorities and perceptions, and the author relies heavily on revealed preferences of the junta through their actions and rhetoric while challenging the popular portrayal of Myanmar's political tussle as a fight between "good" and "evil". The author explains that the military's desired outcome is to establish "a stable political order that safeguards national security" in an uncompromising manner and motivated by a "selfimage rooted in the past" that conflates regime security with national security (p. 112). Chapter three also delineates the balance of power between the junta and the opposition; the overwhelming balance in favour of the regime is evident. This chapter highlights the unpalatable truth that even the moral authority and charisma of Suu Kyi, the perceived legitimacy of the electoral victory, and Western support for the opposition are impotent against the junta.

Chapter four addresses the "five key aspects of meaningful transition" to a viable democracy in Myanmar. Presenting "unique" but at the same time "interlinked" challenges, they are problems associated with: "national reconciliation"; "state capacity"; "civil society"; "economy"; and undeveloped "border regions" (p. 180). While contending that "regime change" is not the answer to Myanmar's complex and seemingly intractable problems, the author offers only a general comment stating that they "require long-term efforts by all parties to promote change along a range of issues" with an optimistic corollary that "the authoritarian legacy, however deep, is balanced to some extent by traditional Buddhist ideas and values, as well as the influence of international norms that will only grow with an opening up of the country" (pp. 208–09). However, the tragic events of the September 2007 "Saffron Revolution" appear to weaken the author's argument.

The arguments in Chapter five are well constructed but the data problems are most acute here and independent corroboration of supporting evidence on the negative impacts of the sanctions is elusive. Though the case for the efficacy of sanctions is even weaker, the "what if" questions remain unresolved, perhaps even unanswerable given the circumstances and the paucity of information on the inner workings of the junta's decision-making.

The final chapter is rather tame. It calls for the removal of punitive sanctions while taking into consideration the fears and hopes of the military leaders and a long term "broader, more process oriented approach" for incremental change apparently within the bounds acceptable to the military leadership (p. 270). However, no clear road map to bring about change and operationalize the

objectives of this alternative vision for a “better way to human rights” (p. 255) is given.

In the politicized and polarized world of Myanmar studies, this study stands out as a realistic and sober assessment of the options available to the international community and Myanmar stakeholders, despite its obvious position against coercive diplomacy. In his introductory chapter, the author states that the purpose of the study was “to evaluate Western human rights policy on Burma since 1988” (p. 12), the year of regime change from one-party socialist government to direct military rule. As such, he examines the “appropriateness” of the West’s core strategy (*ibid.*) by identifying three issue-related questions: “W[hat] effect do existing policies have? W[hy] has coercive diplomacy not worked? H[ow] can the human rights — that is, the freedom, security, and welfare — of the Burmese people best be promoted?” The author’s attempt to answer these interrelated questions leaves the reader with the impression that while there is light at the end of the tunnel, it seems no closer than before. The difficulty lies in the opacity of the major stakeholders, a restrictive information environment and the prevailing zero-sum paradigm that has been Myanmar’s miasma for a long time (cf. pp. 14–15). The author has had the advantage of observing Myanmar from within the country for more than a decade, but the absence of Myanmar language citations seems to indicate an information deficit and makes one wonder whether it might have constrained the author from fully exploiting that opportunity. However, these quibbles do not detract from the fact that Pedersen has made a significant contribution to the debate on the Myanmar conundrum and this book is a must read for all those who are interested in Myanmar citizens’ quest for security, dignity, liberty and prosperity. This applies to regime supporters and detractors alike, as well as agnostics.

TIN MAUNG MAUNG THAN is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore.