

## BOOK REVIEWS

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***Ethnic Politics in Burma: States of Conflict.* By Ashley South. Abingdon: Routledge, 2008. Hardcover: 277pp.**

The political deadlock in Myanmar has recently diverted international attention from the countries vexed ethnic minority politics. Yet as Ashley South outlines in this book, the nature of state-society relations between the military government and multitudes of ethnic minority communities remains at the core of solving Myanmar's intractable problems of national reconciliation, and overcoming increasing levels of poverty and social misery. South emphasizes two interlinked conflicts: the struggle for a democratically elected government in Myanmar, and the struggles for self-determination of non-Burman communities.

The book looks at these issues by dividing zones of governance and control into three areas: zones of ongoing conflict, government controlled areas and ceasefire zones. In Myanmar's horseshoe geography of conflict and ethnicity along borders with Thailand, Laos, China, India and Bangladesh, the challenges of survival in these three heavily militarized realms are a daily reality for millions.

Although the book is devoted to ethnic politics in Myanmar, the author focuses on only a few ethnic communities. There are several major ethnic groups in Myanmar, although the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) recognizes 135 distinctive "ethnic nationalities". South looks predominantly at those he has interacted with: the Karen, Mon, and Kachin, with some overview of the Wa, Pa-O, and less so of the Shan, while the Karenni, Chin and Arakanese hardly rate a mention.

The study is structured around three broad themes. The first, "Conflicting Histories", is an overview of debates over ethnic identity politics, with an emphasis on the experiences of the Karen and

Mon, and how the post-independence state's attempts to consolidate its hold over the country had the effect of sparking widespread armed resistance throughout the country. The chapter on state and society, and debates over "grievance and greed" as motivations for resistance is well drawn, but there is regrettably little on the nature of insurgent financing, or in-depth academic debates on greed versus grievance to warrant the title.

The second part looks at the nature of Myanmar's civil war since 1988. Much of this section is devoted to the negotiations and dynamics of ceasefire accords. The strongest sections look at the nature of internal displacement in Myanmar (pp. 78–108), a huge problem and an issue the author has considerable expertise in. South has the rare field experience of someone who has witnessed at close hand both sides of Myanmar's borders and how communities contend with conflict. He has actually worked and travelled in all three of the governance realms inside Myanmar his book describes. The detail and clarity in these pages are the book's strongest point.

The final part of the book looks at the nature of ceasefires, and the benefits and drawbacks to ethnic communities of the uneven peace dividends from the post-1989 ceasefire arrangements between the central government and over 17 armed groups. This is the section in which South attempts to draw disparate threads of debates over development, international engagement strategies and their impact on internal displacement. Civil society rejuvenation in Myanmar has resulted from some of these ceasefires, and there has been promising progress for local development, but South acknowledges they are both uneven and fragile.

The author makes the salient point that for Myanmar to change, "what is required is more- and better quality-engagement between international and state agencies and local communities" (p. 208). Now, more than ever, it is a prescription that Myanmar and the international community need to understand and respond to. It is therefore unfortunate then that he expends only three pages on the vexed debates over international assistance to Myanmar.

In his analysis of ethnic classification, South critiques the essentialist nature of identity by internal and external actors (ethnic elites in Myanmar, and foreign, Western, supporters of them) to "fetishise ethnicity" which has led to "zero-sum politics" (p. 217), which have not had many positive benefits to communities or peace-building in recent decades. Compare this with the military governments "often brutal nation/state building programme" and it explains why the politics in the country between the state and ethnic

groups are so hard-edged, and sustainable change so elusive. South acknowledges that reports of widespread human rights violations in ethnic areas are rarely fabricated: “life for civilians in the war zones really *is* that bad” (p. 109) [emphasis in original].

There is a concise epilogue of the 2007 Buddhist monk-led protests and the devastating effects of Cyclone Nargis in May 2008. The authors concluding recommendation to the diverse Burmese opposition and ethnic communities is to “review, reform, and re-engage” (p. 230) with the central government and the international community. This is a process that many groups are already starting as the planned multi-party elections of 2010 in Myanmar loom.

This book catalogues a litany of missed opportunities for better state-society accord, and the resultant human misery of continuing low-level conflict. South tries to signpost these missed opportunities and suggests alternatives so they are not repeated.

Given the magnitude of the subject matter, the author could have arranged the material better; there is a good deal of meandering which might leave the lay reader feeling confused. However, what works extremely well are a series of tables listing various groups, pros and cons of ceasefire arrangements, and various arguments over political transition theories for Myanmar. Moreover, for a book of this size, South does a rigorous job of pulling a pile of information together, and he stands as one of the most prominent Western scholars of this often neglected and misunderstood country.

This book is an essential contemporary reading for any academic, aid worker or United Nations official attempting to understand Myanmar’s seemingly impossible challenges.