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## BOOK REVIEW

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### *Myanmar in Crisis: Living with the Pandemic and the Coup*

Justine Chambers and Michael R. Dunfold (eds)  
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*Myanmar in Crisis* is another book in what is becoming an ISEAS series based on the annual Myanmar Research Centre gatherings at the Australian National University. One hopes the series will continue, despite heightened 'ethical and methodological risks' (p. 332), as the 13-chapter volume provides rare insight and analysis of the chaos in post-coup Myanmar.

The chapters follow the research interests of their authors, and so the book has some tangential contributions and touches lightly on some key research questions. Some chapters are broad sweeps about the future for Myanmar, while others are on very specific topics. Chapter 7 helps us understand the complex motivations and peer pressures behind those who joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). COVID is mentioned across the book, but it was hardly a crisis relative to the chaos unleashed by the 2021 coup.

Post-coup, two-thirds of townships in Myanmar are affected by conflict, doubling from one third prior (p. 107). Apart from numbers of people killed and displaced post-coup, the economic repercussions are dire: 1.6 million jobs lost, and over 14 million people 'in need of urgent and direct humanitarian assistance' (p. 237). Illicit revenues from opium, jade, rare earth minerals, gambling, timber and wild animal trade, alongside oil and gas, effectively protect the Tatmadaw from needing to care about the formal economy and are 'a crucial economic lifeline' for them (p. 244)—making the case for targeted sanctions compelling. These illicit revenues are from hills and mountains of ethnic minority areas, further driving conflicts for control.

The important research areas lightly touched upon are of course the most difficult: China and the Tatmadaw. China is mentioned, but almost always in passing. China is becoming the main trading partner and foreign investor—in 2022, 65% of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) came from China (p. 250); it backed ASEAN's role 'partly to keep the west away' (p. 38); and it continues to sell military equipment, along with Russia 'a new player that has entered the game' (p. 38), supporting the air war. And while China 'views the military as a fickle partner', it now sees opportunities to push through its belt-and-road projects and economic zones. Myanmar has historically had a 'carrot and stick' approach with China 'signalling a relative tilt away from Beijing's shadow, while also safeguarding cordial and rewarding ties with them'.

The burning research question, however, is to understand the Tatmadaw. We are given only one teaser insight by former Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP)-aligned politicians, who report that 'General Min Aung Hlaing is known to be a reactionary figure and widely unpopular among those around him' (p.98). The dominant hypothesis for the coup seems to be, yet again, that the military leaders truly believed that they could win the 2020 election (p. 98), and when the results were not in their favour, took over the country. However they were 'woefully unprepared' (p. 98) for the resistance that followed. There is no better evidence that the Tatmadaw live in their own mythological bubble than they would allow free elections, on the expectation to perform well—three times! Research needs to build an evidence-base for what we suspect is the correct hypothesis: that the Tatmadaw's 'success' (since 1962) is built on belligerent ignorance, myths and norms that make a mockery of any notion of a civilised compromise towards peace.

Understanding what the Tatmadaw and its leaders really think and believe is essential to

forecast Myanmar's future. From this book the prognosis is negative (p. 162): the military should be understood as 'a form of colonial regime' and the country is now embroiled in a 'revolutionary struggle' (p. 10). The Tatmadaw have made no pretence to contest governance in Bamar majority townships, and instead have returned to their 'four cuts' approach of terrorising populations into submission. Consequently, 'many Bamar have come to realise that they have common cause with the country's ethnic insurgents' (p. 48). The Tatmadaw have closed their own doors for a negotiated settlement, and nor is one wanted now. Michael Dunford highlights how the military themselves are the political crisis in Myanmar and questions whether any non-violent solution to overthrowing them is even possible (p. 177).

Since the declaration of a 'defensive war' by the National Unity Government (NUG) in September 2021, most of the country is reportedly now under the control of NUG-aligned groups or Ethnic Resistance Organisations (EROs). On the other hand, by September 2022, the State Administration Council (SAC) controls less than half of the country and is 'facing major challenges even within much of this area' (p. 46). However, 'no government has officially recognised the junta or the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH)/NUG' (p. 305). Malaysia, United Kingdom, United States of America (USA) and the European Union have been open about their engagement/dialogue with the NUG, and countries like China, Russia and India have 'publicly sought relationships with the SAC and (not accidentally)' (p. 304). The idea of dialogue with the Tatmadaw for a 'return to democracy' (p. 290), as Nicholas Coppel hopes, seems unrealistic.

That leaves us with the question—who will ultimately win, and how long might that take? Several chapters address this, mostly optimistic about revolutionary achievements to date. Morten Pedersen, however, is more sanguine: 'the belief that [the resistance] can win on the battlefield stretches the limits of realistic analysis' (p. 59). He also notes that resistance forces like the People's Defence Forces (PDFs) in Sagaing (p. 113), cannot retreat over borders like the Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) (p. 63). The junta, however, can also not achieve 'decisive victory'; so a long period of 'low-intensity conflict' is most likely during which 'history shows that the Tatmadaw is likely to be

able to reorganise, rebuild, and divide and rule' (p. 62).

Ironically, the return to conflict, the Tatmadaw has opened 'a new chapter' (p. 37) for the political evolution, as 'amidst the chaos and despair caused by the coup, a revolutionary movement has grown, pointing towards new and innovative political possibilities for Myanmar' (p. 323). The experiment with the National League for Democracy (NLD) and the perfect patsy Aung Sang Suu Kyi is over, and its legacy is that a negotiated solution is not an option.

The EAOs have grown in influence, and while some 'small and militarily weak groups' aligned with the NUG, 'most EAOs have taken positions that reflect more immediate local calculations' (p. 49). With this, and the EAO's demands for independence, Myanmar has reached the point at which the state may no longer hold together (p. 42). If it does, a 'new system will be more confederal than federal with extensive authority for several of the most powerful ethnic groups' (p. 50).

The relationship between Myanmar and the outside world is also in chaos. The EAOs and NUG want development aid to flow through them to their townships, strengthening their legitimacy (p. 149), which may well provoke the junta to cease all assistance, including humanitarian (a return to pre-Nargis). While EAO townships may be discretely assisted through cross-border NGOs, the best formal long-term strategy may be for donors to explicitly target poor people irrespective of township control.

Several chapters in the book offer views about targeted sanctions. None advocate broad-based sanctions, which makes sense given the dualistic nature of the economy and Tatmadaw revenues flows. Nicholas Coppel, however, is most critical of targeted sanctions; talking of their 'performative dimension' (p. 289 and p. 293) and just being 'signals of discontent' (p. 297). His criticism is based on assigning unrealistic expectations on sanctions leading to 'regime change' (p. 296) or 'restoration of democracy' (p. 297). Further research would include a detailed look at targeted sanctions imposed to date and their economic impact on junta revenues and its ability to purchase key commodities such as jet fuel.

Foreign aid, sanctions and diplomacy can somewhat lessen the pending humanitarian crisis, and nudge economic forces against the

Tatmadaw, but more could be done. Nicholas Coppel talks of formal constraints on international options, but those did not stop the USA supplying stinger missiles to the Taliban, supporting the Bay of Pigs invasion, or a litany of military interventions in central America. Further, despite the UN's 'unwavering support to the people of Myanmar' (p. 302), there remains very little it can do, with Secretary Council permanent members Russia and China 'unwilling to support collective action against Myanmar' (p. 302). The real constraints are political will and a realpolitik desire not to provoke China. It would also be nice if Asia's democracies (including India) emerged from their American security umbrella and were more aggressive, and willing to suffer the economic costs of standing up stronger for their principles. Post-coup, Asian investors and businesses 'were silent...[doing] business as usual' (p. 246), and while Kirin withdrew and South Korea and Japan signed the

2021 Joint Chiefs of Defence Statement, the heavy lifting (as usual) was left to western democracies.

With tepid international support, Myanmar probably faces yet another decade of low-level conflict, with the military showing no sign of 'turning or letting up' (p. 309). This conflict phase, however, is different to previous uprisings in 1974, 1988 and 2007. The Tatmadaw find themselves fighting the Bamar people, and the 'overall deep sense of utter devastation' (p. 32) is profound after the taste of democracy and Facebook. The Tatmadaw offer only a struggle to the death, which is now being accepted, with the 'sobering realisation that, if change is to come, it will have to come from within Myanmar' (p. 309).

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