

Book Review: Gravers, M., & Flemming, Y. (Eds.). (2014). Burma/Myanmar—Where now?

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Myanmar has been ruled by an authoritarian military regime for more than half a century. The Southeast Asian country gained sad notoriety through political repression, massive human rights abuses, armed conflicts, socioeconomic decline, and extreme poverty. This began to change only in 2011 when the junta replaced itself with a quasi-civilian government in order to seek ways out of its political and economic isolation. Thereafter, the country embarked on a new political course of opening up and political liberalization. While the international community has euphorically celebrated Myanmar's self-initiated "roadmap to democratization," new and old problems endanger the transitional process. In response to this, Mikael Gravers, an anthropologist and Myanmar scholar, and Flemming Ytzen, a journalist with a long-lasting Burma engagement, put together this ambitious volume taking stock of the current political situation with a thematic focus on conflict resolution, peace building, and democratization. Bringing together the perspectives of 21 academics, journalists, and practitioners, the purpose of this book is to address the attainments and prospects of the transitional process so far, as well as the future challenges and threats lying ahead of the conflict-torn country.

The book features three parts and a brief conclusive chapter. Part I, entitled "Order and Change" (pp. 23–139), guides the reader through the most salient events, developments, and changes of the country's ongoing transition from a military dictatorship to a civil government with all its institutional consequences. Ytzen and Gravers draw a lively picture of the controversial elections of 2012 as well as the upcoming polls of 2015. This is followed by an overview of the altering role of the media and newly emerging space for political engagement. This section also looks at the main actors and key political figures, their interests and strategies, most notably Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD), President Thein Sein, the military-affiliated Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), and the various ethnic minority parties, but also societal forces such as the Tatmadaw (military of the union government), the bureaucracy, the Buddhist Sangha, business interests, and (armed) ethnic groups. Michael Lidauer provides detailed insights into the new constitution and the political administrative system enshrined in it. He highlights the need for more decentralization, constitutional amendments, and corresponding changes in the election system on the way towards a new and more democratic state in Myanmar. Charles Petrie and Ashley South briefly sketch the country's civil society

landscape and elucidate the potential role NGOs may play for peace building and democratization. More critically, referring to Myanmar's geostrategic position in the region, Bertil Lintner argues that reforms are embedded in and driven by geopolitical power games and interests that do not necessarily serve the democratic transition in the first place. Subsequently, Josine Legêne and Flemming Ytzen describe how global and regional players aligned their foreign policy towards Myanmar throughout its turbulent history. Beyond politics, major social issues are addressed by Marie Ditlevsen, who sheds light on current developments in health and education, while Jessica Harriden elaborates on the situation of women who suffered greatly because of decades of armed conflict and violence. Anna Roberts shows that despite recent legal improvements, the human rights situation remains precarious and has even aggravated in the face of flaring anti-Muslim violence.

With almost two hundred pages, Part II, entitled "Challenges to Unity" (pp. 142–338), represents the analytical heart of this volume. While the preceding part describes changes due to political reforms, this section analyzes the challenges inherent in the current transformation and legacies of the past. Mikael Gravers depicts how many of these obstacles stem from the British colonial era. The British divide-and-rule colonial policy, which systematically segregated ethnic and religious groups within Burma's "plural society" (Furnivall, 1948) fuelled distrust and fear, which escalated into multiple, ever-complicating conflicts after the country gained independence in 1948: "Politicization of ethnicity, internal conflicts and general mistrust has created a complex scenario that is difficult to handle in the ongoing reform and peace process" (p. 154). In this context, Gravers traces the Karen's struggle for autonomy as a process of ethno-nationalism, factionalism, and multifaceted conflicts. Far from describing homogeneity, Gravers insightfully illustrates how the Karen have become increasingly fragmented since 1948 due to inner conflicts between the Christian and Buddhist camps and their changing relationship with the (military) government. Gravers vividly demonstrates how different layers of conflict emerged over time and space.

Remaining with Southeast Myanmar, Tim Schroeder and Alan Saw U, both engaged in the peace process in Karen State, look into more contemporary developments under the ceasefire agreement signed by the government and the Karen National Union (KNU) in 2012. In the face of massive land grabbing, the illegal extraction of resources, and large-scale top-down development projects, the authors hint at the far-reaching social and ecological impacts that will potentially bring an abrupt end to the flimsy peace process. Both authors underline the urgent need for more coordination between international actors engaged in humanitarian aid and more participation of local populations and civil society in all affairs related to peace building and regional development in order to avoid further conflicts. Fair access to and even distribution of natural resources must be duly ensured in the peace process. How different groups/local elites cooperated with military government and private investors in the field of natural resources extraction under so-called "ceasefire capitalisms" (Wood, 2011) and how abruptly such ceasefire agreements can end is shown by Wei Moe's chronology of the Kachin conflict in Myanmar's Northeast. In 2011, after a 17-year bilateral ceasefire agreement between the Tatmadaw and the Kachin Independent Army (KIA) was broken, fighting started over the development of hydropower and other large-scale projects (e.g. Myitsone dam), as well as plans to in-

corporate the KIA into the government-controlled Border Guard Forces. Moe draws a portrait of a highly complex and almost unresolvable conflict that has long extended its scope across Kachin State into Northern Shan State and even China. From a more emotional perspective, Lian H. Sakhong describes what it means to return to Myanmar and to visit his homeland, the Chin State, after having lived more than twenty years in political exile. Throughout this chapter, it is repeatedly emphasized that peace building and reconciliation are the key factors for the country's democratic transition and socioeconomic development, but this is difficult to achieve as long as limited trust among conflict parties and divergent expectations about peace exist. Charles Petrie and Ashley South recap the history of peace building endeavors between the government and non-state-armed groups (NSAGs) over the past decades. Concerning state building in post-conflict zones, one of the key questions is how "non-state local governance structures will relate to formal state structures. This is a particularly pressing question in areas of recent armed conflict, where communities are subject to multiple authorities" (p. 227). As ethnic minorities have little trust in the Tatmadaw and fear growing central government influence (Bamarization), for them peace, essentially, is about more regional autonomy and ownership over policies and the development process. For the military and the union government, however, peace is traditionally tantamount to controlling the margins to ensure political stability and national unity. Given such contradictory perceptions, the authors conclude that more needs to be done in order to enhance the dialogue between government, NSAGs, and urban populations to generate mutual understanding and create a common basis for peace. As the reform process continues to gather momentum, donors are increasingly engaged in peace building initiatives but often lack sufficient background knowledge of the complexity of the situation. At present, as illustrated by South, donors predominately support and operate through governmentally controlled structures while neglecting direct cooperation with conflict parties and their organizations – indeed, a one-sided and therefore risky approach.

The second section of Part II deals with religion and ethnicity, which are tightly entangled in Myanmar. Buddhists comprise the majority (eighty-nine percent of the population), but there is a diversity of other beliefs such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Animism. Gravers and Ditlevsen provide insights into religion and its politicization. Following this, Mandy Sadan describes how among the Kachin (which is basically an umbrella term for several ethnic subgroups settling in Northeast Myanmar) Christianity has become the common identity and major ideology supporting their long-term struggle for regional autonomy. With respect to democratization, Gravers depicts Buddhist worldviews on democracy, human rights, and political culture and what we can learn from this for the current democratization process. Following up on this, Gravers traces the politically inherent role of Buddhism throughout different epochs of the country's modern history, focusing on the political engagement of the Sangha as a historical continuum, in both positive and negative terms. On the one hand, Buddhism constantly has acted as a vehicle of social, political, and moral criticism and resistance to repression and authoritarianism. The struggle for freedom from British colonial rule and the Saffron Revolution of 2007 are explicitly discussed in this context. On the other hand, Buddhism constitutes an unpredictable source of xenophobic nationalism and political polarization. The recent anti-Muslim

riots, in which politically radicalized monks played a major role, are the most recent manifestation of a whole array of similar incidences carrying on from past to present. Ardeth Maung Thawngmung discusses the outbreak of communal ethnic-religious violence between Buddhists and Muslims in Northern Rakhine State in 2012. She examines the historical roots of this conflict and the controversial term Rohingya for the ethnic Muslim group in Rakhine State. Officially considered Bengali (illegal immigrants from Bangladesh without formal citizenship status), this group of people has become the target of severe discrimination, displacement, and other human rights abuses in the wake of rising xenophobic nationalism coupled with fear about the spread of radical Islam.

Part III considers “Economy, Development and Environment.” Sean Turnell examines economic reforms and their effects, among other issues, including the new foreign direct investment law, trade liberalization, the new exchange rate regime, and land reforms. Rather skeptically, Turnell argues that macroeconomic and fiscal reforms are lagging far behind the political developments. The reforms, yet unfinished and fuzzy, have created a regulatory environment in which the country’s elite and foreign investors are taking advantage in a socially and ecologically unsustainable way. While growth has increased, it remains non-inclusive and largely dependent on natural resources extraction for export, mainly oil, gas, gemstones, and teak. Also, other sectors remain embedded in a political economy featuring crony capitalism: “One of the most remarked-upon developments in the latter years of the Burma’s then-ruling SPDC regime was the increasing dominance of the economy by the military, and by a handful of elite business figures attached to them—universally known throughout Burma as the ‘cronies’ ... there can be little doubt that they will remain a force in Burma’s political economy” (p. 382). In contrast, rural areas, where the bulk of Myanmar’s population lives, face constrained livelihood opportunities and poverty due to little public investment in infrastructure, unsecure land tenure, and no clear rural development policy to change things for the better. After reading Part I and II, Part III, fraught with repetition, falls a bit short of expectations. It has little new to offer that has not already been said elsewhere in the book. Less description and more analyses of the changing political economy would be of great value for the reader to complement the picture provided in Part I and II.

All in all, covering a wide range of issues essential to grasp the present situation, this is a useful book in many respects. Approaching a wide readership ranging from scholars to practitioners, it has much to offer in terms of overview knowledge as well as in-depth analysis and thought-provoking considerations about the nexus of peace building, democratization, and development. Endowed with an index and multiple glossaries on issues such as ethnicity, main political organizations, and armed groups, as well as a range of useful chronological tables and cartographic materials, the book also serves as a valuable reference book. In this regard, however, one wishes that the editors had paid more regard to structural issues. For instance, it remains unclear why the book distinguishes between normal and so-called ‘in focus’ articles and how these two types of articles align with each other.

Thematically, the book largely focuses on the Southeast and Northeast as well as explicitly violent and armed conflicts. Other aspects would have been worth paying more attention to. When it comes to ethnic minorities, the Kachin and Karen are

in the spotlight, whereas other regions and more 'silent' conflicts (e.g. Shan State and Chin State) receive far less attention. As so often occurs in the highly politicized context of Myanmar, some views and political analyses are debatable, but the editors managed to balance divergent views and draw a differentiated picture of the current situation. Although no article solely deals with the history of the country itself, in most articles history is taken into consideration and used to explain current processes and dynamics. Hence, the book undoubtedly provides a solid foundation for all those meaning to engage with contemporary Myanmar and its transitional process to an uncertain future.

Simon Benedikter

Researcher and advisor, based in Hanoi, Vietnam

Ute Köster

Consultant to civil society organizations, based in Yangon, Myanmar



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