

Book Review: Yamahata, C., & Anderson, B. (2022). Demystifying Myanmar's Transition and Political Crisis

Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN: 978-981-16-6674-2. 344 pages.

Rainer Einzenberger^{a*}

^aUniversity of Vienna, Austria

*corresponding author: rainer.einzenberger@univie.ac.at

Received: 13 September 2022 / Accepted: 27 October 2022 / Published: 23 December 2022

► Einzenberger, R. (2022). Book review: Yamahata, C., & Anderson, B. (2022). Demystifying Myanmar's transition and political crisis. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies*, 15(2), 321-324.

The edited volume by Chosein Yamahata and Bobby Anderson stands in the tradition of edited volumes on contemporary issues in Myanmar emerging from academic conferences, such as the “Myanmar/Burma Update” series hosted by Australian National University (ANU) in the wake of Myanmar's transition since the early 2000s (Cheesman, 2012; Cheesman et al., 2010, 2014; Reynolds et al., 2000; Skidmore & Wilson, 2007, 2008; Wilson, 2006) and others (Egreteau & Robinne, 2015).¹ Similar to these volumes, the present book *Demystifying Myanmar's transition and political crisis* aims at introducing an interested (not necessarily purely academic) public to the current socioeconomic and political developments in Myanmar, covering a broad range of issues. The volume is based on the “Burma Review and Challenges International Forum” (BRACIF) – masterminded and organized by Chosein Yamahata, a professor of global and area studies at the Graduate School of Policy Studies, Aichi Gakuin University, Japan – held in 2009 and 2018.² What makes this volume particularly relevant and remarkable is the fact that it is one of the first of its kind as it was published shortly after the coup of 1 February 2021, triggering the so-called *spring revolution*. However, not all articles refer to the coup and some were obviously completed long before. The declared aim of the book is to “demystify the complexities of the derailed transition, the coup, and what both could inform about the future of Myanmar” (p. 18). It consists of 16 chapters organized in the two parts “transition and the periphery” and “from challenges to unity”. Given the limited space available, this review cannot discuss each chapter in detail but will highlight some of those chapters that seem most relevant for the declared aim of the book mentioned above.

1 For a complete list of the volumes emerging from the “Myanmar Update” Conference series, see <https://myanmar.anu.edu.au/myanmar-update/2015-myanmarburma-update>.

2 The book is also part of a series of books under the Academic Diplomacy Project (<https://www.academicdiplomacyproject.org>).

In the opening chapter, the editors – Yamahata and Anderson – themselves look at the recent transition in Myanmar, comparing how different “criteria of democratization” were “satisfied under different governments” in Burma/Myanmar (p. 5). According to Yamahata and Anderson, “people generally enjoyed more civic freedoms, political rights, and stable democratic institutions under the National League for Democracy (NLD) administration [from 2016-2021], although it still fell short of the parliamentary democracy of the 1950s” (p. 4). The recent coup turned “the Union from a budding democracy into a killing field” (p. 3). For the authors, it was the military’s reasoning that a coup could be the “last chance” to stop the further consolidation of Myanmar’s democratic transition. The military had also miscalculated that the NLD lost support. Another reason for the current crisis, identified by the authors, was a “messianic understanding of politics” in Myanmar, which accorded “unquestioning faith” in Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD (p. 7).

The second chapter, by Michal Lubina, continues with the analysis of the role of Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK) in Myanmar’s transition (see also, Lubina, 2021) and the election turnout in 2020, which brought a landslide win for the NLD to the dismay of the military. While, as Lubina argues, Suu Kyi tried at the beginning not to provoke the military in order to avoid a coup following the 2020 elections, she did not try anymore to soothe the fears of the military that “everything would remain the old way” (p. 39). As a result, the military “overreacted and staged another (fourth) coup”, which, according to Lubina, throws Myanmar “now back to 1988 or at best around 2003, after the Depayin massacre” (p. 40). The following five chapters provide “perspectives from the periphery” by looking at developments and transformations in the regions and states outside Myanmar’s political and economic centers. For instance, in chapter three Takeda and Yamahata discuss human security challenges in Myanmar. Based on the example of the Mon Women’s Organization, they show how ethnic women’s organizations (EWOs) are fulfilling an important role of civil society by promoting human security at the grassroots and, thereby, alleviating insecurity. In another case study, Khen Suan Kai (chapter four) looks at the delivery of basic education in Chin State, one of the most marginalized of the ethnic states. According to Khai, the reasons for the low quality of basic education in the state include insecurity, inadequate infrastructure and learning environment, insufficient and inadequately trained teachers as well as a lack of decision-making power by the state government. Coming back to the national scale, chapter eight by Lidauer provides a detailed account of the 2020 elections. He argues that there was no apparent tempering with the election results, despite some shortcomings. According to Lidauer, the statements by the Myanmar military that rejected the election process and used it as a pretext for the coup were implausible.

In the second part of the volume, the editors (together with Saw Chit Thet Thun) in chapter ten critically examine Myanmar’s ill-fated peace process and ceasefire monitoring by highlighting its shortcomings with the aim to draw lessons for a better future. Their core criticism is that the most powerful non-state armed groups were excluded from the process, most pressing issues were avoided, and the civilian government lacked the authority to negotiate. They sternly conclude that “the ‘Panglong 21’ process, prior to its likely demise as a result of the coup, could not lead to any meaningful conflict nor political transformation in Myanmar” (p. 187). Taking a broader

international perspective, Jittipat Poonkam, in chapter 11, looks at Myanmar's current crisis in the international political context by taking an international relations perspective. According to the author, under the current crisis of international order and the "nascent bipolar system with Sino-US geopolitical competition", humanitarian intervention in Myanmar is impossible (p. 224). Furthermore, he claims that sanctions and economic pressure are unlikely to force the military into retreat, since they are not followed by all countries. In addition, his article criticizes the insufficient diplomatic approach by ASEAN.

A core contribution to this volume that takes the aim of 'demystifying' the recent developments in Burma/Myanmar seriously is chapter 12 by Patrick Meehan. It contextualizes Burma's/Myanmar's recent developments within larger development discourses, including development theory and practice. He shows how Burma/Myanmar became a "new frontier for development interventions" following the lifting of international sanctions, "which led to Myanmar becoming the worlds' third largest recipient of aid" within a few years (p. 233-234). Meehan argues that, due to the rush to engage in Myanmar, a large gap remained between critical development studies scholarship and development practice. Rather than reflecting on the disruptive nature of development, entrenched power structures and questions of distribution, a "market-plus" (p. 238) development narrative remained dominant in Burma/Myanmar, which served to depoliticize development. As a case in point, Meehan shows how *Myanmar's Agricultural Development Strategy*, which implicitly favors large-scale agribusiness and ignores the experiences of rural populations, negatively effects upland communities. He argues for a relational framework that "allows researchers to consider how forms of poverty and vulnerability can become embedded in the kinds of economic development promoted by governments and donors" (p. 250). The last chapter of the volume, by editor Yamahata, is focusing again on the coup of February 2021, which has "pushed Myanmar towards a 'point of no return'" (p. 232). He compares the coup to previous coups (including Thailand and Indonesia) and argues that, by the definition of the *Fragile State Index*, Myanmar has already become a failed state, with a declining economy, increasing poverty rates, lack of territorial control, and the military junta committing crimes against humanity. However, he makes clear that the Myanmar people did not 'fail' their state since they resist the junta with everything they have, most importantly through the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and armed resistance. Thus, the *spring revolution* marks a watershed moment in the country's history. Consequently, Yamahata demands democratic forces outside of Myanmar to support and "empower" the forces fighting for their country and democracy (p. 324). "Therefore", he adds, "recommendations from external players that neglect the people's grievances, inspirations, struggles and determinations to deal with the junta are 'out of question' to the people of Myanmar". They "simply refuse to have their freedoms and hopes stolen by the military once again" (p. 323).

Although thematically diverse and lacking a particular focus, this volume is a welcome and timely contribution to the field of Burma/Myanmar studies and also Southeast Asian area studies as it raises some important questions. Concerning its ambitious claim to "demystify Myanmar's transition and political crisis" made in the introduction, it certainly critically reflects some earlier misconceptions of Myanmar's transition and issues that were possibly overlooked or ignored by many outside

observers. (Although many of the issues were a topic among critical civil society actors in the country and continue to be.) This holds specifically true for Lubina's discussion of the role of ASSK and the editors' introduction to part two of the volume highlighting the limiting factors of the peace process, which from some quarters might have been assessed too positively. Also, Meehan's chapter might resonate well with former development workers and other people engaged in the development field. Particularly strong is Yamahata's analysis of the coup and spring revolution, which for him marks a breaking point in the country's history, and to some extent questions Lubina's assessment that the country has been thrown back to 1988. Overall, this edited volume is a valuable and diverse resource for social scientists and other interested scholars as well as students and a broader public that try to decipher the current developments in Myanmar and their potential future implications.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rainer Einzenberger worked as a University Assistant at the Department of Development Studies, University of Vienna from 2015-2019 and as a lecturer since 2014. He received his doctoral degree from the Department of Development Studies in 2020, where he focused his research on land and resource politics, critical geography, and indigenous movements with a special focus on Myanmar. Since 2019 he works as a Programme Coordinator for Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalisation (OeAD).

► Contact: rainer.einzenberger@univie.ac.at