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### BOOK REVIEW

#### The Hidden History of Burma

Thant Myint-U. (2020.) The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism, and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century. London: Atlantic Books, 288 pages.

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#### Introduction

Interpretation on how the political history of a ‘mysterious’ country like Burma has been many and cross-firing in multiple senses. Through an interesting life as a grand-son of the late former UN Secretary-General U Thant, an intern in UN-related think tank in Geneva, a founder

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of All Burma Students' Democratic Front, the author of this book Thant Myint-U tries to re-tell a story about race, capitalism and attempts to democracy. Using the common technique in historiography known as a narration of turning points, the author creates a chronographic episode for the political history of Burma through people-made moments that define the movement of politics and democracy into certain direction. Nevertheless, Thant Myint-U finds that at certain disjuncture, he loses track of what is coming. This book opens a larger horizon for people who are ignorant of the political and democratic history of Burma that turns out to be interesting and volatile; the paradox of this book is that the realization that the more unpredictable a political history, the more foreseeable it becomes. Chaos is almost certain.

Whoever sensitive enough to sense the tones of this book would immediately sense an attempt to constraint a euphoric exclamation of joy. Published in 2020 or just a few months before a surprise coup, this book represents a very nice blow-by-blow account on the turns of events leading to the coup. In spite of this bleak sense of insecurity and helplessness in predicting the "future" of Burma, the author sets some glimpses of images for the things to come through the natural turning points in Burma's political history. This book brings its readers through a visual history through personal's accounts of some people involved in the story.

The most important contributions of this book to non-Burmese readers are immense and timely. **First**, the glimpses of a first-hand account of important personalities really offer visual guidance to the realities behind persons most people know only by names. The name of Min Aung Hlaing, for example, appears in five pages of this book to show his political nature, i.e., "had to be managed by the president with care" (p. 214), "who made clear that this [barring Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from presidency] would not be changed" (p. 221).

**Second**, the author provides a clear and convenient timeline for turns of events in Burma's political history as what the author sets in the contents list. The first chapter on New World or the first event is the portrayal of Burma's history along with the history of the world (the 1970s onwards). Changing Lanes or the second event (second Chapter of the book) reveals the author's marking the landmarks to signify the events that are unique to Burma in its parts as the world's history—as "crony capitalism", "ceasefire capitalism", "army

capitalism” (the 2000s when democracy turned a buzzword) (p. 54). The third chapter or Drifting to Dystopia shows the author's uneasy feeling to see the dark future (the early 2000s until the herald of the New 2008 Constitution). The fourth chapter (Tempest) shows that after the New Constitution and the cyclone, the country is traversing to uncharted territories (2008 to 2010). The fifth chapter (Fighting Chance) tells the changes that take place during the 2010s (the election, release of Aung San Suu Kyi, jettisoning of the Burmese Way to Socialism). The sixth chapter (Alignment) tells the story of some new developments (and rumors) about civilian [nominal] president, abolition of junta, Than Shwe's plan to lock everyone in place ("to make sure nothing can change very quickly"), appointed Gen. Min Aung Hlaing the head of the armed forces, the movement towards a market economy, etc. As the reformist agenda ascends (p. 153), the split between Aung San Suu Kyi and Thein Sein deteriorates.

The seventh chapter (Blood and Belonging) exposes the turbulence between President Thein Sein—through Aung Min—who tried to begin peace talks with the armed ethnic groups. By 2013, upbeat talk of “Burma's Transition” began to circulate. The eighth chapter (Virtual Transitions) heralds the growing hope to a real transition that culminates in the 2015 Election won in a landslide by the NLD. The ninth chapter (Unfinished Nation) continues the previous chilly relationship among the country's elements, especially the crestfallen ex-generals with the rising NLD components.

**Third**, the author's story-telling style really helps to keep the attention to the flowing stories after stories.

**Fourth**, the book shows some small but very significant introduction to the character of Gen. Min Aung Hlaing who turned out to set a surprise move through a coup. These serious anecdotes appear on pages 135, 214, 221, 222-223, 241-242 that readers might be interested in checking. The most interesting pieces of information on the coup leaders are the reported fact that the "nominal president" must content with Gen. Min Aung Hlaing who self-acclaim as 'guardian of Constitution' and the promise of this General to finish the "Bengali immigration" problem and Muslim insurrection. Yet, this important information, among others that are not written down for editorial consideration, was not sufficient to the author and readers to set a meaningful foreknowledge on what this General might have capable of doing later (after the

book was published).

This review is set mainly on the division of the book and the argument.

## Book Division

The first chapter opens a very broad introduction of Burma as the world's civilization has been moving on through involvement through passing by kings and rulers in the valleys along the Irrawaddy River. Beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the kings who spoke Burma overcame their rivals who spoke Mon took the port city and renamed it Rangoon or “the enemy is vanquished”. The author claims that in 1784, Burmese kings expanded and conquered the kingdom of Arakan (p. 9)<sup>2</sup>. As all types of foreigners from many continents came and went, the Burmese have generalized all of them into “*kala*-based compound words” such as *bayingyi-kala* (Europeans), *Bilat-kala* (British), etc. After the Burmese armies marched westward to seize the old kingdom of Manipur, Brahmaputra River’s valley, the Assam kingdom, the armies depopulated these kingdoms and captured ten of thousands of people (p. 13). These captives, including those from Arakan, were taken back to farm royal lands and to build irrigation works near the capital; ten of thousands of Arakanese fled across the border into British-controlled Bengal (p. 13). As time went by, the following Anglo-Burmese wars from 1826 to 1853 ended up in the annexation of Burma and the abolishment of Burma’s monarchy system (exile to India). The British erected new governing structures, ready-made and imported from India; modern Burma was born as a military occupation (p. 16). To cut the story short, on 2 March 1962 the Burmese Army set up a Revolutionary Council to begin “Burmese Way to Socialism”. And Burma was sealed off from the world (p. 31).

Chapter two begins with the involvement of the author with the Burma’s history as an 8-year old grandson who needed to attend his grandfather's funeral (U Thant) in Rangoon in 1974. A symbol of different, more liberal Burma, the late U Thant was treated coldly by Ne Win's regime with an ordinary funeral. Enraged by such lowly treatment, Buddhist monks and angry students took the coffin of U Thant to the Rangoon University compound and

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<sup>2</sup> A very strange claim given the recent claim that the people living in Arakan (or Rakhine) are “immigrants”.

demanded a public monument to mark the late former UN Secretary-General's burial site. Regime's troops stormed the university, got the remain of U Thant, and buried him under six feet of concrete near the foot of the Shwedagon Pagoda. After riots broke down and a crackdown followed suit, the family of U Thant was forced to leave the country. The following history for the next 14 years unfolds the story of Burma's path into "crony capitalism," "ceasefire capitalism," "army capitalism" through the Communist Party of Burma's attempts to seize power (but failed) in April 1989, crackdowns on pro-democracy protests, the rise of the heroin-based economy with Chinese-led opium kingpin (Lo Hsing-han), the opening of trades with China, rampant corruptions, etc (pp. 50-55). The future in such a chaotic was, thus, bleak.

Chapter three summarizes this bleak future into a drift to dystopia. After chaos for three decades, in the early 2000s, Burma's Gross Domestic Product was standing at around half of that of Cambodia or Bangladesh (p. 60); inflation stroke at 40 percent a year. Malnutrition attacked 30 percent of children under 5. While the generals wanted a modern future through big "infrastructure projects" (industrial revolution) (p. 61), the opposition led by the National League for Democracy and its supporters wanted political changes. Isolation (except a backdoor to China's borders) cemented the environment where the generals and their cronies were performing well (p. 62). The author asks sarcastically whether there was any thought to what landscape could best prepare the country for democratic change and make change sustainable if and when it ever came (p. 62). After the release of Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest in 2002, swarm of men ambushed a convoy carrying her and her supporters in her open-air speeches calling an end to military rule; dozens were killed and Aung San Suu Kyi was jailed again. More tests of patience appeared to the military junta's door, including a referendum on the new Burmese Constitution set for May 2008. And the cyclone destroyed everything.

Chapter four reveals mostly the calamities befalling upon the country through Nargis Cyclone on 28 April-2 May 2008. At least 138,000 people died between 2 and 3 May (p. 87), and 450,000 houses were destroyed; seawater flooded 600,000 ha of farmland and drowned 60,000 water buffaloes. As the stories go, all help offered by foreign countries—ASEAN, Europeans, the UN, the US—were siphoned off by the military (p. 98). The response to Nargis

Cyclone laid bare the state's weak institutional capacities (p. 99). The army and bureaucracy simply had no wherewithal to do anything approaching what was needed; they just turned in panic to their cronies and business people to rebuild townships (p. 99). Burma turns into a new, risky new direction.

Chapter five tells a story on how old forces were trying to reclaim influence in Burma: Aung San Suu Kyi (returned to house arrest) and the NLD, Senior General Than Shwe's new Constitution (his pre-retirement plan), Egress, Beijing, the US (through foreign policy), and other players are fighting the old political struggles. Aung San and over hundreds of NLD members and 2,000 political prisoners were behind bars separated from one another (p. 106). General Than Shwe already prepared the dissolution of the junta with a new constitutional set-up through a power-sharing arrangement between the army and a semi-elected parliament (with 25 percent of the seats from the military (p. 106). This "new" constitution is identical to the one proposed by the military in 1993 and rejected by the NLD (p. 107). This constitution enshrined basic rights and prohibited discrimination based on race, birth, religion, and sex. Yet, nothing should "prevent the appointment of men to positions that are suitable to men only" (p. 107). Egress was a place at the back of a dilapidated 1970s hotel that offered short courses in "capacity building" (politics); it was also a think tank for influencing regime policy (p. 122). Beijing has been hoping since the 2000s that Burma would provide a route to the Indian Ocean, a very old ambition tracing back 2,000 years ago. The US, through Obama and State Secretary Hillary Clinton, ordered a review of American policy on Burma, i. e., "path we have taken in imposing sanctions hasn't influenced the Burmese junta" (p. 118).

Chapter six reveals the premonition from the earlier chapters about chaos and attempts to stabilize the situation. After the new constitution, the doubters who called this constitution as a sham began to look correct. The generals were now ex-generals and getting ready to fill "civilian's" roles. Confident in his outmaneuvering Aung San Suu Kyi, Than Shwe wanted to live his pensioner life without any new strongman appearing on the horizon (p. 133). When the ex-general Thein Sein, number four in the junta hierarchy under Shwe Mann, was chosen as the president in 2010, many were left surprised (p. 134). Than Shwe packed the new cabinet with hand-picked ex-generals with mixed personality types to offset one

another (conservative types were given deputies who were eager for change and vice versa). “Old wine in new bottles” seemed to be reality (p. 135). With his need for “good and clean governance,” Thein Sein suddenly wanted cooperation not only with other political parties but also with other “political forces and well-meaning individuals” (Aung San Suu Kyi by implication) (p. 136). The bigger surprise came later: Thein Sein appointed U Myint (Berkeley-educated former UN economist and Aung San Suu Kyi’s friend) as a chief economic advisor. More progressive moves appeared under Thein Sein’s administration, as readers can check in Chapter 6, including the renewed peace talks.

Chapter seven continues the stories from chapter six. The peace talks, for example, did not bring Burma on the verge of peace. The ceasefires were significant, but they did not include big rebel armies on the Chinese border (p. 168). Thein Sein ordered Aung Min to focus on the Karen National Union and rebel groups along the Thai border (the insurgents along the Chinese border were undertaken by other ex-generals). For some reason, fighting resumed again with the Kachin around the jade mines at Hpakant, leading more people to leave their homes (p. 170). The spillover of the shells falling on the Chinese part of the border alarmed the Chinese deputy army chief Qi Jianguo who arrived in Naypyitaw to discuss “border stability” (p. 170). The clashes in Arakan also began on 28 May 2012 (p. 180). The constant talk of Burma’s “transition” by 2013 did not point to necessarily towards either peace or democracy (p. 189).

Chapter eight exposes the real things that happen in Burma. President Thein Sein and Soe Thane personally met with every major potential investor and corporate CEO of Google and General Electric to Samsung and Mitsubishi (p. 191). More and more embassies were coming and considering expanding their services (and their buildings) out of the growingly dilapidated old Rangoon. The author ever set up what he called “the Yangon Heritage Trust” to save what was left of Rangoon’s built heritage (p. 191). A city with a bloody history of war, riots, revolutions, colonialism, and anti-colonialism, Rangoon is peppered with religious and historical sites from Anglican and Roman Catholic cathedrals to Sunni and Shia mosques. And here is how the state (and its military juntas) is exposed to its drawbacks. State could crackdown protests, lock up dissidents, keep rebel militias at bay; but State has few

instruments to craft policies and brings about results (p. 192). State's instinct is just to avoid confrontation and let society to go about its business unless State (junta) survival is threatened. With global capitalists lurking around to look for victims, the junta targets mainly telecommunications to bite its parts (p. 196). In 2012, Thein Sein liberalized the phone market to lure in billions of dollars investment. By 2015, over 40 million Burmese enjoy the fastest Internet speed in Asia. While in poorer countrysides, corrupt officials and shady but connected businesspeople conspire to rob millions of acres since the 1990s (p. 198), thus living the poor fewer hope during rainy days. By 2015, Shan Hills became the global epicenter for the production of meth tablets (p. 200) with militias allied to the Burmese army involved. On the political side, Shwe Mann's closeness to Aung San Suu Kyi was the last nail on his political coffin; on the night of 12 August 2016, Shwe Mann and his top lieutenants were forced to resign from the party leadership (p. 216) to stop Shwe Mann-Aung San Suu Kyi coalition from assuming power. The struggle continues until 8 November 2015, when 70 percent of eligible Burmese voters came out to vote for a landslide to the NLD. Burma seemed on the brink of the best chance to unite around a new agenda for peace and development (p. 219).

Chapter nine narrates a story of further uncertainties after the first and most democratic election in Burma's history. The National League for Democracy's victory is significant despite the army's hold on a quarter of the parliamentary seats (p. 220). Than Shwe, who had been missing for 5 years, decided to meet Aung San Suu Kyi on 4 December 2015 in Naypyitaw (p. 221). Allegedly saying, "It is the truth that she will become the future leader of the country," Than Shwe seemed to be giving his blessing for a government headed by Aung San Suu Kyi (p. 221). In this disjuncture, a significant actor appeared coincidentally: General Min Aung Hlaing, a staunch nationalist and self-acclaimed "guardian of constitution" (that lifted him into chief armed forces leadership), and a believer in the army's historical call for nation-building (including new "standard armed forces" to go beyond "border guardian" duties). This General's staunch refusal to amend the constitution was a sign of bad faith (p. 223). While Aung San Suu Kyi launched a kind of "reform", everyone was watching. Her target to amend the constitution was replied by the commander-in-chief Min Aung Hlaing with "only once the country's armed conflicts were no more" (p. 226). Meanwhile, Beijing quietly and

discreetly planned a comeback through some political maneuvers (pp. 228-231). Aung San Suu Kyi's Achilles Heels appeared on the Rohingya or Muslim issues—no Muslim appeared in her administration. Her move to appoint former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to deal with Rohingya “problems” was scoffed by the army and the Arakanese Buddhist politicians. Then more rounds of violence and skirmishes broke up. The future grows bleaker. Everything else—the banking system, economy, growth, foreign investment, tourism, business confidence—dropped into the abyss.

The Epilogue sets the “latest” situation as far as the book publication is concerned (before the coup took place about three months ago in February 2021). (This Book Review is written around 15-20 May 2021.) Aung San Suu Kyi already moved to Naypyitaw; she won an election and was, for all effective purposes, the head of government. Power was centralized in her office, and no other figure stood even close in terms of either popularity or decision-making authority. Although the constitutional set-up meant that the armed forces enjoyed near-absolute autonomy and that the three security ministers were appointees of the commander-in-chief, the chain of command led to a president who was effectively a deputy of Aung San Suu Kyi (p. 252). Three years earlier, when the National League for Democracy won its landslide election victory, some Burmese analysts had guessed that its government wouldn't last: differences with the generals would come to an end, and there would be an army takeover (p. 252). At a talk in Singapore, Aung San Suu Kyi said that relations with the military “were not that bad” and that the generals in her cabinet were “rather sweet” (p. 253). In January 2019, the General Administration Department (GAD) was transferred from the Home Ministry to the Cabinet Office. The GAD has some 40,000 staff to run the entire administration of the country, down to the district and township level. They had reported via the home minister, a serving general, to the commander-in-chief as well as the president (p. 253). As the military link was severed, it was a big victory for Aung San Suu Kyi's hope of moving the army away from civilian functions. In February 2019, the NLD-dominated Parliament set up a new committee to explore options for constitutional reform. After initial opposition, the army agreed to take part (p. 253). Despite the darkened environment for the media, including the imprisonment of Reuters journalists (released in May 2019) and the draconian use of anti-

defamation and colonial-era security laws, Burma was a far freer place than the Burma of a decade before. But Burma in 2019 was a place where core issues around race and identity were not only unsettled but were heating up, with civil society groups, political parties, businesses, militia, and armed organizations all mobilized around ethnic identities to a degree unprecedented in the country's history (p. 254). The peace process since 2011 to stop all fighting has not worked. Part of the problem is that the situation is a "war" requiring "peace," as if a previously orderly society had fragmented into civil conflict and needed only to be repaired. **But Burma was never whole** (p. 255). The core strategy of the state since independence (of seeing Burma as a collection of peoples with the Burmese language and culture at the core) has failed, and will continue to fail. Race and identity have been at the heart of Burmese politics since the start of modern Burmese politics a hundred years ago (p. 253). Any brighter future will depend on Burma crafting a new and more inclusive identity, one not tied to race and one not based on a notion of uniting fixed ethnic categories. Accepting this, seeing it as a strength rather than a weakness, finding new sources of national identity, separate from notions of ethnicity, and embarking on an aggressive agenda to end discrimination in all its forms, are elements of a conversation that has been almost entirely absent (p. 253).

Then the coup took place in February 2021 or 14 months after the book publication on 12 November 2019. President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, with many ministers and deputies along with members of Parliament, were detained. Until 12 April 2021, hundreds of civilians were killed by the military, and around 3,000 people forcibly taken into illegal detention. All the attempts by ASEAN or other agencies were repulsed at the pretext of the non-interference principle. The prediction of some Burmese pundits on political history about "army takeover" finally turns into reality.

## **The Argument**

At the end of this history narration, the author recounts that the plight of the poor in Burma continues to be ignored with impunity. Western sanctions, aid cut-offs destroyed the

lives of millions without accountability (p. 258). Sanctions during the 1990s and 2000s did nothing to compel the generals in a liberal direction and have made any transition to a better future more difficult. The warning signs are flashing. The two most combustible elements on the Burmese political landscape remain race and inequality (p. 258). They are now being mixed together with immature democratic institutions, blind faith in free markets, multibillion-dollar illicit industries, and uplands awash in weapons.

## **Conclusion**

This book really helps for non-Burmese to understand some otherwise hidden stories around the political history of Burma. The choices for important "turning points" of Burma's history are strategic, interesting, and effective. The perspectives of narration are moving smoothly from a third-person to a first-person perspective without causing too much alarm. The use of personal pronouns protects this history from becoming a boring documentary narrated in flat-tone third-person voice. However, as the book is an English version of a history written by a native son of the land, non-Burmese still need some explanation and narratives on the author's position as a "native son."