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BOOK REVIEW

Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know

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Book Contribution

Written by an author who has been dealing with Burma for 50 years as Assistant Representative of the Asia Foundation in Burma (1958-62) and Director for Philippines, Thailand and Burma Affairs in the US Agency for International Development (State Department), this book is really a product of experiences in real fieldwork. Beside leading the negotiation team to the re-entry of the US aid program to Burma, the author also has been teaching on Burma at Georgetown

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University and Johns Hopkins University. This book thus is beneficial for those with little knowledge of Burma's politics or economics.

More generally, this book offers a kind of 'textbook' for any "Burma/Myanmar 101 Course" with the pedagogical of Q&A representation. This book also reveals a systematic explanation of A-to-Z on what happened in the country in a chronological structure that eases younger learners to follow the unfolding 'drama.' The author exposes in chronological order of the political-economic history of the country in the following manners.

The first chapter throws a time bomb with an overdue explosion: Why is Burma so problematic to all of us? The second chapter retraces the contaminating residues from the pre-colonial period where the ambitious, despotic kings—no matter charismatic they are thought of—set a foundation of enmities and rejections from global/regional forces. The third chapter nails down the colonial era (under British rule) as one of the most critical factors for Burma's political history for years to come. The fourth chapter shows how much (or little) the early independence years leaves any influence on the country's political-economic trajectory. The fifth chapter puts the foundation of the military clutch mixed with experimental Burma's Socialist Programme from 1962 until 1988 that turns out to be disappointing (for the military). Thus, the sixth chapter shows the decision to continue the complete military despotic control over the country. Then the seventh chapter begins to analyze the nature of the relatively "stabilized" situation under complete military rule. Chapter 8 sets a discussion of the country's future—with little premonition for the latest military coup in early 2021. Chapter 9 still sound optimistic about the apparent "positive change" (through the dizzyingly buzzing word of "transition") ahead of the planned 2010 general election.

Book Division

The book is set into nine chapters. The first chapter reveals the reasons for the crises that are called Burma/Myanmar. Its author's turning subtitles epitomize the educator's style of this book in every chapter into questions. Our interest in Burma is simple: it is an anomaly. First, its tragic presence is not just confined within its border. However, it spills over its frontier

and is littoral to neighboring states with refugees, minority poor, dissidents, and politically or economically scared citizens (page 3). Second, Myanmar is geographically strategic as it is sandwiched between India and China (and US ally Thailand), with numerous indigenous minorities spilling over the places. Moreover, it watches the most strategic natural waterway globally, which is the Malacca Straits, as the commercial link between the Middle East and East Asia, especially for the Middle Eastern oil reserves (page 4). Third, since July 1997, Myanmar has been a member of ASEAN, with Myanmar's politics have proven to be an embarrassment (page 5). Fourth, Myanmar has extensive, underused natural resources like oil, gas, teak, gems (rubies, jade), copper and many others coveted by the world powers. The lessons the readers might learn from Burma are the multiple issues that cover Burma and other states. Burma, for example, features many problems facing multicultural states and raises a fundamental question: how might societies with disparate ethnic and linguistic groups achieve national integration without destroying local cultures—creating nations and not just states (page 7). Myanmar offers lessons on the effect of the presence or absence of various components of civil society on its people and the political process. What does it take in Myanmar for a government to be considered legitimate by its various peoples and the international community (page 7)? However, the obstacles to understanding Burma are extensive. Is Myanmar a "failed" state, a "weak" state, a "fragile" state, a "rogue" state, a "pariah" state, a "thuggish" state? These are terms used by foreign powers and institutions, but what do they mean, and what effect does their use have on Myanmar itself and its relations with others? (page 8). Burmese bureaucracy is usually reluctant to assist scholars because any negative views they may later express abroad could have dire consequences for those who approved the research (page 9). There is not only fear within Burma, whose citizens are subjected to pervasive intelligence surveillance but there is also fear in expatriate communities where political heresies can result in social exclusion (page 9). The crises in the country are multidimensional and multitude.

The second chapter exhumes that important, deeply buried bones from the pre-colonial period. Considering themselves as custodians of national unity and sovereignty, the regime cliques have written a new history of their direct lineage to the great ancient Burmese

kings and military leaders who unified the state (page 16). Some scholars have argued that since 1962 the military has acted very much on the model of the Burmese kings who perceived power as finite. In modern administrative theory, power is viewed as essentially infinite to be shared or delegated to the potential advantage of all involved (page 20). In these circumstances, power becomes personalized; loyalty becomes the prime necessity, resulting in entourages and a series of patron-client relationships. The administration was personally (not institutionally) determined; a trained, tested, and permanent bureaucracy never developed, resulting in an administratively weak state unable to manage a socialist economy effectively (page 20). The authority of the state (the kings or modern rulers) extended to economics as well. The introduction of tempered socialism on independence under a moderate civilian government and virulent socialism under the military after 1962 has historical precedents (page 20). Also shown are the historical Chinese-Myanmar relationship, the emergence of Chinese influence over Myanmar, the relationship between Myanmar and Thailand (and rivalry based on historical events), and the splits of Tai-Shan ethnic people over both sides of the border (page 22). The military continuously applied the Indian model of the British policy of "divide and rule" among ethnic groups, resulting in today's mistrust among the Burmans and the minorities in the country. (The author explores this in detail in the third chapter.)

The third chapter reveals the short though influential colonial era (1885-1948) for its impact within traditional patterns of authority and nationalistic reaction to it among the native leaders (page 27). The British perceived expansion of the Burmese empire towards India as a threat after the Burmese empire took over the kingdom of Arakan, bordering on East Bengal. The British occupied the central lower Burma, western province of Arakan and the eastern region of Tenasserim as reparations from the first conflict/Anglo-Burmese war (1824-1826) (page 29). Until 1937 the British ruled Burma as a province of India with the Indian pattern of control as the model (page 29). After 1937, Burma was separated from India to be ruled through the Burma Civil Service; since the British did not trust the Burmans, those recruited into the Burma Army were the "martial races" like the Karen (27.8 percent), Chin (22.6 percent), and Kachin (22.9 percent). By the 1930s, Rangoon was essentially an Indian city, and Burmans

became the minority. No wonder that the colonial period is generally deplored especially by the military and cited as the root cause of most of the problems against the state (page 39). The fourth chapter shows what happened during the time of independence (1948) and its following civilian government (pre-1962) to show the mixed heritages of world history onto Myanmar history. The author highlights how the country had gained independence from the British under the leadership of General Aung San following the agreement with several minorities from the Panlong Conference Agreement in 1946 (page 42). Furthermore, Burma was plagued with what seemed like myriad rebellions over time following the 1962 Military coup (page 44). The opinions on the civilian government that lasted from 1948 to 1962 (military coup) have been both positive and negative to the political future of Myanmar. Some believe that the parliamentary democratic government under the 1947 Constitution is a precedent and guide of what Myanmar needs for the future. Others believe that such a democracy had severe problems (page 41).

The fifth chapter exposes what really means of the coups during the Socialist Period (1962-1988) for the perpetuation of military control. For example, the military codified the 1974 Constitution and thus created another citizenship law in 1982 which excluded some of the ethnic minority groups in Myanmar, including Rohingyas, from the status of nationals. The military coup of 2 March 1962 appeared to accomplish four goals. First, the military ensured that the Union of Burma would not be dismantled through minority secession. Second, the military freed Burma from what the military regarded as an incompetent and corrupt civilian rule. Third, the military wanted to strengthen the socialist base of the economy (to eliminate foreign dominance). Fourth, the military provided the foundation for the perpetuation of military hegemony over the state either directly or indirectly through a civilian government. At the end of 1988, however, none of these objectives could be thought of as achieved in any sense (page 63). Ethnic tensions increased while rebellions mushroomed. Socialism, as tried in Burma, turned out to be an admitted failure, and the establishment of civilianized control through the Burma Socialist Party Programme (BSPP) was not effective. The military needed another coup (on 18 September 1988) to “straighten” these failures.

The following sixth chapter about the SLORC era (1988 to present) confirms the forced continuation of military power over Burma. This chapter exposes the secrets of the military coups/transitions and the generals behind them since then (1958/1962, 1988, 1992, 1997). It also highlights the emergence of the momentum of the democracy movement in Myanmar before the 1990 election, where the National League for Democracy (NLD) had won the majority to form a government. However, ultimately the military refused to accept the result and took over the country. Moreover, the author interestingly also points out the military's drama and reasons behind the elections of 1960, 1990 and 2010 and how the military reacted and played a role after each election (pages 91- 94). The situation in Burma is not as rosy as the official statistics would have it. UNICEF, for example, notes that around 50 percent of students do not finish primary school (page 97). Health services, only 0.5 percent of GDP, are only available to the rich or connected. Malaria (700,000 cases per annum) and TBC (130,000 cases per year) are rampant, as well as HIV/AIDS (350,000 cases in 2005 alone). The military's role in the power structure and administration is not that much understood yet often explained. The Government built up institutions run by or under the influence of the military in all fields. Military training institutions produce officers for the present administration and a future elite cadre who will staff civilian institutions (page 104). The Tatmadaw runs its own schools for health care, business establishments, monasteries, etc. The elements of "state within a state" are becoming tentacles that reach out administratively into civilian life. For example, the so-called Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) (with the membership of over 24.6 million or two-thirds of the adult population) was established to serve military needs, the cooperative movement, the Maternal and Child Welfare Associations, the firefighter association, and the Myanmar War Veterans' Association (with 26 businesses worth MYK 9.6 billion).

The most interesting parts of Chapter 6 are two questions on the status of human rights in Burma (pages 135-137) and the reasons for the change in the capital city (pages 139-142). The readers are recommended to read these intriguing pieces of information by themselves.

Chapter seven then follows through with the nature of Burmese politics. The author acknowledges how difficult it is to gauge or anticipate the country's prospects in a rigid or deterministic manner. In the author's own words, "How much the analysis that follows simply reflects tendencies reinforced by this or any military command system rather than one inherent in Burman society is an issue that only the future will reveal" (page 149). The author, nevertheless, predicted the following. "One broad assumption is necessary if we are to consider the future over the next half-decade and beyond: the 2010 elections will be carried out and a new government formed in line with the provisions of the Constitution approved in 2008. That is the most likely scenario. The possibility that some untoward events might take place that would prevent the election from occurring that some elements internally would be able to form a new government, perhaps of mixed military-civilian character, is remote and seems highly unlikely at this writing. This scenario could occur, however, either through the evolution of military leadership or in the streets" (pages 149-150).

Power in Burma is conceived as finite, not infinite, as in "modern" administrative theory. *Ana* (coercive power) is different from *awza* (the power or influence of moral authority, charisma). The military is said to have the former but lacks the latter, which Aung San Suu Kyi is said to possess (page 151). Personalization of power leads to loyalty (not necessarily competence); power is dependent on developing entourages through personal loyalties, which encourages factionalism. The effectiveness of entourages requires the distribution of assets (financial, prestige, rewards, lower levels of power) both down the system from the top and, in the case of loyalty and financial assets, up from the bottom (page 154). To ensure power and the cohesiveness of the entourage, orthodoxy of views is generally required on important issues, and dialogues on policies do not seem to be possible once a leader issues some authoritative decisions (page 154). Since salaries are low and inflation high, subsidies and rent-seeking and corruption are required to generate the funds to make the entourage system work (page 155). The leader maintains secret information on all associates and their families to command loyalty and conformity (page 156). This is effective because (a) breaking existing laws is required for economic survival, (b) the entourage system requires extralegal funding, (c) policy replaces law and is controlled at the apex of the system, and this what may

have been 'legal' yesterday may be illegal today, (d) loyalty requires the follower to obey leadership commands even when they contradict legal norms or common sense, and (e) wives often have business interests based on 'insider trading' and have been accused of corruption in the past (page 156).

Chapter eight discusses the issues in Myanmar's future. If the state is to deliver to its own peoples, whether civilian or military, the fruits of its own slogans and promises and to find a respected place in the international community, it must delineate the issues it deals with (page 159). Although some believe that the junta has no intention of meeting any of the above targets, the author of this book still believes in an ideological core and a sense of national purpose. The first and foremost question here is the current and future strategic interest of foreign powers in Myanmar. The foremost answer is China's strategic interests in Burma that grow exponentially. Myanmar is important to China for various strategic reasons, i.e., potential market, reliance on the Malacca Straits (in wars) for energy supplies, electricity from Myanmar's untapped rivers, bridge to India, and some others (pages 160-162).

The second question is the attitude of the Burmese regime toward foreign governments and individuals. A Senior General stated that "The nation should be one in which only Myanmar reside and which Myanmar's own. ... It is important that Myanmar does not become the home of mixed-bloods influenced by alien cultures though it is called Myanmar" (page 162).

The third question is about the future of the military in Myanmar. The general Western concept that the military should be under civilian control is thus far more difficult to achieve in Myanmar, although the National League for Democracy (NLD) Party put the concept on its platform in 1989 (page 163). Under the Constitution approved in 2008, the military will have veto power over any substantive decision on state policy (page 163). Any amendments would, in effect, require military approval, which means the military has to vote to diminish its own role. This is most unlikely in the foreseeable future (page 163). Over the next decade or so, it is most likely that the military will play a leading role in the distribution of power in that state (page 163). Moreover, many military officials would be required to retire before the 2010 elections and run for public office both at the national and regional Hluttaw levels (page 165).

The military would also keep substantial economical institutions under its auspices like the Myanmar Economic Holdings Corporation (MEHC) and the Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC) that are conglomerates with hundreds of thousands of workers with extensive joint ventures and contract operations with foreign firms (page 164).

The next question is about the minorities' dealing with the new government. After the new government from the 2010 elections, the Myanmar administration is going to counter external criticisms and claim that the minorities have more autonomy than they have had in fifty years (page 165). The six minority areas (the Kokang, Wa, Naga, Padaung, PaO, and Danu ethnics) that have local and limited self-government at the township level may be more pleased than before. Nevertheless, the major minority groups are unlikely to be satisfied. Since 1962, these areas have been controlled by the center. Many in the major minorities that now have states (Chin, Kachin, Shan, Karen, Kayah, Mon, Rakhine) have wanted some form of federal structure and virtual autonomy from central control (page 166). The Tatmadaw, thus, increased its battalion strength in the Chin State from two to 14 battalions since 1998 (and 24 to 41 battalions in the Kachin State since 1994).

The other question is about the economic crises that will face the country. The economic crises that the country faces need disaggregation (page 167). There is now no crisis in macroeconomic terms; the state has a favorable balance of trade (USD2.89 B in 2008) and international reserves in 2009 of USD3.361 B. The crisis is not with funding but with the knowledge of economic affairs, priorities, and the distribution of the state's present and future resources with falling world prices in 2009 (page 167). If many other states struggle to fund social entitlements and other requirements, the Burmese regime has none of that concern; instead, their priority has been military expenditures—varying from 25 to 37 percent of state administrative expenses or 2.64 to 3.94 percent of GDP (page 167). The military size increased from 199,861 personnel in 1988 to 400,000 personnel today.

The Brookings Institution noted that Myanmar was the 17th weakest of 141 countries (page 168). Furthermore, the military distrusts the notable but aging corps of Burmese civilian economists the military perceives have limited the junta's economic policy options (page 168). The government in the past had accepted foreigners who would deal with specific technical

issues and projects. However, since the 1950s, the governments have felt that policy advisors were an infringement of national sovereignty. The military felt that it was capable of planning and executing economic policies and programs. However, it lacks the basic sophisticated understanding of monetary policy, i.e., money supply. Foreign economists commented that "monetary policy is incoherent" (page 168). Economic decisions seem arbitrary: overnight increases in government salaries or eliminating energy subsidies without careful consideration of their effects.

The next question is about the social crises that face the country. Access to higher education is controlled by the military. The previously told political crises produce the crisis of youth, the frustration of a lack of a future in the society, the belief that emigration is the only possibility, the second-class status of civilians (even with full citizenship), and a malaise so deep that deliverance from this morass will be very difficult (page 170). Health and nutritional standards are appalling; infant mortality is estimated at about 79 per 1,000 births, life expectancy 60 years, and Myanmar rates 125 of 174 countries on the UN Human Development Report of 2000. Landlessness is increasing in rural areas as the population expands (25 to 40 percent of the rural populace is landless). Farmers only receive one-third of the export price of rice (compared to 50-60 percent for Vietnamese farmers). For more prognoses for the future of this country, readers are suggested to read by themselves for the best experience.

The Argument

After 50 years of authoritarian control, about half of which was spent in relative international isolation, Western states have responded positively to these reforms (page 214). These "reforms" of the "civilianized" Republic of the Union of Myanmar in 2011 have been perceived as remarkable. The European Union, the US, and Japan have welcomed these events by suspending their stringent sanctions. However, the US Secretary of State to seasoned specialists on Myanmar (even the citizens of the country) have questioned whether the reform agenda can be sustained and whether it is too fragile to continue (page 214). These issues are

real but in contrast to the views of early foreign and domestic skeptics who believed the reforms were false of façades for continued authoritarian governance (page 214). The author, like many foreign observers, is trapped into the assessment that “the reality of reforms has been generally accepted, but their continuity and potential effects are subject to question” (page 215). The strongest signs of “optimistic” nature of this prognosis were the success of President Thein Sein to administer the ASEAN Summit in 2014 and the Southeast Asian Games in 2013 (including Barack Obama’s visit to President Thein Sein in 2012). However, the author also hangs his prognosis by stating that “the most difficult task will be to find a quintessentially Burmese solution to the majority-minority tensions that since independence in 1948 have resulted in dozens of larger or smaller rebellions and the loss of some one million lives (page 217). Thus, the argument is “More positive initiatives have happened since March 2011 than in the proceeding half-century, but reaching an acceptable equilibrium of distributing power and resources among all ethnic groups will be difficult, involving changes in attitudes long engrained in the social fabric” (page 218).

Over the next decade or so, it is most likely that the military will play a leading role in distributing power in that state. This is a provision of the new Constitution, but it would have been likely under any government, even a civilian one (page 163).

Conclusions

This book, published in 2013 after the author witnessed some "serious" signs of serious reforms hallmarked by the opening of the USAID Program, is the representation of the baffled foreign observers who try to offer the most crystal-clear oracle to the future of the enigma called Burma. The result of this book is left hanging into a quandary whether the "reforms" (or the hyped "transition") were real or fake. It is easier for those who witness the February 2021 coup to conclude that "the military has no qualm to keep the grip with any means necessary" (including a coup and even more military operations to marginalize more ethnic groups and possible rebellious elements farther from the urban centers). Like Murphy's Law has stated, Burma and its bloody military-related history speak so eloquently that "if something might go wrong, it will go wrong."