

Domination and Dereliction: Exploring the State's Roles in Burma

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Myanmar: The State, Community and the Environment. Edited by MONIQUE SKIDMORE and TREVOR WILSON. Canberra: Asia Pacific: Australian National University E Press, 2007. xix, 301 pp. \$40.00 (cloth).

Myanmar: State, Society and Ethnicity. Edited by N. GANESAN and KYAW YIN HLAING. Singapore: ISEAS; Hiroshima, Japan: HPI, 2007. \$43.90 (cloth); \$32.90 (paper).

The State in Myanmar. By ROBERT H. TAYLOR. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009. xxv, 555 pp. \$28.00 (paper).

A History of Modern Burma. By MICHAEL W. CHARNEY. Cambridge, UK, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xiii, 241 pp. \$73.00 (cloth); \$24.99 (paper).

WHAT THESE FOUR QUITE different books broadly share is a focus on the role of the state in Myanmar society. Current scholarship describes the authoritarian state in Myanmar, which has been controlled by the army since 1962, as either dominantly present or neglectfully absent. Censorship and the repression of autonomous spaces in society, on the one hand, and the failure of the state to enforce efficient health and environmental policies, on the other, are keywords in these works that illustrate the double-faced appearance of the state's existence and role in society.

Myanmar: The State, Community and the Environment is a collection of twelve papers presented at the seventh Myanmar/Burma Update conference in Singapore in July 2006. Since 1999, the aim of the Myanmar/Burma Update conferences based at the Australian National University has been to record recent developments and report on current issues. Like the other published tomes of the Update conferences (the latest being *Ruling Myanmar: From Cyclone Nargis to National Elections* edited by Nick Cheesman, Monique Skidmore, and Trevor Wilson, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010), this volume provides information on a country that has been represented in the international media in a simplistic and monotonous way precisely because it has

remained vastly understudied. The 2006 conference tried to assess political and military developments after the purging of Prime Minister (Lt. Gen.) Khin Nyunt from power, dealt with the economic situation after the banking crisis of 2001, and pioneered an examination of the environmental and social impact of the exploitation of natural resources. The authors are deeply familiar with or have been professionally involved with the country for extended periods of time, which is largely responsible for the quality of their observations.

Vicky Bowman, a former British ambassador, gives a depressing account of the country's political situation in 2006. Against the background of the excessively slow implementation of the seven-step roadmap towards democracy, the authoritarian leadership was trying to consolidate its support in rural areas while the major opposition group, the National League for Democracy (NLD), was weak and effectively marginalized. Bowman's bleak outlook on political and economic progress is mirrored in Sean Turnell's account of the economy in 2006 and Trevor Wilson's paper on foreign policy.

Wilson's well-referenced paper characterizes Burma's foreign policy mainly as a tool of the powerful clique at the head of the state to preserve the regime. While the impact of Western nations and even Japan, a long-trusted friend before 1988, was close to nil, relations with the U.N. remained awkward and did not substantially improve during the period from 2004 to 2006. While international attention focused on human rights, Burma, by the stubbornness and lack of innovative approaches of its rulers, caused discomfort even for its well-meaning neighbors, be they China or members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Turnell, well-known for his readable and well-informed writing on Burmese finance and banking, gives an excellent presentation of the causes of widespread misery and the capital-starved and underperforming economy. While stressing the capricious and "even simply irrational" (*Myanmar: The State, Community and the Environment* [MTSCE], p. 118) nature of the country's macroeconomic policies, he shows that even the benefits derived from the expanding gas exports were offset by deficits in service and income payments.

Ikuko Okamoto shows that Burma's repeated efforts at liberalizing its rice trade have gone only halfway. While the domestic market was liberalized, private traders were prevented from exporting. Low rice prices have generally been a key requirement to ensure support for the government given the fact that 70 percent of the population belongs to the agricultural sector.

The four papers on environmental governance stand out in this volume, first of all because in recent years few academic studies have been devoted to the impact of ruthless mineral exploitation, dam projects, and the improper management of natural resources on the ecosystem and the society. Tun Myint shows in his paper "Environmental Governance in the SPDC's Myanmar" that environmental conservation has been largely driven by external forces, such as U.N. regulations, and used by the government to improve its reputation. In the

context of competing armed groups vying for control of resource exploitation in Kachin State, Tin Lwin Thaung shows that people at the grassroots level see the widely illegal, “unsustainable logging,” and the “uncontrolled mining” for gold, iron, and jade as major conservation concerns (MTSCE, pp. 275–79). But on the other hand, the common peoples’ need for survival and their lack of power limits their concern for long-term sustainable development. Tin Lwin Thaung’s description of complicated governance ties with Ken MacLean’s study of the riverine networks of Nyaunglebin District in southeast Burma. Asking questions about governable spaces and the strategies to produce authority in an environment where both the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) government and the Karen National Union claim to exert control, MacLean investigates environmental, social, and political implications of the local struggle for power. Waterways shape the major transport network of Nyaunglebin District, and their alluvial soils form the basis of cash crops and the local food supply. But the exploitation of gold deposits and the prospect of the devastating construction of a hydroelectric dam have led to predatory practices by the military and increased the militarization of daily life with the displacement of people and cases of forced labor. Matthew Smith’s paper on mining starts with the contradiction between the government’s proclaimed aim of environmental protection and the policy of boosting production to cash in on foreign-exchange earnings. He demonstrates with the example of both industrial and artisanal extraction of copper in Monywa the weakness of Burma’s poorly enforced mining laws and the inconsistency of official policies, showing above all how mining in insecure conditions becomes a “vehicle for the perpetuation of poverty” (MTSCE, p. 234).

Myanmar: State, Society and Ethnicity is also a volume of collected papers, presented as the outcome of two workshops held at the Hiroshima Peace Institute in 2005. The editors, Kyaw Yin Hlaing and N. Ganesan, modestly present it as an “attempt to cumulatively increase scholarly interest and research on Myanmar” (*Myanmar: State, Society and Ethnicity* [MSSE], p. 1) against the background of a presentation of the political stalemate twenty years after the crisis of 1988. More precisely, the volume purports to address “questions that we regard as important for a serious social science survey of Myanmar” (MSSE, p. 4).

What the editors refer to as the first part of the volume (a division not apparent on the contents list) contains two papers that should place developments in Myanmar “within a broader historical and geographical frame” (MSSE, p. 4). But while the editors consider that the political developments that have taken place in Myanmar since independence are “certainly unique and not replicated anywhere else in Southeast Asia” (MSSE, p. 3), N. Ganesan’s paper “State-Society Relations in Southeast Asia” and Rachel Safman’s contribution “Minorities and State-building in Mainland Southeast Asia” fail to illustrate this argument. After glancing over the factors that have sustained military authoritarian regimes and

recalling developments in state-society relations in Southeast Asia, Ganesan leaves the question of whether Myanmar is an exception in the Southeast Asian experience somewhat in the air. With the odd conclusion that “social scientists are reduced to crystal ball gazing and speculative thinking or *ex-post facto* judgments at best when it comes to dealing with Myanmar” (MSSE, p. 26), he seems to question the intrinsic *raison d'être* of the volume. Safman writes that “much of the story of state-building in Myanmar seems to have been excerpted from the experiences of the other countries in the region.” With formulations like this one, this seemingly unrevised paper has an appalling lack of references and rehashes common knowledge that is not very enlightening on Myanmar’s position within contemporary Southeast Asia.

In contrast, the second part of the volume shines with five excellent papers written by seasoned scholars of the country. In his contribution on British policy towards Myanmar, Robert Taylor provides a critical historical overview stretching until the most recent times when the media frenzy over events in 1988 “brought out a kind of lunacy in discussions of the country in London” (MSSE, p. 88). Underscoring that the reification of ethnicity imposed by the colonial regime “bedevils clear thinking about the society’s issues” until the present day (MSSE, p. 76), Taylor provides analytical acumen sorely missed in the introductory essays. Because of its constant support for the Burma of Ne Win, Japan has often been considered as particularly influential on the government until quite recently. Retelling Japan’s “special relationship” with the country after independence, Kei Nemoto shows that Japan’s “ambiguous policy” has been a policy of “strategic ambiguity” (MSSE, pp. 98, 108) unsurprisingly criticized by the two sides of the political divide in Myanmar. David Steinberg’s discussion of concepts and implications of legitimacy in Myanmar is a superb piece of writing. Setting the legitimacy debate against its cultural background, the author shows how the army has become the “embodiment of legitimacy” through its religious and infrastructure activities, a fact often wrongly evaluated by Western commentators (MSSE, pp. 126–7). Indigenous perceptions may clash and rarely overlap with Western perspectives. As the military government stresses its historical role of defending unity and calling for economic development, the NLD (the main opposition group) recites the mantra of elections and democratic policies while both dip into Buddhist role models to underscore their claims. Kyaw Yin Hlaing’s essay on associational life in Myanmar is a highly original contribution, as he not only recalls the lively past of associational life, but also demonstrates that, despite authoritarian rule, various types of organizations have continued to exist and new ones have constantly been founded, many of them with a potential for social influence. Tin Maung Maung Than, another veteran scholar of Myanmar economic and social issues, contrasts the traditional national security concept with the contested but relevant concept of “human security.” Among the various elements he introduces, such as health, food, community, economy, and personal security, the environment is a

burning issue currently under greater scrutiny (see MTSCE, pp. 189–289). This reviewer considers his use of “state-building” (rather than nation-building) as noteworthy, as the careful use of that term underscores the actual weakness of a state still unaccomplished while peace with the ethnic groups, when realized from a top-down perspective, does not necessarily represent positive social development.

In the third part of the volume, there are four contributions that may best be characterized as indigenous voices from the grassroots level. Two of them focus pointedly on recent peace efforts among ethnic minorities. Alan Saw U documents a series of peace initiatives among Karen groups while Jan Nan Lahtav highlights similar endeavors headed by the Shalom Foundation, a non-governmental organization (NGO) working in Kachin State. Sai Kham Mong’s paper on the Shan in Myanmar is a critical but quite confusing assessment of Shan political demands since independence. Seen from the conventional ethnic minority point of view, this characterization by a Shan of the 1947 constitution as “the root cause of problems” and his urgent call for “a central strong government” are unexpected (MSSE, pp. 264, 274). The last paper of this volume offers a wholesale condemnation of Western sanctions by Khin Zaw Win, a former Burmese dental surgeon and prisoner of conscience. Here as well as in his contribution to the Skidmore and Wilson volume (MTSCE, pp. 18–35), he is highly critical of the failures of the democratic movement and the missed opportunities of political dialogue in the country.

In sum, *Myanmar: State, Society and Ethnicity*, despite its unexciting introductory essays, offers vital contributions to the discussion of present developments in the country. The fact that several papers in this volume appear to be field reports formulated in NGO jargon, or partial political commentaries, standing in contrast with polished, methodologically sound pieces of scholarship with ample references, is symptomatic of the overall state of affairs in research on Myanmar. A major reason for this is the limited availability of local and international expertise and research.

Both *Myanmar: The State, Community and the Environment* and *Myanmar: State, Society and Ethnicity*—like most Western writing on contemporary Myanmar since 1988—carry an underlying message that, given the country’s authoritarian rulers and the economic mess, the paramount concern in describing Myanmar’s realities is the prospect for change, which implies a kind of moral duty for Westerners to encourage, wish well for, and further such change. Such a concern may seem odd in postcolonial analytical writing, but it illustrates David Steinberg’s observation that “the marketplace of ideas on contemporary Myanmar tends to be oligopolistic.”¹ But in the finest writing on the country, this claim ennobles the author, such as when an anonymous commentator

¹David Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2001), viii.

praised Steinberg's delicately balanced critique of the Burmese regime with a critique of Western policy toward Burma.

On the other hand, it is of little surprise to read in the preface of Robert Taylor's *The State in Myanmar* that some readers of the book's first edition (*The State in Burma*, published in 1987) were "angry" about it, one of them suggesting that Taylor was "responsible for Myanmar not being the liberal, prosperous country ... it should be" (*The State in Myanmar* [TSM], p. xvi). As Taylor addresses the state as the dominant partner in the relationship between the state and society, shaping the social and economic life and fixing the conditions of human existence through its coercive power, he shows how the state as a perennial institution has been run over the centuries for better or worse by successive generations of "state managers." Unlike most writing on contemporary Myanmar, this is a study of how things came to be as they are, not about possible ways to bring about political change or how to take up a good cause. Taylor sees the Myanmar state as being "more than just a human institution ... [having] a life and a spirit of its own" (TSM, p. 4). His key assumption (which space does not allow to be discussed extensively here) is that "cultural continuities" create significant links between the precolonial and the postcolonial state, an idea that enables him to explain the contemporary state of Myanmar in comparison with its predecessors.

The State in Myanmar is an extended version of *The State in Burma*, which has been and definitely will remain a standard reference work to understand the political history of the country. The virtues of this book are factuality and transparency. Taylor's work offers an impressive mass of scholarship built on both English and Burmese sources.

The book is divided into six chapters. The author's scholarship is strongest on the colonial and contemporary periods, and the first chapter describing the organization and the working of the precolonial state is basically a reflection of the orthodoxy of Michael Aung Thwin's and Victor Lieberman's work. Little contested and barely rivaled twenty years ago, this work has since undergone criticism, so that an update matching the state of research could have been wished for. While the second chapter deals with the rationalization of the state during the longest part of the colonial period (1825–1942), the third investigates the politics under the rationalized state during the time when the colonial state became increasingly contested by its indigenous subjects (1886–1942). Taylor calls the period from 1942 to 1962 "the displacement of the state," as the authority and the institutional continuity of the state were contested during the upheavals of the world war followed by independence and the shaky fortune of the country under the parliamentary regime. Taylor sees the taking of power by the army in 1962 and the project of General Ne Win to transform Burma into a socialist state as a reassertion of the state and its authority. The sixth and last chapter is the book's new addition, covering the period from 1988 to 2008 (TSM, pp. 375–486). By its title, "The State Redux," Taylor suggests that the

latest phase of postcolonial state-society relations has consisted in a new edition of the state's dominant role in society. Followed by an addendum on the 2008 constitution, several maps, and over thirty tables, the book also boasts a well-assorted list of newly added, post-1988 publications both in English and Burmese. This review will concentrate on the book's new chapter.

Taylor's ambition is to understand how state leaders have performed in their interaction with society since 1988, and how those who have opposed the state have failed to obtain power. One of Taylor's merits lies in the way that he disentangles actors, institutions, and relationships by focusing on their links to political, institutional, administrative, and social issues. By patiently describing and analyzing the political actors on both sides of the divide and putting their actions into context, Taylor pulls readers back from a simplistic vision of the country as the emblematic brutal regime run by generals and its government as a self-perpetuating military junta.

Taylor's account of the return of the army to power and the contest for state power between the military leadership (the State Law and Order Restoration Council, or SLORC, followed by the SPDC in 2007) and the mainstream opposition (the NLD) is probably one of the most reliable starting points for an academic discussion of the country's current challenges (TSM, pp. 393–418). The NLD, a coalition of opposition movements founded after the army took power in September 1988, failed to wrest control of the state from the army because it was divided very early by factionalism, ruled by a gerontocracy of mostly former Burma Socialist Party Program members, and held together mainly by the symbolic figure of Aung San Suu Kyi. Twenty years of confrontational politics alternating with failed negotiations finally disabled the NLD while Aung San Suu Kyi, politically ineffective at home, remained much adulated in the West. Consistently refraining from attaching qualifying labels to competing forces, Taylor's style of factual distance may occasionally convey the feeling that he condones things as they are. But he has no praise for the "systemically weak state bureaucracy unable to fulfill its functions" as society's vitality is sapped by the state, which rules with an army but cannot provide security, economic infrastructure, education, or health services (TSM, p. 450).

After becoming used to identifying Burma above all with a catalogue of human and other rights violations, one may sometimes feel unsettled by Taylor's matter-of-fact approach and his way of letting revolutionary moments, great causes, and charismatic figures such as Ne Win or Aung San Suu Kyi shrink back to real-life proportions. While the book works as an antidote to the overwhelmingly negative reporting on the country since 1988, key events are retold only as much as necessary within a presentation of a contest of social and political forces for state power in a protracted crisis. Some major episodes in recent years appear as unduly cut short. Presenting the "bankruptcy of socialist Burma," Taylor is interested in the big picture of systemic failures and concludes that "near total state control was leading to near total state collapse" (TSM,

p. 377), but he dismisses the events of 1988 in a footnote, stating that “there is little dispute among all sources about the events” though “discussions with persons living in Myanmar ... lead to very differing accounts” (TSM, p. 383, fn. 14). What *The Economist* called the “Saffron Revolution” in 2007 is summarily reported by Taylor as “a month of protests eventually led by politicized Buddhist monks” (TSM, p. 418). Given that the events of 1988 have marked so many biographies of the people involved in present-day developments, and given that the events have led to much myth-making, itself an element to cope with in competing political discourses, 1988 does in fact weigh heavily on present and future state-society relations, and cannot be dismissed lightly.

Taylor agrees with most scholars of Myanmar on the difficulty of making clear assessments for lack of sufficient sources. Many questions, such as how much the army elite believes in its own propaganda, have to remain unanswered. Such caveats can never be welcome enough and one may note with attention that while the wealth of engaged literature on the 1988 crisis year might suggest otherwise, Taylor states that “explanations for the occurrences of 1987–88 have been few,” looking forward to historians in the future who are “able to study in detail the underlying forces at work” (TSM, p. 390).

While Taylor’s huge effort to keep track of the state’s course is promised to last as a reliable basis for further enquiries, the same can hardly be said of Michael Charney’s rushed attempt to write a short general history of Burma. *A History of Modern Burma* promises to retrace the country’s development from the British annexation of 1886 down to 2008. With most of its nine chapters covering relatively neat chronological periods, the book primarily takes an interest in the country’s political history, for which it offers a balanced account. The author’s wish to emphasize certain “themes,” such as the struggle between supporters of parliamentary and authoritarian rulership, the opposition of lowland and highland Burma, or the failure of economic policies, is well intentioned but not much honored, as he fails to bring analytical depth to his descriptive accounts.

The book was purportedly written for undergraduates and the non-specialist audience. But only an expert will be able to value or reject the author’s attempts at periodization that diverge from past scholarship. The first chapter page of “The Revolutionary Council,” while tacitly expecting readers to know that this period covers the years from 1962 to 1972, does not actually introduce the early military government, but concentrates on what the author calls “the BSPP years” (1972–1988). Given that the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) was founded in 1962, this idiosyncratic presentation of political developments may offer confusion rather than orientation to a neophyte reader.

The association of—at times—excessive factual details with superficial and sometimes careless statements does not help to make this either an easily readable work or a comprehensive guide. We find that during the parliamentary period of the 1950s “Nu’s Burma was from the start an economic nightmare” (*A History of Modern Burma* [HMB], p. 81) while under the army’s rule in the

1960s the “shift of control to Tin Pe marked the beginning of an economic nightmare” (HMB, p. 132). Within the chapter alluded to above (HMB, pp. 107–32), the economic policy of the Revolutionary Council is essentially presented as a conflict on nationalization between two ministers, Aung Gyi and Tin Pe (“From Aung Gyi to Tin Pe”). As the author nowhere provides an overview of the country’s economic structure, nor even an insight into the key role of rice agriculture, the hasty list of Tin Pe’s measures and laws does not provide an adequate perception of what Charney then casually labels the launch of a “quick Marxist transformation of the Burmese economy” (HMB, p. 123).

The endnotes show that the author has mostly availed himself of English-language secondary literature, periodicals, and official British papers. The use of Burmese sources should be expected from a historian whose main field of competence is Myanmar history. Burmese scholarship and primary documents are extant notably for the period from 1942 to 1962.

There is indeed a need for a comprehensive and well-presented general history of modern Myanmar, but while *A History of Modern Burma* may be useful to Myanmar insiders, with its factual record and summary overviews, it is not an introduction to the major issues of Myanmar’s modern and contemporary history. If one recalls what each writer on Burma generally underscores, namely Burma’s historical, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, Michael Charney’s *History* is surprising, with its narrow focus on Burma’s political development seen and interpreted strictly from a centrist, capital-situated, Burman elite point of view. This approach gratifies the reader with some lesser-known and welcome vignettes on Rangoon (HMB, pp. 18–45, 186, 193), though the author does not hint at the changing urban landscape during the last years. But there is no engaging argument about those who have been living on the country’s frontiers, evolving at the margins of central power. Should not the scope of a history of modern Burma be slightly broader, giving, if only occasionally, a nonetheless distinctive voice to the plurality of people, their histories, and their place in a larger narrative?

Independently from the quality of writing in the publications of political and social scientists reviewed here, one notes that contemporary academic publications on Myanmar share a practice of representing and evaluating the social, cultural, and political realities of the country mostly through the top-down prism of authoritarian political conditions. This is understandable but should allow for greater reflection on the way that authoritarian structures and practices are often rooted in the social fabric. Taylor’s model of state development, which links the postcolonial state to its precolonial antecedents, may account for this, though it may not go uncontested with historians of earlier periods. The fact that most writing is consciously or unconsciously embedded in the consensus that the case of contemporary Myanmar is singular should be critically reviewed, as it hampers comparison. Myanmar may be exceptional in certain regards, but exceptionalism per se does not form the basis of investigative methodologies.

In Thailand, another country often postulated as unique because of its alleged uncolonized status, recent developments with regard to the role of the army in the state have forced a rethinking of the functioning of the state as a whole. Craig Reynolds has proposed in a recent lecture to “think of the Thai state as an entangled mass of interlocking relationships, alliances and struggles between and among many centers of power often in competition with one another” and to “imagine further a jungle gym such as you find in playgrounds where the links are made of flexible braided cables instead of rope and are joined together at connection points.”² For the case of Myanmar, innovative perspectives such as this could be helpful to balance accounts of the plural and overlapping realities of authoritarian structures, the weak and dysfunctional state, and the multiplicity of competing forces at the center, at the peripheries, and beyond.

²Craig Reynolds, “Autocratic Rule in Thailand and Its Neighbours,” Outsider view lecture at Chiang Mai University, August 3, 2011.