

Understanding Reform in Myanmar: People and Society in the Wake of Military Rule
by Marie Lall, London, Hurst and Company, 2016, xviii + 346pp., ISBN 978-1-849-04580-3

Understanding Reform in Myanmar is a detailed account of Myanmar's political transformation between the years of 2010 and 2015. The book benefits greatly from the author's access to several actors across the political and civil society spectrum, which makes for a rich and detailed telling of the events in this decade, including many behind-the-scenes machinations that are hard to capture through media accounts.

The first two chapters provide an overview of the period being discussed in the book, looking at visible changes, especially in the military regime, but also less visible ones, such as the key role played by civil society actors, as well as their ambiguous relationship with Myanmar's military. There's an entire chapter on the changing fortunes of Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party, and its relationship with the military regime. It makes clear that in the years of and leading up to the reform at least, despite Suu Kyi's house arrest and political marginalisation, channels of communication between her and the military remained open, and negotiation continued. The following chapter focusses on the peace process between various armed ethnic militias and the military regime. It is the focal point of a theme that runs throughout the book – that of the many ethnic groups in Myanmar asserting themselves and seeking political representation, and forming an opposition to the military regime in different ways to the NLD.

The two following chapters focus on specific aspects of the reform process – economic reforms and re-engagement with the world economy, including the contentious issue of sanctions on Myanmar, as well as a focus on the education sector, drawing from the author's own interest and expertise in the field. The processes of both the economic and education sectors 'opening up' are described thoroughly, though perhaps without looking critically enough at the role of institutions like the IMF and the World Bank, whose controversial history of pushing countries towards structural adjustment programmes makes it problematic to consider them neutral players.

The last chapter before the conclusion and epilogue looks at the rise of Buddhist nationalism, and the violence over the last several years that has led to the displacement of many Rohingya. An interesting by-product of the book's detailed exploration of the reform years is its laying bare of Suu Kyi and the NLD's ambivalence around the Rohingya issue much before her international fall from grace in recent times. Despite the dismay that many have expressed at the Nobel Peace Prize winner's refusal to condemn Rohingya expulsion, Marie Lall's book demonstrates that the writing has been on the wall much longer.

One of the book's important contributions is to question the idea of democracy as it is framed through Western experience, and instead outline how its meanings can be different in different contexts. Moreover, the book demonstrates that act of exercising democratic rights like the right to vote is not merely about who wins and who loses, but the process is valuable also because it increases political participation overall, and creates a sense of political agency despite disappointment with existing parties and regimes. The author briefly makes connections between current political stalemates (in particular, between various ethnic militias and the state) and their relationship to colonial policies (especially Chapter 4). Her observation in an endnote (261) about these developments finding echoes with other South Asian countries – like India and Pakistan – suggests that there are perhaps rich insights to be sought from doing comparative contemporary analyses of these historically contiguous

regions. The most striking parallels are with immediately neighbouring Northeast India, where, for instance, Assam's contemporary exercise of identifying 'authentic' citizens (largely to the exclusion of Bengali Muslims), mirrors the Rohingya's sudden loss of citizenship through the suspension of their 'white cards'.

All in all, this book will make for a fascinating read for those familiar with and interested in Myanmar's historical development.

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