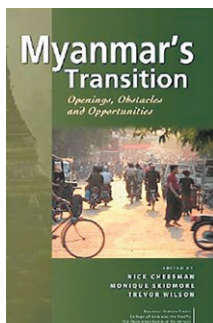


Revolt or evolve?



There are many myths about Myanmar that make it difficult for people to fully understand what is happening in the country, and what lays ahead. Through a mixed-method approach, *Myanmar's Transition*, edited by Nick Cheesman, Monique Skidmore and Trevor Wilson, provides alternative ways to counterbalance some of the beliefs held about Myanmar.

Reviewer: Kai Chen



Reviewed publication

Nick Cheesman, Monique Skidmore & Trevor Wilson. 2012. *Myanmar's Transition: Openings, Obstacles, and Opportunities*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, ISBN 9789814414159

THIS COLLECTION OF ESSAYS features 7 thematic parts. In Parts I and 2, Monique Skidmore, Trevor Wilson and Thant Myint-U overview the historic transition in Myanmar, and outline the subsequent chapters. The next Part (chapters 3-6) covers the dynamics of Myanmar's politics following the 2010 elections: Richard Horsey asks if it will be a revolution or an evolution? Nicholas Farrelly discusses ethnic armed conflicts; Marie Lal and Hla Hla Win look at the concept of citizenship, and Renaud Egretreau explores Myanmar's gem trade with China.

In Part IV (chapters 7-9), Khin Maung Nyo, Sean Turnell and Tin Htut Oo examine the different aspects of the economic landscape in Myanmar. Part V evaluates the role of the media in counter-corruption and explores the perspective of the weekly news journals in Myanmar. The next Part (chapters 12-14) re-examines the critical challenges facing the rule of law in Myanmar (i.e., the Supreme Court and the Constitutional Tribunal), especially corruption. Finally, Part VII (chapters 15-18) focuses on the challenges facing international assistance and stakeholders (e.g., INGOs and the EU) in Myanmar, such as limited access and funding.

Different from many works on Myanmar, the editors and contributors to this collection develop alternative opinions, which attempt to correct at least four myths about Myanmar in transition. First, there would be no lasting end to human rights abuses and skirmishes in Myanmar, while the ethnic-based militias still control sizable territories. Because no stakeholder could possibly bring the conflicting parties to understand each other's concerns and limits. Historically, the Myanmar military always operates above the law. Today, most members of Myanmar's current administration "are either former military officers or ministers from the

precious SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) regime" (p.139). Moreover, in many cases, security forces enjoy "impunity for human rights abuses carried out in the name of national security" (p.11). At the same time, the Myanmar government is unable to prevent the skirmishes between ethnic-based militias and the Burmese Army, especially in the border areas (e.g., Kachin State and Shan State), where there is "a mix of informal local autonomies with areas of government control" (p.30). With regard to Aung San Suu Kyi, although she is considered to be a "Burmese democracy icon" (p.127), and has called for a nationwide settlement of disputes, "it is far from clear that she will be able to contribute effectively to finding a solution unless all concerned can agree on a new strategy for this purpose" (p.9).

Second, it's increasingly hard to ignore the economic privatization in Myanmar, that is, "numerous state-owned enterprises under military control" (p.16). Few have realized that Myanmar's economic structure has been dominated by several large military economic corporations (e.g., Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings and Myanmar Economic Corporation) and private businesses operated by cronies, who were "able to influence some government decisions and regulations which benefited them monetarily" (p.122). Such a military-economic concoction is responsible for corruption and the distortion of national finances. For instance, the former military regime's cronies have been "receiving substantial transfers of state assets with little or no transparency" (p.16). Unfortunately, as yet no programme for removing this behemoth has been devised (p.17). As a result, many Burmese (especially relatively skilled workers) try to seek better paid jobs abroad, leading to "a scarcity of labour in Myanmar" (p.127). In addition, the contributors also notice that the Myanmar government has a "twofold purpose" in liberating the private media in Myanmar. On one hand, the government could persuade the pro-military journalists in the private media to coordinate public relations in favour of the government. On the other hand, the government would organize the pro-military journalists to deal with "its domestic and international rivals and critics" (p.192).

Third, the Western sanctions on Myanmar have been set back by the kin-based transnational networks on the Myanmar-China border, which are "consequently, extremely

Above:
Rangoon traffic.
Image reproduced
under a creative
commons license,
courtesy of Axel
drainville on flickr.

difficult to trace and control, for whoever aims to legally curb their activities" (p.105). In the case of the gem trade, it is increasingly based on transnational kinship networks, "with Myanmar and Chinese dealers having secured a quasi-monopoly" (p.107).

Fourth, in Myanmar, evolution is more likely (and more preferable) than revolution, which has "a rather violent and unsuccessful history in Myanmar" (p.50). As Sean Turnell argues, the current change in Myanmar "does not yet constitute a reform moment" (p.152). In an evolutionary context, it will be more likely to establish a mechanism through which a vulnerable population could voice their needs.

How to turn the present vicious cycle into a virtuous cycle? Urging the military elite or ethnic-based militias to abandon their vested interests would be no different than asking a tiger for its skin. Tin Htut Oo believes that it will be essential to turn to "an approach that coordinates public and private activities" (pp.167-168). In my view, this approach may refer to public-private partnership; i.e., the international community and Myanmar government should build a partnership with the private businesses operated by the military elites and their cronies. In the foreseeable future, no stakeholder could take over the role of the military-economic complex in Myanmar.

I think the collection could give more attention to the impact of ethnic-based militias. Some militias have established their own parallel systems, such as ethnic-based administrative structure, websites, NGOs, schools and business. What tensions and interconnections exist between the system dominated by the Burmese and the ethnic-based system? If the editors and contributors would take this into account, their arguments and policy recommendations would be more inclusive. In short, as a well-documented collection, *Myanmar's Transition* is timely enough to inspire scholars, students, and activists interested in Myanmar studies; it has provided a valuable addition to the literature on Myanmar, and has helpfully opened up more doors for future studies.

Kai Chen, Assistant Professor,
Center for Southeast Asian Studies,
School of International Relations,
Xiamen University
(kaichen@xmu.edu.cn).