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## Book Reviews

Cheesman, Nick, Nicholas Farrelly, and Trevor Wilson (eds) (2014), *Debating Democratization in Myanmar*

Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, ISBN: 978-981-4519-13-7, 381 pages

Myanmar is at a critical juncture. Since 2012, political and economic reforms initiated by President Thein Sein and liberal elements within the quasi-military regime have clearly transformed the former military regime. Political prisoners have been released, media controls have been eased, civil liberties and political freedoms have been broadened. As a result, international sanctions against the former international pariah have been lifted or partially withdrawn. The outcome of the transformation, however, is by no means clear. Due to the resistance of conservative elements within the military and the ruling party and the intransigency of authoritarian rule, democratisation remains an uphill struggle for all those fighting to improve human rights and the rule of law in the war-torn country. There is already an intensive discussion going on as to whether liberalisation has reached an end. *Debating Democratization* intends to shed light on the causes, pathways and consequences of the political reform process. The book is a product of the 2013 Myanmar/Burma Update Conference at the Australian National University in Canberra and features 16 articles by politicians, consultants and academics. It is a must-read for all those seeking to understand the current reform process and its concomitant phenomena, such as the growing significance of Myanmar's parliament, the debate about the election laws, the role of political activists, rising labour demonstrations, local politics, economic development and fiscal reforms, the role of the security forces (police and army) and the growing violence in the country. In a nutshell, it covers a broad range of topics and is an enlightening read for anybody interested in the political developments of the country.

Despite its academic merits, the book falls short on several issues. Not all pieces directly address the issue of democratisation, and some articles simply do not fit into the edited volume, such as the economic update and the broader debate about the return of the exiles. The volume also fails to add anything new to the ongoing theoretical debate about the institutional weakness of military rule in general given the omnipresence of the military in Burma. The question of whether the current opening is a strategy to recalibrate authoritarian rule and consolidate military power remains unanswered. What we do find are the in-

sightful views of the some of the actors involved, such as the foreword on the context of current reforms by former Minister of Development Winston Set Aung and the very interesting article on the impact of the land laws by one of the leaders of the most influential civil society groups in this context, Kyaw Thu Aung. By including these voices, the volume is able to provide an initial “in-depth analysis of events in Myanmar in this remarkable period of excitement and change” (Wilson, p. 17).

A more academic introduction and context is provided by Morten Pederson, who assesses the significance of the ongoing reforms process, its background and the challenges ahead. He concludes that the military is initiating these reforms because it wants to, not because it has to (p. 36). In his view, the “necessary condition” for change was the leadership change from Senior General Than Shwe to President Thein Sein; the improved security situation, the military’s self-perception as guardians of the nation-state and the economic backwardness of the country should be seen as push factors in the liberalisation of military rule. He points to the ongoing challenges of hardliners blocking further liberalisation and the peace process – both reforms are heavily intertwined and so far researchers have not been able to bring to light the destructive role of the security forces in the recent opening and its impact on the peace process. Several articles in the edited volume stand out: Thomas Kean, editor of the *Myanmar Times*, analyses the crucial role of the Parliament in the early phases of political reform. He shows that several rounds of conflicts between the legislature and the executive have led to an image that the Parliament is far more than a rubber stamp. Since it enacted many new laws in the early phase of transition, it became a reform actor in its own right. Since analyses of the Parliament in its initial stages are rare, Kean’s chapter is an important contribution to the debate on the emancipation of legislative institutions.

Renaud Egretreau provides a nuanced view of the involvement of the military in the reform process. He shows that the military – currently the prime veto actor with heavy institutional involvement in Myanmar politics – has successfully managed a generational change and has brought forward a new set of officers willing to work on restoring the prestige and public image of the armed forces. This includes a refinement but not necessarily an end of their domestic role. Similarly, in his article on police reforms Andrew Selth, a long-time observer of the security apparatus, warns of too much optimism. Substantial changes, including revised thinking about political protests and the role of the police, will need time to occur. Measured against the three benchmarks of hu-

man rights compliance, effective internal and external accountability and community outreach, the police still have a very long way to go, although initial steps have been taken (p. 222). Whereas these chapters provide much-needed analyses of the main drivers of reforms, other articles concentrate on the consequences. Often, Myanmar's political reforms are described as elite-driven or "top-down". However, Tamas Wells and Kyaw Thu Aung show that the empowerment of the local level by grass-roots civil society has been an integral part of the political liberalisation. Although these forces faced restrictions from the state, local networks are fighting for space in the political system.

Kyaw Soe Lwin demonstrates that with increasing local mobilisation and expanded space, organised labour could also play a more active role as the country has witnessed a number of strikes in recent years. The government has taken a cautious, if not negative stance towards these protests, pushing civil society's actors not to support these strikes. In other chapters, Ma Khin Mar Mar Khi analyses the struggle of women in the reform process, and Seng Maw sheds light on the war in Kachin State. The ongoing war raises the question of why the difficult peace process has not been taken up prominently in the book. The answer may lie simply in the sheer complexity of reforms in the multi-ethnic country, the high number of reforms so far and the ambiguous developments we have seen since liberalisation – all this being just too much for one edited volume. A thorough analysis of the reform process is still needed. The book represents an attempt to trace some of these initial developments, but it is just a beginning.

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