

**Smith, Martin.** *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*. rev. ed. New York: Zed Books, 1999.

A revised and updated version of a study published a decade ago, this edition adds minor revisions and a 35 page chapter on the 1990s. Maps, charts, including brief descriptions of insurgent groups and conflicting parties, 50 pages of notes and a detailed index contribute to the comprehensive nature of a volume that scholars and earlier reviewers regarded as "encyclopedic" and "definitive."

Author of two previous books on Burma, as well as extensive reporting for the *London Times*, *Guardian* and BBC, Martin Smith focuses on "the largely unrecorded struggles of Burma's diverse ethnic peoples." Broadly classified into four major groups, the Tibet-Burmese, Tai, Karen, and Mon people still control large areas of the country, particularly along the Chinese and Thai borders. Smith regards Burma's ethnic past as central to understanding its tragic modern history, arguing that "the rise and fall of so many armed movements is less haphazard than first appears." He maintains this position without minimizing the consequences of domination, invasion and intervention by various empires - Britain, Japan, China, and, as the Vietnam war impinged on everyone in the region, the Soviet Union and the United States.

In what amounts to a preface to the four major sections of the book, Smith examines the implications of the crisis of 1988, which shattered forever "the myth of this idyllic Burmese Shangri-La," with 10,000 deaths and the emergence of military strong man, General Saw Maung, Army Chief-of-Staff and Minister of Defense, in power. In Smith's view, this national uprising against the 26-year rule of General Ne Win's Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) reflected the past and shaped the present, including the emergence of Aung San Suu Kyi as a national leader, barred by the military government from participating in the political life of her country.

The chapter title in Smith's study suggests the lasting effects of ethnic division and conflict: "Insurgency as a Way of Life." In the decades following independence, and the effort of various coalitions and alliances, including Buddhists and students, the influential Communist Party remained indifferent to ethnic conflict, while reflecting the confusions and rivalries between the Soviet Union and China. With the collapse of parliamentary democracy in 1958, the *Tatmadaw* (military) emerged as "caretaker," to be followed in 1962 by Ne Win and the BSPP dictatorship. Not surprisingly, under the circumstances, "one of the many paradoxes of the 1962 military coup is that, far from offering a solution to Burma's political violence, it both poured oil on the flames of the country's ethnic insurgencies, and in effect, restored the Communist Party to its former position as Burma's leading opposition party."

Through the 1980s, particularly after the 1988 uprising, the Burmese army strengthened its hold on power, drove the student movements underground or into exile and marginalized all other political forces. Although the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) made a few cosmetic changes, including renaming the country

Myanmar Naing Nagan (Union of Burma), it continues to ignore the "plural, polyethnic" character of the country.

Although "Burma's human and economic potential is not in doubt," Smith concludes, "decades of political impasse and conflict have bequeathed a bitter legacy." As with the other ten poorest countries around the globe, new social problems - over one million inhabitants displaced, grave environmental problems and an estimated 500,000 HIV carriers, for example - make democratic reform extremely difficult.

The greatest obstacle to any meaningful reform is the determination of the *Tatmadaw* to hold onto political power and its willingness to use any means to keep the opposition weak and divided. The army's brutal suppression of the 1998 democracy movement and the annulment of the 1990 election results betrays its total disregard of public opinion and democratic political processes. During discussions on constitutional issues, it has insisted on an institutional role for the military in any future political order. It believes that the *Tatmadaw* is the only institution which is capable of safeguarding Burma's national unity, national security and national sovereignty.

Fault lines in the Burmese political and social fabric are many and complex, running between the ethnic minorities and the Burman majority, between the different political parties of the Burmans and between the democratic aspirations of the political parties and the authoritarian attitude of the *Tatmadaw*. There is no broad political consensus on a future political framework, no unified political leadership which can mount sustained pressure on the military to move toward democratic rule.

Since the internal dynamics have failed to break the political deadlock, the international community will have to adopt a proactive policy with an appropriate mix of sanctions and constructive engagement to help relieve the sufferings of the Burmese people whose political and human rights have been denied and who have been reduced to abject poverty because of the mismanagement of the economy by the military regime. The role of the ASEAN and other neighboring countries will be crucial.

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