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## BOOK REVIEW

### Burma Myanmar: Strong Regime Weak State?

(Pederson MB, Rudland E & May RJ (eds.), *Burma Myanmar - Strong Regime Weak State?*, Crawford House Publishing Pty Ltd, Adelaide, 2000, price: \$A30)

#### Adrian Lipscomb \*

It was stated by one Norman Angell in the Autumn of 1914 that military conquest has a natural limit - that even if France were to fall to the Germans, French civilization would survive because a conqueror cannot harm or extinguish the culture of the conquered. A contemporary, G.K. Chesterton, differed - the culture of the conquered can be injured and extinguished "simply because it can be *explained* by the conqueror", he said. Should France fall, French culture would be interpreted by the Germans to form an all-pervasive "German picture of France."<sup>1</sup> Modern historians would, I submit, almost unanimously endorse Chesterton's view - indeed, such "explanations" seem inevitably in danger of attending not only "occupied" cultures but also cross-cultural analyses of cultures, particularly when the cultural differences are significant. This is, of course, a phenomenon for which the term "ethnocentrism" was later coined.

The case of present-day Burma in this respect is interesting. The scope for ethnocentric "explanations" of the socio-political situation in Burma is great. For a start there is a military junta (primarily ethnic Burman) which has imposed its economic pragmatism and regulatory ethos on the communalistic village populations with all the cultural baggage and "explaining" that comes with that process; secondly, there are the secessionist and minority groups in the more remote parts of Burma whose cultures differ markedly and which are also "explained" by the ruling elite in order to categorise and thereby better control them; and thirdly there is the rest of the world which is looking in on Burma and attempting, through the mists of cross-culturalism, to find universal truths and patterns in its affairs. At all three levels there is scope for ethnocentric interpretation - and the first two types necessarily form a large part of the

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<sup>1</sup> This reference is owed to Stanner WEH, "Fictions, Nettles and Freedoms", *Search*, Vol 4, No 4, 1973

subject matter of the third. (Indeed, a fourth type of “explaining” could be conceived of as book reviews and critiques of the aforesaid third type - these are essentially “explanations” of “explanations”, with all their inherent layered biases and difficulties!)

So it is that any publication which attempts socio-political analyses of discrete nation-states must tread very warily. The book *Burma/Myanmar* is a collection of such analyses - but, let me hasten to say, it does skilfully avoid the pitfalls. It comprises eight papers (and an introduction) which were presented at the Burma Update Conference at the Australian National University in August 1999, and its contributors are mainly academics from Australian and American universities. It is a lucid and comprehensive account of the current situation in Burma, and its authors have gone out of their way to place their analyses in context, drawing extensively on their learned knowledge of the country and the culture. Of course the political scope of the book and the dearth of available public information on some of the subject matter (for example, the *tatmadaw* [the Burmese Armed Forces], about which the contributors could not be expected to have significant first hand experience) make some of the analyses dependent on secondary and even tertiary material. However, given the significance of such topics, it is understandable that these are dealt with in such a manner. The only other exception is Craig Reynolds who begins his paper on “The Ethics of Academic Engagement with Burma” with a disclaimer concerning his limited experience of Burma (if only academics were always so candid!) but then goes on to produce a very worthwhile analysis of an area he *does* know: academia. The result of all this is a book which aims to describe rather than to explain, and in the process it gleans some rather interesting insights.

A familiarity with Asia sometimes leads one to wonder whether, on the surface at any rate, the rest of the world has moved on leaving Burma in a time warp - there seems to be a sort of political *deja vu* about that country - and I must admit that this feeling is exacerbated on reading *Burma/Myanmar*. There is so much in this book which bring to mind Burma of the 1970s or 1980s, or even earlier. The drug trade is still flourishing as it was back then, the secessionist groups are still troublesome, and the economy is still problematic. Even the legal system seems changeless - David Steinberg notes, for example, that the present law in Burma “is a meaningless and arbitrary set of regulations promulgated primarily to support the state establishment and to prevent dissidence. Law is personal rather than contractual, thus opening multiple

avenues for corruption”,<sup>2</sup> a description which brings to mind a piece of fiction written by George Orwell which I read long ago. Orwell had a good knowledge of Burma gained from five years as an officer with the colonial police force, and his account of the culture of corruption which existed in 1920s Burma is, in truth, not a lot different from that which exists today. Orwell wrote of one fictional magistrate:

As a magistrate his methods were simple. Even for the vastest bribe he would never sell the decision of a case, because he knew that a magistrate who gives wrong judgements is caught sooner or later. His practice, a much safer one, was to take bribes from both sides and then decide the case on strictly legal grounds. This won him a useful reputation for impartiality.... And even beyond the grave his success would continue. According to Buddhist belief, those who have done evil in their lives will spend the next incarnation in the shape of a rat, a frog or some other low animal. U Po Kyin was a good Buddhist and intended to provide against this danger.<sup>3</sup>

(It is interesting that Orwell’s keen insights into the use of language permitted him an “explanation” of aspects of Burmese culture unencumbered by the vagaries of political propaganda, the like of which he later forecast in 1984.)

But things *have* changed in Burma - it is now ruled by a repressive and powerful military junta with all its attendant problems of violation of human rights, the lack of rule of law and economic mismanagement. All the contributors to *Burma/Myanmar* (indeed the contributors to this edition of the *Southern Cross University Law Review* as well) are generally agreed that a prerequisite for social and economic change in Burma is political reform, or (as many commentators put it) “democratisation”. The nature of the obstacles to that political reform are the subject of a large part of the current debate on Burma’s future. Where *Burma/Myanmar’s* approach differs, however, is that it does not assume that such change is imminent, nor does it devote lengthy treatises to suggestions on how that change might be brought about - for to do so courts the danger of “explaining”. Instead the contributors acknowledge that the regime will probably persist into the

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<sup>2</sup> Steinberg DI, in Pederson et al, at 97

<sup>3</sup> Orwell G, *Burmese Days* (first published in 1935), in his collected works, Octopus Books, London, 1976, at 74

medium or long term - and they examine the possibilities which flow from that premise.

David Steinberg's contribution, entitled "The State, Power, and Civil Society in Burma-Myanmar: the Status and Prospects for Pluralism", is perhaps the most culturally-sensitive in the book, and, in itself, provides a necessary barrier against out-of-context "explaining" - his subject matter makes it the most appropriate section in which to insert this sort of material. He looks at concepts of power, status and social capital in Burmese society and the manner in which the present regime maintains its rule, given the facilitations and constraints of those factors. He also acknowledges the importance of Buddhist values (which, he notes, tend to be perceived positively by the Burman population but otherwise by some ethnic minorities) and concludes significantly that "the potential for ethnic conflict remains the single most explosive issue in contemporary Myanmar".<sup>4</sup>

Whatever future scenarios are desired for or expected of Burma, the armed forces will undoubtedly play a crucial role in its leadership. The military ethos is now too well entrenched to conceive otherwise (and even Aung San Suu Kyi has no hesitation in acknowledging this fact). Hence three of the papers in this book are devoted to military/strategic assessments: Mary Callahan discusses recent changes in the military's relations with the rest of society, Andrew Selth looks at the future of the *tatmadaw*, and Mohan Malik investigates Burma's role in regional security.

There are always dangers in drawing too close parallels between Burma and other Asian countries - one's view may become homogenised, and Burma may merge in one's perception into an all-encompassing pan-Asian entity. Nevertheless parallels can serve a useful purpose by highlighting trends and suggesting scenarios. There are, for example, similarities between status groups in Burma and Indonesia - in both countries there is a powerful military, a prime function of which is internal security. Moreover the *abangan* (village) and *priyayi* (aristocratic) dichotomy of the dominant Javanese in Indonesia is not unlike the "high culture/low culture" social makeup in Burma. Another similarity can be seen in the limited accord reached with minority groups - Jakarta with the Acehnese of Sumatra and the Melanesians of West Papua viz-a-viz Rangoon with the

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<sup>4</sup> Steinberg in Pederson et al, at 103

dissident Shan, Chin, Kachin and Karen groups of northern and eastern Burma. *Burma/Myanmar* does occasionally draw similar parallels - but again, well within the bounds of reasonableness. And of course, any book of this type would be remiss were it to give any less emphasis to the unique and enduring civil-military relationship in Burma. To this end, Malik suggests, “*unless a split emerges within the tatmadaw into pro- and anti-democracy factions (similar to what happened to the Philippine armed forces in the mid 1980s), a popularly elected civilian government is ... unlikely to emerge in the foreseeable future.*”<sup>5</sup>

Bertil Lintner, the only non-academic contributor (he is a journalist with the *Far East Economic Review*), has a first-hand knowledge of the opium trade in Burma and has contributed a paper on drugs and economic growth. Clearly Burma remains the key to the drug trade in Southeast Asia and any efforts to reduce or eliminate that trade must focus on Burma's dissident states. Conversely the drug trade is also crucial to political control. Ne Win's so-called drug eradication campaign of the 1970s was criticised at that time for its ineffectiveness while also enabling the regime to sidetrack US funding to help fight the secessionist movements.<sup>6</sup> The huge amounts of money which the international community continues to throw at the illicit trade seem to be as ineffective now as then. One wonders at the political naiveté of the US and UN organisations which continue to insist that the drug problem can be addressed separately from the political and human rights issues which dominate Burma. As Lintner suggests, “Burma has become Asia's first and only state that survives on the export of narcotics”<sup>7</sup>, and “it is unlikely that the Burmese government could seriously move against the traffickers without upsetting its delicate ceasefire agreements with them, which have been in place for ten years and are of vital importance for the survival of the present regime”.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Malik M, in Pederson et al, at 275

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Schwab RW, “Opium and Instability: the implications of an Unexamined Policy - American Initiatives in Burma”, *Asia Quarterly*, 1978/4

<sup>7</sup> Lintner B in Pederson et al, at 189

<sup>8</sup> Lintner B in Pederson et al, at 192

In 1997 Burma was admitted to ASEAN (the Association of South East Asian Nations), a notable achievement for the government given the opposition of the west (and especially the US) to that admission. ASEAN's goal, as stated on its inception in 1967, was the promotion of regional co-operation in the economic, social, cultural and technical fields. However, it is the economic field which seems to have come to the fore in recent years - and AFTA (the ASEAN Free Trade Area) may yet provide a profitable trade outlet for Burma. In a useful economic analysis, Mya Than has contributed a chapter which charts the implications and impacts the regime's ASEAN membership (and the Asian crisis which occurred contemporaneously with its admission) is having on the Burmese economy. His prognosis is, nevertheless, that the economic prospects for Burma are far from encouraging. Which leads one to ask the question: what role then might the rest of the world play in reforming the political process in Burma? International opinion of Burma has long been ambivalent, but Pederson (who is both an editor and a contributor to the book) is pessimistic on this point - he concludes in his paper on "International Policy on Burma" by suggesting that:

without comprehensive political, administrative and legal reforms to address ... structural weaknesses, broad-based and sustainable economic growth will remain stymied, and an influx of foreign investment and aid is likely to merely prop up an ineffective regime and undercut the need for much needed governance and policy reforms.<sup>9</sup>

*Burma/Myanmar* is a well-designed and laid out book. Indexing is comprehensive throughout (although sub-headings in the index would have been useful). Abstracts would also have been welcome additions, as would chapter lists of keywords (something which, I suggest, should become mandatory in both academic books and on-line material as the world becomes more and more cyber-oriented). Undoubtedly aspects of *Burma/Myanmar* will become out-of-date within a few years, for (despite Burma's seeming social immutability) such is the volatile nature of the economic and political affairs which are its subject. But for the moment its analyses are both relevant and incisive, and the book's subtitle accurately reflects the thrust of its argument: Burma is a weak state with a strong regime (and the question mark suggests that even this may be a problematic analysis!). It is a book which any Burma-

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<sup>9</sup> Pederson MB in Pederson et al, at 228

watcher, or even those with a more general interest in Asia, should not overlook.