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### N. Cheesman & N. Farrelly (eds)

*Conflict in Myanmar: War, Politics, Religion*. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing—Yusof Ishak Institute [Myanmar/Burma Update Conference Series], 2016, xiv + 390 pp. ISBN 9789814695848 price: 38,99 euro.

This book is based on the 2015 Myanmar/Burma Update Conference held at the Australian National University, which also hosts the insightful New Mandala weblog on Southeast Asia. It focuses on the final years of the quasi-civilian Thein Sein government (2011–2015), leading up to the elections that brought Aung San Suu Kyi's party the National League for Democracy (NLD) to power. The chapters, which also cover the immediate aftermath of the 2015 elections, are grouped around military, political, and religious conflict, although some authors refer to conflict only indirectly.

After an introduction by Nicholas Farrelly (chapter 1), part 2 (chapters 2–6) covers the various ethnic armed struggles and peace building efforts. Chapter 2 describes the government's new role as negotiator between ethnic armed groups (EAGs) and the Myanmar army since 2011, as well as the role of the then newly established Myanmar Peace Center (MPC). Despite several setbacks, the government secured ceasefire agreements with eight EAGs in October 2015, which leads the author to reach relatively positive conclusions. The chapter is rather descriptive (as the author also notes), and leaves out various contested aspects concerning the peace process and the role of the MPC. It does point out some interesting divergence between the government and the military.

Chapters 3 and 4 cover developments in Kachin State, which saw a long-time ceasefire break down in 2011, just as the government initiated peace talks elsewhere in the country. The renewed civil war resulted in grave human rights violations and mass displacement, a situation that is still ongoing at the time of writing. Chapter 3 questions the use of ethnic identity politics in relation to underlying power contestations over territory and resources, while chapter 4 analyses the intersection of gender, ethnicity and religion-based violence. The author argues that gender-based violence encourages Kachin women to join the armed struggle, but that conservative gender norms within Kachin organizations and IDP camps may actually sustain their marginalization. Chapter 5 provides a detailed account of the way 'ceasefire capitalism' (as coined by Woods, 2011) plays out in the Pa-O Self-Administered Zone and in southern Shan State, where former opposition movements transform themselves in the face of new business opportunities, while local youth benefit from opportunities provided by donor support for civil society organizations. Chapter 6 draws on previous work by South (2012) and others on protection strategies in eastern

Myanmar, where communities have been using landmines to their advantage in order to protect infrastructure, assets, and community space.

Part 3 (chapters 7–11) discusses political, legal and societal developments around the November 2015 elections, when the NLD secured a massive victory. With the exceptions of Rakhine State and Shan State, the NLD defeated most of the ethnic minority parties that had gained seats in 2010. This election period also marked the culmination of hostilities towards Muslims since 2012, as all parties removed Muslim candidates from the voting lists. Meanwhile, many white-card holders, primarily Rohingya Muslims, lost their right to vote. As a result, as noted in Farrelly's introduction (p. 13), there are currently no Muslims in the legislatures or senior government positions. Thus, although Buddhist nationalists' attempts to frame the NLD as a pro-Muslim party were largely unsuccessful (as noted in chapter 9), Myanmar's Muslim population has not fared well under the NLD government. Aung San Suu Kyi did not react publicly when her prominent legal advisor (and Muslim) U Ko Ni was murdered in January 2017, nor did she speak out against the army's horrific human rights violations in Rakhine State. Viewed in this light, the lack of experience and elitism mentioned by Farrelly (p. 14) as possibly hindering the NLD's newly established rule can no longer be considered its main obstacles.

Chapter 7 describes how the cancellation of the elections in certain areas due to security concerns often worked in the advantage of the former-military party USDP, and chapter 8 (on the role of the Union Election Commission and international observers) mentions that many inhabitants of the urban slum areas could not vote, as they lacked formal household registration. Chapter 9 details the role of the Arakan National Party in fostering Islamophobic sentiments in Rakhine State, while chapter 10 compares the legislature's passive response to communal violence and other 'sensitive' issues to its more active interference in resource-based conflict. Chapter 11 argues that legal reform may not always provide a solution to conflict, but may in fact exacerbate it. Examples provided include the previously mentioned discrimination of white-card holders, and the excessive use of the 'contempt of court' law to silence dissent. Chapters 10 and 11 also briefly mention the discriminatory four 'race and religion laws' that were passed under pressure of Buddhist nationalists in August 2015.

Part 4 (chapters 12–16) describes the increasing hostility against the country's Muslim minorities from various angles. Chapter 12 discusses the rise in communal violence from the viewpoint of Western aid workers, who were suddenly confronted with local partners that became 'part of the problem' (p. 251). The author argues that the Western liberal narrative on democracy may clash with the traditional Burman emphasis on maintaining unity and protecting the

Buddhist majority, and that inter-group dialogue may therefore not always generate consensus. Chapter 13 covers the results of the Asian Barometer Survey conducted in Myanmar in 2015, where ethnic minorities expressed particular concern over unequal income distribution and other forms of discrimination.

In chapter 14, interesting parallels are drawn between Islamophobic sentiments in Myanmar and the United States, which arguably help us to look beyond simplistic, essentializing conclusions. Chapter 15 discusses the activities of non-state welfare networks such as garbage collection and funeral services as a form of ‘small ‘p’ politics’ intrinsically related to formal politics. The indirect reference to conflict here is that Buddhists confirm their own moral citizenship by downplaying that of others, particularly Muslims. Chapter 16 focuses on border management and threat perception in the Myanmar-Bangladesh borderlands, particularly in relation to the Rohingya. The author points out several worrying developments that now read as precursors to the latest and most severe outbreak of violence in August 2017. With these recent events in mind, the well-intended recommendations seem hopelessly optimistic.

In the concluding chapter 17 (part 5), Nick Cheesman discusses the return of politics in Myanmar, distinguishing formal politics from ‘the political’ as a form of non-violent dialogue and conflict resolution. He views the latter as still suppressed in Myanmar, especially for minorities, who may consequently seek other outlets. The current political climate, he argues, relies too much on ‘forced consensus’ (p. 357).

This book provides an accessible introduction to many of the pressing issues in Myanmar society over the past few years, covered from a diversity of angles. Some of the chapters are quite factual and report-like, while others provide more in-depth analysis of political and societal processes. Some readers might find the extensive coverage of the achievements by the Thein Sein government a bit one-sided, as the severe restrictions posed by the military-drafted 2008 constitution and the continued application of restrictive laws from the (pre-)military era, such as the Unlawful Associations Act and the Official Secrets Act, do not receive much mention. For a full picture of the country’s current challenges, the reader is encouraged to consult this useful compilation alongside recent news items and human rights reports.

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### References

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