

Ian Holliday. *Burma Redux: Global Justice and the Quest for Political Reform in Myanmar*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2011. Xiii + 287, bibliography, index. ISBN 978-0-231-16126-8

The author of this welcome study of contemporary Burma, Ian Holliday, is Professor of Political Science at the University of Hong Kong whose research and teaching focuses on Southeast Asia and on humanitarian intervention and global justice. Holliday's first two chapters provide a fairly succinct and accurate overview of Burma from the colonial period, through independence, up to the rainy season of 1988. Holliday has done his homework and those seeking a brief overview of how Burma's past can explain the political and economic problems of the last half of the twentieth century would do well to read these chapters. Holliday says little here that this reviewer would disagree with. Nevertheless, this reviewer disagrees with his view of the strength of the Burmese economy in 1948. The reason that Burma's economy was a nightmare from the start of Nu's rule reflects the poor starting point of the Burmese economy due to wartime destruction not repaired by independence, the postwar weakness of the UK economy to which Burma as a colony had been tied, and related factors. This low base made Burma's high rate of economic growth over the following 14 years possible and in the first two years of Nu's rule, annual GDP did not grow, but shrank, by -10.1% in 1948-49 (the first year of independence) and by -5.1% in 1949-50.¹ And it was probably only the increased demand for rice because of the Korean War rather than internal economic reforms that put the Burmese economy in the black from the latter fiscal year. Indeed, as Holliday admits, although overall GDP by 1961-1962 had grown beyond the levels enjoyed in the prewar period (some two decades after the war had begun), per capita GDP was 14 percent below what it had been in the 1930s under colonial rule (p. 47). Where Holliday and this reviewer agree is that the economic picture became much, much more dire under military rule from 1962, following a coup by General Ne Win.

In Chapter 3, Holliday shows how Burmese overthrew Ne Win's rule in 1988 only to see a new group of military leaders (protégés of the old man), restore military control through a coup a month after. From 1988 until just after the elections of 2010, it meant little to talk about the Burmese state separately from the *tatmadaw*, for “until 2011 [there was] no attempt made to give state structures some detachment from the military machine (p. 59). This resulted from what Holliday terms the military’s “scorched earth policy” including the abrogation of the 1974 Constitution and its “eliminat[ion] or coloniz[ation of] existing structures, and making everything subject to enhanced military control.” Holliday blames the colonial inheritance for this approach, suggesting that social and political programming by the British shaped the choices available, so “that when major challenges arose … leading figures forcefully reasserted state control and pointed the way to the dictatorship and deadlock of the junta years” (p. 80).

Internal reasons for the delays in the democratic transition (this reviewer has elsewhere labeled the past two decades of military review “perpetual delay”) are examined in Chapter 4. Some of the major underlying and complicating issues have been question of national reconciliation and avoidance of punishment for past crimes. Burma's population is ethnically and religiously heterogeneous and many if not most of these groups took part in the civil war against the Burmese state (and essentially

¹ See Table IX-9. Annual Growth Rate of GDP (1947/48-1992/93), in Teruko Saito & Kin Kiong Lee (eds.), *Statistics on the Burmese Economy: the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999): p. 230.

against the Burman majority) and, after the publication of Holliday's book, we see a resumption of armed Kachin opposition to the state and the ethnic problems in Arakan between the Rakhaing and the Rohingya, both indigenous groups divided along religious communal lines. The questions of how ethnic groups will fit into the new Burma and how federalist the military was going to allow to future (now past) Constitution were the cause of major delays in reform. So too was the desire of the military to delay the democratization process long enough so that the question of punishment for past injustices (mainly perpetrated by the military) would become a moot issue –evidence for this concern comes from the impunity clauses for the military included in the 2008 Constitution (p. 96).

Holliday spends the remaining chapters examining the ways and results of various attempts by individuals, organizations, and countries to engage and intervene in Burma's political problems with varying degrees of failure and success, since 1988. The United States, Japan, and ASEAN have been major forces at work in engaging with and attempting to secure changes within the country. Holliday devotes significant attention to the views and responses of Burma's major opposition party (and winner of the 1990 elections), the NLD, which was strongly in favor of continued isolation until it had secured significant reforms from Burma's military leadership. Holliday examines the ways in which the rest of the world is complicit in the injustices at work in Burma, how outside interests accepting the concept of global justice can engage with the country in its own political space, and what local views of the proper place of outside actors in Burma's domestic political space are.

As Holliday notes in his conclusion, potentially one of the most significant transformations Burma is undergoing today is its reopening to contacts with the outside world after a half century of isolation and xenophobia. This phenomenon was introduced as cautious detachment by U Nu government in the 1950s, when Burma sought exclusion from the problems of the Cold War, and carried to the extreme in the forging of Ne Win's "hermit state" from 1962 (p. 200). After Ne Win's displacement, lopsided engagement with the outside world, substantial with Asian neighbors but limited with the Western world, delaying until now a rapid influx of western investment and ideas and ideological influences.

Where Burma will go now and who will determine the direction of change are bigger questions. Holliday argues that local people overwhelmingly want Burma to move in the "direction of democracy, and that implicit in that shift will be attempts to entrench inter-communal diversity and cross-cultural respect" (p. 200). While Burma may pursue large-scale reforms, the Burmese might also be satisfied in the short-term with the limited democracy afforded their Chinese neighbors by their Communist leadership. It will be the Burmese, Holliday insists, who make these choices, not outsiders. Certainly, there is more opportunity for the Burmese to attempt accomplish this. Although there is some reason to doubt the depth and longevity of the current spate of democratizing reforms, the rapid reopening of the country promises to release forces that even Burma's careful military leadership could not foresee and will certainly be unable to control. Certainly, access to new communication and social networking had already been at work in this direction, producing a social revolution (p. 202) that is changing Burma's urban landscape but also increasingly rural Burmese as well. Time it would seem has caught up to the *Tatmadaw*.

This is a timely, well-written, strongly researched, and erudite work, recommended for both specialists and the general reader interested in this country and the exciting transformations currently taking place.

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