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## Book Review: Metamorphosis: Studies in Social and Political Change in Myanmar

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Book Review, Headline, Myanmar



All's well in Naypyidaw

How a junta transitioned to democracy. Edited by Renaud Egretteau & Francois Roubine. NUS Press, 2015. Paper, 428 pp with bibliography and index

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The reform process that moved Myanmar toward democracy began in 2008 with the approval of a new Constitution and the subsequent 2010 elections. Though widely considered rigged by observers and boycotted by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), the elections paved the way for a semi-civilian government which took power in 2011, which in turn has led to improved press freedom, a diminishing number of political prisoners and a spectacular economic boom, with GDP growth averaging above 6 percent since 2010 and reaching almost 9 percent in 2014.

That unlikely revolution is the subject "Metamorphosis – Studies in Social and Political Change in Myanmar," published in October 2015 by the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the French Research Institute on Contemporary Southeast Asia (IRASEC), which deals extensively with Myanmar's democratic transition from an academic perspective.

The volume is a collection of 13 articles written by different authors, covering topics from ethnic conflict to transnational activism, from the role of education in the country's democratic transition to biomedicine in Rakhine State (Myanmar's westernmost province.) The main theme of the book is the transition – or, as the editors suggest, the metamorphosis that took place in Myanmar in the past few years and extensively transformed the country.

The book partly focuses on little-known aspects of this transformation, one of its attributes.

One chapter, for instance, is entirely dedicated to the role which education plays in fostering – or damaging – democracy. Rosalie Metro, who authored the study, looks at how discrimination against minorities in schools wind up increasing the chances of conflict.

Another surveys the behavior of military Members of Parliament – the 2008 Constitution establishes that the armed forces are automatically allotted 25 percent of seats in both houses of parliament – and finds that while so far their presence has not been overly invasive, officers are unlikely to give up their role of “guardians of the nations” anytime soon.

The book is structured as a collection of papers rather than as a cohesive work, allowing for a variety of subjects to be presented without damaging the narrative. This choice makes it possible for different approaches to coexist: while some papers rely deeply on scholarly work, others are more personal in nature. In her “The 2010 Election and the Making of a Parliamentary Representative”, for instance, Alexandra de Mersan reflects on recent developments in Rakhine State through the experience of a single subject, U Maung Nyo, who starts out trying to protect Arakanese culture and eventually becomes an elected MP.

The lack of a cohesive narrative is also a weakness, for the reader is not going to find a complete chronicle explaining the transition process and its causes. Furthermore, the lack of a systematic approach means that the volume also overlooks two important issues.

As acknowledged by the editors in the volume’s introduction, “Metamorphosis” does not take into account the international environment in which the transition is taking place – even though this is of paramount importance in order to understand the logic behind the democratization process.

Following a bloody crackdown on pro-democracy protesters in 1988, Myanmar progressively slid into isolation, with an arms embargo applied by the European Union in 1990, followed by US economic sanctions in 1996 and 2008. The lack of alternatives forced the country to rely on few partners still willing to engage in business and trade – mostly Thailand and China, which quickly emerged as the major winners from Myanmar’s isolation.

In the intervening two decades, the People’s Republic became the main investor and chief arms supplier to the country. According to some [estimates](#), between 1988 and September 2013, Chinese companies invested \$14.19 billion in Myanmar, or about 32 percent of the total \$43.74 billion foreign investment approved by the Burmese authorities.

Observers point out that the dependency on China played a pivotal role in the democratic shift from outright dictatorship to a more liberal state. As Chinese influence grew too strong to bear, Burmese leaders realized that without changing course, they were going to lose their traditional independence in foreign affairs. The obvious solution was to open up and reform in an effort to engage with other countries.

The second missing element is a serious discussion of the military’s strategy of playing one ethnic group against another, which ethnic leaders say has often been deployed to foster divisions among insurgent groups. Officials from the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), for instance, argue that the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) has recently been helped – at least logistically – by the Burmese armed forces in its fight against the Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA). They also contend that the military has encouraged the Red Shans – a subgroup of the Shan ethnicity – to form their own militia, with an eye on weakening the Kachin insurgents.

It goes without saying that there is no reason to agree with such conclusions, but skipping these thorny issues altogether leads to gaps in understanding Myanmar’s transition process. Regardless, *Metamorphosis* deserves praise as a wide-ranging, serious effort to analyze current trends beyond stereotypes and simple answers. Researchers, journalists and amateurs alike will find it useful in understanding some of the most controversial issues in the country.

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