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# MYANMMAR A POLITICAL HISTORY

Nehginpao Kipgen

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**FOREWORD**

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Through most of the 1990s, in the wake of Myanmar's statewide popular uprisings calling for democratic change and the former military government's repressive counter-measures, the universities were shuttered. Government officials in Myanmar feared that the country's universities had become seedbeds of democratic activism and would no longer tolerate such a risk to their control—even if it meant sacrificing its once highly respected institution of higher education. An entire generation of Myanmar trained scholars seemed to be lost or otherwise marginalized from the production of knowledge, particularly in the political and social sciences. Many of the young scholars of this time found ways to pursue their university education and graduate studies abroad. A new generation of scholars in the social sciences from Myanmar has begun to offer the world their own interpretations of Myanmar's ongoing conflict and recent institutional transformation. Nehginpao Kipgen is one such scholar who brings his important voice to our understanding of a central issue at the heart of Myanmar's current democratic reform process: national reconciliation.

In this book, Nehginpao Kipgen argues that the lack of trust between ethnic minorities and the successive central government led

by the dominant Burman group has been fundamental to decades-old problems in the country; and that the success of the country's national reconciliation and democratic transition is largely dependent on establishing mutual trust (as evidenced by the ongoing nationwide ceasefire negotiations since 2013). While many Western scholars have suggested that the military coup in 1962 was to protect the country from U Nu's weak civilian government, or to establish a communist one, Kipgen argues that the primary reason for the military's intervention was to undermine the ethnic minorities' demand for autonomy and federalism. He explains that the conflicts were consequences of the mistrust between the majority ethnic Burman-led successive central government and ethnic minorities because of the failure to implement the 1947 Panglong Agreement, a treaty that served as the foundation for the formation of the Union of Burma in 1947 and the country's independence from the British in 1948. This is significant for contemporary debates on democratic reform at this critical junction in Myanmar's institutional transformation.

This book ultimately makes the compelling case that if Myanmar is to build a unified Myanmar today, it will have to address this ongoing ethnic conflict, and that this will require 'sincerity, honesty, and the participation of all ethnic groups.' Though not all scholars and observers of Myanmar's contemporary struggle for national reconciliation will agree with Kipgen's history of its emergence, nor his assessment of what is required to address Myanmar's ongoing ethnic conflict, his framing of the political problem at hand cannot be dismissed. It has become increasingly evident that any transition in Myanmar we might identify as democratic will not be able to avoid addressing 'the ethnic minorities question', and that it will have to do so within a context that is not confined by any one ethnic group's nationalist perspective.

Kipgen has published two books: *Democracy Movement in Myanmar: Problems and Challenges* and *Democratisation of Myanmar*. The latter is based on his doctoral dissertation research. He has also published over 100 articles in international newspapers and magazines spanning five continents. His works are a testimony to the breadth of

his knowledge about Myanmar and the high quality of his scholarship. Kipgen's book offers to our understanding of national reconciliation in Myanmar not only an uncommon ethnic minority perspective from Myanmar, but also a transnational perspective that is informed by a deeply comparative way of thinking.

**John G. Dale**  
George Mason University  
September 2015