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The volume is a presentation of Myanmar in different perspectives covering the myriad issues from the days of British colonial era to the first civilian government and then the political transition from decades of military rule to a quasi-civilian government. It also highlights how the colonial rule has an impact on the present-day Myanmar society, including the demand for self-determination by ethnic minorities.

One focused issue is the political change under the Thein Sein administration which began in 2011. It predicted that even if the Aung San Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy won the 2015 general election, it would still largely be a cosmetic change bereft of genuine democracy because of the fundamental flaws in the 2008 Constitution along a similar line of electoral authoritarianism in Russia and Cambodia.

Significant media freedom began in 2012 when newspaper editors were no longer required to submit materials to the prepublication censorship board. The liberalisation of media was even considered to be relatively better than in some ASEAN member states. However, despite the tangible development in press freedom, which was considered to be on the right track, the flow of information was still largely controlled by the authorities.

The role of some actors or personalities was crucial in shaping the political process of the country. The focus has often been a struggle between the military and the Lady, but a group of elites, including President Thein Sein, parliamentary Speaker Shwe Mann and former military leader Than Shwe were all crucial in the peaceful power transition from decades of military rule to a quasi-civilian government.

Women have played important role in the country's political history. While women made several important contributions under successive governments or among the democratic forces, their status arguably became much more evident and prominent with the emergence of Aung San Suu Kyi into Myanmar politics. The election of women candidates in the country's legislative bodies—national parliament, state and regional assemblies—has also brought women into the political limelight.

Since the military caretaker government in 1958, especially after the coup in 1962, the government began to extend its control over the previously autonomous bodies, either by curtailing or eliminating the role of independent civil society. Since the 1990s, civil society groups gradually reemerged but were mostly concentrated in ethnic areas where the central government had no

complete control. The role of civil society dramatically expanded since mid-2011 with the end of direct military rule.

Several international actors played varying roles in the country's political process. Though with different priorities, China, India, Japan, Thailand, United States, ASEAN, the European Union and the United Nations played differing roles. As its closest ally, China has been the most influential international actor since the country's independence. Despite the increased in Western engagement and the suspension of the US\$3.6 billion Myitsone dam project in 2011, China's influence is likely to continue.

The healthcare system was largely neglected during the era of military regime, accounting for roughly only 2% of its GDP. The two most common diseases were malaria and tuberculosis, whose average prevalence rate was three times higher than the global average and one of the highest in Asia. The spread of HIV/AIDS was another largely neglected area under the military era but received greater attention when Aung San Suu Kyi was made the ambassador of UNAIDS in 2012. The education sector was also largely neglected until the quasi-civilian government came to power in 2011 when the government increased its annual budget from 1–2% to 5%.

Though Bamar or Burman group forms the majority, there are several other ethnic groups that are officially recognised by the government. There are also some other groups that are not listed among the officially recognised 135 ethnic races, such as Rohingya, Chinese and Indians.

Ethnic diversity also means multiple grievances and conflicts. The non-Burman ethnic groups have been engaging in armed conflicts with the central government demanding federalism or self-determination. In their efforts to strengthen their unity and to put greater pressure on the ethnic Burman-led government, the ethnic minorities have formed organisations such as the Democratic Alliance of Burma, National Democratic Front, Ethnic Nationalities Council and the United Nationalities Federal Council.

The decades-old struggle of ethnic armed groups is not just about a campaign for political and cultural autonomy, but also for the control of local resources and trade in their own territories. The study suggests that to achieve a lasting solution to the decades-old conflicts, negotiations between the government and ethnic armed groups is not enough. Civil organisations should be involved in the peace process, while also addressing inter- and intra-conflicts among the different ethnic armed groups.

The volume also covers casualties of war both inside the country, as well as along the Myanmar-Thailand border. Many fled as refugees across the border or became internally displaced people inside the country. The study suggests that some 150,000 refugees have lived along the border, with support from non-

governmental organisations. With the assistance of the International Organisation for Migration, thousands of these refugees have been resettled in several countries, including the United States, Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

As a consequence of the conflicts, several forms of human rights violations have occurred, including the use of rape as a weapon. The report of the Women's League of Burma suggests that more than 100 women and girls were raped by the Myanmar army since 2010, of which 47 cases were gang rapes and 28 of the women were either killed or died of their injuries. Similarly, the Kachin Women's Association Thailand documented 59 cases of sexual violence by the Myanmar army between 2009–2012. Some of the human rights abuses, especially in the ethnic minority areas, are so serious that they could possibly be classified as ethnic cleansing, war crimes or crimes against humanity.

During these years of fighting, both state and non-state armed groups recruited children below the age of 18. The Myanmar army deployed child soldiers in areas where conflicts with the ethnic armed groups were happening. The border guard forces, which were former ethnic armed groups, and other non-state armed groups such as the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, Karen National Liberation Army, Kachin Independence Army, Karenni Army, Shan State Army-South and the United Wa State Army have also used child soldiers.

Another aspect of the volume focus on religion. Though religious groups are not supposed to involve in politics, the Buddhist monks have played important role in the people's struggle for democracy. The role of monks became even more significant during the 2007 saffron revolution when the monks protested fuel price hikes, which led to the death of several dozen monks and other civilians. While the majority of monks preach peace and harmony among different religious groups, there are some radical monks, such as Wirathu, who advocate for Buddhist ultra-nationalism, thereby creating religious tensions, particularly between Buddhists and Muslims.

The violence in Rakhine state is one example of religious tension. While the Rohingyas consider themselves to be citizens, the government and the Buddhists in Rakhine state consider them as illegal Bengali immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh. The conundrum is compounded by the fact that Bangladesh does not accept them as their own citizens. The violence in Rakhine is influenced by a number of factors, including cultural and religious differences, historical relations and the policies pursued by colonial and post-colonial governments. Unfortunately, the voices of extreme elements (pro-Rohingya or anti-Rohingya) overshadow the voice of the moderates, including that of Aung San Suu Kyi. Because of the nature of the problem and the respective extreme views, any chance of amicable solution in the near future is slim.

One other important aspect of this volume is economy. The country is rich in natural resources but remains among the poorest countries in the region. The GDP in 2013 was about US\$59 billion, which was 15% less than that of Thailand. The bad economy was largely due to mismanagement by the military government, which ruled the country for over 50 years. Poverty, human rights violations and healthcare problems were some of the issues that attracted the attention of the international community. However, the military regime was restrictive in allowing which donors to operate in the country; their operations were restricted or were under constant surveillance from the authorities.

The Thein Sein government created the Foreign Investment Law in 2012, which was aimed at attracting foreign investments and improving the country's economy. Such a step was necessary after countries, which previously imposed economic sanctions, lifted them as a reward to the democratic reforms. Japan, the United States Agency for International Development, the European Union, the United Nations, the United Kingdom and Australia were among the leading foreign donors and international organisations.

The entry and operation of foreign aid became easier since Cyclone Nargis in 2008, more so after the political reforms began in 2010–2011. The focus of foreign aid also gradually shifted from humanitarian aid and service delivery to long-term development programmes, such as capacity building for civil society groups. In just five months in mid-2013, foreign direct investment projects worth US\$1.8 billion were approved, compared to US\$1.4 billion for the entire 2012. In June 2013, foreign investment reached more than US\$42 billion from 32 different countries. Substantial foreign aid and investments have poured in but the question is if they can be used to benefit the people, or just the state and its cronies in disregard for the voice of the local population and causing environmental problems.

One other issue, perhaps a more relevant question, is whether the political and economic reforms will be sustained. The nature of political reforms is a top-down approach that President Thein Sein, the military and Aung San Suu Kyi negotiated under the 2008 Constitution, creating a hybrid regime under which the military plays a significant role in politics. Among others, the Constitution gives the military the power to veto any constitutional amendment, i.e., at least one member of the military, which controls 25% of seats, needs to vote in favour of a constitutional change even after 75% of the legislature supports it.

One other major challenge the country faces is the peace process between the government and ethnic armed groups. One major demand of the ethnic armed groups is the creation of a federal army, which the Myanmar army equates with fragmentation. The issue has the potential of complicating the

peace negotiation process further if the government continues to oppose the demand. Another potential challenge is about disarming and demilitarisation. The ethnic armed groups see their weaponry as a natural part of their political authority and power.

The gradual devolution of military-dominated political system and the gradual disarming of ethnic armed groups can only be possible when there is mutual trust and all sides agree to adhere to a concept of mutually-acceptable democratic form of government that guarantees equality of rights to all citizens. This will involve continuous rounds of dialogue and negotiation, involving different stakeholders at different levels.

Like many other edited volumes, this one has the difficulty of establishing one coherent theoretical framework or argument, which the editors sincerely acknowledge. The strength of the volume lies in its evidence-based empirical data that offers different perspectives of understanding the myriad issues and challenges of the country. The extensive use of pictorial presentation is another strength of this volume.

Despite the variation of topics covered in the volume, the editors have managed to condense them under the broader theme of order and change, challenges to unity, economy, development and environment, and looking at the way forward. The volume is a helpful resource for students and people who have no prior understanding of the country, as well as researchers and Myanmar specialists who are looking for chronological events of developments from the colonial era to the political transition under the Thein Sein administration.

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