

MYANMAR (BURMA) SINCE 1962: The Failure of Development. By **Peter John Perry.** *Burlington (VT): Ashgate Publishing, 2007. xv, 208 pp. (Tables, maps.) US\$99.95, cloth. ISBN 978-0-7546-4534-4.*

Myanmar (Burma) poses a serious problem for the democratic world. Its regime is extremely repressive and apparently cares little about the welfare of the great majority of its citizens. When Cyclone Nargis struck the south of the country in May 2008, the reaction of the ruling junta was so lethargic that the French foreign minister suggested that the United Nations should mount a humanitarian mission to the worst affected parts of the country even if the government did not support such an intervention. That this did not happen was mainly due to the realization that China would veto any United Nations' initiative that did not have the support of the Burmese government. Eventually the government did allow some international aid, mainly owing to the persuasion of its partners in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). But the destruction of lives and property was enormous and the delta regions have yet to recover from the tragedy.

This monograph covers the period from 1962 to early 2006, so the impact of the cyclone is not dealt with. But the author is unlikely to have been surprised at the reaction of the junta to a natural disaster which caused such havoc over a large part of the country. Perry claims to have had a long-standing interest in the country, although it is not clear how often, if at all, he has been able to visit, let alone carry out field research. Much of the book is based on secondary data, with many references to the work of expatriate Burmese scholars such as Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, Khin Maung Kyi, Kyaw Yin Hlaing, Maung Maung Kyi, Mya Maung, Mya Than, Myat Thein and Tin Maung Maung Than. Several of them have been associated with the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, and that institution's annual publication, *Southeast Asian Affairs*, has over the years managed to keep up a running survey of events in Burma/Myanmar, as has the American journal, *Asian Survey*. In recent years scholarly work by non-Burmese scholars has inevitably dwindled as access to the country has become more difficult and academic rewards from a specialism in such a controversial country have been slim. The World Bank no longer publishes much on the country and the Asian Development Bank's published surveys have been compromised by a rather uncritical approach to highly dubious government statistics.

Perry's book is therefore to be welcomed, even if it is mainly a survey of work done by other scholars. The first four chapters look at the Ne Win era and its legacy, followed by four chapters on the rice economy, teak and timber, and minerals. These chapters are followed by a useful discussion of how the distribution system operated over the 1970s and 1980s as the "Burmese road to socialism" caused a sharp decline in the private system of wholesale and retail trade. By the 1980s, the high-ranking, and to a lesser extent middle-ranking party and state officials had access to state cooperatives to buy basic

foods and other needs; everyone else relied on informal or illegal markets. Here Perry uses the work of Kyaw Yin Hlaing who has described in detail the *hmaung-kho* system that emerged in the 1980s and in which the great majority of the population by the 1990s was involved for their basic needs.

Perry devotes a chapter to the growth of regional insurgencies and the drugs economy during the Ne Win era, making use of the work of Lintner, the Boucaud brothers and others. The final two chapters examine post-1988 developments. One feels that the space devoted to this period (30 pages out of 185 pages of text) is rather meagre. In particular this reviewer would have liked more information on the growing importance of Burma's neighbours, especially Thailand and China, but also India, in supporting a regime which would seem to have little support from its own citizens. Burma is one of a mercifully small group of brutal and repressive states (Mugabe's Zimbabwe is the other obvious example) which survives because neighbouring powers are prepared to support it, thereby frustrating the desires of the state's own citizens. How much longer can this continue?

Perry does not really try to answer this question; perhaps it can only be answered by the Burmese people themselves. His book gives a useful background to anyone wishing to understand how contemporary Burma reached its present parlous state, although the price of the book means that only libraries are likely to buy it. Students should probably photocopy the bibliography and try to read as much as they can about a country which will continue to feature in news bulletins for the wrong reasons.

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