

Michael W. Charney, 'A History of Modern Burma' (London, Cambridge University Press 2009)

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reviewed by Ashley South

Michael Charney - Senior Lecturer in the Department of History at SOAS (University of London) - has written the first general history of Burma in half a century. The focus is limited to the colonial period (1826-48) and since, allowing for a concise and compact study.

According to the Introduction, *A History of Modern Burma* was written for the "nonspecialist audience and for undergraduates who might find the specialised literature to inaccessible." The author has achieved these objectives admirably. Those seeking a brisk, yet comprehensive, overview of the modern political history of this fascinating and complex country at last have an adequate reference book. No longer will it be necessary to refer back to classics from the 1950s, to sift important information from questionable analysis in the works of Robert Taylor (whose newly revised 'The State in Myanmar' was reviewed in ASEASUK No.45 Spring 2009), or rely on the more anecdotal approach of Thant Myint-U ('The River of Lost Footsteps: Histories of Burma' - New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux 2006). However, the 'general reader' implied in the above quote may come away somewhat disappointed, as the style adopted throughout is rather dry, and fails to capture the passion of Burma's tumultuous political life.

The only quibbles provoked by the book are of a minor, stylistic nature. The phrasing is sometimes a bit odd, and in the final two chapters (covering events since the 1988 'democracy uprising') the chronology is in a couple of places slightly obscure. Otherwise, this is an exemplary survey.

Dr. Charney is even-handed in his assessment of key events and historic characters. He sticks mostly to reporting the course of events, taking care to place these within the appropriate regional and geo-political context. Only in the concluding chapter does the author allow himself the luxury of a broader analytical framework. In general therefore, the history recounted here is solidly objective, and should raise few complaints from the broad range of often antagonistic stakeholders which make up the Burmese political scene.

Charney provides a usefully concise overview of the colonial period. He proposes a modified version of the historical periodisation generally adopted by historians of Burma. He succeeds in demonstrating that the final years of British colonial rule, and the disappointing experience or 'self-rule' under Japanese occupation during World War II, merit consideration as a single 'era of Aung San' (2), during which Burma's modern nationalist politics took form.

The book is particularly strong on the state-socialist period in Burma (1962-88), and the manner in which the Ne Win regime moved to control Burmese society, and suppress dissent. Charney focuses on the relatively 'ideology-rich' nature of the Burma Socialist Program Party's rule, usefully complementing the account provided by Robert Taylor (*op cit*).

For this reviewer, a more sustained emphasis on 'the ethnic question' would have been welcome. However, the lack of detailed attention to this important theme is compensated for in the conclusion, where Charney identifies "lowland-highland, and thus Burman-minority, bifurcations of the country [as] ... an important determining factor in the trajectory of Burmese history in the twenty-first century" (202). He also correctly identifies the junta's expertise in crisis management, and short-term strategising, as key to the longevity of military rule in Burma (204-06).

A deeper and more specialised history of Burma would need to reference Burmese and minority language sources, which Charney rarely cites in his footnotes or bibliography. Such omissions perhaps explain the 'outsider account' nature of the narrative. However, it is easy enough to find emotionally engaged tracts on Burmese politics. Michael Charney has achieved the much rarer and highly valuable goal of producing a systematic and reliable historical overview.

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