

did indeed play a more important role in her choices than she is conscious of or willing to admit. This brings with it the danger, in a kind of self-amplifying circle, of again featuring only those writers who are already known to an interested international public and of failing to give a voice to those who might be at least as or even more prominent and important for the local literary scene, but have not yet published in English. Another serious issue is that of the translations of the authors' accounts and texts which Wiles claims she "did" on the basis of "initial translations" provided by either the author or by a local translator (p. 12). Without being able to read the original, one cannot do a translation; one can only modify someone else's translation – and in this process, distortions of the original meanings happen easily. Not having access to the original texts (which would have been a major asset to the book), the reader can only hope that the fact that Wiles asked the authors to check "her" translations has minimised misunderstandings. However, some of the translations and transcriptions do contain errors evident to anyone who knows the language.

Her point that there are so few translations (to provide her better access to Myanmar's literary scene) because there are few able translators in Myanmar is not really valid; good translations of literature have to be done by those translating from their second language into their native tongue (and not the other way round) in order to achieve a quality that meets international standards. We can therefore only hope that in the future Wiles and other native speakers of English, French, German or other languages take upon themselves the effort to learn the language and start translating more of the wonderful literature of Myanmar. Her fascinating and very readable account may well be a very good incentive to do so.

*Georg Noack*

MARIE LALL, *Understanding Reform in Myanmar. People and Society in the Wake of Military Rule*. London: Hurst, 2016. Xviii, 352 pages, £20.00. ISBN 978-1-8490-4580-3

Since the transition of Myanmar to democracy or as some say, a less repressive form of rule, observers and experts have guessed at the reasons for the change of heart of the military government. Generally it remained just that: guesswork.

Marie Lall does not furnish clear-cut reasons or a deep analysis of the process either, but that is not her objective. What she provides is a very detailed, very knowledgeable survey of the processes that led to the changes from 2004 up until the present. What she also does is to discount many of the myths surrounding the transition, such as that the sanctions against Myanmar led directly to the junta bowing down before the international community. She is very decisive about this; the sanctions definitely did not make the military government blink. Yet even if the junta did not suffer under these measures, others like civil

servants and population groups connected to the military through private or public ties did, and that would have weakened the economy (p. 134, 145). Likewise she dismisses the idea that the Myanmar diaspora and international NGOs were a driving force for change. On the contrary: whereas local civil society groups attempted to initiate a dialogue with the junta in order to be able to function at all, these attempts were denounced and dismissed by international NGOs and diaspora organisations. Much more crucial for the changes would have been, she suggests, the attitude of Myanmar's fellow ASEAN countries who, while not openly criticising or condemning the junta would have made known their misgivings about the direction taken (p. 76). This was evident, for example, in the pressure on Myanmar to forego the presidency of ASEAN in 2005.

The book is divided into seven chapters plus an introduction, conclusion, and epilogue and it covers all aspects of social and political life in Myanmar. The author's main thesis is that after the cease-fires of the 1990s, civil society in Myanmar played a major role in at least furthering and fostering change, if not actually initiating it. This was particularly the case for organisations in ethnic regions, above all in the Kachin and Karen areas. The cease-fires, she says, opened a certain space and room for manoeuvre, and enabled both traditional NGOs (or civil society organisations, as she refers to them) like religious ones that had long existed and new ones that emerged in the 1990s to operate and initiate a dialogue with each other below the radar of government supervision, so to speak.

Marie Lall sees a leap forward for these organisations after the dismissal of Intelligence Chief Khin Nyunt in 2004, though he had been the West's "darling" because he was ostensibly open to foreign dialogue. But his exit also removed the close supervision by military intelligence and opened up opportunities for CSOs to expand their activities.

She illustrates the way these organisations worked by means of the example of Myanmar Egress, an educational NGO founded by Myanmar academics both from within the country and in the diaspora, and funded by a range of international organisations. The NGO had to liaise closely with government authorities, providing courses with unthreatening and innocuous titles like "English" or "business classes". Over time, the content was only marginally connected to these titles. The organisation worked with and financed itself through third and fourth party arrangements.

The presentation makes it clear that the transition did not suddenly appear out of the blue but had its beginnings in developments of the 1990s and early 2000s. The junta aimed at a gradual transition to a more open political set-up, the control of which would always remain in their hands. Besides the cease-fires and the peace process the cyclone Nargis in 2008 played an important role: the natural disaster opened the country to international help from Asian neighbours and ultimately from Western countries. The referendum in 2008 shortly after Nargis and the elections in 2010, as well as the re-entry of the NLD and

Suu Kyi into the political process in 2012, meant a process of political education for the population, even though both the referendum and the elections of 2010 could in no way be termed free, fair or representative of the people's wishes. The release of Suu Kyi in 2010 and the surprising suspension of the Myitsone dam project in 2011 were, in a sense, the end rather than the beginning of the transition process, the result of which was reconciliation with the NLD.

The author agrees with the Myanmar academic Kyaw Yin Hlaing that the military was ruled by an *esprit de corps* that did not allow for disagreements, at least not public ones, but she also outlines the fissures and fractures within the junta quite clearly. The last three chapters deal with educational, economic aspects and the strengthening of Buddhist nationalism in the country in the wake of liberalisation, a phenomenon familiar from other cases. The educational needs are described competently, but the chapter on economic reform stresses the necessity and advantages of international investment and touches only lightly on the feared disadvantages of investment in resource extraction and export agriculture, for example with regard to land rights and agriculture (p. 146, 150).

The conclusion and the epilogue are interesting since there is a contrast, even a contradiction, between the author's skepticism over the chances of an NLD election victory, and her discussion of the actual results, namely a huge victory for the NLD.

This is an extremely useful study and summary of developments in Myanmar in the last decade from an expert who knows the situation from personal experience over many years rather than, as she herself puts it, from "sitting in an aid agency office in Thailand" (p. 6). This is a statement this reviewer heartily agrees with: having visited the country since 1999 and observed the changes, she was sometimes astonished by comments from so-called experts who had never set foot in the country. Though the tone is optimistic, the author does not gloss over the multiple challenges and unresolved problems, especially in the ethnic regions and most recently with the upsurge of Buddhist nationalism and even extremism, both of which look decidedly threatening. This book should be required reading for anybody aspiring to know something about the new – and also the old – Myanmar.

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