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Robert H. Taylor, 'The State in Myanmar' (London, Hurst 2009)

reviewed by Ashley South

This is an updated version of Prof Taylor's 'The State in Burma' (Hurst 1987), with an additional chapter describing developments over the past two decades. The original book remains the most comprehensive account of the state-socialist period in Burma (1962-88). Unfortunately, this new version adds little of interest, while retaining many of the problems which detract from its predecessor's value.

The first five chapters are reproduced largely unchanged from the earlier volume: in these 373 pages, there are just 16 citations of post-1987 publications. Given the large amount of new scholarship and other material regarding Burma/Myanmar produced over the past twenty years, the selection of new material is somewhat idiosyncratic. Furthermore, Prof Taylor has not updated the non-Burma-specific political science references. In consequence, his theoretical framework is rather dated.

In his Preface, the author notes that some reviewers of the original book were critical of its 'reification of the state'. The new volume likewise focuses almost exclusively on the state, with the justification that this "has been the dominant institution in shaping economic, social and other opportunities for the population" (1). This emphasis on 'bringing the state back in' may have been necessarily corrective in the 1980s, but tends to obscure important alternative perspectives.

Taylor describes the manner in which the state emerged in the pre-colonial era, was 'rationalised' during the colonial period, and was displaced during the chaos of the early years after independence, before being 'reasserted' under military control. The account is replete with useful and interesting detail (often derived from primary sources). However, it fails to acknowledge the manner in which the state was effectively captured (in the 1950s and early 1960s) by a faction within the officer corps, which has since pursued policies designed to perpetuate military rule, and the interests of the military class.

Taylor praises the role of the state in guarding against ethnic recidivism. However, he fails to appreciate that - far from being a disinterested arbiter - the militarised state has come to be identified with the Burman majority, through the attempted imposition of a homogenising cultural and linguistic 'national identity', derived from the Burman historical core.

In the 1980s Prof Taylor produced important work on ethnic politics in Burma. He described how the colonial administration's cod-anthropological

notions of Burmese social structures helped to create (or at least consolidate) the categories of ethnic identity which subsequently came to dominate state-society relations in the country. Unfortunately, this important critique of essentialist notions of ethnicity has been deployed in ways which suggest that all forms of ethnic identity in Burma, beyond the purely decorative, are inauthentic, because partly derived from non-indigenous sources.

Taylor is much concerned with issues of legitimacy. However, such discussions are undermined by his failure to seriously engage with the criticisms of military rule elaborated by a range of opposition actors. He refers to "allegations about human rights abuses" committed by the Burma Army (377; similar wording echoes throughout the book, e.g. 398, 449). In fact, such abuses are very well-documented, in numerous reports produced by (admittedly, often opposition-sympathising) human rights organisations.

Taylor is highly sceptical regarding the positions of non-state actors. This approach is illustrated by a comment attached to the book's updated bibliography (523). The author correctly states that many "advocacy documents are careless in their use of allegations and claims about causality". However, he does not provide similar caveats regarding official (government) publications, which despite their many deficiencies are treated as un-problematically accurate.

Other errors are more banal, but equally revealing. It is claimed that, at the time of the 1988 'democracy uprising', Mon and Karen insurgents were engaged in infighting at the border town of Myawati (389). In fact, the skirmishes occurred about 100 miles further to the South, at Three Pagodas Pass. Although this may be regarded as a minor mistake, it is not one which would be made by anyone with a passing knowledge of Burma's ethnic politics. (A further amusing error occurs two pages later, where - in his determination to avoid using the word 'Burma' - Taylor mistakenly refers to the Myanmar Socialist Program Party, which ran the country in the period before it was renamed.)

Prof Taylor's veneration of the state, and dislike of opposition politicians (particularly Daw Aung San Suu Kyi), colours his account of politics over the past two decades. Rightly sceptical of the activities of exile political formations, Taylor gives very little attention to popular anti-regime sentiment inside the country, devoting just one fleeting reference to the mass protests led by monks in August and September 2007 (447). However, his analysis of the ceasefires agreed since 1989 between the military government and various armed ethnic groups is reasonably balanced.

In general, the military government in Burma/Myanmar is presented as wilfully misunderstood by other commentators, and unjustly put-upon. It is true that many observers fail to understand the manner in which the country's military rulers claim "state legitimacy [on the basis of] their capacity to maintain and protect a number of values held dear by themselves ... including sovereignty and territorial integrity" (471). However,

Taylor over-compensates for such shortcomings, by providing an extended - and strangely naïve - apology for military rule in Burma.

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