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Caretaking Democratization: The Military and Political Change in Myanmar. By Renaud Egreteau. New York: Hurst, 2015. 193 pp.

This slim, accessible volume of just 134 pages plus notes, suitable for a general readership, seeks to explain Myanmar's post-2011 political transition. Its basic line is undoubtedly correct: the military superintended the transition and remains the country's most powerful institution, thus limiting significant reform. Accordingly, euphoria or even optimism is unwarranted. Most of the book is a descriptive account of post-2011 politics (chaps. 2–3), along with thematic treatments of the military's continued power (chap. 4), ethnic and religious cleavages (chap. 5) and enduring problems like political factionalism (chap. 6).

While perhaps useful for the uninitiated, and not without insight, Egreteau's treatment adds very little to the research base, despite the back-cover blurbs from distinguished Myanmar experts. The most original contribution is probably his study of the backgrounds of parliamentarians during 2011–15, the largest group being businessmen (p. 71). Intriguing; but nothing is made of this theoretically. His remarkably brief treatment of ethnic and religious divisions (pp. 99–113), which are central to Myanmar's political problems, does not engage meaningfully with recent research advances by scholars like Sadan (2013), Meehan (2011), Brenner (2015) or Woods (2011 and 2013). The volume also neglects the economy almost entirely: just one short paragraph mentions the influence of crony capitalists (p. 77), and there is one brief mention of the army's economic interests (pp. 89–90). Even when Egreteau discusses clientelism, bizarrely, he does not link it to the economy (pp. 118ff.).

The book's real downfall, however, is its reliance on "transitology" to interpret Myanmar's transition. The term denotes work by scholars like O'Donnell, Schmitter, Diamond and others trying to explain transitions from military rule to democracy, mostly in Latin America in the late 1980s. Sadly, "transitology" has been found badly wanting beyond this context, and it certainly does not help to explain events in Myanmar. Egreteau rightly says that

Myanmar's army stage-managed the transition — through the 2003–7 “national convention”, the 2008 constitution, the 2010 elections and the 2011 handover from junta to elected government — “from a clear position of strength” (p. 3). Transitology simply cannot explain this, because it expects only threatened or fragmenting authoritarian regimes to relinquish power, by way of pro-reform elites seeking a “pacted transition” with democratic opponents. As Egreteau notes, no such pact took place in Myanmar before 2011 (p. 32). To make transitology “fit”, therefore, he instead claims that there was a secondary, “pacted transition” *after* 2011 thanks to “tripartite dialogue” (pp. 28–29), meaning Myanmar is now in “transition ‘towards an uncertain “something else”’” (p. 27, quoting O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986).

The problems with this tortured thesis are manifold. First, it entirely neglects to explain the most important development in Myanmar's recent history: the military's withdrawal from direct rule in 2011. Second, there is no real evidence of a meaningful “pact” between *ancien régime* forces and the opposition. The only evidence offered is Aung San Suu Kyi's decision to enter parliamentary politics in 2012; beyond that, elite conversations are “shrouded in mystery” (p. 33). And what did this pact involve? The National League for Democracy agreed “to play the political game *according to the 2008 constitution*” (p. 32, my emphasis) — a constitution that remains unchanged. Third and relatedly, Egreteau's own sober analysis rightly concludes that there has been no subsequent transition to “something else”. At times, he strains to demonstrate that there has been “progress”, but this often involves a distorted or misleading treatment. He claims that a “post-junta reformist movement has enabled the re-emergence of multiparty politics” (p. 47), when that was actually enabled by the 2008 constitution and 2010 elections, both of which occurred under the junta. He claims a rise in media freedom and civil liberties, but then immediately notes continued restrictions (pp. 46–47). He discusses the rise of former parliamentary speaker Shwe Mann as a “key actor” — but completely fails to discuss his downfall (p. 74). He claims that parliament has trimmed the military budget, when in fact it has increased in real terms,

falling only relatively (p. 75). But Egreteau's overall argument is clear: the military has not, and will not, fully relax its grip. After 2011, "unmistakable red lines were drawn by the military" (p. 49). "Prospects for a healthy and stable multiparty parliamentary system appear quite bleak" (p. 79). "A prompt military disengagement from the country's legislature ... remains bleakly distant" (p. 97). Prospects for change "appear quite bleak" (p. 129). He concludes, "no fundamental restructuring of the Burmese state and society has been proposed or imposed" (p. 128).

How on earth is this a "transition to something else"? Quite clearly, it is not. The military has fixed the rules of the game via the 2008 constitution, and it has no intention of changing them. Democratic politics is occurring within the limits that it dictated. By focusing on a non-transition, Egreteau fails to account for the transition that really mattered, and which will continue to set the contours of Myanmar's political life for years to come.

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