
Area studies

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Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar) (2nd edition)

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Though the history of Burma is little known in the West, this *Dictionary*, one of the largest in the series, demonstrates that it has been a turbulent one. It comprises more than 800 articles, of between 50 and 1,500 words, on personalities, places, organizations, ethnic groups, customs and events in Burmese history, although about only 100 refer to the period before 1900. The text has in general been updated to the middle of 2016; although one refers to an event in January 2017, several others appear to have been written before the end of 2015.

As usual, the supplementary material comprises a list of abbreviations, acronyms and several maps (most of them old and badly reproduced); a chronology from the earliest times to April 2016 (but with few references to the pre-colonial period); and a long historical introduction, also concentrating on the past 200 years. The classified bibliography, with a critical introduction, lists 900 books and periodical articles and a few websites, updated to 2016.

Even the cover of the *Dictionary* illustrates the degree of controversy involved in recent Burmese history. The author explains that in 1989 the military government altered the official Romanisation of place-names, thus replacing “Burma” with “Myanmar”, but the use of the latter is often taken to imply support for the military regime, hence the two alternatives are given. The same problem applies to most other place-names, and he has provided a table listing

both forms. The current flag, shown on the cover, also dates from the period of military rule.

Throughout the book, readers will find many examples of the author’s comprehensive knowledge of Burma’s unusual culture. While most Burmese are devout Buddhists, they combine this religion with a continuing belief in a pantheon of traditional ethnic gods and a devotion to various occult practices, such as astrology and numerology, which (as in ancient Rome) have an influence on everyday affairs. For example, the military regime introduced banknotes which, rather inconveniently, were denominated in multiples of nine, that being considered a lucky number. Many articles describe significant religious practices and traditional customs, including those of the non-Buddhist ethnic minorities. It is noted that the expensive new capital of Naypyidaw includes an enclosure for six revered white elephants. Even national character is not forgotten: the author notes that the customary deference to those in power, and reluctance to offend people by mentioning inconvenient truths, may help to explain the difficulties Burma has had in establishing a stable democracy.

Diligent readers of the *Dictionary* will also discover what these difficulties have been. Only two-thirds of the population are ethnic Burmans; there are 135 recognised ethnic groups and 107 languages. The minorities, mostly living in remote regions, were, like those in India, allowed considerable local autonomy by the colonial regime. But in 1947, on the verge of independence, Burma suffered a catastrophe when General Aung San, the only leader whom the minorities trusted, was assassinated; in consequence, numerous armed conflicts soon broke out, leaving the central government dependent on the Army for survival. This situation, some years later, paved the way for a military coup. The new rulers proved to be not only autocratic (so much so that they even set up “Government-organized non-governmental organizations”) but also economically incompetent, spoiling the prospects of a country with abundant natural resources.

Such was the position of Burma when the first edition of this *Dictionary* appeared in 2006 (RR 2008/049); but, the present one has a somewhat more hopeful story to tell. Eventually, the military leaders began to realise the drawbacks of their system and permitted the re-introduction of (more or less) free elections, allowing the daughter of the national hero, Aung San Suu Kyi, to come to power in 2015. She, however, has to manoeuvre carefully within the limits of a Constitution which still allows the head of the armed forces – not appointed by the Government – to name 25 per cent of the



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members of Parliament, and several of the most important Ministers, and goes on to prescribe that these provisions could be altered only by a 75 per cent majority. She has also to contend with the 30 armed insurgent groups still active, most of whom are officially subject to precarious ceasefire agreements, and attempt to bring greater prosperity to a people suffering from the

effects of 50 years of economic mismanagement. We may hope that the third edition of this informative *Dictionary* will record happier days to come.

Kenneth C. Fraser

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