

Charting conflict and peace in a new Myanmar



Michael Wesley reflects on a new volume examining Myanmar's path to peace and political transition.

One of the remarkable evolutions over the past decade has been the transition in Myanmar, from a closed, dictatorship at the margins of mainstream attention to a dynamic and vibrant case study in change.

I became one of the thousands of pilgrims to the new Myanmar last December, in the unforgettable company of Andrew Walker.

Myanmar is a country of singular and growing importance to the region and the world. It is a case study of the painful and contradiction-ridden process of nation-building. We watch it, at times inspired, at times appalled, often perplexed at the process of finding a balance within such a diverse society, and with how a new political system replacing a long period of military rule is dealing with the great pressures of modernisation.

Myanmar, of course, is a country with an evolving sense of itself in the region and the world. There are strong elements of that prickly independence that caused a recently independent country to withdraw into itself, determined to keep the rest of the world at bay.

But there is in Myanmar also a new sense of the country's geopolitical importance, of the crucial role it occupies as rivalry between Asia's powers intensifies. And a new confidence and maturity of Myanmar as a leader within regional bodies, especially as some of the region's traditional leaders have succumbed to internal turmoil.

Myanmar is also a case study of whether a society can transform itself peacefully. Can its democratic transition, which began so unexpectedly in 2011, continue to consolidate, with all of the ethnic and religious conflicts it needs to deal with? Can Myanmar overcome decades of ethnic division and conflict to develop a sense of national inclusiveness? What about economic development that is sustained, inclusive and moderately egalitarian?

So many questions surround this fascinating country.

Many of them, and more, are raised in a new and important book, *Conflict in Myanmar*, edited by Nick Cheesman and Nicholas Farrelly. It brings together some of the papers presented in last year's Myanmar Update, taking place at the Australian National University's College of Asia and the Pacific.

The Myanmar Update conferences have now cemented themselves as a globally pre-eminent site for the consideration of politics, society and economy in Myanmar. They are organised by our wonderfully vibrant Myanmar Research Centre, and the planning for the 2017 Update is well and truly underway.

Conflict in Myanmar clusters its papers into three themes – war, politics and religion – which are off limits in any polite dinner discussion, but absolutely central to understanding evolving Myanmar. And what a collection of essays these are.

War in Myanmar, and of course the prospects for peace, is examined from a series of interlocking perspectives.

I was particularly struck by Laoutides and Ware's examination of the dynamics of ethnic conflict from the point of view of the Kachin people. They observe that often the Kachin see their conflict with the Tatmadaw as an extension of the struggle between the aggrandising Burman kings and the minority peoples they tried to eradicate. To the Kachin, nation-building has a distinctly menacing ring.

Against this background Gregory Cathcart's new take on landmines as a form of community protection is fascinating. Jenny Hedstrom's analysis of the gendered sources of Kachin grievance

fits beautifully with Laoutides and Ware's account, while Ricky Yue's account of conflict in Shan State offers a really rich comparison.

Su Mon Thazin Aung's account of the peace process, where the Myanmar Peace Centre played the crucial role of mediating between the Tatmadaw and Ethnic Armed Groups leaves the reader both daunted and hopeful for the prospects of some form of resolution.

The five essays on the elections and after offer a detailed and illuminating account of Myanmar's contemporary politics.

Michael Lidauer and Than Tun each examine the effects of ethnic and religious rivalries on the election process from different directions; both show that the conflicts and rivalries had distorting effects, but elections are a crucial part of finding some way to resolution.

Chaw Chaw Sein's and Chit Win's essays turn the spotlight on important mechanisms for mitigating conflicts: the election commission and the Hluttaw respectively. Melissa Crouch adds the role of legal reform to this, while raising important concerns about the capacity of these reforms to mediate political, social and economic conflicts.

The final section is titled "Us and Them" and rounds out the volume strongly.

Bridget Welsh and Kai-ping Huang present the results of the 2015 Myanmar Asian Barometer Survey, a fascinating dissection of the electorate's perceptions and crucial background to the actual election results. Against this background it is fascinating to read Tamas Well's examination of the contrasting perceptions of democratisation held by people internal and external to Myanmar.

Matt Schissler and Helal Mohammed Khan each produce important chapters placing the violence and religious chauvinism in Myanmar in comparative context; the latter examining a key site of contention, the Myanmar-Bangladesh borderlands.

Gerard McCarthy presents a nicely fine-grained analysis of "small p" politics in rural Taungoo, an intriguing contrast to the other considerations of Myanmar's "big p" political transition in the volume

Conflict in Myanmar is a rich and rewarding read. I commend the editors. Their introduction (Farrelly) and conclusion (Cheesman) are themselves masterpieces of concise scene-setting and drawing together of themes. In both, as well as in many of the chapters, one can discern the demanding discipline of *New Mandala's* style – accessible, learned, and balanced.

I am delighted to launch *Conflict in Myanmar*, and urge all of you to acquire, borrow, or Google its wonderful chapters. We are all the richer for this wonderful volume.

Michael Wesley is Professor of International Relations and Dean of the Australian National University's College of Asia and the Pacific. This article is based on his speaking notes from the ANU launch of Conflict in Myanmar on 10 November.

Conflict in Myanmar *is available from* [ISEAS Publishing](#).