Nick Cheesman and Nicholas Farrelly (Eds.)
*Conflict in Myanmar: War, Politics, Religion*

It is rare to find a text which can straddle the interrelated yet complex conflict dynamics of communalism, identity, inequality, and nationalism, and still offer in-depth, critical analysis. *Conflict in Myanmar* is a volume which does just this; its editors and contributors successfully address the significant complexities that affect field research in a country which has been ruled by military dictatorship for 50 years.

This collection of essays builds upon the already excellent “Myanmar/Burma Update” conference’s catalogue, and its editors set out to explore the re-emergence of politics, or “the political”, through an analysis of conflict in three key realms: war, politics, and religion. Nick Cheesman and Nicholas Farrelly organise the book’s 15 chapters into three sections which focus respectively on “War and Order”, “Elections and After”, and “Us and Them”.

The first section, “War and Order”, primarily unpacks and contests the dominant narratives used to rationalise organised violence within Myanmar. The authors posit that a proper understanding of the groups and motives involved in violence is inhibited by the tendency of elite and outside observers to frame disputes as expressions of traditional enmities. The contributors focus on the relationship between conflict and the unequal distribution of political power between groups in an analysis of the re-eruption of violence in the Kachin state in 2011 (Chapter Three); women’s participation in and support for political violence (Chapter Four); why some marginal groups were able to retain power amidst large nation-building projects (Chapter Five); and the decision by some communities to use landmines for protection (Chapter Six). A brief respite from this conflict-centric narrative is offered in Chapter Two which explores peace processes through an analysis of the Myanmar Peace Centre’s mediation efforts between armed groups.

The “Elections and After” section takes a turn away from organised violence to address conflicts that result from the electoral and legislative dynamics within the country. Chapters Seven and Eight unpack the 2015 election to show how local and national entities were instrumental in its success given the high level of political will for peace, transparency within electoral institutions, and compliance by the military (*Tatmadaw*). Chapters Nine and Ten continue the focus on the positive role that local and national factors can have in mitigating conflict. Than Tun advocates the reconceptualisation of the role of religion and ethnicity in Myanmar politics given the relative insignificance of Buddhist nationalism in the election, while Chit Win examines the role of the legislature (*Hluttaw*) in conflict resolution. Win attributes the legislature’s successes to its institutional characteristics which include the strength and role of its two speakers, its non-partisan approach, and its ability to question and oppose the executive. Finally, in Chapter Eleven, Melissa Crouch looks ahead to caution the government’s plans to reform international investment and business sectors. She argues
that these moves could have a negative impact on local communities given the susceptibility of laws to interpretations that legitimise violence.

The final section, which focuses on “Us and Them”, undertakes perhaps the volume’s most ambitious effort in its analysis of communal and religious conflict. Two primary themes are explored within its five chapters, as authors draw on the active construction and distancing of “the Other”, and, to a lesser extent, the historical influences that continue to shape and create divisions within Myanmar’s societies. Matt Schissler argues that growing anti-Muslim sentiment is historically significant in Myanmar and supplanted the Indophobia which was rife during British rule (Chapter 14). Gerard McCarthy makes the case that Buddhist charitable organisations (made influential by the authoritarian regime’s deficient welfare space) have steadily expanded their roles to become informal political institutions which formulate and manipulate politics, often to the detriment of Muslims (Chapter 15).

An appreciation of the social construction of “the Other” is perhaps essential to an understanding of conflict in Myanmar. Though this section is unsurprisingly dominated by a focus upon anti-Muslim sentiment, Helal Mohammed Khan (Chapter 16) broadens its scope by assessing Myanmar’s relationship with Bangladesh; he argues that tensions were caused and have been exacerbated by imperceptible elements of fear “rather than the tangible perception of threat” (p. 345). The construction of “the Other” is also explored by Schissler who situates Myanmar’s growing Islamaphobia within the wider post-9/11 world and claims that this resentment has, in part, arisen out of an attempt to position Myanmar within the international community. Chapter 12 delves deeper into the factors that influence these constructions and draws on Gallie’s notion of democracy as a contestable concept; Tamas Wells argues that the Bamar activists’ moralistic and collective conceptualisation of rights clashes strongly with the West’s emphasis on liberalism. In Chapter 13, Bridget Welsh and Kai-Ping Huang find evidence in the 2015 Myanmar Asian Barometer Survey that common ground can be found for communities to work together towards political reform despite the many divisions and tensions that exist between groups.

Conflict in Myanmar is heavily reliant on empirical data. Its 15 papers are grounded in fieldwork from surveys to ethnographic analysis, and it features a wealth of context-specific information; this leaves little room for scholars to reflect ideas back into the wider peace and conflict discourse. Ultimately, what emerges from the text is a snapshot of contemporary Myanmar. It explores a variety of tensions which shaped conflict between 2010 and 2016 while offering only a limited critique of emerging problems and solutions.

This volume does not offer major insights for those scholars who are seeking to anticipate how peace will progress in Myanmar, but, unlike many conference publications, it does not suffer from significant overlap in its arguments and its editors have brought together materials which successfully reflect the myriad complexities apparent in Myanmar’s modern-day politics. The book offers an exceptionally nuanced array of research that explores the social, economic, and ultimately political forces which shape Myanmar’s contemporary conflict. While this breadth may be problematic for readers new to Southeast Asian politics, it provides ample opportunity for further investigation, and the sheer variety of detailed new research it contains ensures that the volume makes a positive contribution to the field and will have value for both new and experienced scholars alike.

Ultimately Conflict in Myanmar highlights an unusual dichotomy which Cheesman aptly highlights in his concluding chapter. He reasserts the intrinsic relationship of conflict and politics and suggests that the snapshot of Myanmar presented in the volume points to the re-emergence of politics and “the political”. The volume not only draws attention to a political space in which Myanmar’s people are contesting and shaping their country and institutions, but also shows how that space is threatened by those who are fearful of violent conflict: in
their attempts to mitigate it, they deny their enemies a political voice and potentially fuel further conflict instead.

Aidan Gnoth
National Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies
University of Otago
New Zealand