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## I n t r o d u c t i o n

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# Metamorphosis: Studies in Social and Political Change in Myanmar

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Myanmar is a country in transition in more ways than one. Since the general elections held by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in November 2010, the world's attention has focused on the startling transformations at work in the long-isolated Southeast Asian nation. For the first time in decades, a bicameral parliament was formed in the new capital, Naypyitaw, in January 2011. It soon gave rise to optimism that pluralism and the acceptance of political opposition would eventually be restored in a country so routinely ruled by soldiers since it won independence from the British in 1948. On 30 March 2011—the day the SPDC officially disbanded—a semi-civilian government was sworn in under the leadership of Thein Sein, the last SPDC prime minister. The political system thereafter evolved from a junta type of military administration to a hybrid parliamentary regime based on a multiparty system, where the exercise of power is shared between the military and civilian authorities. After 23 years of direct military rule since the last coup d'état staged by the Myanmar armed forces (or Tatmadaw) on 18 September 1988, the Burmese military leadership finally initiated a long awaited, yet still gradual, withdrawal from day-to-day politics.

A vast array of political, economic and social reforms was then announced by the new “post-junta” executive and legislative powers,

both created according to the military-written 2008 Constitution. Thura Shwe Mann, former joint chief-of-staff of the Tatmadaw, was elected speaker of the lower house (*Pyithu Hluttaw*) of the Union parliament on 31 January 2011, whilst four days later Thein Sein was chosen as president and head of the new executive. These two retired army officers and their entourage of civilian advisors have subsequently spearheaded—in a very top-down fashion—the post-SPDC reforms. Thein Sein’s administration and the new parliament, drawing their legitimacy directly from the *ancien régime* and the Constitution the latter had inspired and ratified in 2008, vowed to improve the social and economic conditions of the Burmese population, while acknowledging shortcomings, if not mistakes, of the past. By all accounts, the extent and nature of these political changes initiated at the dawn of the 2010s have surprised most observers, including seasoned Burma-watchers (Cheesman et al. 2014; Steinberg 2014a).

The return of Aung San Suu Kyi to the forefront of her country’s legal politics quickly prompted the lifting of most international sanctions, which had been imposed against Myanmar since the early 1990s. The democratic icon, who spent 15 years under house arrest since her return to Rangoon in 1988, was freed a week after the general elections were held in November 2010. After a staunch strategy of boycott and head-on opposition to the military power that be, the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize recipient finally chose to play by the constitutional rule and re-registered, in November 2011, her outlawed political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). She, along with 42 other NLD delegates, subsequently won a parliamentary seat when a by-election was organized by the government on April Fool’s Day 2012. This unleashed, at the same time, a flurry of diplomatic activity in and around the country. Foreign dignitaries and world leaders—including US President Barack Obama and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon—CEOs of powerful multinational companies, heads of international NGOs and donor agencies, acclaimed international artists, intellectuals and scholars followed one another to Naypyitaw to meet the new Burmese “civilianized” leadership, as well as to Yangon to visit and pay tribute to “The Lady”. Myanmar progressively rejoined the international concert of nations, signed various progressive international agreements (on extractive industries, for instance) and was—after an

initial snub in 2006—finally granted the chairmanship of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) for 2014. Western powers subsequently abandoned their opposition to Myanmar in international financial organizations, such as the International Monetary Fund, the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank: the latter even reintroduced Myanmar in its annual “Doing Business” report in 2013. These key international institutions could then refocus their assistance on a Burmese national economy long disconnected with global financial and commercial flows. Despite a few US restrictive measures renewed by President Obama in April 2014, Myanmar’s economy seemed on the verge of extraordinary change at the dawn of the 2010s.

There has been, therefore, a sense of euphoric optimism among Burmese and foreign observers. The sense of change has been palpable in Yangon, the former capital city, where rental prices for private apartments and office buildings have skyrocketed since 2012. Mobile phones and freshly imported foreign cars are now to be spotted on every street, and traffic jams have become an everyday problem for a city boasting six to seven million inhabitants, but no proper transit system. In regard to the unfolding “post-junta” transitional moment, foreign and domestic analysts alike have begun speculating whether Myanmar is finally entering the 21st century. Many offer a case for swift and peaceful democratic change. After decades of military intervention in national politics, poverty-inducing governance and inter-ethnic conflicts, has the long-isolated country finally become a likely candidate for democratization, social change and sustainable economic development? Will Myanmar be the surprising poster child of a successful transition from military rule to a stable multiparty democracy? Has Myanmar finally entered the 2010s with a new vision and new hopes for the future?

Even more striking than the latest political and institutional developments unveiled since the disbanding of the SPDC is the way Myanmar’s society has been shaken over the past decade. While political change and startling top-down reforms outlined by seemingly progressive elites in Naypyitaw have dominated the news since the passing of the torch from military hands into civilian ones in 2011, deep social and cultural transformations have also been at work inside the country since the early 2000s. The rapid political transition of the

2010s should not overshadow the profound and protracted changes that have occurred in Burmese society since the turn of the 21st century. Many a domestic political event that occurred before the 2011 transition has indeed fostered, in one way or another, social and economic change in the country. The massive purge and complete break-up of the state intelligence services, once headed by the powerful General Khin Nyunt, in 2004; military crackdown on the peaceful demonstration of Buddhist monks and the subsequent subjugation of the sangha (the Buddhist monastic order) during the misnamed Saffron Revolution in 2007; the tragic passage of Cyclone Nargis across the Irrawaddy delta and Yangon in 2008—all these crises and predicaments have shaken the country and its society in ways foreign and domestic observers have still not critically reflected on.

We, as editors, have opted for the notion of “metamorphosis”, rather than “transition”, in the title of this volume, to epitomize the transformative powers at work in Myanmar today. We assert that metamorphosis—a complex developmental process—presupposes *both* change and resilience. It best conveys what the 13 contributors to this academic enterprise aim to highlight in their respective articles: deep-seated, incremental and observable transformations but with elements of resilience, if not (frustrating) persistence, such as the political salience of the armed forces, social resistance to modern biomedicine or continuing inter-ethnic contention. Unlike “change” that implies a rupture, a *before* and an *after*, a metamorphosis, rather, suggests a “mutation”. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is a classical mythological work that is a continuing source of inspiration for creative authors and scientists alike. Ovid’s myths poetically tell of the transformation of divinities, heroes and ordinary people into forces of nature (Simpson 2001). A similar process is involved in the Hindu-Buddhist pantheon through the different avatars a deity is usually represented in. In that respect, these myths do not depart very far from the very same biological process that is a metamorphosis.

In this volume, we leave the mythical and biological orders aside and explore metamorphoses in the social order. In a sense, we follow the work of French anthropologist Maurice Godelier, who described the most recent, and surprising, evolution of the structures of kinship in the West, and their implications for a modern society (Godelier 2004). In his *Métamorphose de la parenté*, Godelier highlights the way one set

of kin relations takes the functions and forms of another one, without any drastic rupture or sudden revolution. Likewise, in modern Southeast Asia, Christianity placed strongly its imprint on kinship amongst the Kachin in northern Myanmar (Robinne 2007; Sadan 2013) or the Akha in northern Thailand (Kammerer 1990). But neither has the adoption of the Christian faith by these communities generated any watershed or rupture. What we have observed in Myanmar over the past few years is precisely this: a series of transformative forces at work, with new claims being formulated by various segments of the population, and a new transitional social landscape gradually being shaped but with resilient deep-seated roots. As André Malraux once put it, there is one sure thing about Myanmar today: the chrysalis cannot become a caterpillar again, it has to turn into a butterfly, whether beautiful or repulsive.

Mutation of, and within, a society is a complex process, the cause and nature of which are multidimensional. As editors, we do not venture, in this volume, into the theoretical and speculative realm to postulate on what has lately fostered change in Myanmar. Rather, we let the contributors analyse if, and how, various sets of actors inside and outside Myanmar have adopted new social values, new political ideologies and preferences; shaped new behaviours; introduced political innovation; or re-modelled local or state institutions in ways that have inspired transformative change in Myanmar's social, economic, political and religious orders over the past decade. There is, indeed, a general consensus amongst the contributors that significant changes have taken place in Myanmar since the late 2000s, as well as amongst its population living in exile. While the following articles identify and decipher the role and influence of various "agents" of these transformations—the Buddhist monastic communities, state bureaucracy, armed forces, ethnic intellectual and political elites, non-Buddhist minorities as well as Burmese migrants, among others—the volume broadly intends to illuminate the various processes of social, political, economic and religious transformation that Burmese society and polity have experienced over the past few years.

Our focus is, of necessity, multi-disciplinary, despite an obvious anthropological tone to the volume. Anthropologists examine and seek to decipher social dynamics and the (re)formation of identities—which are by definition unstable—and their analyses set the tone of

this book; they are joined by historians and political scientists. We are convinced that only a pluri-disciplinary approach can bring a valuable cross-examination of the many interconnected and ongoing “metamorphoses” at work in Myanmar. This represents our attempt to understand the complexities that have underpinned these processes and explore some of the factors that have eased, or subverted, the transitional moment observed since the SPDC disbanded in March 2011. The articles address a number of complex topics, including the evolution of the Buddhist nunnery, the current state of biomedicine in western Myanmar, the innovative legislative role the military is seeking in parliament, the identity conundrum of the Muslim Rohingya minority, the specific dynamics of the Muslim and Christian communities facing the emergence of Buddhist nationalism, the construction of new forms of transnational activist networks by Burmese militants remaining in exile and the enduring inter-ethnic conflicts undermining the country since independence.

The volume is, of course, not exhaustive. Rather, we hope to break new ground in neglected areas of research, which is our primary purpose in gathering together the work of these 13 scholars of Burmese contemporary affairs. What is presented here is, therefore, a subjective selection of articles exploring areas in which innumerable, yet substantial, metamorphoses have occurred in Myanmar; we were compelled to make subjective editorial choices due to the limitations of space and time. This volume does not, then, focus on every evolving aspect of Burmese society in the 2010s. It lacks, for instance, a thorough analysis of Myanmar’s post-junta diplomatic relations and an elaboration on the evolving role of the democratic icon, Aung San Suu Kyi. Neither does it delve into the daunting social and economic challenges increasingly confronting the Burmese agricultural and rural world.

However, the book concentrates on developments that have been examined at length by international scholars with extensive field knowledge and the longitudinal expertise indispensable in deciphering the Burmese world. In the articles to follow, some of the world’s leading researchers working on Myanmar’s contemporary affairs provide an insightful window into the latest evolutions of the country and its diverse population. All the articles highlight both past and current in-depth research in significant areas, and are based on extensive and regular

fieldwork carried out over the past few years. The transitional moment engaged in 2011, and the subsequent effusive hopes it unleashed in Yangon and throughout the world, has drawn into Myanmar a new crowd of what David I. Steinberg labels the “ephemeral experts” (Steinberg 2014a): opportunistic professionals and foreign consultants seeking to summarily explain Myanmar’s complexities and dispense advice on how foreign investors ought to enter Asia’s “last frontier”, or the path the Burmese state leadership needs to follow in order to foster democracy, sustainable development and long-term political stability in the country. With its strong empiricist approach, this volume is thus intended as a scholarly guide on contemporary Myanmar. As such, it complements recent publications debating post-SPDC political and transitional events (Cheesman et al. 2014; Steinberg 2014a). A few seasoned Burma watchers have indeed been prompt to offer a wide range of interpretations as to why the SPDC eventually disbanded in March 2011, and what could be expected from then on (Callahan 2012; Cheesman et al. 2012; Taylor 2012; Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2012; Egretau 2013b; Pedersen 2014; Cheesman et al. 2014). But more comparative research is needed, from fields beyond political science and strategic analysis, to examine global metamorphoses in Myanmar today.

Initiated in 2012, this book takes its cue from another collective research work on contemporary Myanmar affairs published in French four years earlier (Defert 2008). This project was developed under the auspices of the French Research Institute on Contemporary South East Asia (IRASEC), stationed in Bangkok. When Gabriel Defert’s volume was released back in 2008, in the aftermath of the so-called Saffron Revolution and just before the tragic passage of Cyclone Nargis, the intention of the editor, then IRASEC’s director, was to introduce French-speaking readers to the multiple societies, populations, histories, arts and cultures of Myanmar, as well as its economics and political and strategic dynamics at the dawn of the 21st century. It aimed, at the same time, to highlight the most recent research work carried out on contemporary Burmese affairs by French academics. Our volume rather opted from the start for a multi-national perspective, with scholarly insights provided by Japanese, Australian, Swiss, Luxembourgian, American and French researchers; we, however, regret not having secured one, or more, Burmese authors. As editors, we have nonetheless tried to

bring together scholars of different backgrounds, gender, origins, and of course, disciplines, to document the most recent transformations at work in the country. Furthermore, all contributions in this volume were individually peer-reviewed. They represent original work by experienced scholars and practitioners, as well as emerging postdoctoral researchers who have grounded their articles on months and years of painstaking field research. Their empirical studies deliberately take a historically informed, dynamic and often comparative perspective. Besides, while we have coordinated and supervised the first stages of the peer-review process, the publishers—NUS Press—and their resourceful team have monitored the second phase of refereeing, converting the manuscript into a coherent volume.

Our initial intent was to analyse the ongoing processes of change thematically, by looking at four intertwined elements of Myanmar's present transformations. The book, therefore, starts with a first section exploring the evolving political and institutional ecologies of the country since the early 2010s. For many observers, the general election held by the SPDC on 7 November 2010 is an inevitable benchmark from which to explore the current process of change in Myanmar. The political landscape has since seen a surprising level of fluidity, despite the initial deception caused by the elections results, marred by alleged rigging in favour of the regime-backed party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). Burmese voters nevertheless elected representatives to two houses in the union parliament as well as in 14 provincial assemblies—a first in Myanmar's postcolonial history. A new breed of Burmese political actors, the parliamentarians, has therefore re-emerged in the country after decades of silence. In his introductory chapter, Renaud Egreteau looks at the emergence of the new legislative branch. While the renaissance of parliamentary politics is to be celebrated, the Burmese armed forces have nonetheless maintained a presence in all legislative assemblies—an institutional arrangement seldom observed elsewhere, as Egreteau informs us. By specifically analysing the role and significance of the military legislators who have been seconded to the parliament by their hierarchy, his article questions the potential legislative influence of the still dominant state institution, and examines what can be perceived as an evolving policy role for the Tatmadaw. Alexandra de Mersan, by exploring in Chapter 2

the political journey of a Rakhine intellectual who was elected in the lower house of the union parliament in November 2010, further throws light on this emerging Burmese parliamentary elite. Observing the new freedoms of movement and association which various segments of the Burmese population have increasingly tested since the reforms were initiated in 2011, Elliott Prasse-Freeman, in Chapter 3, examines the rise of grassroots social protest movements inside the country, and evaluates their surprising political impact.

The second section delves into the unsolved equation on how to live together in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious Myanmar. Four chapters critically analyse the most saliently antagonistic inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic group relations in the country. Maxime Boutry starts, in Chapter 4, with the concept of “Burmanization” and the dominance of the Bamar ethnic group. He underscores the need for documenting Myanmar’s ethno-religious complexity beyond mere “ethnic politics”. By underlining the malleable and moving nature of the concept of ethnicity in the Burmese context, one can indeed better envision the probability of successfully constructing a “national identity”. In order to offer another case in point on Myanmar’s extreme diversities, Jane M. Ferguson, in Chapter 5, presents perspectives on the post-SPDC transition and process of change expressed by ethnic Shan-identified people living in Shan state or in exile in Thailand. Focusing on one of Myanmar’s Muslim minorities, the Rohingya, Jacques Leider, in Chapter 6, explains why and how Buddhist and Muslim communities in Myanmar’s western state of Rakhine (Arakan) have been led to uphold mutually exclusive sets of identities. Unless there can be a more widely spread awareness of these identities and new ideas for how Muslim and Buddhist communities can share a common political vision in the region, the planning of Arakan’s future, he argues, looks bleak. Ignorance and age-old resentment may indeed continue fuelling communal violence, despite socio-political progress observed elsewhere in Myanmar. In Chapter 7, Carine Jaquet illuminates another case in which an open conflict has emerged between the post-SPDC central government and the Kachin, an ethnic minority. Drawing in particular on interview and vernacular sources, she looks at both the Kachin and Burmese military narratives internalizing and justifying the war that broke out in June 2011.

The third section reflects on the trajectories of social change. Education and health are sectors in which deep and steady reforms are expected in post-junta Myanmar. Rosalie Metro presents, in Chapter 8, several field examples that highlight the underutilized potential of teachers and students to contribute to current initiatives for educational reform. Susan Banki, in Chapter 9, draws on interviews of Burmese militants living in exile and analyses their practices of homeland activism. More specifically, she examines how social and economic precariousness manifests itself among Burmese transnational activists, and what implications can be drawn for the mode of activism they support. In Chapter 10, Céline Coderey sheds light, through a field-based ethnographic approach, on the role biomedicine plays in western Myanmar, as well as the functioning of state health policies and the difficulties local people have in accepting them. By stressing the strong inequality in terms of accessibility to medical services between the centre and the periphery, Coderey emphasizes one of Myanmar's immediate challenges as far as health issues are concerned.

Finally, the fourth and last section focuses on the ongoing changes observed in the dominating Buddhist/Bamar world. Myanmar has long been described by extant scholarship as a multi-ethnic society dominated (two-thirds) by ethnic Barmars, who happen to be overwhelmingly Buddhist. Complementing the argument in the article following, Hiroko Kawanami, in Chapter 11, highlights the perceptions and standing in Myanmar's Buddhist world of the Buddhist nuns, a generally understudied topic of Burmese religious life. Largely apolitical, the nuns (*thilashin*), as Kawanami informs us, can serve as a useful barometer to measure the health of Myanmar's monastic community as a whole, in particular in times of change and transition. In Chapter 12, Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière stresses the surprising evolution of the character of the Burmese Buddhist community, or sangha, in recent years. She convincingly claims that a new generation of Burmese monks emerged at the turn of the 2010s; they are now in line with their time, increasingly influenced by new modes of religiosity, and attempt to make the most of the apparent relaxing of state control over religion. Last, in a context where Buddhist hegemonies now tend to surface in increasingly exclusive ways, Chapter 13, by François Robinne, considers emerging patterns of Christian and Muslim dynamics. The former have, over the

past decade, been engaged in various processes of “Christianization” of local cultures, processes which have been gradually re-appropriated by the churches, while the latter are involved in further Islamization processes aimed at countering their increasing alienation from the mainstream cultural referent.

We chose to make the volume as accessible and readable as possible, and free it from jargon. We have attempted to unify, polish and bring together 13 different articles written by scholars with diverse profiles. However, the usual disclaimers remain. Though the editing choices remain ours, the contributors are solely responsible for the content of their articles. Through this thoroughly researched and evaluated volume, we hope to offer observers and students of contemporary Myanmar an essential guide to the most recent political and social challenges Myanmar has now to face. A series of pictures and maps illustrates the contributors’ narratives and a consolidated bibliography is available to help readers locate the most appropriate literature available on contemporary Burmese affairs.