The volume attempts to understand the complexities of conflicts that have engulfed Myanmar under three broad thematic areas—war, politics and religion. It discusses conflicts in general, election and legislative reforms, and religious tensions.

One of the focused issues is the peace process. The Myanmar Peace Center, founded in 2012, played an important institutional role with its piecemeal approaches through the use of both formal and informal channels by encouraging the Tatmadaw (armed forces) and the ethnic armed groups to engage in dialogue and sustain the peace process until the end of the Thein Sein administration.

Another focus point is conflict in ethnic minority areas. The major issues of conflict in Kachin areas is explained as the competing ideological beliefs of how political power is framed, distributed and managed. It suggests that conflict should be resolved through a constitutional change that would guarantee freedom and equality of political rights to all the citizens.

The study highlights how mainstream researches fail to consider the experiences of insecurity among the Kachin women. The systematic marginalisation and devaluation of women’s rights as equal citizens increase their insecurity. To address such insecurity, it suggests that women from marginalised communities should be recognised as stakeholders both in times of conflict and peace building process.

The volume also covers detailed discussion on electoral politics. The study shows that patronage, power and having the right broker helped the Pa-O National Organisation (PNO) in the 2015 general election in Shan state. Cease-fire capitalism gave electoral advantage to the PNO over its rival the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party. Though it is not the only deciding factor, the power of arms is still relevant in party politics where the state withdraws the monopoly on the issue of violence.

Despite a considerable fear due to armed conflict between the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed groups, religious tension between the Buddhists and Muslims in Rakhine state, the 2015 election was by and large peaceful. The study suggests that the success was due to the strong political will of the people for peaceful election and also the fear that the costs of political violence would be too big. Support from the international community, incentives and diplomatic pressure for credible and peaceful election contributed to the peaceful transfer of power.
The study also attributes the peaceful election to the cooperative efforts of different players, such as the Union Election Commission, government, military, civil society organisations, the media and the international observers. The military could have disrupted the election had it chosen to but instead stayed neutral. But the continued involvement of Tatmadaw in politics remains a matter of concern that needs to be dealt with through consideration of history and trust building.

One aspect of the volume deals with ethno-nationalism and religious tensions. Prior to the 2015 election, the Ma Ba Tha, Buddhist nationalists, urged the Buddhist community and the government to defend Buddhism, which they say is under threat from a Muslim takeover. The Arakan National Party’s (ANP) victory in Rakhine state assembly was seen as a success along ethno-religious line, advocated by the Ma Ba Tha. However, the National League for Democracy (NLD)’s nationwide landslide victory suggests that the influence of Buddhist nationalism dissipated across Myanmar. The ANP, which is a regional party, is believed to have a limited influence on the national political change.

Another aspect of the volume is the analysis of the role of legislature. During the years of transition from military rule to semi-civilian government, which began in 2011, the Hluttaw (legislature) was confronted with several challenges, including Myitsone Dam, communal violence in Rakhine, land grabbing disputes, the clashes between Constitutional Tribunal of the Union and the legislature. Despite the challenges, the study finds that the legislature was taking a non-partisan approach not to exacerbate the conflicts under the stewardship of two reform-minded speakers of both houses of the parliament. The study suggests that the parliament was the most aggressive institution to resist any perceived or real attempts by the president or the courts to limit its power during the Thein Sein government between 2011–2015.

One other focus of this volume is the use of landmines in the frontier areas. The study finds that communities in eastern Myanmar engage in the use of landmines to establish control over their territories. However, the people are often confronted with the choice between protection of their community from other threats and the possible cause of physical and psychological trauma. Because of the existential threat of landmine use, it suggests the need for reduction of landmine use where the authorities should involve the local population.

The volume also presents the perception of the general population on a range of issues. Based on Asian Barometer Survey data, the volume highlights how the citizens of Myanmar hold different views on government and governance. The study shows that citizens are intolerant and deeply religious, hold conservative values but at the same time supportive of democracy, inclusive parties, reduction of conflict, including the use of force.
One other highlight of the volume is about the imperceptible and tangible threats along Bangladesh-Myanmar border. The study suggests that Myanmar needs a democratic framework that genuinely protects human rights and equality of rights for all its citizens that aims to reintegrate the marginalised population, including the Rohingya Muslims, which otherwise will prolong conflicts with its neighbours.

The edited volume has the difficulty of establishing one coherent theoretical framework, which also means that there is no central hypothesis, nor research question. But to its credit, the strength of the volume lies in its evidence-based empirical data that offers new ideas and different perspectives of understanding the myriad problems of the country. The volume also provides suggestions on how to address the protracted conflicts, contested political ideologies and the simmering religious tensions.

Despite the variation of topics covered in the volume, the editors have managed to condense under the broader theme of conflict. The volume is a good read and helpful resource for researchers, Myanmar specialists, as well as people who have interests in thematic issues of war, democracy and ethnicity, especially in diverse societies.

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