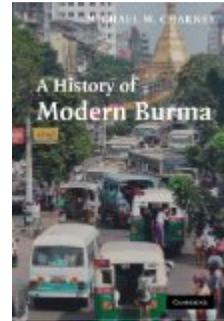


Michael W. Charney. *A History of Modern Burma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 256 S. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-85211-1; \$24.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-61758-1.

Reviewed by Tilman Frasch

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (September, 2012)



M. W. Charney: *A History of Modern Burma*

If some twenty years ago, the study of Burmese history has been the reserve of a few specialists who tried to make their way against the odds of language, the availability of sources outside Burma or access to the archives and collections inside the country, Burma has meanwhile returned to the academic attention in a remarkable manner. Historians (as much as scholars from other disciplines) have widened our understanding of the country with new approaches and in-depth studies of the country's rich history and culture. Charney's "History of Modern Burma" is, besides the works of Donald Seekins and U Thant Myint-U Donald Seekins, *State and Society in Modern Rangoon*, London 2011. U Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*, Cambridge 2001 (covers mainly the 19th century), the third account of Burma's recent history to be published within a decade.

The scope of the work is the period between the demise of the Konbaung dynasty (Burma's last royal house) under the impact of the British annexation and the developments in the early 21st century, with a certain emphasis resting on the post-WW2 period. The book is, Charney points out, "essentially a political history" (p. 2), though there are regularly references to the economic rhythm of the country as well as the world market, to which Burma was so closely linked for most of its colonial period. This implies that religious developments figure less prominently, appearing mainly in connection with the politicization of Buddhism by monks and lay organisations in the interwar period and the debate about Buddhism to become the state religion in the late 1950s. Apart from this, Buddhist or other religious persuasions

matter little. Someone interested in the links between religion and the anti-British resistance in the 1890s or the "pacification" of Buddhist monks by the successive military regimes since 1962 will find this a bit disappointing.

The chapters of the book are broadly arranged in chronological order. The first chapter gives a concise account of the colonial period from the deposition of Burma's last king to the mid-1930s, which is continued in the second chapter that covers the phase until independence. The focus on this chapter is, as its title "The Colonial Centre" indicates, on the capital which experienced two diverging developments after the 1930s. On the one hand, the Burmese became an ever smaller minority in their own capital due to the heavy influx of Indian and Chinese migrants (although this influx began to decline as a result of the Great Depression of the early 1930s). On the other hand, a new generation of leaders of the Burmese national movement emerged, who were more urban and cosmopolitan than their predecessors. Even then, the movement overall retained its rural bases and held its annual meetings anywhere except in Rangoon.

The fourth and fifth chapters deal with the years of U Nu's premiership, the only phase in Burma's history when a democratically elected government was in power (the true nature of Burma's current political situation is yet to be established). The period was beset with problems, beginning with a prime minister who had to come in from the cold after the assassination of General Aung San, and a series of uprisings and armed rebellions both along the borders and in Burma's very heartland. For

several years, the power of the central government was confined to Rangoon and a few loyal garrisons dispersed across the country. After the army had succeeded to restore some degree of law and order, U Nu embarked upon the project of nation-building. One part of this project was economic planning and the nationalisation of industries (though it has to be said that Burma's economic performance is treated rather briefly and superficially here), another was to use the available media for propaganda purposes (the Burma Translation Society, another one of U Nu's brainchildren, could have been mentioned here as well). Failing with all this, U Nu finally resorted to appealing to the Buddhist identity of the majority of the Burmese, which culminated in his announcement to make Buddhism the state religion of the country. The latter decision was seen as a potential danger to national unity by the army under General Ne Win, who deposed U Nu in 1962. However, a further and perhaps more important reason of the coup d'état remains unexplained. Aung San's concession to the minorities, who he persuaded to join the Union of Burma in spring 1947 (by way of the Panglong Agreement), was a clause in the constitution giving them the right of secession. This clause had been suspended for ten years, but in late 1961 several Shan rulers (in addition to the Karen National Organisation which had been in armed rebellion since the inauguration of the Union) began thinking aloud of secession. This gave the army an opportunity for seizing power under the pretext of safeguarding national unity. As Charney later on rightly points out (p. 111), the country's unity forms a pillar on which Burma's state ideology continues to rest until today.

Chapters 6 and 7 cover the years of the first military regime, which came first by the name of Revolutionary Council and then under the guise of a civilian party, the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). The fact that during these years Burma's economy went into a massive decline is indicated (p. 125 and 144-147), but not fully substantiated. In fact, the section on the economy comes down to a competition between two of the members of junta without much further explanation. Especially, the dramatic decline of the country's rice production would have deserved more emphasis. After all, the downfall of the BSPP reign began with Ne Win's confession in 1987 that home production would not suffice to feed the population, which was followed by a request to be awarded the status of a "Least Developed Country" (LLDC). Though the "88 Rebellion" cannot be reduced to a mere series of food riots, the food shortage did play its part in triggering it.

The brief period of hope for Burma's future under a civilian and democratically elected government and its brutal suppression by a rejuvenated military regime is treated in a separate chapter. Much of what is presented here presupposes some familiarity with the events and the major protagonists. Truly, Senior General Saw Maung was the regime's figure-head, but he was widely believed to be an idiot (and his hour-long speeches, all duly broadcast on national TV and printed in the *Working Peoples' Daily* on the next day, did little to disperse this impression), with Brigadier Khin Nyunt both masterminding politics and pulling the strings. Khin Nyunt enters the scene quite suddenly (p. 164), but both his real position as head of the Military Intelligence Service and his official role as Secretary No. 1 of the newly formed State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) are not only mentioned in passing on the following pages. The phase of experimenting with democracy ended with elections in May 1990 that brought a landslide victory for the National League for Democracy. Although the results of the elections never officially declared void by the regime, the elected parliament never convened as Saw Maung announced in June 1990 that the country first had to be given a constitutional fundament. This u-turn made the elections – the fairest Burma had experienced since independence – a complete farce and laid bare what little skills in running a country SLORC actually possessed. Charney's remark that with hindsight the generals would have had an easier time to gain control of the country without the elections being held (p. 169) may sound cynical, but is spot-on.

The final chapter covers the most recent developments from the 1990 elections to the summer of 2008, when cyclone Nargis hit Lower Burma. Apart from this great tragedy, that cost the lives of an estimated 40.000 people (the true number will never be known), this period was otherwise marked by less dramatic events. These include, the conversion of SLORC into an outwardly more civic State Peace and Development Council (SPDC); the military victories over and ceasefire agreements with minority rebel groups operating in Burma's border areas; a far-reaching economic liberalization (which mostly benefited the SLORC leaders and their cronies); Burma's full membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); and of course the two major contests for power within SLORC. In the first of these reshuffles, Saw Maung was forced to retire in favour of General Than Shwe, while the second resulted in Khin Nyunt being first sidelined and later removed from power altogether.

In his summary, Charney singles out some of the

major themes of Burma's history identified in the preceding chapters. These are the question of Burmese-ness vis-à-vis the status of the minorities; the persisting poverty of the vast majority of the country's population; the struggle between civilian and military forms of government; the sometimes xenophobic fear of foreign domination on the side of the various governments; and finally the political participation of monks. But is there a rhythm in Burmese history, as suggested in the introduction? As Charney claims, little has changed in the course of the 120 years of Burmese history which he takes under scrutiny (p. 201), though the evidence presented to validate this statement would rather work to its contrary. It is easy to construct economic backwardness by comparing the Burmese only to their more successful neighbours; another limitation is that in terms of civil liberties, only independent Burma is taken into regard, while the Burmese today are said to be as dissatisfied with their government as "earlier generations" were – but what about those two or three generations that have lived between 1948 and the present day? By alluding to a permanent standstill (or "perpetual delay", as chapter 9 is entitled), Charney seeks to avoid the impression that Burma had been better off under the British, when unequal distribution of wealth and political power were as bad as they are today. But at the same time he fails to account for both the conjunctural ups and downs in Burma's modern history and the fact that some things indeed have improved. The picture he uses for the economy under both U Nu and New Win – "an economic nightmare" – exemplifies this indifference in a telling manner.

Another strange trait of the book is the way in which its references and bibliography have been drawn to-

gether. The references come in their majority from contemporary newspapers, magazines and journals, partly of Burmese and partly of Western origin, while references to scholarly literature are kept to a minimum. Moreover, standard printed sources such as government publications, speeches and writings of the leading persons (with the exception of the autobiographies by Dr. Ba Maw and U Nu) and the like have been ignored almost completely. The list of "standard sources" omitted from the book includes Aung San's writings and speeches, the two volumes on the transfer of power in Burma, U Nu's statements, the constitutions and statistical yearbooks of Burma and even Saw Maung's speeches. U Thet Tun (ed. and tr.), *The Writings of General Aung San*, Yangon 2000; Hugh Tinker (ed.), *Burma. The Struggle for Independence 1944-1948*, 2 vols., London 1983-4; U Nu, *Forward with the People. Translations of Selected Speeches*, Rangoon 1955, to name just a few. This is not to say that the sources Charney has used are entirely devoid of value; indeed, Charney breaks new ground by using contemporary publications from Burma such as the *Guardian* magazine or the *New Burma Weekly*. But it is obvious that much of what these publications reveal can be found either in official documents (a case in point is the White Paper of 1945, which is summarized by way of an article in the *Far Eastern Survey*; p. 62) or in scholarly literature. After all, these official publications are more likely to be found in some public or university library than a magazine published in Burma in the 1950s. That said, and all criticisms made above duly gauged against the merits of the book, Charney's concise and comprehensible "History of Modern Burma" is a useful addition to the historiography on modern Burma.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Tilman Fräsch. Review of Charney, Michael W., *A History of Modern Burma*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. September, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37235>

Copyright © 2012 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.