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Ian Holliday. *Burma Redux: Global Justice and the Quest for Political Reform in Myanmar.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. 304 pp. $89.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-16126-8; $29.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-16127-5.

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Returning to Burma

Since the early 1990s, Burma has been a major focus of international concern and protest. It first drew worldwide condemnation with the violent suppression of anti-regime protests in 1988 and the apparent failure of the military to honor the results of multiparty elections held in May 1990. But international pressure has been subsequently maintained, for more than two decades, by near-constant reports that the regime has been committing serious human rights abuses and by the detention of Aung San Suu Kyi, the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, who was held under house arrest for a total of fifteen years between 1989 and 2010. However, the dramatic nature of the events that brought Burma worldwide condemnation, and perhaps in particular the detention of Aung San Suu Kyi and her remarkable international presence, has unfortunately had the result of excluding the historical context from much of the public understanding of Burma's continuing crisis. In other words, in the eyes of most of the world, the history of Burma begins in 1988. And crucially, that absence of historical perspective has fatally undermined attempts by external interests–from the United Nations to activists–to secure change.

This point is firmly made by Thant Myint-U in the preface to his *The River of Lost Footsteps: Histories of Burma*. "Since the 1988 uprising, Burma has been the object of myriad good-faith efforts, by the United Nations, dozens of governments, hundreds of NGOs, and thousands of activists, all trying to promote democratic reform. But the net result has been disappointing at best and may very well have had the unintended consequence of further entrenching the status quo and holding back positive change. And, given that result, I think it is no coincidence that analysis of Burma has been singularly ahistorical, with few besides scholars of the country bothering to consider the actual origins of today's predicament. We fail to consider history at our peril, not only, I suspect, in the case of Burma."[1]

In *Burma Redux*, Ian Holliday has heeded the call for historical perspective. The first four chapters–almost half the book–provide a detailed history of Burma from roughly the middle of the nineteenth century to the present, although most attention is given to the period of regained independence from 1948, and in particular to the two and a half decades since 1988. These chapters draw on a close reading of an extensive secondary literature. The discussion is nuanced, and the judgments are firmly supported. This is a fine introduction to the modern history of Burma and in particular to the history of Burma since 1948. Here is the historical perspective that is critical to an understanding of, in the words of Thant Myint-U, "the actual origins of today's predicament."

The second half of the book–a further four chapters–is devoted principally to an examination of the literature on the theory and practice of global justice, and an exploration of the ways in which this might be applied in the search for effective external engagement in political reform in Myanmar. Thus, working from the debates on global justice, it considers, for example, "the extent to which foreigners are implicated in injustice in Myanmar, and thereby carry corresponding obligations to engage with it" (p. 20). Readers unfamiliar with this literature may find the discussion rather demanding and, it must be said, somewhat unreal. For while it may be possible to argue from the concept of global justice that states, international agencies, and socially responsible international corporations, for example, have a responsibility to engage in the quest for political reform in Myanmar, it is difficult to avoid the thought that the world, sadly, does not work in that way. To justify intervention or to attempt engagement on human rights grounds is one thing. But in a world of harsh political calculation, that alone will not secure intervention, or even appropriate and effective engagement.

This second section of the book includes particularly

valuable descriptions and assessments of, to quote Thant Myint-U once again, the "myriad good-faith efforts, by the United Nations, dozens of governments, hundreds of NGOs, and thousands of activists … to promote democratic reform" in Myanmar since the early 1990s. The efforts by governments, principally the United States and the United Kingdom, and by activists focused on condemnation and isolation through sanctions and boycotts. They failed–although, it must be said, so too did the attempts by other governments, notably the Association of South East Asian Nations bloc–to associate with Myanmar and quietly and firmly urge reform. In the light of these failures, it is interesting to note that, in its conclusion, *Burma Redux* points to a far more modest, non-state approach to external engagement in political reform in Myanmar. In essence, it proposes "a bottom-up approach seeking to boost grassroots agency above all through a wealth of non-state transnational engagement," in other words, low-profile non-state external engagement with locally driven, on-the-ground reform initiatives (p. 198). It must be said that it would have been possible to reach this conclusion simply by appreciating the practical political realities of present-day Myanmar and understanding its more recent history.

Note

[1]. Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps: Histories of Burma* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), xii-xiv.

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