In her recent work, *Burmese Haze*, Erin Murphy delivers a fast-paced narrative of the many starts and stops in US-Myanmar relations over the past thirty years. Murphy was a political analyst for the CIA assigned to Myanmar for ten years of the period covered by the book, and an independent economic consultant for businesses looking to expand in the region after that until the closing of Myanmar after the most recent military coup of 2021. Her active involvement with the policy decisions discussed in this work, as well as her grounds-eye view, give the work a personal feel that makes it both compelling and widely accessible for a general readership.

Murphy’s prologue briefly elaborates the conflicted nature of contemporary Myanmar. It is a region with tremendous wealth in natural and human resources with long history of civilization and culture and yet it is wracked by political strife, widespread poverty, and a debilitating lack of economic infrastructure, all of which this work loosely relates back to General Ne Win’s coup of 1962 and the failed pro-democracy uprisings of 1988. In her first chapter, the author briefly elaborates the postcolonial history that led Aung San, the father of Aung San Suu Kyi, to emerge as a heroic symbol of democracy, and a procession of military juntas to suppress that vision. Murphy provides an excellent synopsis of the primary political actors in the diverse and contested region but refers readers to Martin Smith, James Scott, and Bertil Linter if they desire a more detailed accounting of the history and culture of the region.

[1] Murphy’s focus, rather, is on the realpolitik in Myanmar as it has unfolded over the past three decades, and the specific personalities and crises that have unfolded to create the current situation.

Myanmar was barred from US trade and economic assistance for a combination of humanitarian abuses and narco-trafficking beginning in 1988. In 2008, just as Myanmar was planning to host democratic elections for the first time, Cyclone Nargis hit, leaving 138,000 dead or missing. This natural disaster may have enabled the military junta to push through its constitutional agenda, which guaranteed the military would continue to
hold at least a quarter of parliamentary seats while forbidding foreigners or their spouses from obtaining key governmental posts (a clause which permanently barred Aung San Suu Kyi from power). It also provided the impetus for the United States and other foreign enterprises to partially lift their sanctions against Myanmar in order to provide humanitarian aid for the first time.

These concurrent events opened the door for a fifteen-year dialogue in which the US-led international community attempted to encourage the expansion of democracy in Myanmar by increasing foreign economic investment in the state while simultaneously attempting to encourage foreign investment by increasing the public perception of the stability of Myanmar’s emerging democratic institutions. While the US remained committed to allowing Aung San Suu Kyi to continue as the spokesman for the Burmese people, the prime minister cum president Thein Sein was especially committed to enacting democratic reforms in the name of expanding Myanmar’s access to global markets and resources. During this phase, the US attempted to shift the paradigm under which its sanctions were imposed to allow specific individuals to be sanctioned rather than punishing the whole state. Murphy’s exposition of the various political thrusts and ripostes involved in ratcheting up international involvement in Myanmar is superb, and is the cornerstone of this work.

True to her role as a political analyst, Murphy’s discussion of the various personalities, policies, and events that account for the turbulence of international diplomacy in Myanmar almost always boil down to pragmatic matters of realpolitik. Throughout the entire narrative Murphy never loses sight of the ultimate goal, which is to modernize Myanmar by reestablishing international commerce there. The author sees these two goals as inseparable and mutually reinforcing. Increases in foreign trade will inevitably lead to the development of infrastructure that will greatly enhance the standard of living of the residents of Myanmar and facilitate the expansion of democracy and protections for human rights, and modernizing Myanmar, especially its political systems and economic infrastructure, will inevitably lure foreign investment and lead to expanding international trade relationships.

In the end, ethno-religious rivalries between the Buddhist majority and the predominantly Muslim Rohingya led to riots in which four soldiers were killed by Rohingya protesters in 2017. The military junta responded by mobilizing forces against the Rohingya, killing an estimated 24,000 people. This rekindling of ethnic violence scared away many foreign investors, and Aung San Suu Kyi’s silence on the genocide only exacerbated the international community’s concerns. Although her party rose to power in the 2020 elections, it was unable to command international support. The military claimed widespread fraud and swept in and took over, placing Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest, leaving Myanmar all but isolated from the world community again. As Murphy puts it in her epilogue, “Each time I travel to Myanmar, I assume it’s my last trip” (p. 169).

Despite her rather optimistic belief that a solid foundation for Burmese democracy and globalization had been built, and there is room for a modern Myanmar to emerge, as of the writing of this book, she holds that the February 2021 coup appears to have ended her involvement in the region. Ironically, despite the fact that Murphy came to Myanmar from a research background in Chinese politics, her analysis offers only sporadic insights into the past and future effect of Chinese aid in the region. Unlike most Western investment programs, which have ground to a standstill in the wake of the Rohingya genocide, many analysts note that ongoing infrastructure projects financed by the Belt and Road Initiative seem to be proceeding more smoothly now than they were before. Then again, perhaps this is proof of the second corollary of Murphy’s central thesis: that continued Western economic investment in Myanmar is es-
sential to the establishment of democracy and the protection of human rights there.

This is an excellent introduction to Myanmar for secondary and early college students of politics, geography, and Asia. Murphy’s copious use of agency jargon also makes it an excellent primer for those interested in entering foreign service. It is altogether fitting that she dedicated this book to the acronyms that she employs so liberally. Most readers will find it necessary to bookmark the list of acronyms in the front matter for easy reference. All but eight of the acronyms used in this work are listed there.

Note


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