

BOOK REVIEW

The State in Burma by Robert H. Taylor, London, C. Hurst & Company, 1987, xvi+395 pp.

I

We have already seen some good works on the history and politics of precolonial, colonial, and post-independence Burma written mainly by non-Burmese scholars. However, few of them have explained clearly through historical perspective the background and the nature of the "Burmese way to socialism" (1962–88) which was the unique process of converting a Buddhist country into a one-party socialist state. This recent book by Robert Taylor, published in 1987, is an attempt to answer this question and Taylor has done the work satisfactorily, showing us persuasive arguments based on full studies of valuable primary and secondary sources in both Burmese and English. Taylor's main interest in this book centers on the appreciation of the legitimacy of the state and on the state's relations toward social classes and institutions in Burma in the context of the state's development from the early modern era to the present (1987).

Taylor's original and impressive interpretation of Burmese history is firstly seen in his dividing the period after the Japanese occupation of Burma. He regards the period from 1942 (the beginning of the occupation) to 1962 (the year of the army coup d'état) as one era, emphasizing the continuity of this period. Usually the period of 1942 to 1948 (the year of independence) is regarded as the most dramatic period of Burmese modern history because of the anti-Japanese guerrilla struggle and the negotiation for independence with the British government. However, Taylor does not agree with that interpretation. He writes that "the most dramatic and lasting consequences of Burmese modern history are seen in the politics of the postwar independence contest and the resulting civil war" (p. 229). That is to say, Taylor gives rather little attention to the political significance of the anti-Japanese struggle, and considers that the postwar development (especially the contest for independence and the serious civil war from 1948 to the early 1950s) carried the greatest political impact for post-independence Burma. This interpretation gives a new perspective to students of modern Burmese history and politics.

II

Taylor presents in this book three strong arguments on the question of the nature of the modern state and politics in Burma. First is the analysis of the historical relationship of the state to the peasantry and other social classes. Taylor singles out key social classes or groups in the three historical periods—precolonial, colonial, and post-independence: the state's intermediary administrative functionaries in the precolonial period (from the eleventh to the nineteenth century), which consisted of officialdom and gentry (*myo-thu-gyi* and *thu-gyi*); the newly emerged middle class in the colonial period (especially after World War I); and local military leaders during the 1950s,

as well as both the Revolutionary Council and the Burma Socialist Programme Party in the period after the coup d'état of 1962.

The administrative functionaries in the precolonial era were deeply connected to the peasantry by patron-client relations. Taylor points out that the monarch "had only tenuous control over his subjects through a set of institutions which often operated more for the benefit of the state's intermediary functionaries than for the king" (p. 61). After the first Anglo-Burmese war (1824-26), however, the colonial rulers commenced what Taylor describes as "rationalization of the state" which brought to Burma completely "different notions about the relationship of the state to society, to the economy, to the individual than those behind the political and administrative instruments of the Burmese monarchs" (pp. 67-68). Taylor uses the term "rationalization of the state" in order to distinguish clearly the difference between precolonial and colonial Burma.

Through this argument of "rationalization of the state," Taylor wrestles with the question of how the colonial state tried to sustain support from the indigenous population. On this point, Taylor's keen attention is given to the newly emerged middle class (the landowning sector, commercial and trade sectors, independent professionals, and government employees). He mentions that the Burmese middle class, the emergence of which was evident after World War I, became mobilized as a prop for the new state, and at the same time as a rival to the British and Indian interests which benefited from the new order. His most meticulous and deeply reasoned arguments in the book are presented in this section. He insists that the new political elite who led modern Burmese political nationalism had emerged from this middle class and grew through the 1920s and 1930s, accepting the concept of the modern "rationalized state." They accepted this concept of the modern state because, Taylor contends, they thought it would guarantee the perpetuation of their main role in society as well as their economic benefit.

After independence (1948), this middle class, which should have benefited from it, remained dependent upon the state regardless of who was the controller, just as it had before the war. Taylor postulates that wealth which might have gone toward the middle class was drained off by the post-independence state because of the state's various restrictions against entrepreneurs. Replacing the middle class, local military leaders had emerged as the most influential political functionaries thereafter. They gained power during the civil war (from 1948 to the early 1950s) through defending local towns from rebels and robbers, and consequently became parliamentary representatives of AFPFL (Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League), a political majority of the post-independence Burma up to 1962. Those local military leaders were the bosses who controlled the local towns which subsequently became "states within the state," areas over which the central government could have only limited control. But this situation was forcibly changed by the army after the coup d'état of 1962.

In discussing the post-coup period, Taylor gives detailed descriptions of the army-led Revolutionary Council (1962-74) and the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) as the key groups in the politics of socialist Burma. His analyses of the politics of these two dominant groups are very persuasive. Taylor explains the reason why the new order had been so stern toward de-politicizing ethnicity which was the main cause of the civil war; how it was able to drive away local military leaders from their domains, i.e., local towns; and how stiff were its measures to mobilize people under the one-party system.

III

The second strong argument which is worth indicating is seen in his analysis of the relationship between the newly emerged middle-class political elite and the peasantry after the 1920s. Taylor insists that in order to wrest control from the British, the middle-class political elite who had accepted the concept of the modern "rationalized state," was able to combine forces with the peasantry who had rejected the concept of the modern state itself. This is quite a different view from the standard interpretation which was stressed by D. Guyot and J. Silverstein, who insist that the so-called "elite-mass gap" had existed in both the colonial and the post-colonial periods of Burmese history. Taylor strongly criticized this interpretation as "the established myth," saying that "there certainly was, and remains, a gap in the perceived interests of the peasantry and the political élite, but it exists because these two groups *do* understand each other and their contradictory interests" (p. 188). Taylor tries to support his argument through exhaustive analyses of the actions, not only of the famous Burmese political bodies such as the GCBA, GCSS, and Do Bama Asiayon, but also of Dr. Ba Maw and U Saw whose roles are generally played down in most studies of modern Burmese history.

Thirdly, it is worth indicating Taylor's arguments on the legitimacy of the state, especially his analysis of how the post-independence government tried to legitimize the state. According to Taylor's interpretation, attempts to legitimize the state through imposition of the ideas of justice, liberty, and equality were accepted as a meaningless doctrine by most of the population during the 1950s. In contrast, "[politicized] ethnicity, religion or Communism inspired more loyalty than did the state" (p. 285).

Therefore, in practice, U Nu's government had to use Buddhism, and the symbols and beliefs of the Burmese monarchs as the most important elements in its search for legitimacy. However, as Taylor states, the attempt failed in part "because the society upon which he [U Nu] attempted to impose these ideas was much more religiously and educationally diverse and sceptical than that of the nineteenth century and before" (pp. 289-90). After the coup of 1962, Taylor considers that the army tried to create a "balanced society." The image of a "balanced society" was shown in the BSPP's ideology which was based on Buddhist epistemology, and utilized Marxist analytical language and Leninist political ideas. Taylor mentions that "the plausibility of the ideology stems not only from its philosophical basis in classical Burmese Buddhist thought, but also from the recent history of Burma" (p. 364), which was marked by the experiences of capitalism, colonialism, depression, poverty, rebellion, and anarchy. He writes that "personal experience has convinced many Burmese that balance is required and that authority needs to exist to create social harmony" (p. 364).

Taylor concludes that in present Burma "for better or worse the state is accepted as inevitable and dominates other institutions" (p. 372).

IV

It is evident that the book is replete with significant intellectual stimulus and presents a new viewpoint of Burmese history and politics. However, the lack of a concluding chapter may bring about diverse interpretations of the book by readers, especially of the significance of the "Burmese way to socialism." Some may consider that the author is passively justifying the "Burmese way to socialism" through pointing out

clearly how and why the system has come into existence, while others may say that Taylor has clearly pointed out the problems of the modern state of Burma and criticized it through his analyses. Both may be right. Maybe Taylor left the final conclusion to the reader.

In this connection, Burmese native historians might accept this book with a little embarrassment not only because of the lack of a concluding chapter but also because of the difference in the methodology of historical study. Burmese native historians would appear not to prefer the writings of history which emphasize the points of *why* a thing happened and *why* a thing is significant and to be investigated in the present age. That is to say, in general, Burmese native historians adhere to the methodology of study and description of history as minutely as possible—*when, where, what, and how* a thing happened. Therefore Taylor's way of describing Burmese history, which can be termed a purely social scientific method of investigating history, may be accepted as a Western ethnocentric view of Burmese history. But this means also the book will give a good chance to start a fruitful discussion on the methodology of the study of history and politics between Burmese and non-Burmese students.

Another point which I would like to mention is that while Taylor analyzes quite precisely and dynamically the behavior and thought of the middle class of the colonial period, the description of behavior and thought of the peasantry seems less than graphical. It is well known that to locate and use primary sources related to the Burmese peasantry of the colonial period is difficult, but if an effort were made to appreciate in depth the peasant's consciousness toward their images of the ideal state during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, by analyzing, for example, the Hsaya San rebellion (1930–32) or the peasants' guerrilla struggle during the anti-Japanese war, the book would have even been more valuable.

The book gives readers twelve useful tables related to modern Burmese politics and economy which make Taylor's arguments much more understandable, particularly, those given in Chapter 5 concerning growth in full-time central state employment, 1962–73, growth in total expenditure of central ministries, 1961–73, BSPP membership figures, and distribution of labor force, 1931 and 1984–85.

Lastly, I would like to mention a minor mistake, though it does not detract from the value of the book. Taylor writes that the Burma Communist Party boycotted the 1947 election (p. 247). It is true that the Thakin Soe's group, or the Communist Party of Burma (so-called Red Flag Communist Party), boycotted the election, but the Thakin Than Tun's group, or the Burma Communist Party (so-called White Flag Communist Party), in contrast, took part in it, passively supporting the AFPFL. The Burma Communist Party understood that bringing on a further confrontation between the AFPFL and the BCP by boycotting the election or by attacking the AFPFL, would only please the British authorities and the right wing. The Burma Communist Party at that time hoped to rejoin the AFPFL, and this intention was clearly announced in early 1947 by the party central committee.

As we know, the regime and the political situation of Burma has changed since 1988 by the military coup d'état which crushed people's aspiration for democracy, and now many people around the world are giving attention to the future of Burma. This book which surely deepens our understanding of Burma's modern politics is worth reading at such a time.

(Kei Nemoto)