

Book review: Gerard McCarthy: Outsourcing the Polity - Non-State Welfare, Inequality and Resistance in Myanmar

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GERARD MCCARTHY, *Outsourcing the Polity: Non-State Welfare, Inequality and Resistance in Myanmar*. (Southeast Asia Program Publications). Ithaca / London: Cornell University Press, 2023. 282 pages, \$125.00. ISBN 978-1-5017-6796-8 (hc)

When a state gives up social welfare responsibilities, how can a society function? *Outsourcing the Polity* provides refreshing insights on distributive politics by focusing on the state's outsourcing of social welfare to private and non-state actors, using the case of contemporary Myanmar.

Informed by a broad range of oral history, archival sources, interviews, surveys and extensive ethnographic research conducted in provincial parts of central-east Myanmar during the decade of partial civilian rule between 2011 and 2021, Gerard McCarthy, an expert on the politics of welfare and development in Myanmar, assesses how non-state welfare can both practically and normatively support democratic movement and still undermine structural social reform.

This book is divided into two parts. The first part – consisting of two chapters, “Post-Socialist Welfare Outsourcing” and “Disasters and the Polity”, and focusing on autocratic welfare capitalism during the period between 1988 and 2011 – demonstrates how the military dictatorship mediated market reform and regulated civil society in ways that transferred social responsibility away from the state and entrenched ideals and practices of non-state welfare within the popular and political culture of Myanmar. The author explains how the state outsourced social obligations to emergent businesspeople while undermining its own capacity to provide social welfare by providing tax remission or commercial concessions to those who made social contributions. In the meantime, the mobilisation of non-state ideals and practices of reciprocity in the welfare mix paradoxically provided space for grassroots activists to enact ideals of social and political change.

The second part of the book provides an analysis of the democratic welfare capitalism that emerged during the period from 2011 to 2020 under partial civilian rule. Three chapters – “Democracy, Freedom, and Morality,” “Philanthropy and Wealth Defense” and “Self-Reliance and Entitlement” – assess how non-state welfare affected the way elites and grassroots activists framed issues of social justice, rights and democratic struggle. A practical preference for delivering social aid and redistributing wealth through non-state charity and philanthropy rather than state institutions, derived from past experiences of state inefficiency and corruption, and coupled with an ideal of non-state welfare as capable of restoring the moral and civic bonds necessary for a free and democratic society, was reproduced among grassroots activists and democratic leaders in the post-2011 period. Wealthy businesspeople continued to assume

social obligations through philanthropy despite the regime change in 2016, so that they were able to cultivate a publicly rooted form of social licence. This new but reproduced form of social licence discouraged state officials from redressing economic inequality or structurally addressing the social needs of citizens through their own actions while protecting the commercial interests of the wealthy. Meanwhile, state officials encouraged ordinary citizens to contribute to social improvement, by which, the author argues, the state “burdened poor communities with an obligation and moral responsibility to prove themselves good ‘partners’ for development” (p. 178). This also justified the exclusion of communities, such as ethnic minorities, unable or unwilling to “stand on their own” (p. 198) due to poverty or historical experiences of state oppression.

I could not agree more with the book’s main argument that although social outsourcing can deliver support to the needy in the short term, it has a detrimental impact in the long run, such as exacerbating socio-economic disparity and eroding popular faith in the state as an agent of social justice and development. While much existent literature on Myanmar has focused on the agencies of the military, government, pro-democracy forces, ethnic elites and civil society, this book uncovers the resiliency of the communities that underlie Myanmar society.

The author could have focused not only on continuity but also on the disjuncture of social outsourcing in the transition from the military-led to civilian-led regime in 2016. While mechanisms of social outsourcing may endure despite regime change, as the author points out, outsourcing by regimes with different levels of legitimacy could have different impacts on state-society relations. After Aung San Suu Kyi’s party took power in 2016, social outsourcing continued, but in parallel with the significant expansion of the government’s spending on social services. One could argue that the outsourcing led by Aung San Suu Kyi, and her popularity, rather strengthened people’s faith in the state. Importantly, the book provides meaningful implications for the evolution of Myanmar society after the coup in 2021. As the state’s capacity to provide social services significantly declined, it appears that, again, “self-reliance” became a primary strategy of survival for citizens while a plethora of civilian-led initiatives for the delivery of services emerged. Could this lead to nurturing solidarity and building an alternative form of the state with “federal democracy”, in which citizens prefer the state as a social service provider? Or will the culture of social outsourcing endure even under the future democratic government?

Outsourcing the Polity is important reading for scholars interested in Myanmar politics and, more broadly, in state-society relations. It provides a new perspective on the enduring effect of social outsourcing on distributive politics.

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