

BOOK REVIEW

***Rights Refused: Grassroots Activism and State Violence in Myanmar.* By Elliott Prasse-Freeman. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023. 366 pp. Paperback, ISBN 9781503636712**

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Rights Refused: Grassroots Activism and State Violence in Myanmar is a comprehensive exploration of the intricate relationship between Myanmar's grassroots activists and a military regime that governs through brutal violence in conjunction with law and regulation practices. The book covers a critical period in Myanmar's recent history as it includes the most recent post-2021 protest movement that needs every form of documentation that it can. For example, Chapter 1 *Variegated Violence* starts with a recount of how bodies (dead and tortured) were used as a form of terrorizing public spectacle by the military after the 2021 coup; prominently displayed to instill and subjugating fear among civilian populations.

Based on several years of rigorous empirical and archival research, the book presents a beautifully executed ethnography building on extensive participant observation and immersion in Myanmar's language, culture and daily struggles. Prasse-Freeman has mastered a way to bring to life the peculiar brutality executed by the military (aka State) and the equally creative responses by activists and civilians.

The introductory chapter of 40 plus pages presents an extensive theoretical exercise of the real-life experiences and challenges of Myanmar's activists, whom many scholars of Myanmar have come to know quite well, with "resistance"/"refusal" and "blunt biopolitics." At a first glance, I am uncertain what good Gramsci and Foucault have to offer the Myanmar protest movement and the activists that suffer immensely under a regime that has no regard for obligations or rights toward its population. This first introductory chapter hits me as almost overly ambitious in its theoretical applications, at times written in language that is unnecessary academic in style. At this stage of the book, I am wondering if it will at all be comprehensible for the individuals so meticulously studied and theorized? Thereafter, the book proceeds with three main sections.

Blunt Biopolitics (including Chapter 1 *Variegated Violence*) delves into the systematic violence employed by the Myanmar state against its citizens to suppress dissent. It examines the coercive measures used by the government to maintain control and sets the stage for understanding challenges faced by activists.

Section 2 *Lives of Refusal* (Chapters 2, 3 and 4) focuses on the individuals and groups who defy oppression, highlighting their resilience and the innovative strategies they employ, including plow protests and the use of rituals, language and esoteric practices as forms of resistance. Chapter 2 *Living Refusal* documents activists' lives and includes more recognizable prison stories and accounts of prison life. The author's ethnographic account is valuable in and of itself because it is informed by being around prisoners and prisons in Myanmar. However, the chapter may have been strengthened by drawing on recent in-depth empirical work concerning "experiences of imprisonment in Myanmar" (Liv S. Gaborit, PhD dissertation, 2020, see also Martin 2021) and the efforts to extensively document events generated by scholars associated with the Legacies of Detention Project at the Danish Institute Against Torture.

Nevertheless, it is when I emerge into Chapters 3 and 4 that I am grasped by the book's magnitude. Chapter 3 *Plow Protests* is beautifully put together and offers fascinating insights into farmers' and activists' desperate and often ill-resulting use of plow protests. Prasse-Freeman details how land is regulated, perceptions and processes of legality, dispossession and re-possession, together with a historical overview of land practices. The hardship of legal action in Myanmar and the tragic unfolding around land and farming will remain with readers.

Chapter 4 *Cartoons, Curses, and the Corpus* is equally fascinating, offering a systematized and – attuned with recent events – characterization of popular beliefs in spirits and astrological predictions and their application to protest. Gems include accounts of "gynophobia" (p. 185) and esoteric rituals applied as a form of fair "trial" in lieu of a functioning system of governance (p. 192). Readers will be left with another insight into what democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi represents for Myanmar's inhabitants.

The book's final section *Rights as Opportunities* (Chapters 5 and 6) discusses the role of the global human rights movement in Myanmar, urging a reevaluation of our understanding of rights and emphasizing the moral imperative of international support for local activists. Chapter 5 *Taking Rights, Seriously* illustrates how activists in Myanmar take on "a semiotic or pragmatic approach to rights" because they have never experienced an entitlement to such from a powerful and monolithic state governing apparatus (p. 28). Prasse-Freeman also extends an overview of the different meaning (or non-meaning) of "rights" in the Myanmar language. Chapter 6 *Rights in Desperation* uses the example of absurd global promises made to the most vulnerable Rohingya population following their persecution and slaughter (p. 228). This section of the book rightfully questions the authority and capacity of the global human rights regime to deploy the language of rights with reference to the Myanmar context. However, Prasse-Freeman is certainly not the first to question such regimes and their nonuniversal application on Myanmar soil.

Rights Refused: Grassroots Activism and State Violence in Myanmar is a gem for law and society scholars. Throughout, the reader is offered rich examples of how law plays out in Myanmar. Prasse-Freeman details law's many peculiar ways of regulating society and also the way law is used as a tool by activists to urge various officials to engage in negotiations (*Know Law as a Tool*, p. 115). This dynamic is one I recognize from my own fieldwork in Myanmar where lawyers explained how knowing the law well was vital even in a system completely hollowed out by corruption and obscurity. The absurdity of Myanmar's law and order system is further exemplified by various forms of criminal liability, for example for being in a car accident or forgetting to switch off a fuse (p. 59).

Prasse-Freeman offers a refreshing interrogation and engagement of well-cited Myanmar scholars, often by mastering the many variations in the Burmese language (see, e.g., p. 208 for the many meanings and interpretations of “rights”). His book also includes fascinating insights on gender and activism and women’s role and meaning within the protest movements (pp. 151, 184). He covers important questions of ethnicity and especially key lessons for understanding the treatment and persecution of the Rohingya.

Rights Refused: Grassroots Activism and State Violence in Myanmar is an ambitious attempt to theorize Myanmar’s protest movement, documenting its struggles, and making sure it remains heard and recorded for our present and in history. The book is one that will be read decades from now, leaving people wondering why not more was done to support the individuals that Prasse-Freeman spent years to get to know and skillfully shadow, in their struggles (however conceptualized) against a brutal dictatorship.

References

- Gaborit, Liv. S. 2020. “We are Like Water in Their Hands”: Experiences of imprisonment in Myanmar. PhD dissertation. Roskilde Universitet.
- Martin, T. M. 2021. “The Politics of Prison Air: Breath, Smell, and Wind in Myanmar Prisons.” *Punishment & Society* 23 (4): 478–96.