



BOOK REVIEWS

A Political Biography of Aung San Suu Kyi: A Hybrid Politician

By Michał Lubina. 158 pp. London, Routledge, 2020.

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Few political figures dominate international representations of their country like Aung San Suu Kyi, and few have been so central to their country's domestic politics for so long. When she first entered the political fray in 1988, the US president was Ronald Reagan, Mikhail Gorbachev was general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and Augusto Pinochet was the president of Chile. Aung San Suu Kyi's domestic and international standing was arguably at its peak during her periods of house arrest in the 1990s and 2000s when she was revered within Myanmar (officially Burma until 1989) for her moral opposition to military rule, and lauded internationally as an iconic symbol of democracy and human rights. From 2016, her time in government as Myanmar's state counsellor—the de facto prime minister—brought responsibility for her administration's decisions and, at times, loud criticisms from both home and abroad.

Michał Lubina's latest book about Myanmar politics *A Political Biography of Aung San Suu Kyi: A Hybrid Politician* (released in September 2020, weeks before the general election and just months before the most recent military coup) is about Aung San Suu Kyi's political practice. Lubina will be well-known to scholars and engaged observers of Myanmar. He has authored six books about the country and regularly presents his work at international conferences. (We have, on occasion, presented on the same panels, and I was discussant for the launch of this book at the 2021 Myanmar Institut conference.)

Lubina's biography enters a crowded market. There are dozens of books about Aung San Suu Kyi and there has been no shortage of journal articles and scholarly chapters either, which have considered virtually every aspect of Aung San Suu Kyi's engagement with politics, including her political thought and the role of Buddhism in her politics, her role as a leader, her influence on both domestic politics and on international foreign policy, and, of course, her long-term failure to speak up for Rohingya human rights. There has even been a Luc Besson-directed feature film starring Michelle Yeoh as *The Lady*, advertised as 'one of the greatest love stories set against a background of political turmoil'.

Understandably, Lubina's focus is different, scholarly, and, significantly, the book is the first political biography of Aung San Suu Kyi to cover both her years in opposition and most of her years in power from 2016. Lubina's book is very readable, and its accessibility to those outside the academy and, importantly, to those in Myanmar and other parts of the Global South is enhanced too by its open access availability funded by the author's home institution, Poland's Jagiellonian University.

In this book Lubina considers key elements of Aung San Suu Kyi's political career, building on his previously published *The Moral Democracy: The Political Thought of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi* (2019). That book considered Aung San Suu Kyi's view of democracy arguing, 'Suu Kyi's democracy is rather a Burmese Buddhist democracy derived from morality not an equivalent to any Western understanding of democracy' (p. 379). Lubina asserts in this latest contribution that from this Burmese perspective, 'the root of a nation's misfortunes has to be sought in the moral failings of the government' and 'one should start the improvement of the world from one's own transformation' (p. 57). He suggests that building a democracy understood in such a way requires a disciplinarian approach that prioritises unity, responsibility, and sacrifice, and so 'if one then disagrees or disunites, then one is not moral enough' (p. 57). This means that Myanmar's people cannot be the ultimate source of sovereignty because people are immoral—and this contributes to an authoritarian and anti-democratic tradition. This helps answer a question asked early in the book: 'How is it, that this democracy icon rules in an effectively authoritarian way, with an iron grip, without tolerating any dissident voices and by jailing journalists and censoring press?' (p. 2). Within this framework, Lubina presents Aung San Suu Kyi as leaning towards a model of rule where the leader might carry out necessary but immoral actions to enable their later moral and enlightened rule. For Lubina, this helps explain Aung San Suu Kyi's 'tokenism and tendency towards moral preaching; propensity to defy public grievances (protests were either ignored or suppressed); poor PR communication; a puritan streak... and her concentration on symbolic yet cosmetic issues' (p. 112).

Lubina structures the book's 158 pages around nine chapters, with a short introduction and conclusion. Within his 'hybrid politician' framework follows a mostly chronological assessment of what might be described as Aung San Suu Kyi's political 'greatest hits'. He plots her entry into politics, her house arrest, *détente* with the military and her subsequent election to parliament, her time as state counsellor, and her response to the Rohingya crisis. Importantly, Lubina's book is based on a good deal of first-hand research. He has met Aung San Suu Kyi a number of times, interviewed her and her colleagues, her rivals, Myanmar analysts, and other scholars. He has thought deeply about Aung San Suu Kyi's politics and political philosophy. Like many of Aung San Suu Kyi biographers, Lubina is clearly sympathetic towards her, and it is because of this sympathy that some analytical rigour frays when it comes to addressing Aung San Suu Kyi's political flaws. Importantly, Lubina does not hide his sympathies: he is honest about the lens he brings to his analysis. This forthright honesty is crucially important when considering contemporary politics, and academia would benefit from more of it.

The value of the book's core contribution hinges greatly on whether the reader agrees with Lubina's assertion about Aung San Suu Kyi's hybridity, rather than seeing her as a merely pragmatic politician. Lubina's 'hybrid politician' argument is highly plausible, but throughout the book he frequently notes Aung San Suu Kyi's political pragmatism, which suggests that perhaps the Burmese side of her hybridity could simply be understood as political pragmatism. As a politician in Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi's fortunes are, of course, determined by Myanmar's voters, so a pragmatic politician might work to align their decisions with those most desired by the voters they rely on for election and appear to be a particularly Burmese politician. However, Aung San Suu Kyi's response to the Rohingya crisis during 2017 strengthens Lubina's case for regarding her as a hybrid politician rather than a merely pragmatic one operating within a Myanmar context.

A purely pragmatic politician would have handled the 2017 Rohingya crisis very differently to Aung San Suu Kyi. Lubina presents the challenge Aung San Suu Kyi was presented with by the military's genocidal forced deportation of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya civilians in 2017 as 'The Rohingya Trap' (p. 89) where 'Speaking out in favour of the

Rohingya meant jeopardizing her popular support; not doing so equalled the risk of losing external backing' (p. 90). But was it? Aung San Suu Kyi's political options were far less limited than this. For instance, foreign diplomats I spoke to at the time frequently expressed their dismay that Aung San Suu Kyi was not prepared to publicly call for 'restraint' on the part of the military. That action might have served both to limit military violence, empower voices within Myanmar that similarly believed the military had gone too far, and given international actors a sense that Aung San Suu Kyi had done what she could, as Myanmar's civilian leader, to limit the bloodshed. In those circumstances, any military payback against Aung San Suu Kyi would perhaps have resulted in a much stronger international response than materialised four years later when the military deposed her in their most recent coup.

Lubina is far from alone in regarding Aung San Suu Kyi as having been faced with a single difficult choice, and his book makes a genuine contribution to our understanding of her politics. As Lubina points out, we may never know with certainty what motivations lay behind Aung San Suu Kyi's decisions. Lubina explains he was unable to get an answer from her, and others have received only vague comments. Aung San Suu Kyi's ongoing incarceration by the Myanmar military junta means we may never again have the chance to hear from her on this subject.

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A Physician on the Nile: A Description of Egypt and Journal of the Famine Years

By 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī. Edited and translated by Tim Mackintosh-Smith. xlv, 256 pp. New York, Library of Arabic Literature, New York University Press, 2021.

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The title chosen by the editor and translator of this text acknowledges two famous texts. The first is *Description de l'Égypte* composed between 1809 and 1829 by the savants who accompanied Napoleon Bonaparte's expedition to Egypt in 1798. Regarded as a foundational document in the modern study of Egypt and a characteristically encyclopedic work of Enlightenment scholarship, *Description* catalogues every aspect of Egypt's culture, from Antiquity to the beginning of the nineteenth century, including the country's geography, flora, fauna, material culture, antiquities, and system of government. The second work is Daniel Defoe's 1722 work *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Once regarded as a historical work, Defoe's book is now classified as a kind of historical fiction.

The work under review was written in 600/1204 by 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī, who intended to present it to the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad, al-Nāṣir lil-Dīn Allāh (r. 575–622/1180–1225). Al-Baghdādī was born in Baghdad in 557/1162. He spent much of his early life travelling between the principal cities of the Ayyubid sultanate—Damascus, Cairo, and Jerusalem. Like many scholars of his time, his travels were structured by a