



Secret Genocide: Voices of the Karen of Burma

Daniel Pedersen

Dunboyne: Maverick House Publishers, 2011. ISBN: 978-1-905379-62-0

271 pp.

Reviewed by John Walsh, Editor of the *SIU Journal of Management*.

Political and social change in our neighbour Myanmar over the past few years has taken place at a staggering rate and has been surprising in nature. As recently as the tragedy of Cyclone Nargis in 2008, at least 138,000 people and probably many more, the grip that the military junta had on the country seemed to be as absolute as ever – so much so as to be in a position to refuse international relief, thereby callously condemning thousands of people to death, while insisting that a referendum go ahead irrespective of the suffering. Yet just a few years later, a civilian president has visited the White House, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is free to do as she pleases and industrial estates and infrastructure to link the interior of the country with international markets and places of consumption is being pushed ahead at a rapid pace. Hungry for profits, corporations are flocking to the country and jobs are to be created which will finally provide decent standards of

living to the long suffering citizens. Surely, then, the future must be bright. Unfortunately, of course, the weight of the past lies like a nightmare on the brains of the living. For decades, numerous ethnic groups have been fighting the military force of the central state – the *tatmadaw* – for a measure of autonomy and in some cases have used drug production and smuggling to fund their armed struggles. The fighting that has been involved has been in many cases vicious, with human rights abuses and atrocities committed against civilians. Most of the reportage of these struggles have depicted the *tatmadaw* as the principal protagonist and there is, indeed, plenty of evidence of wrongdoing by the army. However, even if the rebels have been brutalized by the attacks made on them, few people come out of the conflict well. These issues are at the heart of Daniel Pedersen’s reporting of the portion of the struggle affecting the Karen people, based on personal observation and face-to-face interviews with a number of important participants. The coverage is centred on the concept of genocide and the question is posed of whether the Burmese government was guilty of having conducted such a crime against the Karen people. The fact that the question is raised, not to mention raised as the central issue of the book, will give a good indication of the author’s opinion as to the answer. With wider coverage, of course, the same charge may be levelled against the junta and army in the case of other ethnic conflicts. Unfortunately, it seems unlikely that any charges will ever be laid against those culpable because of the culture of impunity that has settled across so much of the Mekong Region and because atrocities took place away from public scrutiny, involving people whose voices are rarely heard and who have little opportunity to collect and mobilize the evidence that would be necessary. It is possible that external assistance might make this possible but, as the trials of the Khmer Rouge leaders in Cambodia have indicated, the process can be incredibly lengthy and far from guaranteed to end well, even if the process of testifying and having the evidence treated seriously may be helpful to some people.

However, the outbreaks of violence against Muslim Burmese in recent months across the country rather suggest that long suppressed tensions and grievances are being given the opportunity to emerge and are being expressed along ethnic lines. A similar phenomenon took place in the former Yugoslavia after the death of Tito: years of unhappiness inspired violence that was channeled against what seemed to outside observers to be convenient victims rather than the real perpetrators. If this is similar to what is going to happen in Myanmar, then that would be dangerous indeed because there are so many weapons apparently loose in the country and experienced fighters with little to lose and much bitterness to assuage. In the north of the country, for example, there is evidence of the nervousness of the Chinese government at the potential total collapse of the Wa armed forces, which would leave untold numbers of armed fighters loose in the region, which would not be conducive to harmonious relations.

In terms of Pedersen's book, this is not the best of its genre – there are several books available covering similar material and they tend to follow the same pattern of the author describing his journeys across the border with their exoticism and dangers and then the slightly star-struck interviews with the fierce fighters, victims and leaders. Each provides interesting information but tend to lack an overview of the issue that would be useful for anyone beyond the wholly unfamiliar with the region. This pattern is too often followed here and the book leaves the impression that more could have been achieved with the data collected.