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Burma: The beast in its entirety

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In her book Everything is Broken, noted Myanmar-watcher Emma Larkin succinctly summed up the difficulty of really knowing what is going on in the country and, even when some reliable information is available, learning its secrets.

In considering approaches to Burma, and management of the many complex challenges it poses, senior policymakers necessarily rely on objective, evidence-based analyses that take into account issues like Burma's critical geostrategic position in a changing regional environment and the protection of vital national interests in the face of competing imperatives.

Yet, in tackling all these weighty issues, it is important that governments and international organisations do not lose sight of the harsh realities on the ground. In that regard, Burma-watchers at all levels of analysis and commentary would do well to read *Everything is Broken*, a book just published by Emma Larkin.¹

Larkin (the pseudonym of an American journalist based in Thailand) combines extensive firsthand observation with careful research to produce an informative and insightful overview of recent developments in Burma.

¹ Emma Larkin, *Everything is Broken: The Untold Story of Disaster Under Burma's Military Regime* (London: Granta, 2010).

She closely examines the 'Saffron Revolution' in 2007, the devastation caused by Cyclone Nargis in 2008 and the military regime's responses to both.

While clearly sympathetic to the plight of the Burmese people, she rises above sensationalist reporting and partisan political commentary to describe, in elegant and often moving prose, the impact of these events at the grassroots level. In so doing, she gives an immediate, human perspective to government statements and official reports.

Larkin is also refreshingly self-aware and candid about the many traps that lie in wait for those who try to write about modern Burma. Having followed developments in that deeply troubled country for nearly 40 years, in various capacities, I found the following passage from the book struck a particular chord:

Given the regime's restrictions on information and association, it is difficult to form any public consensus or verifiable version of the truth. While certain events can be accounted for with certainty, there is much that remains unknown. Like those blind men in the parable [trying to describe an elephant from different vantage points], it has become impossible for anyone to see or fathom the beast in its entirety.

In a society where nothing can be taken for granted, distorted truths, half stories, and private visions are, by necessity, woven into the popular narrative of events. Burma is a place where the government hides behind convoluted smoke screens. It is a place where those who sacrifice themselves for their country must go unrecognised and can only be lauded or remembered in secret. It is a place where natural disasters don't happen, at least not officially, and where the gaping misery that follows any catastrophe must be covered up and silenced. In such an environment, almost anything becomes believable.²

2 *ibid.*, pp.251–252.

This text is taken from *Interpreting Myanmar: A Decade of Analysis*,
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