Marie-Sybille de Vienne


Internationally published books on Brunei are a rarity and this English translation of Marie-Sybille de Vienne’s *Brunei de la thalassocratie a la rente* (2012) is a welcome addition that provides many insights into the modern workings of this small yet complex country with an absolute monarchical system of government. Previously, Graham Saunders’ *History of Brunei*, first published in 1994 with minor additions in the second edition of 2002, stood as the only attempt at a full-length history of the Sultanate. De Vienne also gives us a full-length history, but unlike Saunders, she focuses mainly on the post-independence period (about sixty per cent of the book), from 1984 until 2014. Mainly because of the paucity of academic studies on modern Brunei, this period will be of most interest to readers. It is also the period about which the author appears most knowledgeable and where her skills as an economic historian come to the fore.

B.A. Hussainmiya writes in the Foreword that the book is ‘daring’ and ‘candid’, words that surely refer to the comprehensive analysis of the last thirty years, where a range of sensitive issues are addressed. These include the national philosophy of *Melayu Islam Beraja* (Malay Islamic Monarchy, MIB) and its function in sustaining the monarchical system of government and managing society. The author further explains the role of history in relation to MIB as ‘one of the key instruments of policy-making’ that is used to ‘hammer out a collective consciousness’ (p. 267). Other sensitive issues addressed are immigration, ethnicity, Islam, and the long-term durability of the sultanate, all of which receive detailed attention and are well researched and illuminating, often accompanied by statistical evidence and explanatory graphs.

The author’s analysis of Brunei’s hydrocarbon economy is by far the most comprehensive to date. De Vienne also contrasts the Brunei economic model with the Gulf States, and finds some fascinating, fundamental differences. While the Gulf States have made ‘financial services—and correlatively indebtedness—a major axis of their development policies’ (p. 200), Brunei has been much more cautious and opted for ‘the accumulation of surpluses, invested and managed abroad’ (p. 200). She estimates the Brunei sovereign fund’s (BIA) assets to be about $170 billion and that by 2030 returns from investments will be able to contribute 27–45% of GDP. These assets are not public knowledge and while the accuracy of the author’s estimate remains uncertain, her methods in calculating them are convincing.

In the concluding section, the author notes the real popularity the Sultan enjoys among citizens but argues that the current social and political consen-
sus is maintained by ‘hydrocarbon rent’ that finances the ‘welfare monarchy’ (p. 285). She suggests that in the medium-term the main ‘threats’ to this consensus are not economic but may arise from what she sees as a number of ‘paradoxes’ within the Brunei model. Her examples include: the increased focus on university education, with many students studying abroad, which appears to be at odds with the style of societal management and supervision; MIB versus syariah; and the revival of the Brunei Melayu tradition while simultaneously adopting and partially reinventing Middle-Eastern norms that were largely unknown in Southeast Asia before the 1980s.

The earlier parts of the book are sometimes less insightful than the latter. In attempting to locate early Brunei within the wider region and reconstruct some of its early history, the author, as many before her, turns to translations of problematic Chinese sources and repeats some of the mistakes of earlier scholars. These sources have been addressed in detail by Johannes Kurz (first available 2006; 2014a), who presents modern and accurate translations of texts relating to toponyms some have attempted to associate with Brunei (and other places), a comprehensive analysis of the sources, and a demonstration of how they have been misunderstood and misused by non-classical Chinese specialists (See also Kurz 2013; 2014b). Kurz is referenced numerous times but the author’s use of his work in her arguments does not always match my own understanding of Kurz’s careful analysis.

The historical narrative becomes more convincing as it moves forward in time and many will find the sections that cover Brunei’s sixteenth century golden age and the following seventeenth to nineteenth centuries informative. In my view, the section on the important British Residency period before WWII is abrupt and the Japanese occupation of Brunei deserved more than just over a page. Perhaps here the author could have assessed the impact of this occupation on Brunei society and addressed several studies that argue it contributed to the development of nationalism. The short section on the volatile early 1960s is well written and informative but provides no new information or interpretation on the Brunei Rebellion, which is glossed as the ‘The 1962 crisis’. Personally, I thought that the lead up to independence could have been more expansive, in particular Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien’s determination to maintain Brunei as a Sultanate with a monarchical system of government, although a number of good studies cover this period in detail.

Overall, Marie-Sybille de Vienne’s study of Brunei contains a wealth of information and insights on modern Brunei, with detailed analysis of numerous political, economic, and cultural issues that will appeal to both specialists and general readers. It falls short of being a definitive history of Brunei, though this does not detract from the author’s achievement in producing a book that will
likely become the standard reference work for the study of post-independence Brunei and provide a clear analytical framework for future studies on this period.

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References


