

As an outcome of this conference, a strategically edited volume shall be published which will appeal to courses in history, religious science, political science, sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies. In addition, a website will be developed that summarizes the conference proceedings and the key contributors with their work. It will also encompass links to organizations and institutions that promote the study of globalization. All participants agreed on the affectionate atmosphere and the excellent conference organization arranged by all members of the Centre for the Pacific Rim. It is to hope that this conference was not the last one on the given subject.

Sebastian Hiltner

Myanmar/Burma Elections 2010: Support or Boycott?

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Myanmar's new constitution, the basis of next year's election, is flawed. It was passed through a rigged referendum. Aung San Kyi has been jailed and is on trial. Given the bleak picture, it seems farfetched to believe that Myanmar's election in 2010 may lead to a better future. But most participants at a recent conference in Berlin did just that: "It is easy to dismiss Burma's so called democratic process. It's more difficult to deal with it. There are good reasons to try. A parliament, in which civilians hold 75 percent of the seats, is better than no parliament", said Irmgard Schwaetzer, member of the Board of the Friedrich-Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNF), which organized the conference. Mrs. Schwaetzer recalled Indonesia's first election after the fall of the Suharto-Regime. "One quarter of the seats was also reserved for members of the security forces. Five years later, this was not the case anymore. Today, Indonesia is a free, stable democracy. Of course developments in one country can't be transferred to another. But Indonesia's example gives hope. And hope, that's what it's all about in Burma."

The keynote speaker was Robert Templer, Asia program director of the International Crisis Group. "Myanmar's election will indeed be a farce. It will in no way be free and fair. It will put in power a government that will be heavily dominated by the military and its proxies. The opposition will be mostly excluded and ethnic minorities will gain only token powers. But this election, however flawed, will be the most important opportunity in the coming years to expand the political space in Myanmar. The significant political changes ahead could offer important opportunities", Mr. Templer said.

His view was echoed repeatedly throughout the conference. "The elections can be viewed as the means of reaching out to the hard-pressed public and reminding it of the possibilities of democracy. Younger candidates can cut their teeth on politics and prepare themselves for an open democratic system sometime in the future. If there is to be just one reason for contesting the elections, it is that the people of Myanmar

should be given at least the hope of change”, said Khin Zaw Win, a former prisoner of conscience who now works for an NGO in Myanmar. Mr. Win expects the election law to be passed by year-end and the ballot to take place on December 11th, 2010. Who will contest? Mr. Win provided an overview: “The Union Solidarity Development Association or part of it will become the regime’s party. The inside track believes the NLD will run. The general secretary of the National Union Party says they will run. The multi-ethnic Union Democratic Alliance has not been able to make much headway. A number of groups are preparing to form political parties, one that shows promise is the Democratic Party. The present ethnic based parties are sadly echoes of the past.”

Ja Nan Lahtaw of the Shalom Foundation, who works with non-burmese ethnic groups in Myanmar, gave a presentation regarding the plight of minorities in Myanmar. After focusing on ceasefire-groups, Mrs. Lahtaw reminded the conference that several conflicts are ongoing without much attention: “Ethnic conflicts are perceived as domestic issues by the government as well as by the international community. Ethnic issues have become diminished.”

The latter part of the day was spent discussing how the free world should deal with the Government of Myanmar. “Human Rights are non-negotiable. All political prisoners must be released”, said Ulrike Bey of NGO Asiahouse Essen, who supports the EU-sanctions. “The common position provides room for humanitarian assistance”, Mrs. Bey said. Harn Yawnghwe, Director of the Europe-Burma Office in Brussels, agreed: “Sanctions should not be lifted. If the military gets its way, the human rights situation will not improve.” While agreeing that the EU’s common position is morally just, several participants pointed out that so far, sanctions have not accomplished anything tangible. “Sanctions have failed. If anything, they may have stiffened the stance of the regime. The number of political prisoners has risen”, said Marco Bunte, Senior Research Fellow at the German Institute of Global and Area Studies. “I would have liked isolationism to work, but it hasn’t”, said MEP Jules Maaten, “I am tired of passing resolutions annually and nothing changes. Some sort of engagement would be useful.” Andreas List, desk officer Myanmar at the European Commission, would like to see bridges build: “The free world should seek dialogue, possibly with a new Government of Myanmar after the elections in 2010. Unless there is a willingness to engage, Europe will remain sidelined and incapable of really helping the people of Myanmar”, Mr. List remarked. German MP Karl Addicks is convinced that oppressive governments, in Myanmar and elsewhere, are destined to fail: “One day, the last dictatorship will fall. I just wish it would happen faster.”