

Historical Preconditions and Causes for the Political Development of Present-day Myanmar

Passau, 18 – 21 July 2016

H.E. the Ambassador of Myanmar, Daw Yin Yin Myint, kindly agreed to open the conference with a welcoming speech at the Department of South-east Asian Studies, University of Passau. She began with some remarks on Myanmar's place in the world and as a member of ASEAN and named the current issues – maritime, military and security – that are significant for the country within this context. She emphasised the importance of a conference like this for better understanding the unique characteristics of Myanmar as a nation.

Marie Lall took up this theme in her keynote address by stressing that to understand where Myanmar stands today one must know where it has come from. She identified the ceasefires of the 1990s as an important catalyst for the changes in the 2010s, because these gave civil society the breathing space to slowly open up and explore how far it could go. This enabled third force organisations like the NGO Metta to arise and nullified the military's expectation that the NLD would die a gentle death. Egress – an NGO founded by Myanmar scholars and social workers in 2006 to promote democratic awareness – likewise provided an opportunity to educate young adults with the help of EU funding. From “garage schools” with no outside funding, a range of private schools developed. Change was driven by education in the ethnic areas as well as by monastic networks that all remained below the radar.

The Singapore conference on Myanmar in 2006 for the first time brought together people from the extreme ends of the spectrum: from the exile community to the military. This set off the Bangkok process and got people to talk. The final impetus for change came with cyclone Nargis, which opened the door to the normalisation of aid. The 2010 elections showed a consciousness of the significance of participatory politics. The challenges since the elections of 2015 come from the ethnic areas: ethnic voices are now subsumed and there is a certain loss of diversity. The biggest challenge is the peace process, which did not go as planned. For the peace conference in August, “21st Century Panglong”, no roadmap yet exists.

Chaw Chaw Sein started off the first section on “Recent Political Developments” with a reminder that precisely that day, 19 July, was Martyrs' Day in Burma – when Aung San and half his cabinet were assassinated by a former comrade. She asked whether Myanmar can now be called a democracy and affirmed that if we are speaking of an electoral democracy, then yes – but if a liberal democracy, then not yet. Whereas the 2010 elections

were not free and fair, the 2015 ones were, mainly due to the Union Election Commission and its cooperation with civil society organisations.

The development of military rule from 1958 until 2011 was outlined by Uta Gärtner. Her presentation highlighted the changing self-perception of the army from custodians to state builders. They call it the Burmese way, and it is important to be aware of the connection between history and politics. Democracy after independence was chaotic and unintelligible to the mass of the people, especially after the assassination of Aung San. Therefore in 1958 the coup was welcomed, although there was dissatisfaction with its methods. By 1988 this had become open contempt for the Tatmadaw by the population. The history of the army is an interesting one. In 1945 two armies existed: the British-trained ethnic army and the Japanese-trained liberation army. To combine the two was difficult because of mutual suspicions. The independent Burmese army had a strongly anti-communist bent, though that ideology appealed to the rural poor. But the army's anti-communism was less an ideological than a physical necessity to prevent the country from being torn apart. After 1962 and 1974 this became the "Burmese Way to Socialism" and the aspirations of the army turned to hegemony.

Wolfram Schaffar looked at the political changes in Myanmar from a comparative perspective of countries ranging from South Africa through Thailand to Ireland. He discussed the phenomenon of the introduction of constitutional courts as a third wave of democratisation. The interesting fact is that these were introduced (e.g. in South Africa, Thailand or Ireland) to preserve the hegemony of the elite, because these courts can overrule parliament. In 1958 the introduction of a constitutional court in South Africa was sought to be prevented, but then introduced subsequently in 1993 to secure the economic status of the white minority. In Myanmar similarly the constitutional court acts as a means to control parliament, and the state counsellor in his role *vis-à-vis* the president acts as a chancellor.

Yin Myo Thu followed up with a highly technical but very informative paper on the political economy of foreign assistance. She concentrated on foreign institutional aid and its effectiveness. "Institutional design aid" is officially aimed at good governance, and Myanmar has introduced strategic plans and commissions for long-term and short-term state building to whom the ministries should be answerable. One of these is the Myanmar Peace Centre. But aid effectiveness depends on the system of the country and on the relationship between the ministries and the commissions. There is no doubt, however, that international institutional design that is modelled on institutions in Western countries increases the flow of FDI and international credibility, even if the consequences within the country are more equivocal.

The relations between ASEAN and Myanmar were the focus of Carole Ann Chit Tha. She emphasised the strongly independent status of Myanmar, with no foreign military bases and a decided emphasis on non-interference; Myanmar therefore joined ASEAN in order to gain international recognition. One question is the attitude of the new government to ASEAN, considering that Aung San Suu Kyi and ASEAN governments regard each other warily. Aung San Suu Kyi has not yet visited any other ASEAN countries, except Singapore and Thailand – and shortly Laos – to discuss the topic of migrant workers.

Seng Raw Lahpai finished the first day's sessions with a paper on the representation of the non-Myanmar in the new Myanmar. After a short digression on terminology she backed the demands of the various ethnic groups for greater representation, as the First-Past-the-Post electoral system does not allow for an equal representation of minorities. Minority parties and minorities in general have lost out in the elections because the NLD refused to field local candidates. Another problem is the township-based constituencies that led to vast distortions of popular will because of widely diverging population figures (the urban constituencies were smaller and more numerous).

The second session, on "Historical Preconditions and Legitimation", started on 20 July with an in-depth talk by Jacques Leider on the issue of Rakhine State and the Rohingya problem. He first analysed the term *rohingya*, a term not documented in early literature, which came into fashion only at the end of WWII to describe Muslims in Rakhine State. Thus, Leider asked whether the issue can be considered anti-Muslim rather than ethnic. In fact, Bangladeshi businesses see a lot of potential in Rakhine and therefore want a negotiated solution with Myanmar. This leads Rakhine Buddhists to claim discrimination and a lack of support as they feel overwhelmed by Bangladeshi business interests.

Hans-Bernd Zöllner then discussed the visual perception of developments in Myanmar and began with a brief discussion on the swastika as an ancient Buddhist symbol which only later took on political overtones. He also mentioned the shoe controversy as a religious controversy from the early 20th century. Myanmar remained secular for long years under the junta, before 1988–2011, when religion was brought back in. He calls present-day Myanmar a constitutional democracy, which under Aung San Suu Kyi might yet become a monarchical democracy.

Tilman Frasch raised the question of how Myanmar saw the outside world and interacted with it from the time of Bagan onwards. He rejected the opposition between *akye* ("downstream") and *anya* ("upstream"), where *anya* denotes the "real" Burma. This dichotomy, he said, must be seen as a false one. Burma adopted Buddhism from India, but is the least "Indianised"

of the countries of Southeast Asia. He outlined three episodes of Buddhist ecumene where indeed the relations with the outside world were quite close: the Bagan empire, the late 18th century, and the present.

The paper by Mo Mo Thant described the social work of nuns from 1948–2010. Buddhist nuns in Myanmar are called *Thilashin*. In the following centuries the question arose as to whether they, though termed “daughters of the Buddha”, are part of the *Sangha* or not. *Thilashin* renounce normal life but contribute to society, though they should not be concerned with secular life and issues. The government’s policy of nationalisation took social welfare out of their hands to some extent, but they are still involved in health care for women and children.

Juliane Schober emphasised the interaction of women, race and religion. Women in Burma are often seen as intermediaries between the majority and ethnic minorities. This thinking is influenced by a colonial discourse. Burmese civil law is administered according to religious legal texts, which establish otherness as well as astonishingly long-lived ethnic identities. Women are blamed for what goes wrong in both politics and religion as they are assigned to embody the nation. Women in Burma do counter this discussion. They argue, for example, against faith-based bills which deny agency to women or against limiting the number of children a woman can have.

Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam discussed the perception of history as it applies to Asia and Burma in particular. History can tell us who we are, by remembering and forgetting, but in order to be forgotten, something must first be remembered. This implies that rulers and elites try to collect historical sources in order to dominate memory and control history – and thus the present and the future. In Myanmar, the very term for history has changed since colonial times from *yazawin* to *thamaing*, a shift which indicates a programme of interpretation. Historiography in Burma still relies very much on inscriptions and secondarily on chronicles. Both the military and the NLD try to mould history – and themselves – according to a certain view of this history which emphasises varying aspects of the political and religious tradition. The junta saw itself as defender of the faith in the line of the kings of Pagan of old. And many in public life still think nostalgically about Aung San, whose assassination was a rupture and left a void that cannot be filled.

The presentation of Alexey Kirichenko linked up with that theme and discussed the sources of Burmese history and their usage. In Burma there is no holistic approach to sources; their preservation is always appropriation. They are preserved not in order to be interpreted, but to be reified. Often terms are deliberately falsified in editions (e.g. from *talaing* to *mun* and from *myanma* to *bama*) by the University Historical Research Commission. Inscriptions are physically relocated to the centre in order to be controlled.

They are placed in concrete to prevent them from being worked with. But inscriptions can never be seen in isolation; they must be considered together with palm leaves and other perishable materials.

The third session, on 21 July, focused on “Media and Communication in the New Burma”. Oliver Hahn analysed the media landscape and the role of international actors in assistance for media development. He described his recent guest professorship in Yangon, where he also looked at the current media scene. The print media in particular still struggle to reach the remoter areas of the country. There is still, despite the abolition of censorship, strong self-censorship and post-censorship in the media, not least because the media in Burma are still strongly politicised. As in other parts of the world, the importance of social media is steadily increasing.

Ma Thida related her personal experience with censorship and imprisonment. She was strongly critical of the media legislation in Burma even after the abolition of censorship. There are still other ways of controlling information. Media owners have too much control over editorial content. The cartelisation of print media by political agents and cronies further impedes freedom of expression.

Finally, after three days of inspiring and fruitful discussions, Rüdiger Korff summarised the proceedings with a view towards further work to be done. He emphasised that one has to investigate what role the law must play in regulating freedom in Burma. Referring to current experiences in Thailand, the questions are whether laws are implemented equally and whether the courts, especially the constitutional court, are politicised. The importance of laws lies as well in their function to limit the power of elites and regulate political procedures.

The conference was attended by 20 speakers, of whom six came from Myanmar. Without the funding of the Fritz-Thyssen-Foundation this would not have been possible.

Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam / Rüdiger Korff