

Conference Reports

Rakhine Days: The Rohingya Conflict and its Implications for the Democratisation of Myanmar

BERLIN, 9 MARCH 2018

On 9 March 2018 the Wissenschaftsforum Myanmar (WiMya) at the University of Passau, together with the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), organised a one-day workshop at the premises of the DGAP in Berlin. In four panels, experts gave short inputs on the theoretical and methodological considerations of research in conflict areas of Myanmar, the historical background, the differing interpretations among actors and stakeholders, and possibilities for reconciliation.

The first speaker, Rüdiger Korff, described the hyperreality that is heightened by reinforcing loops of information and that blocks out the reality on the ground: the global discussions on the Rakhine conflict are far removed from the discussion inside Myanmar and the situation in Rakhine itself. The distribution of material and financial aid for the affected is thus based on the maxim “who pays the piper calls the tune”. Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam also emphasised the importance, for any analysis, of access to reliable data – which in the conflict area can be hard to come by. Moreover, the ethics of research become a factor when questions of neutrality, impartiality and objectivity arise. She stated that it is important not to get hung up on labels but to analyse the situation and structures of oppression in order to help the victims. Focusing on the effects of the media, Oliver Hahn described a media logic that is focused on personalisation, i.e. the stories of the victims; in his opinion, conflict reporting is a kind of storytelling. Myanmar is still more or less a blind spot as regards international journalism and in large parts an inaccessible territory. Moreover, most foreign journalists do not speak the language, which is a major drawback to profound and professional journalism. In order to look at both the problem and the actors involved and to determine the concrete issues at stake, Bernt Berger recommended a think tank. At the moment a battle about narratives is raging, he argued, which leads to talking around, not about, the issues.

Another speaker, Hans-Bernd Zöllner, saw the problem in Rakhine as a cyclical one that reoccurs periodically in a different guise. Many available sources and explanations are not utilised because they are old. He mentioned the riots in 1930 and 1938 that similarly targeted Muslims for alleged defa-

mation of Buddhism or the fear that their number would lead to the extinction of the Buddhists (interestingly, at that time Rakhine was quiet).

How the Rohingya conflict turned from a triangular one in 2012 to a multipolar one at present, with multiple actors – Muslims, militants, AA, ARSA, the army, NLD, foreigners, NGOs, OIC – was described by Jacques Leider. He also noted that the international relevance of the conflict stands in contrast to the perception in Myanmar, where there exists no impression of urgency. Moreover, highlighting the historical background for an explanation is obviously insufficient to grasp the problem, because mindsets are linked to a shared past, but a separate history. In addition, the Muslims were traditionally strongly linked to the army and the USDP, a fact that only changed very recently, in 2012. At the moment historical analysis seems to clash with legal and human rights arguments. In August 2017, the final report of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, which was chaired by Kofi Annan, was presented to the Government of Myanmar. As Mandy Fox stated, it provided a glimmer of hope, though there were queries about the Commission's composition and mandate. The report presented 88 recommendations covering the whole range of humanitarian and developmental issues relevant for Rakhine. It is striking that this report is not mentioned among international activists referring to the genocide of the Rohingya.

Aung Tun Thet, a member of the Myanmar Peace Commission (MPC) and Chief Coordinator of the Union Enterprise for Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement and Development in Rakhine (UNHERD), provided a nice quotation as the Myanmar delegation outlined their proposals for a possible solution of the conflict. Against an intense engagement with the history and origins of the conflict, he cited Lord Buddha: "If you have an arrow in your heart, do not ask where it came from, how, who shot it and why, just pull it out." In his view, the solutions proposed thus far – sanctions, embargoes and involvement – are not helpful, but would lead rather to a deterioration of the situation. UNHERD presents a fresh approach because it involves all actors and primarily the private sector with a view to economic development. It is driven by domestic resources and intends to start with infrastructure in Rakhine, with roads, electricity, etc. Aung Tun Thet outlined some planned projects, such as a Special Economic Zone in Maungdaw, to increase cross-border trade, banking, SMEs, health and tourism that should be initiated in cooperation with the regional government. Rakhine has to be brought back from a war economy to a peace economy according to the UN global compact: human rights, labour standards, environment, anti-corruption. The private sector, in particular, is being challenged to contribute to these endeavours.

During the discussion that followed, the Myanmar delegation stressed that in the rural areas there is very little knowledge and understanding of human rights, therefore education is badly needed on this topic. Once again Aung

Tun Thet emphasised that historical, political, economic and social factors are deeply interrelated and can only be solved together. In this regard demographics have to be considered. Sometimes the impression is created that the majority in Rakhine are Muslims. That is not true, and poverty affects all. However, the aid response by the international community goes only to this one group. In a view only conditionally accepted by the other participants, Aung Tun Thet dated the beginnings of the current problem to 2012, as an intercommunal conflict turned militant because of ARSA (Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army) attacks, with only the army's response being condemned. It should be kept in mind that Rakhine is a border state, making national security an issue. In fact, the atrocities discussed internationally are concentrated in the three border townships, where the Muslims form a majority of sometimes more than 90 per cent of the population.

Pyone Kathy Naing, Member of the Parliament of Myanmar, pointed out the complexity of the problem that in her view stems basically from colonial times: Rakhine is the poorest state in a poor country, with poverty affecting Buddhists and Muslims alike. The Rakhine Buddhists object to an internationalisation of the conflict because they fear it will disadvantage them. But international commitment can have a productive role if it cooperates with the government. Another member of the Myanmar Parliament, Je Yaw Wu, drew attention to the significance of the military in the solution of the conflict, citing a need for checks and balances.

The question of the return of the refugees and their citizenship status was admitted to be the thorniest problem. Aung Tun Thet complained that in the Kofi Annan Report there is little mention of the state's responsibility towards the Muslims in this regard. The delegation emphasised that the rules of citizenship are crucial, and that the 1982 law is still applicable. The Myanmar government will probably not recognise the Rohingya as an indigenous ethnic group with special rights. But these people have a right to individual citizenship on the basis of individual human rights: their status is equal to the status of Muslims with Indian or Chinese ancestry in other parts of Myanmar. Currently, registration is proceeding at the moment. This involves first a documentation process through the so-called "National Verification Card", which is issued to returnees as a first step, before they obtain citizenship documents. To get this card, no special documentation is needed, but the returnees must state which village they are from and how long they have lived there. However, there are reports that some people who wanted to go through the process were killed or prevented from applying.

The workshop provided a sober and dispassionate view of the problem in the Rakhine State of Myanmar in contrast to the numerous often biased and one-sided events on the issue. Importantly, the views of different sides in Myanmar were given attention, while it was acknowledged that the problem in the

area is severe, and that the Rohingya are definitely subject to oppression and violence. The extent and origin of these conditions, however, are more complex than often assumed.

Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam

Opportunities and Challenges of Democratisation in Myanmar

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The conference was held in commemoration of the 97th anniversary of the foundation of the University of Yangon, and was sponsored by the universities of Yangon, Passau and Yunnan and the Hanns-Seidel-Foundation. In continuation of questions raised during the Interdisciplinary Myanmar Conference (WiMya) in July 2017 in Passau, the following issues were addressed: the role of the military in Myanmar, the effectiveness of civil society, aspects of economic development, international factors and implications, especially the effects of sanctions, religio-cultural factors connected with questions of centralisation, decentralisation, autonomy and the situation of minorities, and media and the public sphere. Discussions, particularly with the Chinese participants, were vivid and sometimes controversial, as in the latter's denunciation of the "West" in general and the "Western" media in particular. Across sessions, similar issues were discussed repeatedly from different angles, including the role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), the current problems in Rakhine state, and the Chinese view of Myanmar politics and economy.

The introductory keynote, "Towards an International History of Myanmar's Transition", was kindly given by Dr Thant Myint-U, the grandson of former UN Secretary-General U Thant. He outlined his view of the transition process in Myanmar as perceived internally and internationally and touched on a number of topics that were discussed again later. He saw the changes as a top-down and intra-elite process initiated by a ruling class that in the 1990s perceived it as inevitable that they would end up in a pact with the National League for Democracy (NLD). Internationally, change was helped by quiet diplomacy and a confluence of lucky moments, with India becoming more engaged and Norwegian negotiator Erik Solheim arriving as an advisor in 2010/11. Though Myanmar is a potential regional hub there is no major Western focus on Myanmar as of yet. But local issues, such as questions of identity and ethnicity/religion and their relation to citizenship and armed conflict have become global issues, not unique to any one country. This applies particularly