

# 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

YANGON, 13–14 DECEMBER 2017

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

to the problem in Rakhine, where Myanmar feels justified in its fear of Islamic attacks tied to global Islamic movements. There arises the question of belonging and how to ride the wave of nationalist sentiment. According to Dr Thant Myint-U, the new elite in Myanmar has not yet fully formed, and it should move away from rigid thinking about ethnicity. He also briefly touched on China as a significant model for Myanmar and raised the question of whether democracy is sufficient as an answer to global challenges.

In the first session, Li Chengyang from Yunnan University, Chaw Chaw Sein from Yangon University, Yoshiro Nakanishi from Kyoto University and Wolfram Schaffar from the University of Vienna discussed the role of the military during the transition and the future of the democratisation process. The first speaker compared the current situation in Myanmar with that of Thailand and Indonesia and claimed that the military saw democracy as a tool for modernisation, rather than a goal. This was in a way confirmed by Chaw Chaw Sein, who stated that civilian control of the government remains rare, but that the current government wanted positive engagement within civil society and wide-ranging reforms. She argued that the peace process should be a triangular process combining the three factors of Disarmament, Devolution and Reintegration (DDR). For that process a civil-military partnership is needed as well as a comprehensive security strategy. Yoshiro Nakanishi, the third speaker, emphasised the new and younger face of the military after the reshuffle of 2010. The hitherto invisible military leaders are now more visible in a new PR strategy, e.g. on Facebook and social media. The non-military activities of the military constitute the justification for its political role. However, the issues dealt with are banal, and one must ask whether this will really generate public support. Finally, the stability of the democratisation process was investigated by Wolfram Schaffar, who drew an interesting comparison with Mongolia and Bhutan.

The second session on “Religion and Politics” provided a variety of papers and viewpoints. Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam (University of Passau) introduced the topic with a short overview of the history of the University of Rangoon and its eminent political role in the struggle for independence. Zu Xianghui from Yunnan claimed that Buddhism was a significant cultural but completely apolitical influence in the relations between China and Myanmar – an assertion that was discussed rather controversially. Jacques Leider from ÉFEO Bangkok described competing ethnonationalisms in Rakhine that cannot be reduced simply to the question of the Rohingya. The Rakhine Buddhists feel equally disadvantaged, and there exist other Muslim communities besides the Rohingya. As is often the case, the problem is perceived very one-sidedly outside the country.

“Civil Society and the Media”, the third session, was opened by Oliver Hahn and Ma Thida from PEN International, who presented the state and

perception of the media in Myanmar. Oliver Hahn emphasised two points: Firstly, the character of the media and communication has changed considerably with the rise of social media (mainly Facebook), which are especially popular in Myanmar because they are often used and considered as the only source of reliable information. There exists a new bottom-up public sphere that needs a voice. Secondly, the necessity of journalism for democracy should be questioned. Journalists in the country are activists rather than professionals, he claimed, and both the training and self-organisation of journalists leave much to be desired in the absence of a clear media policy. Journalism may be a check on power but may also serve as an affirmation of the rules.

Ma Thida took the first point further and elaborated on the lack of trust in the rule of law among a population that cannot distinguish between editing of a journalistic piece and censorship. This opens the door to libel and hate speech. As a reaction, politicians increasingly use §66 of the Penal Code (forbidding personal insults and insulting the Buddha) to shut down unwelcome criticism. Mo Mo Thant (University of Yangon) looked at the changing role of CSOs in contemporary Myanmar. She noted that CSOs only emerged in the colonial period, since before then, welfare was a concern of the clergy and pious laypeople. She emphasised the difference between autonomous and non-profit CSOs, often staffed by volunteers working in an honorary and unsalaried capacity, and NGOs that are often organised professionally.

Continuing this topic Rüdiger Korff (University of Passau) opened the fourth session, “International Aspects and Implications”, with a discussion on the influence of international development organisations on Myanmar. These organisations often seem to take over tasks from the state and society and thus indicate a deficit. He posed two questions: 1) Which topics (currently concentrated on peace, justice, gender, human rights) are central and why? and 2) Who are the counterparts in the country itself? It seems that state organisations mostly work with the state and NGOs with NGOs, with little overlap. An important point is that negotiations that take place in the public sphere are influenced by international development organisations that have no democratic legitimacy.

Yin Myo Thu (University Yangon) outlined a contradiction, or at least a difference, between universal norms and particular norms and the implications for Myanmar: while the universal norm of human rights applies, in Myanmar the particular norm of citizenship rights is equally important, a point she illustrated with the case of the Muslims in Rakhine. According to Yin Myo Thu, the human rights argument is invalid as a means for international organisations to compel Myanmar to amend the 1982 citizenship law, since from 2013 Rakhine has been a security issue. The population in Maungdaw region is 94 per cent Muslim. In addition, there is a conflict between the people of

Rakhine and INGOs and IOs. Myanmar has a right to deny the internationalisation of the conflict, though it conducts discussions on this with ASEAN.

Rainer Einzenberger from Vienna University illustrated the significance of CSOs within his research area, the Chin State, an upland and frontier region. The state is trying to integrate the frontier, which leads to problems of land and resource-grabbing in these areas. The discourse still turns on indigenism and the centre-periphery paradigm, in which the definition and perception of the frontier as a geographical and virtual space derive from colonial times. The legal framework does not recognise customary law and creates a land market for the Myanmar state in which people with no documented rights are cheated out of their land and its resources. The CSO discourse of indigeneity and indigenous rights tries to countervail these developments.

The value of democracy for Myanmar, as Kong Jianxun (Yunnan University) pointed out, lies not in its potential for individual liberty and choice but in its welfare potential. In her opinion, democracy means the welfare state and public services that secure income, jobs, health care, etc.: democracy should provide a better life.

In the final session on “Economic Dynamics” primarily the Chinese participants presented their papers, as well as Win Myat Aung from the SEAMEO Regional Centre for History and Tradition, who gave a short overview of the Myanmar economy since 2015. Yang Xianzhang from Yunnan University then examined the importance of Myanmar–ASEAN relations under the NLD. In this context, it was significant that the President of Myanmar, U Htin Kyaw, made his first visit to Laos. ASEAN is a priority region for economic cooperation and a springboard onto the global level.

Ying Yao outlined the political implications of Chinese investment in Myanmar, especially in minority regions such as Kachin State, which objects to Chinese investments and exploitation of natural resources.

Dai Yonghong from Sichuan University threw an interesting light on China’s intentions with an interpretation of China’s initiative “One Belt One Road” (OBOR) and Myanmar’s place in the scheme. He claimed that OBOR should be regarded as a mutual advantage for Myanmar in particular, since China would make up for the latter’s disadvantages. OBOR thus aims at sincere friendship and mutual economic prosperity devoid of political pressure or control. It is about economies, not geography, and based on three pillars: economic development, peace and political transition. Its three corridors consist of China–Pakistan (CPEC), Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar (BCIM) and China–Myanmar (CMEC), which is an integrated region connecting Kunming, Mandalay (the hub), Kyaukphyu and Yangon. In an aside he denounced sanctions (as currently demanded over Rakhine by the “Western” media) as useless because they would affect the people, not the government.

The conference was remarkable and enlightening not only for the views and perceptions of the Myanmar scholars, who provided frank evaluations in a Chatham House environment, but equally for the presentations and perceptions of the Chinese scholars, whose remarks on occasion generated vivid discussions. It is to be hoped that similar conferences will be conducted in the future.

*Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam*

## 2. Mitteldeutscher Südasiientag (2nd Central German Conference on South Asia)

HALLE (SAALE), 22–23 JUNE 2017

This series of conferences for contemporary research on South Asia commenced in 2016 in Leipzig; after a successful first conference in 2016 the second one was held in Halle (Saale) on 22–23 June 2017. The aim of the conference is to provide researchers on South Asia in the German-speaking areas opportunities for networking and interdisciplinary exchange. For that reason, researchers with a focus on modern South Asia from various disciplines and irrespective of their academic level were invited to participate.

The conference was again organised collaboratively by the Institute for Indology and Central Asian Studies of the Leipzig University and the Department for South Asian Studies of the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg. Other involved organisations and sponsors of this year's conference were four associations, namely the Centre for Interdisciplinary Area Studies of the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, the Working Group "Modern South Asia" (Arbeitskreis "Neuzeitliches Südasiien") of the German Association for Asian Studies, Bengal Link, as well as the Halle affiliate of the German-Indian Association. They created a platform for 19 presenters, eight chairs and fifty other participants to share views and ideas or enter into interdisciplinary exchange and dialogue.

The conference opened on the evening of June 22 in the main building of the Francke Foundations. Heike Liebau of the Centre for Modern Oriental Studies delivered the keynote speech in German, "Akteure und Praktiken deutsch-indischer Wissensproduktion in translokalen Kontakträumen" ("Actors and Practices of German-Indian Knowledge Production in Translocal Contact Spaces"). Following the speech the curator of the Francke Foundations



guided the participants through exhibitions that, among others, displayed objects from South Asia.

All presentations were delivered on June 23. They were arranged as eight panels, with two panels always taking place simultaneously. The first two comprised topics pertaining to foreign politics and foreign economic relations (Alexander Benatar, Berlin; Stefan Tetzlaff, Göttingen; Wolfgang-Peter Zingel, Heidelberg) as well as literature (Johanna Hahn, Bonn; Hans Harder, Heidelberg; Réka Uta Máté, Erfurt). The following two panels were either dedicated to legal aspects in India (Tanja Herklotz, Berlin; Kalindi Kokal, Halle (Saale)) or city development and cultural heritage (Kati Illmann, Halle (Saale); Rachel Lee, Munich). After a lunch break there were three presentations on religiously motivated identity politics and Islamism in Bangladesh and Pakistan (Kawser Ahmed, Winnipeg; Bilal Haider Rana, Erfurt; Jürgen Schaflechner, Heidelberg) and simultaneously two presentations on Nepal's to date barely explored architectural and theatrical traditions (Gudrun Bühnemann, Madison; Makoto Kitada, Osaka). The final presentations were delivered focussing on the topics women's rights and their realisation in Afghanistan as well as Pakistan (Shikiba Babori, Cologne; Jasmin Mairhofer-Mehmood, Vienna) as well as the relations of religion and science in Islam and humour in Islamic sermons (Arian Hopf, Heidelberg; Max Stille, Berlin). The full programme can be viewed at [http://www.suedasien.uni-halle.de/Suedasientag\\_2.pdf](http://www.suedasien.uni-halle.de/Suedasientag_2.pdf).

Due to the large number of participants, the variety of topics and the fact that interdisciplinary conferences on South Asia do not take place often in the German-speaking area, the Mitteldeutscher Südasientag shall continue in the future. Furthermore, since the feedback from all of the sections was quite positive, it is being considered to expand the conference format beyond the Central German region. If so, it will bear the title "Deutscher Südasientag" (German Conference on South Asia).

*Franziska Strich*