

Conference Report: WiMya-DGAP- Workshop 9th March 2018

On 9th March 2018 the Wissenschaftsforum Myanmar at the University of Passau (WiMya) together with DGAP organised a one-day workshop in the premises of the DGAP in Berlin entitled

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

The workshop aimed at providing a discussion forum about the so-called Rohingya-conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine state currently discussed very controversially. It aimed specifically at giving colleagues from Myanmar an opportunity to put their point of view about the origin and causes of the conflict.

In four panels experts gave short inputs on the theoretical and methodological considerations of research in conflict areas, the historical background, the differing interpretations among actors and stakeholders and possibilities for reconciliation.

Rüdiger Korff described the hyperreality that is heightened by reinforcing loops of information and 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. Regarding material and financial aid for the affected is based on 'who pays the piper calls the tune'.

Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam stated the importance of reliable data for any analysis which in a conflict area are hard to come by. Besides, ethics of research come in when questions of neutrality, impartiality and objectivity arise. 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.

Oliver Hahn described a media logic that is focused on personalization, i.e. the stories of the victims. Conflict reporting is story telling. There are three possible roles for the media: 1) co-conflict party aligned with one side (embedded), 2) peace-making parties, trying to find a way out (very unrealistic), 3) Third party, i.e. the one who laughs last who is interested in the conflict going on in order to feed an audience. Myanmar is still more or less a blind spot and in large parts inaccessible territory. Not speaking the language is a big drawback as is parachute journalism.

Bernt Berger recommended a think tank to look at both the problem and the actors involved to determine the issues at stake. At the moment there rages a battle about narratives. This lead to talking around, not on, the issues. Working in Myanmar can lead to cognitive dissonance, because the environment is so unusual.

Hans-Bernd Zöllner saw the problem in Rakhine as a cyclical one reoccurring periodically in different guise. Many available sources and explanations are not used because they are old. He mentioned the riots 1930 and 1938 that similarly targeted Muslim for alleged defamation of Buddhism or the fear that their number would lead to the extinction of the Buddhists. Interestingly at that time Rakhine was quiet. This was an indication that religion was just part of the problem. The Muslims were seen as different, but equally important was economic nationalism and social fears (marriage laws).

Jacques Leider described how the 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. The international relevance of the conflict is in contrast to the perception in Myanmar, where there exists no impression of urgency. The question is one of the historian's task. Highlighting the historical background for an explanation is obviously insufficient to grasp the problem. It is also a question of interpretation of existing sources, because mindsets are linked to a shared past, but a

separate history. Besides, the Muslims are traditionally strongly linked to the army and the USDP. This only changed in 2012. At the moment historical analysis seems to clash with legal and human rights arguments.

Mandy Fox stated that the Kofi Annan report (RAC = Rakhine Advisory Commission) provided a glimmer of hope, though there were queries about its composition and mandate. The members were from South Africa and Sweden, after the departure of Bill Richardson, and a Muslim representative. There were 88 recommendations covering the whole of Rakhine, but whether all can be implemented is another matter. Interestingly, among international activists referring to the genocide of the Rohingya, this report is not mentioned.

Bernt Berger stated in the panel on reconciliation that it was too early to talk about reconciliation and questioned whether that was the issue at all. The elites need not be reconciled, they are always in league with each other, but the poor. So the question is rather, who believes the narrative of antagonism that always employs the same stories, and who is fighting whom. At issue is the intersection of conflicts, so one needs to involve all groups and actors and a legal system that involves all.

In the fourth panel, the Myanmar delegation, especially *Aung Tun Thet* outlined their proposals for a possible solution of the conflict. Against a too intense engagement with history and origins, he quoted *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.* This was the path to reconciliation. The solutions proposed hitherto, sanctions, embargoes and involvement are not helpful, they would lead to a deterioration of the conflict. UNHERD presents a fresh approach because it involves all actors and primarily the private sector with a view to economic development as a Trojan horse for reconciliation. It is driven by domestic resources and intends to start with infrastructure in Rakhine, with roads, electricity etc. Arakan under the British was a growth region. Now it only produces rice. He outlined some planned projects like an SEZ in Maungdaw to increase cross-border trade, banking, SMEs, health and tourism that should be initiated in cooperation with the regional government. This was in answer to a remark that mere development could create resentment among a local population that felt it could not participate in the benefits of such development. 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 challenge is the private sector: it went from mixed through nationalisation to crony capitalism. A crisis is also an opportunity, and Myanmar has a late-comer advantage, but it wants to solve the problem itself by asking what we want Myanmar to look like in 2050. The NGOs and international organisations define the deficits of the state, so the international community should not dictate, but attempt to move together.

The discussion concentrated primarily on the following points: the background and origin of the current conflict, the position of the Rakhine Buddhists who felt blamed and treated unfairly internationally, possible solutions and the questions of a return of the refugees and that of citizenship.

The Myanmar delegation stressed that in the rural areas there is very little knowledge and understanding of human rights and sexual harassment. People have to be educated about this. *Aung Tun Thet* emphasised that historical, political, economic and social factors are 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, but poverty affects all. However, the aid response by the international community goes only to one group. He saw the beginning of the current problem in 2012, to which the other participants agreed only conditionally. However, an intercommunal conflict has now turned militant with the ARSA attacks.

Their attacks were coordinated, but only the response by the army was being condemned. It should be kept in mind, that Rakhine is a border state, therefore national security is 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% of the population. The militant incidents, moreover, often coincide with UNGA.

In another context he claimed that internationally, reconciliation is given little attention and that the internationalisation of the issue is problematic. In 2016 the Maungdaw Investigation Commission came already up with 48 recommendations, which were very similar to the 88 recommendations in the Kofi Annan report. It is difficult to disentangle the package of 88, it is not prioritized according to relevance. To a question he answered that for a solution BIMSTEC was still an important factor because integrated development with Bangla Desh and India was vital for a just solution.

Pyone Kathy Naing pointed out the complexity of the problem that basically stems from colonial times: Rakhine is the poorest state in a poor country, with poverty affecting Buddhists and Muslims alike. In the budget, this is accounted for, a commitment that will countervail international allegations. 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. This should also further reconciliation. *Je Yaw Wu* drew attention to the significance of the military in the solution of the conflict; there had to be checks and balances with them.

The question of the return of the refugees and their citizenship was admitted to be the thorniest problem. *Aung Tun Thet* complained that in the Kofi Annan Report there is little mention of the responsibility of the Muslims in this regard, as well as for the deterioration of the situation.

The delegation emphasized that the rules of citizenship are crucial, and that the 1982 law still is applicable. Apart from this a range of options exists. Myanmar will not recognise the Rohingya as an indigenous ethnic group with special rights. But they have a right to individual citizenship on the basis of individual human rights. In other words, their status is equal to the status of Muslims and persons with Indian or Chinese ancestry in other parts of Myanmar. Concerning this, registration is going on at the moment. This involves first a documentation process named the National Verification Card. This is issued to returnees before they get citizenship documents. This process does not need documentation, but the people must state which was their village and how long they have lived there. However, some people who wanted to go through the process were killed or prevented from applying with the argument they would thus lose citizenship. On this issue, obviously a lot of work remains to be done.

Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam