

## **Myanmar – A western view**

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First of all

Thank you very much for the kind invitation to this interesting and important workshop. It is a great pleasure for me to come here and have the chance to discuss with colleagues from Myanmar – a chance which I have rather seldom - unfortunately.

On the other side I was a little bit puzzled to give a “Keynote”; an honorable but challenging task. What is a keynote? If I’ve understood this term correctly I have to provide a note may be a notice which will serve as a key to the solution of a problem or a whole range of problems.

If this is your expectation - I’ve to admit – I can’t fulfill it. What I’m trying to do is to give some insights into the perceptions we had in the west – more modestly spoken – in Germany - about Burma/Myanmar and by doing that – I’m afraid - I’ll raise more questions than giving answers.

Another preliminary remark: in my speech I’ll often use the word “we” or “our” or “west” or “western”. When I use these words, I want to describe with them a position which – according to my view - dominates public opinion and government decisions as well. I am very well aware, that a variety of other opinions exists and existed in the west which did not and do not get so much prominence and influence.

What factors, images and interests shaped our view of Burma or Myanmar? – I will use both names of this country without connecting any political significance with it

To start with the most popular, long lasting but – politically spoken – least telling factor: That I would call Orientalism – Exotism.

For decades Burma was regarded and is still regarded as a mirror truly reflecting all our images and desires we held about Asia. Relying on all the comforts a highly industrialized society provides we often see under-development as authenticity and originality as the true picture of Asian culture which is spoiled in many other places of Asia. We often see stagnation as peace and harmony which we miss in the hectic of our daily lives and all the more in the chaos of Asian mega-cities.

The less religious we get in the western world the more we admire the religiosity of people in other parts of the world. Burma is a very good example for the phenomenon. If you want to see piety and devoutness you have to go to Myanmar. A lot of tourists follow that advice and they will find it, because their view is focused on that what they want to see. “You only see, what you know” as the German writer Fontane put it.

Though this perception of Burma - as some sort of Shangri La - is long-lasting and wide-spread, it is just the background-music compared to the political determinants shaping our governments perception of this country. These determinants changed over the last decades dramatically but their prerogative importance didn’t.

To illustrate this thesis I want to go back to the forties and the fifties of the last century

Burma got its independence in the formative years of the cold war which created a bipolar power-constellation in international relations. Both blocs struggled for influence in the so-called “Third World”, the countries which few years ago got rid of the colonial rule. The cold war divided Germany in two parts, two antagonistic states which got into fierce competition last not least in the field of international politics. The geo-strategic position of Burma, located at the crossroads between South-Asia, Southeast-Asia and East-Asia, between India and China provoked the special attention of the two German states which both could rely on the rather positive image Germany held in this country. In the middle of the fifties both German states opened trade missions in Rangoon which were later transformed to an embassy in case of West-Germany and in a Consulate-General in case of East-Germany.

When Ne Win finally came into power in 1962 this competition for influence between the two German states was not interrupted. Just the opposite, the support of the two German states for the military-government increased.- Although Ne Win’s political program and his form of government were not in accordance with West-German or East-German political norms and values.

Under the slogan “A Burmese way to Socialism” all major enterprises came under the control of the state. Private ownership of land was abolished. But there was no systematic building of a socialist economic system. While a socialist party, the “Burma Socialist Program Party” existed on paper - the political and economic system was de facto controlled but by a military junta led by Ne Win und his clan. There was a Communist Party of Burma based in the north of the country and supported by the Chinese communists, but this party fought a protracted armed struggle against the military-government in Rangoon which used all its dictatorial power and its military forces to launch brutal military campaigns against the armed forces of the communist party and the different groups of the ethnic minorities.

The guiding principle in foreign policy was neutralism. As a founding member of the Non-Align-Movement the Ne Win-government carefully avoided to be drawn in one of the camps of the East-West-Conflict and the Sino-Soviet-Conflict and by following that line getting a maximum of support by these hostile camps and a maximum of independency of them.

This strategy worked because the policy towards Burma of these two international camps was guided just by one principle: maximize the own influence and minimize the influence of the other side. All other considerations and principles like democracy, human rights, socialism etc. were taken aside due to the overriding aim:

Don’t let fall a country in the opponent camp, especially if it is located in such an important geo-strategic position and possesses valuable economic resources.

The case of Germany – more correctly of the two German states- illustrates that very well. Though the policy of Ne Win did not correspond to political aims proclaimed by West-Germany **or** East-Germany - both German states did their utmost, to strengthen the relations to him and his regime. In the diplomatic competition between east and west, in our case between the Federal Republic and Democratic Republic of Germany, West-Germany was ahead, but East-Germany didn’t give up and concentrated its comparatively scarce resources in the field of education. 1973 - after the quasi mutual diplomatic recognition between the two German States - the GDR’s General consulate in Rangoon was raised to an embassy.

The Federal Republic gave massive development aid and was the second-biggest foreign aid donor after Japan. General Ne Win came nearly every year to western Germany on unofficial visits organized by the – at that time – state-owned weapon-factory “Fritz Werner”, one of the most important arms-supplier of Ne Win’s army. 1986 the President of the Federal Republic, Richard von Weizsäcker paid an official state-visit to Burma and declared:

From the first moment of our visit, we felt we are under friends.

One year later, his visit was replied by the Burmese president Sun Yu. From the sixties to the End of the eighties we had quite different coalition governments in Western-Germany but these changes didn’t have any effect on the policy towards Burma. In the eighties, even the greens – at least some voices in this party - regarded the “Burmese way to socialism” as an interesting example of a “Third Way” between capitalism and socialism.

This perception of Burma and the policy towards Burma changed dramatically with the beginning of the nineties.

What had happened?

If we follow the official narrative of the western countries, the following events were decisive:

1988, a protest mostly led by students was brutally suppressed by the military. The military junta led by Ne Win stepped down and a new military junta came to power which gave up the concept of the “Burmese way to socialism” and held elections in 1990. This was a rather strange move for a military junta because a mighty opposition could take part on these elections. This opposition was formed by the daughter of General Aung San widely regarded as the founding father of Burmese independence. His daughter Aung San Suu Kyi has spent the most of her lifetime abroad, first in India later in Great Britain. 1988 she came back to Burma for personal reasons to help her ailing mother. Moved by the political turmoil of her country she courageously jumped into politics. Without having much experience in this field, she founded a new political party the “National League for Democracy” (NLD) which won a landslide victory in the upcoming elections.

But the military junta did not recognize this victory, stayed in power and suppressed the opposition. According to the western narrative, the western countries had no other choice than to support democracy represented by Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD against dictatorship represented by the military junta. The western countries established a policy of economic and political sanctions. Aung San Suu Kyi personified all the ideals of the West and her fight for democracy was rewarded by the Nobel- prize for peace in 1993.

This policy of was something the military junta could hardly understand. The view of the military government at that time was: We are a military government like our predecessor which got so much support by the west especially by western Germany. We gave up this concept of a “Burmese way to socialism” and proclaimed the western concept of “market economy” and we are punished by this sanction-regime. There must be a conspiracy intrigued by the lady and her western friends. Confronted with these neo-colonialist forces we have no other choice than close the ranks and stick together. Grown up in the military you follow the well-trained military exercise: when you are under fire, take cover and entrench yourselves.

But the tremendous change of western policy was not caused by a sinister conspiracy. It was the result of the end of the cold war which in the western hemisphere was perceived as a victory of the west in international politics. We remember the book of US-professor Fukuyama about “The end of history” or Huntington’s book the “Third wave of democratization”, the multi-colored revolutions in Eastern Europe, the democratic movement in China, the beginnings of Doi Moi politics in Vietnam, the international settlement of the Cambodian conflict. It was a time of high-flying hopes for a democratic future worldwide, though in China the democratic movement was soon violently suppressed by the Tian An Men massacre.

Seen from that western perspective the political situation in Burma seems quite clear. It was a fight between dictatorship and democracy represented by brutal and corrupt generals and a beautiful and courageous lady very well familiar with and connected to the western world. It was perceived as a fight between “the beast and the beauty” as Hanns Bernd Zöllner called it in his excellent book. She was considered as a heroine who would lead her people to democracy and therefore deserves every support from the west.

Using this eagle-view many problems were out of the focus of western governments and of large parts of the public opinion and academic debates

- The military was treated as one coherent block. Our politicians did not analyze the different interest-groups inside the military. No offers were made which could have been attractive to some specific groups inside the military and could therefore have deepened the splits inside the military block. In a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, the coherence of what was perceived as the “military block” was in fact strengthened as the pressure of the sanctions policy led to a siege mentality within the military.
- We always spoke about the “ethnic groups”, the “ethnic minorities” as if these groups were well defined political entities and more or less similar political actors. Of course there was a lot anthropological and sociological research about these various and very differently organized ethnic groups, but the results of this research did not reach the level of political decision making. Maybe, these results would have blurred our clear-cut picture of a struggle between ethnic groups fighting for ethnic autonomy and the military suppressing with brutal force this fight for ethnic autonomy, enslave the population and plunder the natural resources of their areas. No doubt, this happened many times but it was only a part of a much more complex picture.

Rather seldom the following questions were raised: How came the leaders of these ethnic groups into power? Are they – in what form however – democratically legitimized? What is their concept for the economic and political development of the areas under their control? Which group is qualified to be partners of the West in political and development cooperation? There was a lot of empathy and sympathy for these people who suffered terribly under the war, but no adequate political strategy was developed which at least could a little bit relieve the plight of these people.

- There was a lot of admiration for Aung San Suu Kyi for her courage, her tenacity and her uncompromising fight for democracy and for the official acknowledgment of results of the elections held in 1990. We also admired her followers taking every hardship to defend her.

But again, very important questions were seldom raised: What is her political program? How can democracy be implemented in an impoverished and multi-ethnic country? What are her political experiences in making compromises, in forming a common political platform or coalition? What about her party? How far is it democratically structured? What is the background of the people at the top of this party? Have not been some of them high-ranking officers in Ne Win's army which fought a brutal against ethnic minorities?

- Besides of the NLD personified by Aung San Suu Kyi there were also several other groups and forms of opposition to the military regime. Western actors and politicians appraised these opposition forces differently. Most of the politicians did not take notice of them or regarded them simply as a part of the activities of the NLD. On the other side, especially in academic circles these groups were seen as the first sprouts of a nascent civil society and important actors of social and political transformation and it was overlooked that these groups are polyvalent. That means: these non-government organizations reflect the positive and the dark sides of the society as well. There would have been a need to carefully scrutinize every group whether it can or how far it can fulfill the high-flying hopes connected with them. But this rarely happened.
- This polyvalence can also be observed in the Buddhist clergy worshiped by the generals and the people as well. In the West Buddhism, the Buddhist church was mostly glorified as the peaceful power of the powerless. This perception was determined by the pictures of Buddhist monks asking for alms and getting alms by people though these people have not much to give. The brutal slaughter of Buddhist monks peacefully demonstrating for national reconciliation in autumn 2007 confirmed this view. In short: Buddhism was seen as a proponent of democracy. This view was not completely wrong, but it was not realized that this is just one component of a much more complex and contra-dictionary picture which came in our focus only recently.

Since we always looked at the top, at the surface of the developments we had very little knowledge about the mechanism, the driving forces and the stumbling-blocks to a prosperous economic and democratic political development.

To cut it short may be too short:

Unwittingly we saw this country like the military saw it. A country which is dominated by the military, a junta – a very close coalition- also dominated by one general and these people at the top - supported by a very effective secret service - can control every aspect and every activity in this country. The only difference between the military's view and our view was the evaluation. The military saw it as the best case; we saw it as the worst case.

The new constitution confirmed by a plebiscite not worth the word, the elections in November 2010 far from matching the basic standards of “free and fair” elections seemed to confirm our worst expectations: There is no political will for real reforms, it is nothing else than window dressing, old wine in new bottles.

Our perception changed when new, highly unexpected decisions were taken at the top: Aung San Suu Kyi was freed from house-arrest, political prisoners were released, the Chinese dam building project in Myitsone was stopped, censorship was lifted; the NLD could register as a

legal political party, which won nearly all the seats in the by-elections in April 2012 etc, etc. I think you are quite familiar with all the reform-steps which were taken by the government of Thein Sein during the last two years.

It took some time till western governments acknowledged that the reform-policy of Thein Sein is sincere and has to be supported by the western countries. Lastly, decisive for this decision of the west was the acknowledgment of Thein Sein's reform-policy by Aung San Suu Kyi.

So the response to the reform-policy reflects the old pattern of western policy towards Myanmar: we look which decisions are taken at the top? We ask: which is the position or policy of the leading politicians? Are there any changes in the foreign policy that may alter the geo-strategic position of this country? By focusing on these and other similar questions we all too easily overlooked and overlook more deep-rooted challenges which have to be adequately addressed to achieve the desired results:

- How consistent is the reform-strategy of the current government?
- Which concrete steps were designed and taken to implement this strategy?
- Which are the social forces which will support the reform-policy?
- Is the reform-policy accompanied and supported by an economic policy which addresses the basic needs of the majority of the population living in the countryside?
- Is there a policy or better policies towards the quite heterogeneous group of the non-Burmanese ethnicities?
- Etc. etc.

To sum it up:

As in the decades before, we seldom take a deeper look into the mechanism of this very complex and complicated society and its political structures. What is worse, we don't see the necessity to do so. After some conversations with young professionals in the field of development cooperation I had held in Yangon last December, I got the impression – and I do hope this impression is wrong – they know everything what has to be done, because they know everything what is written in our textbooks about development policy and they consider Myanmar as a fertile ground to set these theories into practice.

May be this is an exaggeration, but I myself was rather confused to get so many answers and so few questions.

Due to our rather limited knowledge about this country - and our lack of readiness to look beyond our own stereotypes and dig into the complexities that characterize society and politics in Myanmar - we are always surprised and puzzled by developments which run against our conventional wisdom.

- Why does a leading member of the former military government initiate democratic reforms this country hasn't seen for decades?
- Why do "peaceful" Buddhists brutally attack and kill Muslims, torch down their houses, which some Burmese journalists qualify as "Nazi-like" pogroms?
- Why did the icon of the democratic movement Aung San Suu Kyi stay silent in front of these pogroms and declares. I love the military because my father has founded it.
- Why did fighting break out again between government troops and the Kachin Independence Army which had a ceasefire agreement for nearly 20 years?
- Why doesn't our engagement in development cooperation find the responses we hoped for?

When these frustrations go on – and it is quite likely – that they will go on, the high flying hopes will turn into pessimism. We can already observe the first signs of this process. Several days ago (April 25.) an article in "The New York Times" had the headline: "Are Myanmar's Hopes Fading?" So are we back to square one? Was the lifting of the sanctions too early and should we go back to the old policy of sanctions and "force" this government to reforms?

How to escape this vicious circle of euphoria and pessimism? The answer sounds very simple, but hard to implement and realize: we have to face the realities of this country. In my view three points are of special importance:

1. Many aspects of this country are under-researched especially in the fields of social sciences. Our view of Asia is dominated by China, to a lesser degree by India, Japan. The smaller states of Asia and of the other parts of the world as well are coming in our focus, when there are some natural disasters, social uprisings, armed conflicts, havens for terrorist groups or unexpected political moves like in Myanmar. At that time more or less informed experts are popping up and you can observe a sudden and huge interest of our media in this country. But soon this country slips our minds and scholars who want to continue their interest in this country have to justify it and have to struggle to get funding for their research which is seen as very exotic and therefore neglect-able. In short: We need much more comprehensive and sustained research on this country.
2. The few experts on Myanmar work rather isolated. Not a few of them do desk-research without close contacts with partners from Myanmar. There is no or very little

permanent exchange between the different scholars working on Myanmar in different disciplines. The political scientists, the economists work with political scientists and economists dealing with the same topic in other countries. But the very few political scientists and economists dealing with Myanmar seldom exchange their views and results of research with historians, anthropologists dealing with Myanmar. Therefore our knowledge about this and other “small” countries, their specific circumstances and aspects, is rather limited or focused on one aspect, failing to see the interdependency of the different aspects. In short: we need much more cooperation and exchange between the experts on Myanmar.

3. Our public discourse about Myanmar is very emotional and driven by the dynamic of events. Waves of interest are followed by total absence of this country in our media and euphoria is followed by pessimism. There is a very limited and sporadic public debate about the developments of this country. The results of our research seldom reach the level of political decision making.

Both sides are responsible for this state of mutual disregard sometimes contempt between the worlds of academia and of politics. Scholars are not very eager to come in contact with people on the political level and vice versa. Academicians have seldom learned to present the results of their research to politicians or officials in the administration and evoke their interest. On the other side, the decisions of politicians and officials in the administration are based on a variety of interests and considerations under which the needs, challenges and chances of small countries mostly don't figure very prominently. More important considerations and determinants of the policy towards Myanmar are: our Position in the EU, our relationship with the US, the next elections etc. Opinions of independent scholars and think-tanks are welcome as long as they bolster up the decisions of politicians. Sometimes we may observe some variations in this relationship, but normally they will not last for longer. In short: we need a much more intensive and sober public debate about Myanmar and a discourse on equal footing between academia and politics.

Myanmar reflects a general problem: in times of globalization the importance and the role of small countries is often under-valued. What matters, are the big players. Only by severe crises like in Afghanistan, in North Korea we are - rather hesitantly - learning to take into account the impact of these countries on world politics and on our lives. We design a role these countries have to play and we get angry and frustrated if the role is not played correctly. We rather seldom come to the conclusion that the role we designed was wrong. To avoid further frustrations we are well advised to analyze these countries more carefully and engage in these countries in a process of mutual learning and understanding.

In view of the present situation this sounds rather unrealistic and utopist. But the alternative is a muddling through from major to minor crisis and back again from minor to major crisis. And last but not least we should not forget: those who suffer most from the failures of our policy are not we ourselves but the people in these countries who we claim to support and help.