

1. Drawing the sting: Civil society, institutionalisation and human rights in Burma – Matthew Sheader, PhD Candidate, Human Rights Centre, University of Essex (also Director Society, British Council Burma)

Abstract: In both theory and practice, civil society is central to the promotion and protection of human rights. This can involve legal, educational, promotional as well as more confrontational labour, performed by actors varying in status and formality, and operating in different degrees of proximity to state apparatus. Despite a highly restrictive environment, Burmese civil society has been a popular standard-bearer for human rights, demonstrated by the significance of networks of human rights defenders and fully-fledged NGOs over the past decade. Although human rights have been an important mobilizing factor for episodes of activism and protest, the day-to-day work of the small but increasing number of domestic human rights NGOs is different in many regards. For many stakeholders, recognition and support of politically active, rights-focused entities within Burmese civil society is axiomatic for promotion and protection of human rights in the country. This is materially realized in numerous ways, such as project or operational funding, or carving a role for actors in policy development. This paper takes a critical realist approach toward examination of roles and practices of civil society actors engaged in human rights work in Burma, and the new political and economic forces shaping them. It is argued that they encounter, and are constrained and enabled by, pre-existing structures which partly condition both their origin and their human rights activity. From this premise, organizational and neoinstitutional theory illuminates new codes of appropriateness shaping everyday practice and actor identities. Structures and institutions produce a dominant and causally active logic which conflates NGOs and civil society, and which results in constraints and contradictions for human rights more broadly. Research is based on experience of working with civil society in Burma since 2005, and ethnographic data taken from recent fieldwork.

2. Framing 'the situation': how civil society organisations influence perceptions of change (or lack thereof) in Myanmar – Maaïke Matelski, PhD Candidate, VU University Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Abstract: The political situation in Myanmar has changed more over the past few years than in any other period in recent history. Observable changes on the political and legislative level have resulted in widespread international acknowledgement and rewards. In recent years, local civil society actors have spoken of increased 'space' as a result of societal and political developments, and the intention to expand this space through their own activities. Their cautiously optimistic narrative has been countered by more critical voices who warn against a dismissal of serious remaining concerns and grievances among the population. This paper seeks to explain how civil society organisations develop certain frames of the situation in Myanmar, how they attribute responsibilities, and how they design their campaigns and activities. It will discuss why some focus on positive change and opportunities for engagement, while others emphasise existing problems and the need to remain vigilant towards the government.

This requires an examination of the various functions attributed to civil society in theory and practice, from bridging communities to challenging power holders. It also requires an exploration of the way non-governmental organisations and social movements portray themselves in order to secure international assistance and moral support. Using several campaigns initiated by Burmese civil society organisations over the past five years as case studies, this paper will analyse how civil society actors develop collective action frames based on a combination of local interests and global agendas. As such frames are necessarily limited in scope and consideration, a comparison of several of these frames and the rationale behind them will provide a more nuanced and multi-faceted picture of perceptions of 'change' and 'space' in Myanmar.

3. Power and resistance of Myanmar civil society – Diane Tang Lee, Graduate Student, University of Manchester, United Kingdom

Abstract: Chinese investments in Myanmar have resulted in nation-wide protests in recent years and even the suspension of the Myitsone Dam. Some Myanmar commentators and international observers portray Chinese aid and investments in other developing countries as neo-colonialism. Regardless of the intention of China, it inevitably exports certain types of development ideologies alongside its investments – a state-centric, top-down, and infrastructure-driven development approach. With the opening up of political space, Myanmar grassroots communities and civil society organizations (CSOs) respond to these ideologies negatively. In the quest for equitable development, Myanmar CSOs advocate the adoption of international standards such as increased transparency, accountability, and public participation in China's investment projects. These norms to various extents challenge China's own development ideologies. If China is trying to establish ideological hegemony – one that attempts to win the spontaneous consent of the mass of the population about its development approach, the advocacy campaigns in Myanmar can be examined as counter-hegemonic resistance. In this site of negotiation, both sides try to influence each other about what development approach should be undertaken. I examine how this resistance has the power to socialize China into accepting western development norms. Moreover, beyond the regional hegemonic power of China, there is also evidence of resistance against the global hegemony of capitalism. Despite the alignment with western NGOs and adopting their buzzwords of development norms such as transparency and sustainable development, grassroots and advocacy networks have a deeper longing to preserve the environment and culture rather than see any form of development trample over them. Are these development norms what they are really asking for, or do they simply not have other better angles to leverage on transnational advocacy networks to amplify their demands? Based on preliminary fieldwork findings, this paper will address these questions and lay the groundwork for further investigations.

4. The role of the mass media in the demand to halt the Myitsone dam's construction – Htet Htet Nu Htay, PhD Candidate, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies

Abstract: The political system of Myanmar changed from a military regime to a democratic government on April 1, 2011. Censorship of print publications was largely relaxed after this political transformation. The new government began to disclose information and hold press conferences, the control of information was slowly removed. The new government has proposed a bill in parliament. Although it cannot be said that change has spread to the entire country, popular political participation has advanced in urban areas through the mass media. Criticism of a large construction project, sponsored by the government, has become a public topic in a weekly newspaper and the Internet media in the four months since the political change. The Myitsone dam, financed by the Chinese investment, does not profit the Myanmar people, and raises the possibility of large-scale environmental destruction. Articles critical of its construction have been carried daily by many journals, and a popular campaign had demanded its cancellation by the government. As a result, the voice of those who oppose the Myitsone dam's construction has become stronger; thus, President U Thein Sein has announced that he is freezing this project during his term in office. This paper analyzes the role of the mass media, including the Internet, in the demand to halt the Myitsone dam's construction.

5. Unfreezing history in Myanmar: An attempt to engage civil society in dealing with the past – Hans Bernd Zoellner, Lecturer, University of Hamburg

Abstract: As we know, Thaton was conquered by King Anawrahta in 1057. In the official history books prescribed for public schools in Myanmar he is depicted as a hero who united Burma/Myanmar and conquered Thaton out of good intentions (*cetana*). The anecdote shows that this view is absolutely not shared not just by the Mons but by other non-B'ma groups in Myanmar as well. They look at the old story as a first example of B'ma imperialism. However, both sides share the same attitude towards history which can be described as "frozen". Each side claims to know and to profess the truth. As a consequence, ethnic antagonism is underpinned by perceptions of Myanmar history. The same can be stated with regard to the different views of the military coups of 1962 and 1988 which are antagonistically assessed by the leadership of the Tatmadaw and the forces opposing military dominance in Myanmar. "Defreezing" history therefore could be a way to strive for a mutual understanding of Myanmar's troubled history with its abundant cases of controversial historical events both past and present between and within the country's many ethnic and political groups. The "Minesweeping through Mindsweeping Project" is an attempt to address this problem by inviting members of Myanmar's civil society to take new looks at the country's history and start discussing the "hot issues" of the past with the aim to overcome mistrust and reconcile antagonistic perceptions. The paper will explain basic concepts of the project as well as a number of difficulties that could be noticed in its initial stage. Furthermore, the presentation will raise the question of how academic insights can contribute to facilitating peace and reconciliation in Myanmar.