

## **Conference at the University of Yangon:**

### **Tentative concept note**

**Tentative date: 13-15/12/2017**

### **Organiser :**

**University of Yangon, Dep. for International Relations, Yangon University of  
Distance Education, Dep. for History,  
Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences**

**Wimya**

### **Opportunities and challenges of democratization in Myanmar**

There are many journalistic reports that discuss the transition process in Myanmar as well as the current situation, but there is a distinct lack of academic studies regarding the topic. In most cases specific sub-topics are selected and investigated more closely. This improves the state of information but does not help to understand the total process nor does it assist in making prognoses about the direction the current reform processes will take. One reason for this is that access to data is difficult, particularly concerning the informal connections between military and business, but also discussions between civil society groups and other actors. The reliability of existing data is often doubtful.

There are very distinct differences between internal perceptions - the emic view which is characterized by long-term experiences, informal talks, cultural evaluations etc. - and external perceptions - the etic view, which looks at the total picture, but sees few details. Both have advantages, but best is a combination of both. To create a better understanding of ongoing processes, disciplinary, theoretical considerations as well as those characterized by particular research interests as well as emic and etic views should be brought together within the context of the conference.

The conference will highlight key factors that had played and play a role in the transition:

1. Role of the Military: Over the last decade the military government continued to lose legitimacy due to the economic situation as much as the ongoing ethnic conflicts and the isolation within ASEAN. The military government was seen as based exclusively on repression, fear and resignation. The transition may have been an attempt to reduce tensions and increase legitimacy and preempt violent change. The military is still today strongly involved in politics and natural disaster management. It is necessary to find out how the military is cooperating with civilian government in the country's national security agenda.
2. Civil Society: After Nargis 2008, closer cooperation became possible between local NGOs and international aid organizations. Local NGOs like Metta, Shalom and Egress could thus fill gaps in education, rural development and political education. Today, the CSOs are conducting as a bridge between government and military. Their great efforts can be seen in the Myanmar' general elections.
3. Aspects of economic development: State capitalism before and especially after 1988 created a business sector with close connections to the military. Private enterprise took over former public enterprises with profit shares for the military. Since opening up and reforms under quasi-

civilian government, private-public-partnership was enthusiastically carried out. The post election economy of Myanmar adopted with 12 economic policies by encouraging FDI, however, the SMEs are in a dilemma with unclear policy of the government and are also worried with the upcoming ACE in 2018.

4. International Aspects: Myanmar's transition has led to major shift in her foreign policy. The western sanctions in 1990s created a severe dependence on China and Chinese investors, which led to misgivings not only among the population. However, the transition with Myanmar's reform paved way for a reengagement again with the west, especially with the US. Again the 2015 post election Myanmar with new civilian elected government makes a turning point of relations with China again.
5. Religio-cultural factors: The protests of 2007 demonstrated that the Sangha was not and could not be fully controlled by the military. Nargis was interpreted in certain circles as an indication that the military rule did not conform to the ideal of a just Buddhist ruler. It will have to be determined what might be the future role of the Sangha in the reform process, particularly since from parts of the Sangha religio-nationalist movements have originated that attack religious minorities
6. Centralization, Decentralization, Autonomy: Especially the ethnic nationalities demand decentralization and more autonomy for themselves in a federal system. Until now, centralization had hardly been reduced. It will have to be seen, whether and how a proper system of decentralization and federalism is feasible, and whether as well as in how far the elected government is willing to push forward such an agenda..
7. Media and the Public Sphere: With the abolition of pre-censorship in 2012 a manifold media landscape developed comprising print media as well as broadcast media (though radio has remained a state monopoly) and internet and social media. Electronic media, however, mostly reach only the big cities, but social media via smartphone extend over most of the country. These are of vital importance for the dissemination of information, which creates a bottom-up public sphere, but also a large amount of rumor and fake news. Journalistic professionalism leaves a lot to be desired. There is no clear media and information policy discernable nor a clear PR and communication strategy on the side of the NLD.

In sum, for the democratic transition, four aspects are of main importance namely:

1. the political framework and power relations;
2. economic dynamics and access to resources;
3. society in terms of emergence of a democratic value system;
4. civil society as active participation in the process of developing democracy.

Do the respective dynamics (political, economic and social) have a direction towards democratization, and are they strong enough to facilitate democratic transition? This conference will try to answer these questions.