

# Myanmar 2021 – from Where to Where?

## The summary of Myanmar Conference

Michał Lubina



### About Myanmar Conference

The Interdisciplinary Myanmar Conference, a yearly conference of Myanmar-Institut, was organised this year by the Institute of Middle and Far East, Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland on 25-27th May 2021.

The conference was unique and particularly interesting. Following conferences in Bonn, Zürich, Konstanz, Passau, Berlin and Stuttgart this was the first conference beyond the German-speaking countries. At a very special place: the Jagiellonian University (founded in 1364).

Unfortunately, due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the participants were unable to gather in the medieval walls of Jagiellonian University. This conference had to be organised online (just like the previous conference in Stuttgart). On the other hand, the online form allowed a much bigger number of participants and attendees. 242 individuals registered in total to take part & observe the conference. We are particularly happy that despite the unfortunate circumstances, more than 50 people from Myanmar participated in the conference. It wouldn't be possible if the conference was organised in real time.

The topic of the conference was “Myanmar’s Transition: From Where to Where”. The term “transition” is frequently used in this context and refers to a very ambiguous process. Neither the genesis nor the outcomes of the complex and fascinating recent period of Myanmar’s history can be clearly defined. The idea of the conference was conceived before February 1st 2021 but the dramatic events following the coup d’état even enhanced the relevance of the topic.

Here is the brief summary of the conference (some names and some data have been removed due to security reasons; also for security reasons we have removed the programme from the website – only this summary will be available).

### The Activist Panel

The proceedings started on Tuesday 25th May at 15.00 (Central European Time, or CET) with the Activist Panel. It was moderated by Carolin Hirsch, a PhD candidate from University of Konstanz. The participants discussed various forms of the resistance by the people of Myanmar, including in the artistic sphere (inside and outside of Myanmar). The underground National Unity Government’s (NUG’s) role and politics were also discussed (at times critically). As were the current whereabouts of the Myanmar Embassy in the UK, the practical consequences of the political deadlock within the Embassy for ordinary Myanmar people in the UK, Ireland, Sweden and Denmark. An Open Letter supporting the recognition of the NUG was also presented.

### The First Day of the Conference

Conference started on Tuesday, 26th May at 10.00 (CET), with the opening speech and a minute of silence for all those killed in Myanmar after February 1st 2021. Then the keynote speech by Dr. Khin Zaw Win, director of Thampida Institute and a former political prisoner, was planned. Unfortunately, it had to be rescheduled due to power cuts in Yangon.

Instead, the first panel “Select Perspectives on the Myanmar coup and its implications,” opened the conference. It was quite fittingly given political circumstances. Organised by Michael Lidauer (Independent Researcher) & Marco Bünthe (Professor at Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg) it also included Helene Maria Kyed (Danish Institute for International Studies) and Henri Myrntinen (Visiting Research Fellow, KU Leuven). Marco Bünthe’s presentation opened this fascinating, excellent panel. He showed a series of pull and push factors in civilian-military relations, explained the nature of the 2015-2020 tutelary regime and argued that both personal (“toxic relationship between Aung San Suu Kyi and Min Aung Hlaing”) and corporate motives have played a role in

the coup. Prof. Bunte also spoke much about the vital structural factors determining the Tatmadaw's stance. The presentation was followed by a fascinating (and politically sensible) Q&A.

Michael Lidauer analysed the electoral narrative of Myanmar military's 1 February 2021 coup d'état, with a view to the 2020 general elections. The Tatmadaw argued that it opposed the electoral process rather than the results, but appears to want a "corrigendum" of the elections, in line with its desired outcomes. Michael Lidauer mentioned the military-appointed Union Election Commission, quoted from military statements regarding the elections, looked into electoral data published by the current administration, and spoke about the political importance of the UEC's recent meeting with political parties. Finally, Mr. Lidauer drew the attendees' attention to the fact that the Tatmadaw's announcements concerning the elections are also aimed at a foreign audience.

Helene Maria Kyed, "looked at Myanmar from its border area": Karen state to be exact. Employing a perspective from the "border" or "frontier" of state governance, she presented the fragile conditions of peace and plural authorities in a Karen frontier both before and after the coup. Given the current dynamics in Karen state, her presentation was extremely timely. Helene Maria Kyed explained, too, the changed attitude of the Burmese society towards EAOs after the military's pacification. Henri Myrntinen presented the "The Gendered and Generational Dynamics of Post-Coup Politics", starting from analysing NLD's pre-coup stance on gender issues (which can be summarized in a sentence "we already have the Lady") and describing why gender has been considered a sensitive issue. He also summarized the post-coup dynamics: the ongoing societal change and the empowerment of marginalized groups, especially young women.

After the panel, the internet connection with Yangon was restored, so we were able to hear Dr. Khin Zaw Win's keynote speech.

This excellent, profound speech centred on three major issues: the assessment of the current events; the leadership failures in Myanmar and the state of Myanmar society.

The keynote speaker indicated "a profound disconnect" between the intellectual/academic sphere and Burmese political reality, presenting a political leaders' disinterest in expert/intellectual advices: "Myanmar is not lacking in intellectual capacity and technical expertise; it is that the top leadership have not learned how to use it." In second part of his speech, Khin Zaw Win elaborated about leadership failure in his country "civilian and military, term after term, decade after decade" comparing pre-coup situation to "a palace power struggle with no concern for the people."

Finally, Khin Zaw Win described current dramatic events, repeating his words (from Taiwan's TCCS seminar in April) that "it is impossible to predict the outcome of a revolution." He also pointed out to the changed intra-ethnic dynamics within the country, stating "the edifice of Burman ethnic dominance has been shattered irreparably." He concluded his speech by presenting a more universal trend of democratic backsliding, noticeable in both Southeast Asia and Central Eastern Europe.

After a short break, next presentation came from Mon Mon Myat, an independent journalist and a PhD candidate at Paypap University. Mon Mon Myat in her talk "Competing paradigms in Myanmar politics" used a classical text in Burma Studies (Maung Maung Gyi's "Burmese Political Values") in order to read it anew and support the claim of "authoritarian character" being "deeply rooted in Myanmar's military system". She presented a dichotomous struggle between democratic and authoritarian forces. By using these lenses, Mon Mon Myat argued about the outcomes of the coup d'état: "the destruction of the country's transition to democracy in the 21st century" and singled other negative consequences for the country.

Following another short break, a roundtable "Hijacked Transition and Continuing Struggles – Responsive and Proactive Processes in Building a New Myanmar" commenced, organised and moderated towards a lively exchange and engagement of ideas between the two groups of panelists – academics and advocates – by Professor Chosein Yamahata (from Aichi Gakuin University in Nagoya, Japan). Dr. Chosein Yamahata is well-known for his "Academic diplomacy" project.

This numerous and diverse panel consisted of various talks: Tin Tin Nyo (Managing Director, Burma News International, Myanmar) who delivered her analysis on the on the ongoing struggle of Myanmar where people united for a common mission – the 2nd independence revolution – from the military-led authoritarian rule. Due to the scale of atrocities waged by the military, constituting international crimes, the people of Myanmar are determined to remove the authoritarian military at any cost.

Saw Maw Day (Treasurer, Central Youth Working Committee for NLD, Myanmar) presented his position on the new struggle that the NUG has been facing in countering the severity of destruction continuously wrought by the junta (SAC) to all ethnic nationalities, societal peace and order, community security, and human rights since the February coup. He emphasised how the international community can diplomatically empower the NUG by recognising the NUG, and thus, save the lives of civilians in Myanmar, facilitate the NUG, and benefit the world community by stabilising Myanmar.

Naing Tun (Research Intern, Taiwan Centre for Security Studies, Taiwan) highlighted the negative consequences of the military coup in terms of ‘losses’ – economic prospects, human/individual potential, and international connectivity – by comparing national/regional corridors, national/Asia highways, and committed and planned SEZs. He highlighted the fact that the only hope is to give back to the Myanmar people their ability to pursue their dreams towards development, peace and federal state, which can be guaranteed by the NUG so long as it is bolstered by international support.

Naw Thiri May Aye (PhD Fellow, Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain) pointed out other, non-political challenges, including promoting environmental justice in general, reducing socio-ecological vulnerability, introducing measures towards resilience building, and strengthening community capacity building of the marginalised communities and regions by citing past case examples and the Atlas of Environmental Justice. She strongly recommended the process of democratic transition and the subsequent impacts on the stated points during the NLD-led period, and the need to focus on the restoration of democracy in order to benefit the marginalised/vulnerable communities and concentrate on environmental justice.

Dr. Nisit Panthamit (Professor at Chiang Mai University, Thailand) discussed border issues and elaborated on the roles of Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand in general and the border regions in particular. The coup and the subsequent disorder and insecurity have disturbed the equilibrium in many ways in addition to the impacts of the coronavirus on both Thailand and Myanmar migrant workers. He asked for a viable support for Myanmar and indicated how her border people need to be considered from wider, strategic, regional and sustainable perspectives of the Greater Mekong Sub-region as well as in ASEAN.

Dr. Donald Seekins (Professor, Meio University, Japan) generated a situational analysis of Myanmar after the coup in the geopolitical context, theorised about the dysfunctional or unsuitability of “Neo-Asian materialism” (defined by him as “a belief that all human problems can be solved by economic and technological progress”) in this crisis scenario, and shed light on the nature of the emerging political deadlock and security landscape/risk caused by the China factor. He also discussed the potential coming course of violence that all sides of Myanmar may be on, while comparing Myanmar’s situation to that of Palestine which sparked a discussion.

The last panel of this day consisted of two speakers: Dr. Uta Gärtner from Humboldt University in Berlin presented a historical perspective on Tatmadaw’s claim to political leadership. The well-known German lecturer of Burmese language presented archival documents, flags and other symbols and discussed “the noble troops” way to achieve political dominance in 1940s and 1950s. She also estimated the strength of various military branches, from infantry via navy, air force to police, border guard forces and militias.

After Uta Gärtner’s talk a joint presentation prepared by Aung Kyaw Min (a student from Chulalongkorn University) and Dr. Hans-Bernd Zöllner (independent researcher, author of several seminal books on Myanmar) was planned but due to electricity problems in Hamburg, Dr. Zöllner lost connection and Aung Kyaw Min had to present their findings singularly. The talk presented the long road to current catastrophe by elaborating about the crucial factors in Tatmadaw-NLD relationship, including personal relations between Aung San Suu Kyi and Min Aung Hlaing.

## **The Book Launch “Myanmar’s Rohingya Genocide: Identity, History and Hate Speech” by Ronan Lee**

First day of the conference concluded with the book launch of Dr. Ronan Lee (International State Crime Initiative ISCI; School of Law, Queen Mary University of London) recent book “Myanmar’s Rohingya Genocide: Identity, History and Hate Speech” (Bloomsbury, 2021).

Dr Lee situated his book interdisciplinary within: political science, genocide studies and Burma studies, presented his new sources (unknown Buchanan’s texts and many interviews conducted with Rohingya activists) and elaborated about the-post coup political dynamic in Myanmar and about the prospects for the Rohingya. His views about NUG’s stance proved to be particularly insightful: barely a week after his talk the NUG politically recognised the Rohingya in a breakthrough statement. The book launch recording can be found here while the book is accessible from here.

In between session the participants and attendees of the conferences enjoyed talks on Wonder platform which resembles real time academic backstage talks as closely as possible.

### **The Second Day of the Conference**

The second day of the conference started with the presentation of Carolin Hirsch (PhD Student, University of Konstanz) “the Gendered Rebel. A Microstudy of Mainstreaming Society in Myanmar” who researched a punk band Rebel Riot and came to a conclusion that the male-dominated concept of Rebel Riot turns out to be a dynamic concept that is still to a certain extent mirroring characteristics of the Myanmar mainstream society; a society the band members are actively trying to distance themselves from. The presentation offered a no small amount of non-obvious observations while the question from one of the events Rebel Riot attended (“where are the women?”) remains highly symbolic.

Next came one of the highlights of the conference: Mratt Kyaw Thu’s talk (“Fake news during the Military Coup”) delivered from the Frankfurt airport where this dissident journalist awaits for EU’s asylum decision. In an engaged talk that included personal story of escaping Myanmar via EAO-controlled territories, Mratt Kyaw Thu depicted the sorry state of journalism in Myanmar under siege (only approximately 1/3 of journalists remained in the country) and the negative consequences of this state of affairs (“it is not Gaza” meaning there is not so much verified coverage from Myanmar). Most of the talk centred on his struggle with the fake news that spiralled after the military coup. The talk impressed the attendees to such extent that many followed-up by listening to Mratt Kyaw Thu during the break and even longer.

The session, dedicated to cultural issues, started with Ronan Lee’s talk about “Heritage Destruction in Rakhine State: Legal and Illegal Iconoclasm” based on his (co-authored) article under the same title, traced patterns of heritage destruction and argued the use of heritage destruction in Rakhine state should be understood as a tool of genocide. Dr. Lee, showing photographs from such locally iconic places as Sittwe’s Jama (Friday) Mosque (now damaged, closed and defunct) or former Rohingya’s shops, divided this heritage destruction into “iconoclasm from above” and “from below”. His talk sparked a multidimensional discussion, from methodological issues to (disputed) comparisons with Bangladesh’s approach to Buddhist heritage.

The next talk (entitled “The Jewish Community in the Context of Pluralist Society in Burma”) came from Natalia Sineaeva (Never Again Association, Warsaw). The presenter, drawing from her own experience as a researcher of multiculturalism and Jewish history in Eastern Europe, painted a picture of Burmese Jews (based on the book “Almost Englishmen” by Ruth Cernea as well as a personal visit to Yangon and conversations with the leader of the Jewish community of Myanmar). She stressed the history of the Jews in Myanmar (the small community currently consists of about 20 people) is an illustration of the social and cultural diversity of Myanmar which can be a positive resource in a future democratic society.

After a lunch break, there was the roundtable moderated by Dr. Wolfram Schaffar (Professor, University of Passau) entitled “The Role of the Academia in the Present Situation in Myanmar.” Among the participants were: Prof. Dr. Judith Beyer (University of Konstanz); Dr. Nwet Kay Khine (University of Passau/Rosa-Luxemburg-Foundation, Berlin); Dr. Ronan Lee and Ass. Prof. Dr. Naruemon Thabchumpon (Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn

University, Bangkok). Due to security reasons and Chatham House rules of this roundtable it is not possible to disclose the discussed content.

Following a break came my presentation entitled “Discussing transition with(out) illusions. Aung San Suu Kyi in Poland in 2013. A personal account” where I shared my experience of participating in some of Aung San Suu Kyi’s talks with top Polish politicians in 2013.

The last talk during the main part of the conference came from Professor Rafal Pankowski (Never Again Association and Collegium Civitas, Warsaw). His talk also touched upon the Polish-Burmese issues. Prof. Pankowski referred to former foreign minister of Poland Radoslaw Sikorski’s trip to Myanmar and Sikorski’s talks with Thein Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi (mentioned both in Sikorski’s memoirs and in his conversation with Pankowski). After that Rafal Pankowski presented examples of cooperation between Polish and Burmese civil society activists, including the initiative “Identifying and Countering Holocaust Distortion: Lessons for and from Southeast Asia.” The project deals with various forms of genocide distortion and denial, including the denial of the crimes of the Khmer Rouge or anti-Rohingya violence.

**The Book Launch “A Political Biography of Aung San Suu Kyi. A Hybrid Politician”**

The conference concluded with the book launch of my recent book, “The Political Biography of Aung San Suu Kyi” (Routledge, 2020). During the book launch, moderated by Dr. Ronan Lee, I talked about various aspects of the book: the methodological perspective (between postcolonial studies and political science), the narratives about Aung San Suu Kyi; the political career of DASSK and about many other issues. I tried to move beyond clichés. The recording of this book launch can be found here while the book (Open Access now) can be found here.

**Conclusion**

The conference was very successful and fruitful. The enthusiastic feedback my colleagues and I received afterwards proves it was an event worth doing. I would even say it exceeded our expectations by both the impressive number of participants and attendees (it set the record in terms of number of participants – it is so far the largest-ever Myanmar-Institut’s conference) and the academic value of their talks/presentations.

**Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank all those from Myanmar-Institut who organized this conference with me. Our organising committee consisted of Georg Winterberger, Esther Tenberg, Diana Tobias, Jella Fink, Mia Kruska, Felix Hessler and I. Georg and Esther were managing the technical aspect of the conference (thanks to them the proceedings went so smoothly); they too, together with Diana, Jella, Felix and Mia came out with many ideas; Mia also made the graphic design of the programme. During initial stages of the preparations I worked also with Hans-Bernd Zöllner and exchanged many ideas about the conference.

Thank you all so much!

Looking forward to seeing Myanmar-Institut’s next conference in 2022!

Michał Lubina, Phd /dr hab.  
Institute of Middle and Far East  
Jagiellonian University,  
Kraków, Poland

**The Burmese language summary:**

မြန်မာ အင်စတီကျုရဲ့ မြန်မာ ညီလာခံ ၂၅. ၀၅. ၂၀၂၁ က ၂၇.၀၅.၂၀၂၁ ထိ ဗမာစကား အကျဉ်းချုပ် “မြန်မာ ညီလာခံ” က မြန်မာအင်စတီကျု ( ဂျာမနီ ၊ ဆွတ်ဇလန် ၊ ဩစတြီးယျ) က နှစ်တိုင်း လုပ်တဲ့ညီလာခံ တစ်ခု ပါ။ ဒီနှစ် ညီလာခံ ပိုလန်နိုင်ငံ ၊ ခရက်ကိုမြို့ (Krakow) ၊ ရာဂီလိုနီယမ် တက္ကသိုလ် (Jagiellonian University) ၊ အရှေ့အလယ်ပိုင်း နဲ့ အရှေ့အဖျားပိုင်း ရဲ့ အင်စတီကျု (Institute of Middle and Far East) မှာရှိခဲ့တယ်။

ကံမကောင်းစွာပဲ ကိုဗစ်ကပ်ရောဂါကြောင့်online ညီလာခံပဲ ရှိခဲ့ဇာန်။ ဒါပေမဲ့online ကြောင်ဖျါပိုင်ဆွေးနွေးသူတွေ နဲ့ ဝတ်ရောက်သူတွေ ပိုများခဲ့ဇာန်။ ၂၄၂ ယောက်ကျော် စာရင်းပေးခဲ့ဇာန်။ မြန်မာလူမျိုး ၅၀ ကျော် ခက်ခဲတဲ့အခြေအနေကြားထဲက တက်ရောက်ခဲ့တဲ့အတွက် ကျွန်တော်တို့ အရမ်း ပျော်တယ်။

ဒီညီလာခံ အရမ်း အောင်မြင်ခဲ့ဇာန်။ ပညာအသစ်တွေလည်း အများကြီး သင်ယူခဲ့ရတယ်။ ကျွန်တော်တို့ ဖုန်းနံပါတ် ၂၀၂၂ ညီလာခံမှာ ထပ်တွေ့ဖို့ မမျှော်လင်ပါတယ်။

ဒီညီလာခံကို တက်ရောက်ပေးတဲ့အတွက် ပါပိုင်ဆွေးနွေးသူတွေ နဲ့ ဝတ်ရောက်သူတွေ အားလုံးကို ကျေးဇူးအများကြီးတင်ပါတယ်။

လုံခြုံရေး အကြောင်းပြချက် ကြောင့်သတင်းတွေ အများကြီး မပေးနိုင်ဘူး။

ကျေးဇူးတင်ပါတယ်။ နောက်မှ ထပ်တွေ့ဖို့ မမျှော်လင်ပါတယ်။

Michal Lubina (ပြည်စုံ)

ပိုလန်နိုင်ငံ ၊ ခရက်ကိုမြို့

ရာဂီလိုနီယမ် တက္ကသိုလ်

အရှေ့အလယ်ပိုင်း နဲ့ အရှေ့အဖျားပိုင်း ရဲ့ အင်စတီကျု။

<http://pulsazji.pl/2021/01/31/myanmars-transition-from-where-to-where>