

**REPORT – EIAS BRIEFING SEMINAR**

**Voices from Civil Society Actors in Burma: Challenges and Opportunities Facing the Different Sectors in 2010**

*12 July 2010, 14:30-16:30*

*EIAS, Brussels*

On Monday 12 July the European Institute for Asian Studies hosted a briefing seminar on the situation of civil society in Burma/Myanmar, in particular on the print media regulations and the progress of education. The meeting began with a brief overview of Myanmar, which is geographically located in Southeast Asia and has a population of approximately 59 million people. However, as it is listed as a Least Developed Country with an annual GDP per capita (PPP) of about US\$1000, many in Myanmar live in deep poverty. It is also a country that suffers from one of the highest mortality rates in the world.

The first speaker addressed media issues in Myanmar. The key issue is that the news media has been state-owned since the military take-over in 1962 - although there has been an increase of private news agencies in the last decade. Before 1989, the entire country relied on state-owned media, which changed after 2005 with the emergence of private news sources. Currently there are 189 private media sources. However, only 28 of these are news sources - the rest are special interest weekly and monthly publications covering cooking, sport or other hobbies. These private news sources represent approximately four million readers, leaving a vast majority of the population reliant of state controlled news sources, both broadcast media and printed press.

There have been many restraints placed on these private media sources. A law that guaranteed freedom of expression in the press was repealed in 1975. The state currently controls all guidelines and approves all content before printing. According to the Press Situation Index, Myanmar is one of the worst countries in the world in respect to freedom of the press, whereas Thailand and Indonesia are doing relatively well. Some restrictions these private weekly publications have had to adhere to include sensitivity to photo size, as well as restrictions on content and word choice. The censorship is also very unpredictable, although this is difficult to assess because the state does not always provide reasons for excluding content. Criticism of the regime, of other ASEAN countries and news which goes up against the priorities of the state are greatly scrutinised. This is despite that, since 2008, the constitution guarantees that citizens have the right to freely express and publish their convictions and opinions, albeit with conditions.

The second part of the seminar focused on the liberalisation of the education system in Myanmar. Education will have to play a major role in the elections that are to take place later this year. The country has not held elections since 1990, after the 1988 uprising, in which the results were denied by the regime and the elected officials were not able to take control of the country. This means that this year's election will see about 55% first-time voters. This election may potentially unlock a catalyst for change that can affect the education system in the country.

Currently, education is predominately state run. However, these institutions are limited in what they are allowed to teach. On a content level, these restrictions are related to politics, human rights, citizen rights and traumas such as the events in 1989. There are also restrictions on the type of teaching methods used such as debate, dialogue and discussion in the formal education system. In state schools, classroom size has also been a problem, with as many as 70 students per class, which endorses one-way information streams and limits the use of interactive teaching methods. This is also due to a limited number of teachers, as well as teaching resources. As a result, few people leave the education system sufficiently prepared to enter into political dialogue.

There are a handful of NGOs that attempt to provide informal education, who are providing classes in order to increase awareness, skill building, as well as capacity building. These trainings are designed to prepare individuals, but also benefit organisations.

Recently, some organisations have gained space and leeway to teach topics that were previously not permitted. Also the delivery method is improving. State education has not yet changed much, but more people are becoming accustomed to the use of more dialogue and interaction.

Ultimately, education has been expanding both in content and delivery methods. There is reason to have hope for the future, especially the potential effects of the 2010 elections. While Myanmar is still not ready for full democracy, there are ample opportunities for the international community to help through ASEAN or other organisations to build up regional alliances, strategic partnerships and to open up dialogue, in order to strengthen the foundations for a democratic society.

During a stimulating discussion, a question about electronic freedom was posed concerning internet usage. Many websites with questionable content have been blocked by the state. However, some sites, such as Facebook, remain open and provide internet users the chance to share information and express themselves via the internet. Also, while many international news sources are blocked by government firewalls, there are ways to bypass these restrictions to gain full access to the internet. The only remaining constraint is low bandwidth.

Another issue brought up drew attention to the fact that many people are opposed to sanctions as external pressures on the government. Sanctions would further hurt the local populations. However, smart sanctions, focussed on specific areas of trade, for example, could potentially be a solution.

While many are cautious concerning the upcoming election, there are many reasons to be hopeful. New freedoms in education and media continue to expand in the lead up to the elections, but there is much potential for further freedoms to be granted, especially after the elections. Not only are there internal forces pushing for these freedoms, but there are also external pressures from ASEAN and others to release political prisoners. It is due to reasons such as these that there is hope in Myanmar's future.