

Event Report

“Understanding Myanmar”

EIAS Briefing Seminar

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After decades of isolation and military rule, Myanmar has embarked on a historic democratic transition aiming, among other things, at reintegrating itself into the global community. Since 2011, a new political and economic scenario has emerged from the reform process introduced by the former semi-civilian government. Recent openness in combination with its crucial geostrategic location and abundance of natural resources have led to Myanmar gaining wider attention from many great powers and potential investors. Nevertheless, the new National League for Democracy(NLD)-led government elected in 2015 is facing a number of challenges, chief among them the refugee crisis in Rakhine State. This seminar offered an opportunity to shed some light on recent developments and changes in Myanmar, as well as on the potential role of the European Union in Myanmar’s future.

Opening Remarks

Mr Xavier Nuttin, Member of the Advisory Board of EIAS, opened the conference by highlighting the extensive progress that Myanmar has made in its democratization process. He explained how the transition started in 2011 when the newly elected semi-civilian government introduced gradual political, economic and foreign policy reforms. The release of thousands of political prisoners and the National League for Democracy's return to the formal political process led to an easing of international pressure. Mr Nuttin also mentioned that the overwhelming victory of the NLD for the 2015 elections marked a milestone in Myanmar's history, representing a step forward on the path towards democracy. Moving on to discuss the country's economy, Mr Nuttin stated that Myanmar is one of the fastest growing economies in Southeast Asia. Myanmar's economic reforms, aimed at ensuring a transition towards a market economy, have eased the entry of new stakeholders in various developmental sectors and the attraction of a lot of foreign investments.

Despite such positive trends, as Mr Nuttin stressed, there are a number of issues the new NLD-led government still has to face. For instance, there is a constant tension between the two dominant political actors, namely the NLD and the Tatmadaw – the armed forces of Myanmar – with the military still maintaining a lot of power and control over the decision-making process. Mr Nuttin pointed out that the Tatmadaw is constitutionally entitled to 25 percent of seats in Parliament and supervises the Internal, Defence, and Border Affairs ministries.

Mr Nuttin went on to stress the fact that Myanmar has attracted and continues to attract worldwide attention due to the ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis. Rohingya, he explained, are a stateless Muslim minority living in Rakhine State who have long been subject to persecution from the Myanmar military. In 2017, the escalating violence triggered a mass exodus of Rohingyas to Bangladesh. The Burmese government has been widely criticized for its actions and is now under tremendous international pressure to resolve the current crisis. Mr Nuttin finally highlighted how the UN and the EU are stepping up support to address the Rohingya crisis and to help the thousands of refugees settled in Bangladeshi camps.

Keynote Address

H.E. Mr Paw Lwin Sein, Ambassador of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar to the Kingdom of Belgium and the European Union

Mr Paw Lwin Sein opened his remarks by praising the good relationship and cooperation between Myanmar and the EU and by emphasizing the desire to maintain and strengthen this special partnership in the near future. The Ambassador then provided the audience with an historical overview of Myanmar-EU relations. The bilateral ties, he stated, suffered a setback in 1988 when the EU stopped its aid assistance and imposed heavy sanctions on Myanmar. Effective cooperation has since been re-established, when in 2012 the EU lifted most of the sanctions and restrictions and opened an EU Delegation in Yangon. Mr Paw Lwin Sein praised the EU's commitment to re-engage with Myanmar as

the country has advanced in making significant reforms and has opened up to the global community. Furthermore, the EU has emerged as a special partner of Myanmar throughout its recent transition towards democracy. Having rapidly responded to political changes in Myanmar, provided developmental assistance, and offered strong support for democratic and economic reforms and for national reconciliation, the EU has been a key ally in Myanmar's opening up.

Moving on to talk about Myanmar's current situation, Ambassador Paw Lwin Sein affirmed that the Government is dedicated to pursuing democracy and promoting peace and development. Moreover, Myanmar is aware of the negative impact that the crisis in Rakhine State is having on the image of the country and even more significantly, the democratization and peace processes. As such, it is fully committed to solving this complex issue with the help of crucial partners such as the EU and ASEAN. As a final note, Mr Paw Lwin Sein stressed the importance of respecting each culture and national reality and expressed his hope of creating greater understanding between Myanmar and its partners throughout the world.

Panel discussion

Prof. Dr Aung Tun Thet, Member of Peace Commission; Chief coordinator, Union Enterprise for Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement and Development in Rakhine (UEHRD)

Dr Aung Tun Thet drew attention again to the great value that Myanmar attaches to helping other countries understand its own reality and situation. What is important, he stated, is to attempt to develop a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and challenges within Myanmar. Dr Thet wished, therefore, to promote a deeper understanding of his country by providing the audience with a more comprehensive, national perspective.

First, he highlighted the peculiarities of the Southeast Asian country. Myanmar, he pointed out, is characterized by its unique multi-ethnicity – there are 135 officially recognized ethnic groups – which has frequently been the cause of internal conflicts. The Government is strongly committed to pursuing national reconciliation, building trust and engaging in dialogue and negotiations with the country's numerous militia groups. In 2015, a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed between the Government and 7 ethnic armed groups and earlier this year, two more parties signed it. This, it was argued, represents a significant step forward in Myanmar's complex peace process. Dr Thet then stressed the fact that Myanmar boasts a fast-growing economy, abundant reserves of natural resources – e.g. oil and gas – a young population, and a crucial geostrategic location at the tri-junction of South Asia, East Asia and Southeast Asia.

Speaking about Myanmar's triple transition – political, economic and social, Dr Thet provided the audience with a quote of Aung San Suu Kyi: "Peace, development, and justice all are connected. We cannot talk about economic development without talking about peace". This was mentioned in reference to the Government's efforts to ensure the country's development on multiple fronts: from conflict to peace, from a centrally-

planned economy to a market-oriented system, from military rule to democracy. The Government's aim, as testified by the 2016 12-point economic guidelines, is to pursue a sustainable development plan. This plan includes the implementation of the peace process, increasing the competitiveness and innovation of Myanmar's economy, providing greater access to health and education, and protecting the environment. In this regard, Dr Thet brought the audiences attention to a successful programme carried out by the Union of Myanmar Federation Chambers of Commerce and Industry in collaboration with the UN: The Business for Peace (B4P). The aim of the initiative is to support sustainable peace and development with the help of businesses. Implementing internal peace, he stated, is not enough to sign a ceasefire agreement. Peace cannot be attained if livelihoods remain difficult and there are no job opportunities. It is therefore necessary to encourage national business associations to participate in promoting economic development in poor areas of the country and establish peaceful social-economic conditions. Only through achieving these things can long-term peace be achieved.

Dr Thet moved on to talk about the Rakhine crisis. Stressing again the importance of developing a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of his country, he stated that Myanmar is not only Rakhine. The international community should look at the broader situation in Myanmar and acknowledge and support its progress along its sustainable growth and development path. He also affirmed that it is necessary to understand the underlying causes of the crisis before making any allegations akin to accusing Myanmar of instigating a humanitarian disaster. The reality, he stated, is that Rakhine State lacks economic development, infrastructure and job opportunities and is located in an isolated area of Myanmar surrounded by hills and mountains. This is the reason why UEHRD is implementing strategies to reconstruct and develop the state. UEHRD's main goals, he explained, are providing humanitarian assistance, carrying out resettlement and rehabilitation, working for sustainable development in Rakhine State, and promoting harmony and reconciliation. Dr Thet also highlighted that the Union is cooperating with private sector organisations to construct buildings and roads, provide health care and create job opportunities in some growing sectors such as the gas industry and fishing. The aim, he pointed out, is to ensure a good living environment for people living within Rakhine State and to encourage the return of refugees. In his final remarks, Dr Thet expressed his desire that Myanmar not to be criticized, but instead that it be supported by the international community because "only by working together we can change the narrative in Rakhine".

Mr Dirk Buda, Myanmar Desk Officer, European External Action Service (EEAS)

Mr Buda provided the audience with a European perspective on the EU's bilateral relations with Myanmar and on the Rohingya crisis. First, he stressed the fact that the EU has been at the forefront of the international community's re-engagement with Myanmar as the country has embarked on a historic democratization and liberalization process. The EU also played a crucial role in supporting Myanmar's peace process and in 2015 it signed the NCA as an international witness. Moreover, Mr Buda pointed out that EU-Myanmar relations are based on a cooperative approach and joint communication strategy. In 2016, the two partners issued a joint communication setting out a vision for

the EU's engagement in the Southeast Asian country. This vision covers a number of different areas including good governance, sustainable development and human rights.

Mr Buda highlighted the particular attention that the EU places on human rights in Myanmar and on the protection of rights of people belonging to ethnic and religious minorities; including the Rohingya. To this extent, in 2014 the EU and Myanmar started to engage in a regular Human Rights Dialogue. During the last Dialogue, held in Nay Pyi Taw in March 2018, the EU expressed its concerns about the situation in Rakhine State following the Council Conclusions of 26 February 2018. The Council, Mr Buda explained, condemns ongoing widespread human rights violations committed by Myanmar's military forces, including rape and killings, and calls upon Myanmar to address the issue of accountability and to create conducive conditions for the safe return of displaced people.

Talking about effective ways to tackle the Rohingya crisis, Mr Buda stated that sanctions are not the answer. What is essential is for the EU to engage in a constructive dialogue with Myanmar and to jointly work towards common interests such as peace, development and justice for all ethnic groups. He reiterated the importance of continued efforts by Myanmar authorities to provide full accountability for violations and to address the climate of fear and insecurity in Rakhine State. He noted that Myanmar is genuinely committed to this and that UEHRD is making progress towards the implementation of projects for repatriation and resettlement of displaced persons. In conclusion, he affirmed that the EU will continue to give humanitarian assistance to people settled in Bangladeshi camps and that alongside this, it will continue its cooperation with Myanmar government in order to achieve a sustainable solution to the crisis.

Q&A

During the Q&A session, some participants remarked on the decision of both Ambassador Paw Lwin Sein and Dr Thet to not mention the term "Rohingya". The guests expressed their disappointment and called upon the Myanmar government to guarantee equality for this minority group. In response to this, Dr Thet made it clear that this word is not in Myanmar's history and tradition. Nevertheless, the Government recognizes Rohingya as human beings and it has already shown its commitment to creating conducive conditions for the safe return of refugees and for the protection of all minority communities. On this point, a question was asked about what the Government is effectively doing to facilitate the return of refugees currently based in Bangladesh. Dr Thet stated that Myanmar is already ready to receive returnees. Buildings, healthcare facilities and reception centres have been invested in and are ready to assist the returning population. Moreover, returnee's forms were provided to people who want to come back, allowing them to get a national verification card and to travel to Myanmar.

Another question put to Myanmar's representatives was about which development projects Myanmar is carrying out in Rakhine State. In answer, Dr Thet suggested that from an economic point of view, Rakhine has significant prospects for business development thanks to that its special economic zone status of Maungtaw, natural gas fields, and a growing fishing industry and agriculture sector. Moreover, he mentioned again the B4P initiative, stating that they are currently in discussion with businesses regarding how to create job opportunities and increase income.

The last question focused on the role of ASEAN in addressing the Rohingya crisis. It was asked to what extent Myanmar is cooperating with ASEAN countries in order to tackle the situation. The answer was that Myanmar's government is working with Indonesia and a number of religious NGOs to implement the repatriation and resettlement processes. In addition to this, it was highlighted how Myanmar is working with Thailand and South Korea to jointly carry out projects for economic development. As a final thought, all the panellists called upon the audience to take away from this engaging and enlightening event a more positive and optimistic view of the complex situation faced by Myanmar.

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