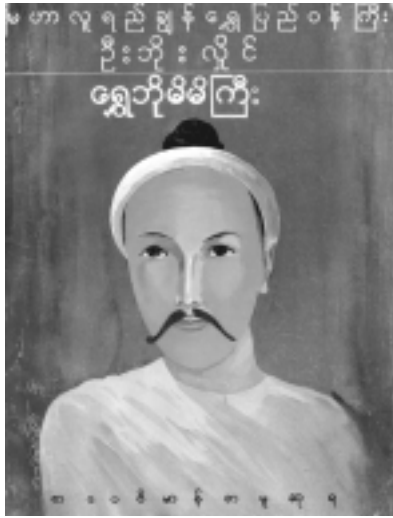


Engaging Burma/Myanmar

Report >
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The fourth 'Burma/Myanmar Update' conference continues the work being pursued on Burma Studies in Australia. It reflects the growing interest at the Australian National University in Burma/Myanmar Studies, and seeks to bring together members of academic and non-academic communities interested in substantive examination of contemporary issues facing the country. The conference was well attended by close to a hundred people, from the expatriate Burmese and ethnic communities, and a range of scholars, NGO workers and civil servants.



Source: Gustaaf Houtman

Portrait of U Hpo Hlaing [1823-83], Minister and advocate of reform in the courts of King Mindon and later King Thibaw, the last two Burmese kings. His biographer refers to Hpo Hlaing as an advocate of 'traditional democracy'.

By David Scott Mathieson

This fourth 'Burma/Myanmar Update' conference reflects the keen interest in Burma Studies in Australia. While no overall subject was designed for the conference, a theme emerged on current developments and engagement with the Myanmar government. The nine speakers were drawn from academic and political circles in Australia and overseas.

The doyen of Burma Studies, Josef Silverstein, directed his talk at the continuing implacability of the government, and its apparent disinclination to pursue meaningful dialogue with opposition forces, defying international opinion. Drawing on fifty years of work on the country, Silverstein outlined continuing human rights abuses in Burma's ethnic states connected to security and trade issues. While supporting many of Silverstein's comments, the veracity of many points was questioned by Australia's Ambassador to Yangon, Trevor Wilson. The Ambassador was critical of many of the gov-

ernment's policies but still harboured hopes for domestic rapprochement. He observed that different countries had diverse approaches to engaging Myanmar but was certain that many of these views were listened to by a regime long derided as implacable. An interesting presentation was delivered by retired Myanmar diplomat Tin Aung Cho. Outlining recent dynamics in the Burmese-Thailand relationship, he argued that the historically strained ties, particularly recent events on the vexed border, require more attention than merely official visits and handshakes. Ian Wilson complimented this talk with an overview of Burma-China relations.

Andrew Selth, the acknowledged Western expert on Myanmar's military, gave an outline of the national defence policy and its efficacy. Despite work on producing a 'comprehensive security' defence policy, he argued that the *Tatmadaw* (Myanmar army) is still primarily concerned with maintaining political power. Selth has produced a new book on this question, *Burma's Armed Forces: Power Without Glory?* to be

released later this year. Myanmar economist Mya Than lamented the lack of progress in the Myanmar economy. He argued that growth has remained relatively stagnant, reflected in part by the inability of the regime to institute sustainable reform measures. Emily Rudland, one of the co-editors of the recent book, *Burma/Myanmar: Strong Regime, Weak State* (2000), outlined the structure of the health sector in Burma and the poor state of services and funding. While all three speakers observed a less than dynamic performance in these sectors, they did note that work was being done in Myanmar at various levels to address the deficiencies.

The question of engagement with Myanmar was directly addressed by two Australian lawyers. David Kinley outlined his role in the conduct of three rounds of human rights training work-

shops conducted in Yangon and Mandalay during 2000 and 2001, sponsored by the Australian Government. Despite the widespread international criticism of these workshops, he argued that they had the benefit of introducing western concepts of human rights to Myanmar bureaucrats. Contrary to some claims on the state of human rights in Myanmar, state employers do have an understanding and appreciation for the concept and practices presented to them. Kinley further argued that while the government seems impervious to outside pressure, permitting these workshops to take place demonstrates a positive step. Janelle Saffin, a member of the New South Wales Parliament and the Burma Lawyers Council, presented a paper on the question of constitutional reform in Burma. Noting the stalled National Convention process, Saffin argued that a historical



The monastery Hpo Hlaing endowed is still standing in Mandalay today.

Source: Gustaaf Houtman

view of constitutions in Burma needs to be employed to understand the failure of two post-independence constitutions and remedy the vexed issue of ethnic representation.

A lamentable absence that day was the lack of ethnic perspectives. While the organizers attempted to fill this noticeable void, Australian experts in the field are, at the moment, thin on the ground. We hope to rectify this situation in our next Update and give this issue the attention it deserves.

The conference was aimed at advancing an already keen interest in Burma Studies at the Australian National University. The nine papers are currently being edited into a book, *Engaging Burma/Myanmar*, which will be published this year by Crawford House and associates. ◀



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His current research project is concerned with shadow economies as a barrier to economic reform measures, and the political economy of war in Myanmar.

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