

Statement on the Buddhist-Muslim conflict in Myanmar given on June 5, 2014 at the  
Parlamentarische Gesellschaft, Berlin

Dear Members of Parliament, dear ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to this hearing and give me the chance to convey some of my experiences as well as insights into the tensions, to put it very mildly, between parts of the Buddhist majority in Myanmar and the Muslim minority. I just returned last Friday from a visit to Myanmar in which I tried to pursue a number of projects in one of which are directly linked to the issue to be discussed this evening. Let me begin with some personal observations.

### 1 Observations

Everything was calm in Yangon this year and according to the reports of the English language newspapers the same applied to the whole country. Not even from Rakhine state where most of the Muslims known as Rohingyas live which is a real hot spot bad news were reported. The peace talks between the government and the armed ethnic rebel groups were highlighted in the press – but Muslims were not involved in these talks because they are not regarded as belonging to the “national races” of Myanmar that are the dialogue partners of the government. We will have to come back to this important point.

The calm regarding the Buddhist-Muslim question was a very uneasy calm, however, I would say. A German professor of anthropology whom I introduced to Myanmar's academic scene observed that the issue under review today was the most single topic mentioned in our many talks but always in a more or less casual way as if it were a matter that belonged to the realities of life that could not be changed. – Then there was one of my Christian friends, a Professor of Theology who got his Ph.D. in Regensburg and who headed the research department of the renowned Myanmar Institute of Theology (MIT). He had only little time for me because of a ten day interfaith program in which Buddhists, Christians, Muslims and Hindus participated. Later he participated in kind of capacity building course on the same issue at a small but very dedicated NGO. He was very pleased with both events when I talked to him later, but when I asked if any anti-Muslim Buddhists had participated in both functions, he admitted that nobody had voiced any negative views against members of these groups.

In contrast, a German lady of my age doing courses in counseling for Myanmar Christians for some years already told me about the reactions of her trainees when she touched this anti-Muslim issue. Just now smiling faces froze after her reference to the topic. Last year, I remember her reporting that a high ranking member of the Myanmar Church confessed, that he didn't like Muslims as well but that in public he had to call for understanding and peace towards them.

Last year, the situation was absolutely not calm. A Chinese Muslim lady, member of a small group that is not targeted directly by anti-Muslims activists, who worked for a project designed by me summarised her feelings during the days of anti-Muslim violence in Myanmar that started in April 2013 in a mail this way: *"There is no place for us to hide and run. So, we put our fate in God's hand. It was horrifying to know that even among the general public, the anti-Muslim sentiments is rooted and widespread."* When I met her this year, she told me that there are still powers in Myanmar eager to revive anti-Muslim hatred. She was referring to "them" and thus took up the "We - Them" dichotomy that is characteristic for Burmese/Myanmar history since the colonial times. She told me that she would move to another NGO in some months which dealt with interfaith issues.

Another experience: I met another old acquaintance again who belongs to the group of well educated Buddhist Burmans (B'ma). He works as an associate director of one big Myanmar research institute and has done a lot of translation work for one of my projects on the history of political and societal ideas in Burma/Myanmar. I came to him to get his advice on a research done by his agency on the political sentiments of Myanmar people, but he was most interested to tell me – as in our meeting last year – that the Western view on the Muslim issue in Myanmar was totally biased. "They are dangerous," he said and "They want to swallow us up." (end of quotation) I know from other conversations that he is not the only one who entertains such racist views but that many other educated B'ma – and not just the uneducated lower classes of Myanmar society – have similar ideas which according to my assessment must be called racist and have to be paralleled to the anti-Jewish, anti-semitic feelings in Germany in the last century that made the Holocaust possible.

## 2 Thesis

That brings me to the main thesis I would like to confront you with today. There exists a deep undercurrent of anti-Muslims sentiments within the population of the great Buddhist groups of the B'ma and the Rakhine (I cannot tell about the Shan and the Mon from my own experience). I would call this sentiment a "sleeping racism" which can be and has been awakened any time by any interested party and which is deeply irrational and connected to the fear of a loss of one's national, religious and cultural identity. As a consequence, it cannot be tackled by rational arguments and political measures alone. The utmost that can be done is to contain it. As a consequence, the problem has to be addressed at a variety of levels both in terms of time and institutional approach.

## 3 Meikthila and what followed in 2013

The last outbreak of this dormant volcano happened last year. It started in Meikthila and spread to many cities in the country. The chain of events follows a pattern that repeated itself many times since the colonial period: There is an incident in which Buddhists and Muslims are involved, in Meikthila it was a dispute at a jewelry shop, then a Buddhist mob appears on the scene here and at other places chasing

Muslims and attacking and destroying symbols of the religion (Mosques, Qurans etc.) as well as shops run by Muslims. Then, things calm down and a debate starts who was behind the incidents but no real solution is found until the next incident. The anti-Muslim riots repeat themselves in a chain of circles.

#### 4 The Riots in 1938

The events reported in 2013 from many Myanmar cities reminded me on what I know about the anti-Muslim riots of 1938 in Burma's late colonial period. According to the official report of the commission investigating into the riots, 240 people died and almost 1000 were injured among them quite a number of Burmans killed by the police in defense of the Muslims.

It was the publication of a book written by a Muslim and allegedly insulting Buddhism that caused a public uproar developing into a pogrom. On July 26, 1938, some 10000 people spiritually and politically guided by 1500 monks assembled on the platform of Yangon's Shwedagon Pagoda, Burma's holiest place. They passed a number of practical resolutions highlighted by the following final sentences:

If Government fails to take necessary action in the matter as demanded, this meeting warns Government that steps will be taken to treat the Muslims as enemy No. 1 who insult the Buddhist community and their religion and to bring about the extermination of the Muslims and the extinction of their religion and language

This is a rhetoric of hatred and the following actions showed that it was rhetoric which fell on fertile ground or better: that this rhetoric expressed what a majority of Burman Buddhists felt.

The commission appointed by the Government tried to find reasons for such feelings and they found some. Yangon – Rangoon – was a city populated by more Indians than Burmans in 1931. 53% were Indians, less than 40 % Burmans (B'ma) half of the Indian population might have been Hindus and half of them Muslims. Ideas of foreign domination (Überfremdung) in terms of numbers, economic power, culture and religion was in the air. But a core theme of the aggressive mood towards the Muslims – then and today – was only indirectly addressed by the commission. It was too irrational.

The reason for the fear to be “swallowed up” as my Burman acquaintance named it, has to do with an assumed Muslim conspiracy that can be called a marriage plot. One Muslim man marries four Buddhist Burmese ladies who give birth to four sons each who become Muslims, each of them marries four Buddhist Burma ladies and so on. According to mathematical calculation, the Burman Buddhist race will have been perished within a short period of time.

This calculation has kind of a rational foundation: The Indian migrants coming to Burma after the British conquest of Lower Burma in 1852 were predominantly male. Indian women were in short supply in the new part of the British-Indian Empire. In

terms of demographics it is true that a Muslim family statistically produces more children than a Buddhist family. But behind this rational arguments – which the present government tries to address by a law regulating cross-religious marriages – exists a deep and gloomy sexist-racist feeling against the Muslim “other” that can be compared to the anti-Jewish sentiments in Germany in the last century.

#### 4 Summary and Outlook

The anti-Muslim attitudes of Buddhists in Myanmar must be regarded as a post-colonial problem that cannot be addressed just by rational means. The “sleeping racism” is deeply rooted in the fear of extinction which results in the wish to exterminate this “other”. As the outcry of the Muslim lady quoted above shows the other side shares the fear of extermination. Events in Burma/Myanmar show that since the colonial period anti-Muslim violence has been erupted again and again as described above. The frightening thing to me is the impression that nothing has changed since 1938 in terms of a Buddhist mainstream perception of the Muslim population that neither in Yangon nor elsewhere in the core of Myanmar form a majority anymore. Therefore, a double strategy has to be used: Containing problems on one hand and trying to work on the root causes – something that has not really started yet according to my observation simply because it is that sinister to openly talk about what I have tried to communicate here.

The anti-Rohingya propaganda concentrates on a group that forms the majority in a certain part of Western Myanmar, in the Rakhine State. What I have tried to expose here, can be seen as the background of the Rohingya case. This case is terrible complicated, as far as I know, and I am very happy that Dr. Khin Zaw Win has agreed to inform about this special topic.