Elite Master´s Programm „Standards of Decision-Making Across Cultures“ (SDAC), Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU)

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Hosts: Prof. Marco Bünte (Political Science, FAU), Dr. Alexander Horstmann (SDAC, FAU), Prof. Dominik Müller (SDAC, FAU)

By Guest Professor Dr. Alexander Horstmann (SDAC, FAU)

Time: Friday, 21.01.2022, 10-00-18.30

The context:

One year after the coup, the conflict between the ruling military junta and the people has escalated from peaceful demonstrations and civil disobedience movement into a full-scale people´s war. The radical transformation of generation Z and its organization into people´s defense forces followed the brutal suppression of peaceful resistance. Many people, who feared immediate arrests, escaped to the ethnic minority areas or, if they had resources and means, abroad to Thailand, India and further away, connecting with the existing Myanmar Diaspora in the West. The junta has outlawed the reigning National League of Democracy with democratic Icon Aung San Suu Kyi. Suu Kyi has been sentenced to a politically motivated trial to remove her from the political landscape. The democratic government in exile National Unity Government (NUG) represents the diversity of Myanmar and includes ethnic Burmese as well as high-profile members of the ethnic minorities. The Burmese Diaspora together with Western NGOs attempt to support the democracy movement and to transfer humanitarian aid to the people most affected by the day-to-day violence. Moreover, the ICJ has ordered the junta to take provisional measures to prevent further violence against the Rohingya minority in Western Myanmar.

After a warm welcome by the SDAC program’s speaker, Dominik Müller, and Professor of Politics of Asia at FAU, Marco Bünte, the SDAC Guest Professor, Alexander Horstmann, introduced the contents of the symposium and welcomed the speakers. Entitled “Hard Choices for the Democracy Movement in Myanmar and for the Myanmar Diaspora”, the symposium examined the political developments one year after the coup, including the Myanmar Democracy Movement and the Myanmar Diaspora. Questions that have been tackled include: What are the strategies pursued and the resources available for actors involved? How do they gain political legitimacy? How does the military react to massive civil protests? How is the NUG organized and what kind of strategies are developed to increase visibility and to put pressure on the Military Junta? How does the NUG mobilize support and legitimation for its aims to support a revolution in Myanmar and how does it receive support and legitimation from the Myanmar Diaspora?

The symposium also enquired into involved decision-making processes, focusing on their actors, the strategies applied, the narratives used, and the resources on which they were founded.

Marco Bünte discussed the contestations of political legitimacy in a tutelary regime. He gave a concise introduction of civil-military relations, the political assertion of the Myanmar military force, the competition emerging between the military and the National League of Democracy before the coup. Bünte also introduced the international politics frame and assessed the role of neighboring China and especially ASEAN in its efforts to mediate in Myanmar.

Nickey Diamond, from the University of Konstanz, himself a human rights activist, provided us with a critical account of the development of the human rights and accountability movement in Myanmar. He argued that the movement documented human rights violations and the mobilization of hate speech by the military and the right-wing forces even before the coup. The NLD-government unfortunately did not support the persecution of human rights violations, especially among the ethnic minorities and did not protect the Rohingya. After the coup, the space for the human rights and accountability movement shrank, and many activists were forced into exile. However, the activists continue to document the human rights violations of the Tatmadaw, amounting to crimes against humanity.

This was taken up by Dr. Nyi Nyi Kyaw, from Institute of Advanced Cultural Studies, Essen, who discussed the politics of activism and democratic Diaspora in the “Spring Revolution”. Starting with his own role as a scholar in the Diaspora, Nyi Nyi Kyaw described how activists use the space in political exile to put pressure on the military junta and to support the revolution in Myanmar, not least by humanitarian support and by activist remittances. In Myanmar, peaceful protests turned into armed resistance and struggle after the cruel suppression of the protests.

Alexander Horstmann drew on the public hearings in the International Court of Justice in the Gambia against Myanmar case. He showed how the ICJ provides a crucial platform for holding the military accountable for committing crimes against the Rohingya that amounted to genocidal intention. Using the concept of moral outrage, Horstmann showed how affects were omnipresent in a judicial language that is supposed to be free of emotions. This was especially clear in the defense of Aung San Suu Kyi, then state councilor of the Republic of Myanmar, who decided, to the shock of the international community, to defend the Tatmadaw against the persecution. Writing this report, the second round of public hearings is undergoing, under different circumstances and Aung San Suu Kyi was arrested by the military that she used to defend in court.

Thawng Za Pum, a doctoral candidate in Political Sciences at FAU, on the other hand, asked for the role of federalism before and after the coup. He outlined the deficits of the peace process between the central government and the ethnic minorities before the coup, and the crushed aspirations and the brutalities after the coup.

We were fortunate to play an invited video recording of paramount scholar and intellectual Khin Zaw Win who gave a keynote address about the tragic development of the political situation. One year after the coup, the country finds itself in an impasse, characterized by civil war, serious human rights violations and a war of the military against its own people. Khin Zaw Win was also one of the few commentators, who were very critical of the NLD government, which according to him did little to stop an increasing Buddhist chauvinism from the center and ongoing human rights violations against the ethnic and religious minorities and democratic opposition.

The students of the SDAC program and participants from Myanmar and from all over the globe actively contributed to the discussion in a “hybrid” format. We concluded that we had a fruitful dialogue on themes of urgent importance and decided to continue the discussion in future follow-up events.