

Press release

“Recent escalation of violence in Myanmar reveals complex struggles over identity”

Researchers and political activists contribute to background book on conflicts in Myanmar – Analysis of complex mix of ethnic and religious pluralities – Religious scholars: Western cliché of ever-peaceful Buddhism in need of revision

Münster, 17 December 2021 (exc) Destruction of entire villages, blockades by the military junta of international aid deliveries: according to researchers, complex struggles over identity that have been unresolved for decades are behind the latest escalation of violence in Myanmar. “The current dramatic developments since the military coup in February reflects a struggle by the military against the full recognition of different religious and ethnic identities”, say religious studies scholar Perry Schmidt-Leukel and theologian Hans-Peter Großhans from the University of Münster’s Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”. “A central aspect here is the goal of Buddhist and Burmese supremacy, which is to subordinate other population groups to it. This also shows that the Western cliché of ever-peaceful Buddhism is in need of revision”.

Together with the religious studies scholar Madlen Krüger, the researchers have just published one of the most comprehensive books to date on the connections between ethnic and religious identities, and the identity politics, of Myanmar. The book, *Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Myanmar: Contested Identities*, is published by Bloomsbury Academic.

The Southeast Asian state of Myanmar, formerly Burma, has existed since 1948, preceded by more than 60 years under British colonial rule and a Japanese occupation from 1942-45. “The population officially includes 135 different ethnic groups and a number of religions”, says Perry Schmidt-Leukel. “At the same time, people of the same ethnicity can belong to different religions or vice versa. The religions and ethnic groups are in themselves also quite heterogeneous”. Myanmar’s recent history is marked by tensions between different ethnic and religious identities, and by the military’s suppression of all efforts towards establishing democratic and federal structures.

“Persecution of the Rohingya not the only religious conflict”

The persecution of the Rohingya Muslim minority and other Muslim groups in the country is by no means the only religious conflict. “However, the notion that politics exploits ethnicity and religion is not entirely true”, Hans-Peter Großhans points out. Rather, politics itself is a manifestation of competing identity claims. As Großhans explains, the new book *Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Myanmar* brings together the perspectives of international experts and scholars from Myanmar with those of academic analysts, political activists, and religious leaders. Contributions from history, political science, religious studies, social anthropology, and

theology shed light on the situation of Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims in Myanmar, and focus on identity issues in the political context.

According to Perry Schmidt-Leukel, both the affirmation of Buddhist supremacy (also by the politician Aung San Suu Kyi) and Burmese nationalism have led to resistance from other groups who struggle against this hierarchization and assert their own identity claims. “A basic problem of Buddhist nationalism is that it cannot adequately acknowledge such claims”.

Burmese historian Thant Myint-U, former UN official and former special adviser to the president on the peace process, has said in the run-up to the publication that the volume makes an essential contribution to understanding Myanmar’s recent past and prospects for the future.

Perry Schmidt-Leukel conducts research at the Cluster of Excellence on structures and patterns of religious diversity, and has published widely on the interreligious relations of Buddhism. Hans-Peter Großhans conducts research at the Cluster of Excellence on the theology of the political. Both jointly led the German Research Foundation (DFG) project “Religious Pluralism in Discourse – Buddhists and Christians in Myanmar, and how they deal with religious plurality” from 2014-2021. Madlen Krüger, currently a research associate in the project “Religions, Diplomacy, and Peace” at the Institute for Interdisciplinary Research in Heidelberg, conducted the field research in Myanmar and developed the concept for the volume. (apo/vvm)

Reference: Schmidt-Leukel, Perry / Grosshans, Hans-Peter / Krueger, Madlen (eds.): *Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Myanmar: Contested Identities*. London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic Publishing 2022.

Caption: Perry Schmidt-Leukel (Photo: Astrid Pawlowitzki), Hans-Peter Großhans (Photo: Bruno Biermann), book cover (Bloomsbury Academic).

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The Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”

The Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics. Dynamics of Tradition and Innovation” has been investigating since 2007 the complex relationship between religion and politics across eras and cultures. The 140 researchers from 20 disciplines in the humanities and social sciences focus in the funding phase (2019 to 2025) on the “dynamics of tradition and innovation”. They analyze in transepochal studies ranging from antiquity to the present day the conditions and factors that make religion an engine of political and social change, with their focus being above all on the paradox that religions often develop their innovative potential precisely by drawing on their traditions. The researchers concentrate on the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and on their polytheistic precursors. The focus of interest is on Europe and the Mediterranean region, as well as on their entanglements with the Near East, Africa, North and Latin America. The research network is the largest of its kind in Germany; and, of the Clusters of Excellence, one of the oldest and the only one to deal with the issue of religion. It will receive funding of 31 million euros from 2019 to 2025.