The Roles of Civil Society in Democratization of Myanmar

by Ms THWE Aye Yu (Presenter 1, 2:00 - 2:45 pm)
PhD Candidate, Department of Asian International Studies

ABSTRACT: The word “civil society” is a collective action of people, representing the community, covers a multitude of non-profit organizations and performs different roles ranging from contention, mediation, to cooperation. Civil society including various armed groups in Myanmar successively confronted the abusive military government by having long civil wars and public demonstrations. Although military government cracked down brutally, many including National League for Democracy continued their movements against the regime.

As the political space was opening up, civil society organizations have expanded their activities dramatically since the Myanmar top-down political transition from authoritarian to democracy started in 2011. The puzzle was while some civil society organizations in Myanmar continue to confront the government using the newly established democratic space; some have supported the government by cooperating with them during the liberalization process. Furthermore, while many civil society groups have liberal aims, others call for illiberal changes, particularly relating to issues of national identity and religion.

Therefore, the research will explore how civil society has changed their roles during the liberalization or political transition process since 2011. In explaining that changes in civil society, particular emphasis will put on how civil society changes from a transgressive (confrontational) posture towards the regime with liberal democratic aims before 2011 to an often symbiotic (cooperative) attitude to the state and sometimes also abandoned liberal objectives. In post-2011 Myanmar civil society groups include symbiotic liberal groups (elections support and peace mediation groups), transgressive liberal (environmental groups civil society) and transgressive illiberal (radical monk association).

ABOUT THE SPEAKER: Aye Yu Thwe is a second-year doctoral student in the Department of Asia and International Studies at the City University of Hong Kong under the supervision of Professor Mark R. Thompson. She earned her Master of Social Science in Development Studies (2009) in the same department. She received Diploma in Political Science (2015) from Yangon University and Bachelor of Nursing Science (2000) from Yangon Nursing University of Myanmar. She has fifteen years of working experiences including elections, conflicts and disaster management, bilateral aids, and integrated developmental projects in Myanmar. She co-founded one civil society organization named Kan Baw Za Youth Library and Reading Club. She is a fully accredited BRIDGE (Building Resource in Democracy, Governance, and Elections) facilitator (http://www.bridge-project.org/en/news2/asia-pacific/1290-first-accredited-facilitator-from-myanmar.html). Her thesis topic is “The role of civil society in democratization process of Myanmar.” She can be contacted at aythwe2-c@my.cityu.edu.hk.

China’s Arctic Dream: Domestic Motives, Foreign Policy Actors and International Outcomes

by Mr Martin KOSSA (Presenter 2, 2:45 - 3:30 pm)
PhD Candidate, Department of Asian International Studies

ABSTRACT: The gradual disappearance of the Arctic sea ice and increased accessibility to the region’s natural resources and shipping lanes have drawn considerable attention of China and other Asian states. Over the past decade, China has been steadily increasing its presence in the region and came to call itself an Arctic stakeholder. Although Beijing still lacks an official Arctic policy, it appears to have set an agenda for the region. At the same time, there seem to be several actors within China that are interested in the Arctic region and have the capacity to influence China’s Arctic decision-making process. As such, this research explores the motives behind China’s Arctic engagement, identifying the main domestic actors influencing China’s foreign policy in the region and reflects on linkages between China’s proactive diplomacy and the Arctic.

The study employs Qualitative research methods and draws heavily on Neoclassical Realism as a theory of foreign policy to explain the present state of China’s interest in the Arctic region. As research analyzing Chinese foreign policy, this work aspires to further develop our understanding of how China operates as an international state as well as the process of state policy transformation in an era of increasing fragmentation, decentralization and internationalization.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER: Martin Kossa, born in Slovakia, obtained his Master’s degree at Zhejiang University in Hangzhou. He is currently in the third year of his PhD studies at the Department of Asian and International Studies at CityU. His background is in Chinese philology and International Relations. His master dissertation was an analysis of China’s emerging interests in the Arctic region.
Date: 13 February 2017 (Monday)  
Time: 2:00 to 5:15 pm  
Venue: Y5406, Yellow Zone, 5/F, Academic 1, City University of Hong Kong  
Language: English

**Accountability Mechanisms in Single-party States: Essential Services, Civil Society and Local Governments in Vietnam’s New Social Order**  
by Ms NGUYEN Nhu Ha  
PhD Candidate, Department of Asian International Studies

**ABSTRACT:** Recent research on “accountability” practices and mechanisms in Vietnam – an authoritarian state has pursued two sets of questions. On the one hand, scholars and experts acknowledged the introduction of accountability on political official agenda in keeping the international commitments and responding to citizens’ driving need of a legitimate government (Bui 2015). On the other hand, there are questions concerning participatory monitoring mechanisms for accountability and the real impacts on citizens’ empowerment and participation with respect to their aims (UN 2014). However, accountability in Vietnamese language and practice is loosely interpreted from its original understanding in so-called representative democracies. It denotes the “responsibility to explain” aspect but not the whole idea of representation and mutual exchange of responsibilities and potential sanctions between the rulers and the ruled.

This research argues that compared to two-decade-old concept of grassroots democratization in sub-national levels in Viet Nam, accountability is rather a new dialogue. In the past few years, the “accountability” term appears on many policy discussions, media coverage, government documents without a clear meaning and participatory monitoring framework. In daily practices, it is rather a “heard-only” than system know-how. In term of central-local accountability relation, this depends very much on the debatable and cautious steps towards political devolution of Vietnam central government. The development of accountability networks in Vietnam has not moved towards democracy but the reinforcement of authoritarianism with a certainly state-centric approach. The immature legal framework for social accountability mechanisms hinders non-state actors such as citizens, service users, CSOs and media to hold state officials accountable. Moreover, the progressing but uneven fiscal and administrative transfer of budget and power to local levels results in divergent performances in governance with respect to local leadership and provincial capacity. In conclusion, it is more likely that some local governments continue to request for self-accountability and self-government to be allowed in both legal and practical terms, the not yet unified reformist groups over the course of development for Viet Nam will bring some small changes only.

**ABOUT THE SPEAKER:** Nguyen Nhu Ha gained her Bachelor Degree with Honours in Sociology from Nanyang Technological University (Singapore) and Master of Arts in Development and Governance from Duisburg-Essen University (Germany). She is now a Ph.D candidate at Department of Asian and International Studies, City University of Hong Kong. Her research interests focus on social accountability mechanisms and women empowerment in developing countries.

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**Humanitarians in the Hermit Kingdom: NGOs, Aid, and Access in the DPRK**  
by Ms Nazanin BAGHERZADEH  
PhD Candidate, Department of Asian International Studies

**ABSTRACT:** The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, also known as North Korea) made its first large-scale appeal for international humanitarian aid in 1995. International organisations (IOs) such as the United Nations (UN) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from around the world responded to the appeal with projects designed to save human lives through food aid, medical care, etc. Over 200 NGOs have worked in the DPRK since, on projects ranging from removing cataracts to offering vocational training for people with disabilities. However, engaging in aid work in the DPRK is fraught with challenges. Issues of access are paramount – the nature of the North Korean state requires IOs and NGOs to engage in negotiations with the DPRK regime in every step of their work, from needs assessments to evaluations.

This PhD thesis identifies and explains the factors influencing the success of NGOs gaining and maintaining access in the DPRK – a context often overlooked within the field.

**ABOUT THE SPEAKER:** Nazanin Bagherzadeh earned an MA (Honours) in International Relations from the University of Edinburgh, Scotland and a dual MA in International Humanitarian Action from Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany and Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium. Her research interests include humanitarian aid, disaster management, civil society, and human rights. She is currently in the third year of her PhD in the Department of Asian and International Studies.

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*All are Welcome*