

Irrawaddy: The Bonfire of the Vanities

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What do opposing academic views on Burma achieve?

Academics are so capable of thinking and writing oddly on occasion that it's a wonder people take them seriously. They just research people or events, develop ideas, write them down or talk about them. That's all. Why then are their views so prominent over contemporary Burma? Who are academics and who pays them? Why should anyone care what they say?

Academic debates on Burma should be put in perspective. They have a role to play in both "traditional" and "engaged" ways. Traditionally, researchers produce detailed work for a predominantly scholarly audience: theoretically grounded, empirically rigorous, impartial, and defined within a discipline such as anthropology, history, economics or geography. In "engaging" with social movements, academics can contribute through advice, training or teaching, and in writing reports, articles or books that have a normative relevance. In short, anything a scholar writes should be read by anyone interested.

On both levels, academics should work with organizations, journalists, aid workers, activists, and grass-roots groups in exchanging ideas, sharing information and suggesting strategy to contribute to debates. Many toil away without involving themselves in public debate, they just provide another perspective. So why then are some so prominent? Because they choose to be.

Take the European Commission's recent "Burma Day." Robert Taylor and Morten Pedersen were commissioned to write a report based on their credibility as academics: Taylor as a semi-retired professor from London University and Pedersen as an analyst with the International Crisis Group and PhD student. The report was designed to avert further EU sanctions and increase aid to Burma. What resulted was a crescendo of disapproval by many observers who accused both authors of being pro-engagement apologists for military rule.

Let's be blunt about this. Debates on Burma can be nasty, personal and unconstructive. Current debates on engagement are marked by a bitter polarization. Pride, arrogance, envy and other personality sins emerge because some people think their answers are better than others. Academics are a part of this. Other pro-engagement scholars have been criticized for expressing views, including American professors David Steinberg and John H. Badgley, Burmese scholar Kyaw Yin Hlaing, of Singapore University, and Australian Helen James. These scholars, among others, have appeared in print or in public together at various times arguing for different approaches to engaging Burma.

Should they be subject to personal attacks merely for expressing this? No, but then both sides in the debate rarely do each other justice in representing opposing views. Most conferences these days are stacked with either pro- or anti-engagement activists, scholars and funders. The results are not edifying. Look at the 2004 Burma/Myanmar Update at the Australian National University, organized by retired ambassador Trevor Wilson and roundly dismissed as an apologists' ball. Many of the presenters had attended similarly themed conferences, and most of the papers presented were familiar, if not re-heated.

Take the collection of essays in the 2004 National Bureau of Asian Research report “Reconciling Burma/Myanmar” as one example of activist “scholarship” that lobbied for greater engagement. Helen James wrote that tertiary education has been a success: before 1988 there were only 38 universities in Burma, and now there are 154. We can be certain she doesn’t spend a lot of quality time in them. Taylor suggested that Burma’s ruling State Peace and Development Council would be a good partner for the US in its war against terror. Weird views, certainly, but should we be bandying around the charged term “apologist” for stuff like this?

On occasion yes, when ideas transcend decency. Take the argument by several scholars of what we will call “authoritarian acculturation.” This contends that Burmese people prefer strong central rule, that they are innately resistant to Western democratic values, and the SPDC, while ineffectual, is still legitimate because its members are like old Burmese kings. The historian Michael Aung-Thwin wrote a contentious article in 2002 where he referred to “Democracy Jihad” and “Parochial Universalism” to argue against the Western imposition of democratic values on Burma, contending they were inimical to Burmese ease with military rule. Another prevalent argument by scholars is that forced labor is really voluntary labor, and has historical and cultural credibility. Several pro-engagement academics use varying shades of these two arguments to qualify military rule and undermine those they view as unrealistic human rights or democracy advocates.

For those academics who choose to adopt a certain stance in public debates, they must be prepared for contending views, and those responses should be more forthcoming on the merits of information and arguments themselves. Scoring points against the other side is petty, regardless of which side it is. Above all, academics should be aware that ideas resonate in the real world, and Burma is more important than their reputations.

P.S.

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