

Helping to Rebuild Burma's Legal System

"There is a real ground swell in the country...people that are hungry for reform, that are working for it."

- ISLP volunteer Matthew Rooney



Matt Rooney addresses the Yangon Bar Association in Burma

Volunteer Matt Rooney, senior counsel at Mayer Brown, recently spent 4 weeks in Burma/Myanmar to help launch ISLP's work there. Back home in Chicago, he shared his experience with Jerome McDonnell, host of NPR's *Worldview* program in an interview broadcast July 11th. Below are a few notes from their on-air conversation, and a link to listen to the full discussion:

JM: Why were you in Burma?

MR: I met with several civil society organizations (CSOs) over there to work with them to help get laws enacted, to allow commerce to start...Most importantly, as kind of a first step, the rules around how these CSOs can operate have to be set up so that these organizations can have a space in which to operate. They're not sure what the process is...Many of the laws in this area are antiquated; laws are still on the books from when this was a British colony from the 1910-1920 time-frame when there were a lot of laws trying to prohibit the right to assembly. Working with them to have the legislature pass laws to define how these organizations can operate is one of the first steps we plan on pursuing.

ISLP

ISLP provides the pro bono services of highly skilled and experienced lawyers to promote human rights, equitable and sustainable economic development and the rule of law worldwide. It assists governments, non-governmental organizations and other institutions working to build legal capacity and to advance the rights and well-being of their citizens.

[Visit ISLP Website](#)

JM: So having rules for CSOs that protect them and keep them functioning is certainly one place to start. Another big issue is land and how people need land title in Burma and need a legal situation. Can you describe what is going on there?

MR: Right now the government owns all the land...Land reform is a big issue. We again are going to be trying to work with some of the CSOs on land reform issues: land use laws...environmental impact requirements...pollution laws. The country has been isolated for 50 years. But there is a real ground swell in the country...people that are hungry for reform, that are working for it, that's why these CSOs have been set up and why they are trying to move forward to work with the government to increase democratization there.

JM: Tell us about the International Senior Lawyers Project.

MR: The ISLP is a great group...They have a network of volunteers such as me that they reach out to to do these projects around the world. They can get experts in certain areas who are willing to go places and work pro bono. My job on this project was to go and work with these 6 groups that we've identified as really good candidates trying to help improve human rights and rule of law in Burma/Myanmar and try to identify the legal expertise we need-who we need where and what we can have them do-in order to help them advance the ball toward forming democratic institutions.

JM: Do you have a common footing to work from?

MR: It is a common law system, such as the US and Great Britain have...so in meeting with the lawyers and the Bar Association we do talk the same language, we do talk about the same kind of legal concepts. And if they would adopt it, the basis to the rule of law is the same. The other side of that, though, is - and this applies both to the lawyers and the CSOs - they've been cut off for 50 years so there is a real desire on their part to have lawyers come to give them training on substantive law issues and best practices from around the world that they can try to have their country adopt.

JM: Did you come away from this experience encouraged about what the possibilities are in Burma? Or did you come away thinking "this is a super long-term process"?

MR: Both. I was very encouraged about the people we met and worked with and the appetite for change...There are many lawyers working for human rights and CSOs anxious to work for change that are very motivated. But it is going to take a long time, and that is one reason that ISLP wants to make a long-term commitment to the area to work with them.



Listen to the full interview on WBEZ