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Burma's Aung San Suu Kyi Should Stand Up for the Persecuted Rohingya People

Doug Bandow

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In the midst of a difficult transition to democracy the government of Burma, or Myanmar, is engaging in widespread persecution of the Rohingya people. Stateless and Muslim, more than a million Rohingya are concentrated in Rakhine state. Many have fled to neighboring Bangladesh.

The reaction of Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi to the violence surprised her international admirers. Suu Kyi heroically led her nation's long fight for democracy. Barred from the presidency by a constitutional provision imposed for that sole purpose, she serves as state counsellor, effectively "above" the formal president, a long-time political ally. Yet she has responded to the ethnic cleansing, mass rape, and murder of thousands of Rohingya as a Burman nationalist, denying the problem's existence. Indeed, after the latest round of government violence she claimed that "fake news" was "promoting the interest of the terrorists."

The Rohingya, viewed by Burma's Buddhist majority as a foreign import brought in to labor in the British colony, long have suffered. Stripped of their citizenship by the military junta which ruled the country for a half century, the Rohingya lack political representation, access to adequate education, family planning, health care, justice, public employment, and other benefits and services, as well as the right to move freely. The lack of political representation means "local communities are generally unable to influence political processes affecting their lives, and have few meaningful mechanisms to voice their grievances," explained the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State. Progress on citizen verification under the 1982 Citizenship Law has been painfully slow. Roughly 120,000 Rohingya were stuck in refugee camps following a violent spasm in 2012.

Increasingly some formerly peaceful Rohingya have turned to violence. In late August the so-called Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) assaulted a military base and police stations, triggering retaliation by the Burmese military and nationalist mobs. As many as 160,000 residents fled, most to Bangladesh—a poor nation unable to provide for its own citizens—fearing further attacks after widespread murder and mayhem, including the destruction of entire villages. Buddhists as well as Muslims sought to escape the violence. The latest incident was better organized than a similar event last October against Rakhine border guards, which also sparked murderous reprisals that killed 1000 Rohingya and sent another 90,000 fleeing.

Evidence of widespread atrocities includes satellite imagery documenting the mass burning of villages. Chris Lewa of the Arakan Project, which monitors events in Rakhine State, said the military mimicked its depredations of last fall: "Renewed clearance operations have indeed resulted in an increase of human rights abuses by security forces. It's burning, burning, burning,

and killing on site.” Unfortunately, Burma’s government has banned most journalists and made it difficult for outsiders, including UN investigators, to document events in Rakhine.

So far the violence hasn’t spread from the north through the rest of the state, though inter-communal relations have deteriorated. However, warned the Commission, a panel led at Suu Kyi’s request by former UN secretary general Kofi Annan: “Increased political polarization and a shrinking of the political space may complicate efforts to find political solutions to which all communities can subscribe.”

The violence reflects increasing frustration and anger. One local Rohingya leader told *The Economist* that the attitude is: “We are dying, let’s put up a fight!” ARSA’s leadership includes radicals from abroad, including emigres in Saudi Arabia. Like Islamist terrorists before them, the group is suspected of targeting the military to encourage retaliation in order to radicalize residents and win foreign support. The insurgents also apparently targeted more moderate Muslim leaders to discourage peaceful solutions. The government claims to have killed 370 Arakan fighters, but the group’s capabilities appear undiminished.

Naypyidaw has responded badly to foreign criticism, refusing to provide visas to a UN investigative team and claiming that humanitarian groups have aided radicals, even providing materials used to make landmines. The Suu Kyi government unpersuasively insisted that its internal investigation can address the problem. Nor is it only Westerners who have expressed concern. Nearby majority Muslim nations, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia, criticized Burma’s treatment of their co-religionists.

No doubt, Naypyidaw’s dismissive attitude reflects the military’s continuing oversized influence under a constitution drafted to deny the civilian government normal powers. Nevertheless, Suu Kyi’s officials have refused even to accept use of the term Rohingya, preferring Bengali (referring to Bangladeshis) or Muslims in Rakhine State. In fact, the Rohingya’s cause remains highly unpopular.

In this case the Nobel Laureate lacks either the convictions or the courage that she previously exhibited. She apparently does not apply the same standards of human rights she demanded for the Burman majority to this persecuted minority. Tun Khin, with Burmese Rohingya Organization UK, who backed her democracy campaign, complained to the BBC: “Aung San Suu Kyi is covering up this crime [the latest violence] perpetrated by the military.”

The growing conflict threatens to destabilize Burma’s still fragile political transition. Violence could spread to other areas where Muslims and Buddhists live together. Moreover, continuing unrest and violence empower the military while undermining the civilian government’s authority. Finally, to fail so spectacularly to protect the lives of so many people may slow the West’s engagement with Burma, leaving China with a greater role.

There is no easy solution to the status of the Rohingya, especially since some of them have taken up arms against the government. Suu Kyi’s government should acknowledge the problem and make the same effort to bring peace to Rakhine State as she has done with warring ethnic groups in the country’s east. Rohingya militants should look to and learn from the multitude of groups, such as the Karen, Karenni, Chin, Shan, and others, which are groping toward sustainable, peaceful settlements.

Moreover, Naypyidaw must address the status of the Rohingya people in Burma. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Raad al-Husseini warned that their situation “most certainly contributed to the nurturing of violent extremism.” A people whose presence dates back decades and more cannot be summarily dismissed. Until the central government, including the military, respects their status and addresses their grievances, peace is unlikely.

Burma’s Advisory Commission on Rakhine State at least offered a start, acknowledging that “protracted statelessness and profound discrimination have made the Muslim community particularly vulnerable to human rights violations.” The body also acknowledged that “the Muslims in Rakhine constitute the single biggest stateless community in the world. The community faces a number of restrictions which affect basic rights and many aspects of their daily lives.” Without an effective response “further radicalization within both communities is a real risk.” In particular: “If the legitimate grievances of local populations are ignored, they will become more vulnerable to recruitment by extremists.”

The Commission cited three interrelated problems: development, human rights, and security. Of particular note, the group urged “inclusivity and integration” and “a broader vision of national identity.” The panel recommended support from the international community while encouraging the latter to “strive to fully understand the sensitivities that prevail in Rakhine State and work with the Government to achieve a positive vision for the future.” Obviously, principles require practical application, and, noted journalist Poppy McPherson, Suu Kyi “made that clear that she’s a politician. She’s not Mother Theresa.”

Suu Kyi defended her record, arguing that “The situation in the Rakhine is a legacy of many, many decades of problems. It is not something that happened overnight. We’re not going to be able to resolve it overnight.” That is true, but, still, Suu Kyi retains both unique responsibility and credibility to challenge the ethnic and religious bias against the Rohingya.

Naypyidaw must act, and soon. The longer it waits, the greater the abuses and harder the problem will be to solve. Amnesty International charged that “The army’s callous and systematic campaign against the Rohingyas may be a crime against humanity.” Yale Law School’s Allard K. Lowenstein International Human Rights Clinic concluded that “genocidal acts have been committed against Rohingya.” London’s International State Crime Initiative warned that “state-sponsored stigmatization, discrimination, violence and segregation” threatened their “very existence.” Such behavior should be unacceptable anywhere, but especially in a nation which has worked so long and so hard to free itself from dictatorship and repression.

In accepting her Nobel Peace Prize, Suu Kyi insisted: “Wherever suffering is ignored, there will be the seeds of conflict, for suffering degrades and embitters and enrages.” That applies to Rakhine State. The Rohingya no less than other Burmese deserve to participate in their nation’s developing democracy.

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