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# Ethnic cleansing brought on by democracy: the appalling case of the Rohingya



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The state-sanctioned persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar has caused worldwide outrage. But why is this happening just when Myanmar has become democratic? And how should we react to this outrageous tyranny?

It is tempting to give up on Myanmar altogether as a credible player in the international order. If even the saintly Aung San Suu Kyi now turns out to be simply a Buddhist nationalist who defends the genocidal behaviour of her military, then what point is there in taking the country seriously anymore? Much discussion in the Islamic world has accordingly moved on from Myanmar's democratisation, and sees the country primarily as the source of fanatical anti-Islamic hate. The main discussion is now about whether the Rohingya are justified in starting an armed resistance movement, and who might help them.

The outrage is genuine and necessary. The scale of the ethnic cleansing taking place in Rakhine State at this moment completely undoes any credit Myanmar may have won in the world's eyes for choosing the angelic Aung San Suu Kyi as its leader. Horrifying images of pregnant mothers begging for water after trudging through mud for hours, of a boat full of children capsizing, of refugees staring unbelievably across the water at their burning villages, and of Aung San Suu Kyi denying it all, are seared on our retinas.

Yet I think there are good reasons not to view Myanmar now simply as a Buddhist enemy to be defeated, and to keep working on the assumption that Myanmar is capable of redeeming itself and playing its part in the world. They are not only practical – we don't need another sectarian war, and Bangladesh surely wants humanitarian help for its overwhelming refugee burden more than offers of jihadist vengeance against its neighbour. They are more fundamental,

too. Democracy is supposed to be the answer to all violence. 'Talking beats fighting' is the democratic conflict-resolution mode. And there is still a constituency for genuine democracy in Myanmar today.

But democratic transitions are dangerous. They often go wrong, because they invite everyone to have their say, regardless of intention. During the 2015 election campaign, militant monks and conservative politicians widely depicted Muslims as an existential threat to the nation. Now Myanmar's military, police, and civilian militias are actually doing what they said should be done: removing the 'threat' physically. Xenophobic feeling has deep roots in this largely Buddhist country, and the idea that any threat to Buddhism may require firm political action is well established. It is called the 'defense of the sasana,' which means any action to defend the community of monks, nuns and laypeople, the Buddha's teachings, and the scriptures that underpin this Buddhist universe.

It is important not to demonise Myanmar as a whole. Whenever someone did turn an alleged Muslim 'threat' into a public issue in recent years, they turned out to be close to the military that has ruled Myanmar since the coup of 1962. The gruesome model for today's ethnic cleansing is a 1978 military operation called Naga Min. It was originally intended to update the government's population data following an influx of Bangladeshi migrants fleeing their own country's war for independence. But the military carried out the operation so brutally that it soon created a flood in the opposite direction. A quarter of a million people arrived in Bangladesh, telling stories of horrifying abuses by the Burmese army and Buddhist militias. In 1991 the government cracked down in Rakhine State again, to punish elements that had supported the 1988 uprising. At the same time they kept hammering on about the so-called 'national races' and how the Rohingya didn't belong to them.

In 2012 the competitive wheels began to turn ahead of announced presidential elections in 2015. Soon the same xenophobic theme was heard. This time the initiative seemed to come from extremist elements within the Buddhist monkhood, with U Wirathu as their spokesperson. He worked together with military figures such as former Lieutenant Colonel Aung Thaung, a political strategist specialised in dirty tricks. Wirathu's group started a movement on social media and at rallies depicting the nation as in danger from 'fanatical' Muslims, borrowing language from the European far right. Political party activists kicked off 'riots' targeting Muslims in Rakhine State in June 2012, and again in October. More riots followed elsewhere. Out of nothing, they had created the impression a 'Muslim problem' really existed. They depicted Aung San Suu Kyi as a 'friend of Muslims'. She feels intimidated by these allegations - her election was only possible because the military had decided she was no longer a danger to their powerful influence over public life.

So what is Myanmar's democratic future? Democracy in Myanmar is in deep crisis. The military has enhanced its domestic popularity by the ethnic cleansing. "They hit the jackpot," said a foreign analyst in Yangon. "They are six years into the democracy era, and they are more popular than in decades." Aung San Suu Kyi is side-lined; journalists are being detained and killed; citizenship discourse is deeply racist.

Is democracy now irrelevant, and are we condemned to a permanent and worldwide Clash of Civilisations? Not necessarily. Myanmar remains constitutionally secular. Actual violence to 'defend the sasana' is not inevitable. It only happens at particular moments of contestation. At other moments, religious xenophobia has played no role. The huge pro-democracy demonstrations of 1988 - which gave rise to Aung San Suu Kyi - were about removing the military from politics, not about religion. Civil society forces

opposed to military privilege remain alive.

Even the men in green might have an incentive to rethink. They also want Myanmar to re-join the international community. After decades of Western sanctions, that is why they allowed free elections. Now Myanmar's political class must do what it takes to earn that place in the world. Burmese democrats, right now keeping their heads low, must stand up and make their voices heard as in 1988. They must take back democracy from the military and the extremist monks who hijacked it. The rest of the world must keep them to it.

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