

Burma, the Rohingyas and Australia

(10:23 AEDT, 8 October 2012)

The circulation in Myanmar of a speech supposedly made by the Australian Prime Minister, expressing views similar to those held by anti-Muslim extremists in Myanmar, once again drew attention to the bitter racial and religious divisions in that country and the plight of the Rohingya in particular.

Burma faces more than its fair share of complex, sensitive and potentially divisive problems, but it is difficult to imagine one more intractable than the future of the Rohingyas, the estimated 800,000 Muslims of South Asian descent who are currently denied any formal recognition, either by Naypyidaw or by the international community.

Canberra has always been very careful in its responses to this controversial issue. However, through no fault of its own, the Australian Government may now become embroiled in it, and in a way that will not be helpful to anyone.

Over the past decade, the plight of the Rohingyas has attracted increased attention, mainly from Muslim countries and multilateral organisations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Yet, the issue is still little known and poorly understood. Accurate and objective analyses tend to be drowned out by passionate interventions from activists and others, amplified by the internet.¹

1 Tin Maung Maung Than and Moe Thuzar, 'Myanmar's Rohingya Dilemma', *ISEAS Perspective*, 9 July 2012, www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF13/iseas-rohingya.pdf [page discontinued].

Since Burma's independence in 1948, several attempts have been made to define the status of the Rohingyas, but they have always suffered discrimination. After 1962, the military government launched a number of pogroms against them, driving hundreds of thousands into squalid refugee camps in Bangladesh. Others have fled further afield and eke out a precarious existence in countries like Malaysia, Thailand, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

On 3 June, communal violence erupted in Rakhine (Arakan) State, on the northwest coast, where most of Burma's Rohingyas live. The unrest appears to have been sparked by the rape and murder of a Buddhist woman by three Muslim men in late May, but such was the depth of feeling already dividing the two communities that it rapidly escalated.

On 10 June, the President declared a state of emergency. The armed forces were sent in to restore law and order, although it has been claimed that they only contributed to the violence.² According to the UN, about 90 people died in the unrest, an estimated 90,000 were displaced and around 5,300 buildings were damaged or destroyed.

The Rohingya problem is particularly resistant to a negotiated settlement. This is despite, or because of, the fact that many in Burma's government and opposition movement, and most of the population, seem to be in broad agreement. In their eyes, the Rohingyas are not entitled to Burmese citizenship and should be expelled. They also feel that the Rohingyas in refugee camps in Bangladesh or in exile elsewhere should not be permitted to return home.

Asked for her views earlier this year, Aung San Suu Kyi was initially equivocal on this issue, prompting rare criticism from international human rights campaigners.³ She has since formulated a more nuanced policy position that emphasises 'the rule of law', but continues to shy away from calls for the Rohingyas to be granted the same legal rights as other Burmese.

2 *'The Government Could Have Stopped This': Sectarian Violence and Ensuing Abuses in Burma's Arakan State* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2012), www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/burma0812webwcover_0.pdf.

3 Anna Maria Tremonti, 'Aung San Suu Kyi's Silence Over the Plight of the Rohingya Muslim Minority', *The Current*, 23 August 2012, www.cbc.ca/thecurrent/episode/2012/08/23/aung-san-suu-kyis-silence-over-the-plight-of-the-rohingya-muslim-minority/ [page discontinued].

Understandably, Australia has been cautious about expressing any views on this vexed question, which touches on aspects of Burma's history, politics, economy and culture. Also, like everyone else, Canberra is keen to avoid saying or doing anything that might slow the momentum of President Thein Sein's domestic reform program.⁴

In June, Bob Carr advised the Burmese Government of Australia's 'strong concern' at the ethnic and religious violence that had broken out in Rakhine State, and called on all parties involved to seek a negotiated, peaceful outcome that respected all sides.⁵ The ambassador in Rangoon was asked to present Australia's concerns directly to the President's office and relevant government ministers.

Last month, the foreign minister announced that Australia would provide humanitarian aid for 14,000 people left homeless in Rakhine State by the recent sectarian violence. Australia is also working with CARE and other agencies 'to identify opportunities for ongoing, long-term support ... that will help the victims of violence rebuild their lives, strengthen community resilience to ethnic conflict and restore peace'.⁶

In the circumstances, these responses seem measured and sensible. Australia has expressed its justifiable concerns over the situation in Rakhine State, called on all parties to settle their differences and provided practical assistance to the victims of the violence. It is worth noting, too, that, since 2008, Rohingya refugees in camps in Bangladesh have been included in Australia's humanitarian immigration program.

This carefully considered position, however, may be threatened by a leaflet that appears to be circulating in Burma, claiming that the Australian Prime Minister supports the hardline anti-Muslim stance taken by many Burmese.

4 Michelle Nichols, 'UN Chief Urges Careful Handling of Myanmar Rohingyas Issue', *Reuters*, 29 September 2012, www.rohingya.org/un-chief-urges-careful-handling-of-myanmar-rohingyas-issue/.

5 Senator the Hon. Bob Carr, Minister for Foreign Affairs, 'Violence in Rakhine State, Myanmar', Media release, Parliament House, Canberra, 15 June 2012, foreignminister.gov.au/releases/2012/bc_mr_120615.html [page discontinued].

6 'Support for Rakhine State, Myanmar', News release, AusAID, Canberra, 11 September 2012, www.ausaid.gov.au/HotTopics/Pages/Display.aspx?QID=801 [page discontinued].

The document in question purports to be a speech made by Julia Gillard, in which she demands that Muslims in Australia accept the country's predominantly English-speaking Christian culture or leave.⁷ The 'speech' seems to have been lifted from the internet and translated into Burmese. At least one copy has been found in Rangoon, but it may have already spread more widely around the country.

The Rangoon copy was given some credibility by being attached to an article on Muslim migration to Rakhine State that was being sold through local bookshops by a member of Burma's Historical Research Department. In an accompanying commentary, Prime Minister Gillard was praised as a resolute world leader, standing up for the rights of Australian citizens in the face of a Muslim threat. The message to Burmese readers was clear.

This kind of scurrilous literature has a long history in Burma. The violence periodically perpetrated against Muslim communities—not just in Rakhine State, but also elsewhere in Burma—has often been sparked, or inflamed, by virulent anti-Muslim propaganda. Peddled by hardline nationalists and religious zealots, such leaflets usually repeat the canards that local Muslims are disrespecting Burmese women and insulting Buddhism.

The Gillard 'speech' is obviously a crude hoax. As with similar reports in the past, it is unlikely to fool anyone who knows anything about Australia's government or political culture.⁸ Yet, some in Burma may be inclined to believe it. Quite apart from any lack of familiarity with Australia, the purported remarks by the Prime Minister are likely to find a ready audience among those Burmese who already harbour deep reservations about Muslims in their country—not least the Rohingyas.

7 Holte Ender, 'Aussie Prime Minister Julia Gillard to Muslims: Live with Our Beliefs or Get Out', *MadMike'sAmerica.com*, madmikesamerica.com/2011/01/hate-begets-hate-julia-gillard-to-muslims/.

8 David Mikkelsen, 'Muslims Out of Australia', *Snopes.com*, 2005, www.snopes.com/politics/soapbox/australia.asp.

This text is taken from *Interpreting Myanmar: A Decade of Analysis*,
by Andrew Selth, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian
National University, Canberra, Australia.