

## Aung San Suu Kyi's aura is fading

(15:10 AEDT, 18 November 2014)

*Two regional summits held in Naypyidaw in November 2014 attracted the world's attention, but the press coverage of those events suggested that international opinion regarding Aung San Suu Kyi was shifting. Increasingly, she was the subject of articles critical of her refusal to speak out on behalf of those in Myanmar—notably, the Kachin and Rohingya minorities—who were suffering from human rights abuses.*

The East Asia and ASEAN summit meetings in Naypyidaw last week<sup>1</sup> drew attention to a wide range of issues concerning the Asia-Pacific. They also prompted journalists and commentators around the world to take a closer look at Burma (Myanmar) itself.

There were three kinds of articles about Burma published in the news media earlier this month. Two were expected and aired arguments that have become familiar since the advent of President Thein Sein's mixed civilian–military government in 2011. The third set of articles, however, was unexpected and seems to reflect a major shift in international attitudes towards opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

---

1 Brendan Thomas-Noone, 'Myanmar's Big Week: A Backgrounder', *The Interpreter*, 12 November 2014, [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2014/11/12/9th-East-Asia-Summit-The-best-on-Myanmar.aspx?COLLCC=2527660672&](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2014/11/12/9th-East-Asia-Summit-The-best-on-Myanmar.aspx?COLLCC=2527660672&) [page discontinued] [now at [www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/myanmars-big-week-backgrounder](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/myanmars-big-week-backgrounder)].

The first category of articles highlighted the slowing pace of reform in Burma, the government's failure to achieve a ceasefire with ethnic armed groups, continuing discrimination against the Rohingya minority<sup>2</sup> and parliament's refusal to amend the 2008 constitution so that Aung San Suu Kyi can run for the presidency in 2016.<sup>3</sup> World leaders were urged to put more pressure on Thein Sein, even to reimpose sanctions.

The second category of articles included a number of thoughtful commentaries by analysts who took a more strategic view.<sup>4</sup> They recognised Burma's shortcomings but made greater allowances for the enormous challenges faced by Thein Sein and the reformers. After considering the alternatives, they argued strongly for the international community to be patient and to continue supporting the transition process.<sup>5</sup>

As these articles revealed, human rights campaigners and other activists remain focused on Burma's immediate problems. Governments and international organisations, however, are increasingly looking forward to wider reforms. They believe the democratisation process is real but accept that it will be difficult and take a long time.<sup>6</sup> They are clearly unwilling to do anything that might harm the prospects for further change.

While the broad positions outlined in these articles were not new, it was striking how Aung San Suu Kyi no longer seemed to be viewed as central to the resolution of Burma's problems. The focus was clearly on the national government. Indeed, in a third category of articles, published

2 Charlie Campbell, 'If Obama Only Talks About One Thing in Burma it Must Be the Rohingya', *TIME*, 13 November 2014, [time.com/3582611/obama-rohingya-burma-myanmar/](http://time.com/3582611/obama-rohingya-burma-myanmar/).

3 Matthew Pennington, 'US Lawmakers: Myanmar Vote Unfair without Suu Kyi', *Yahoo News*, 5 November 2014, [news.yahoo.com/us-lawmakers-myanmar-vote-unfair-without-suu-kyi-191159697.html](http://news.yahoo.com/us-lawmakers-myanmar-vote-unfair-without-suu-kyi-191159697.html) [page discontinued].

4 Nirmal Ghosh, 'Little Choice but to Support Reformists in Myanmar', *The Straits Times*, [Singapore], 10 November 2014, [www.stasiareport.com/the-big-story/asia-report/blogs/story/little-choice-support-reformists-myanmar-20141110](http://www.stasiareport.com/the-big-story/asia-report/blogs/story/little-choice-support-reformists-myanmar-20141110) [page discontinued] [now at [www.straitstimes.com/asia/little-choice-but-to-support-reformists-in-myanmar](http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/little-choice-but-to-support-reformists-in-myanmar)].

5 Priscilla Clapp, *Myanmar: Taking the Long View*, Asia Pacific Bulletin No.286 (Washington, DC: East-West Center, 10 November 2014), [www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/private/apb286.pdf](http://www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/private/apb286.pdf) [page discontinued] [now at [www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tdf/private/apb286.pdf?file=1&type=node&cid=34833](http://www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tdf/private/apb286.pdf?file=1&type=node&cid=34833)].

6 Erin Murphy and James Clad, 'Previewing President Obama's Trip to Myanmar for the East Asia Summit', *Commentary* (Seattle: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 4 November 2014), [www.nbr.org/downloads/pdfs/eta/MurphyClad\\_commentary\\_110414.pdf](http://www.nbr.org/downloads/pdfs/eta/MurphyClad_commentary_110414.pdf) [page discontinued] [now at [www.nbr.org/publication/previewing-president-obamas-trip-to-myanmar-for-the-east-asia-summit/](http://www.nbr.org/publication/previewing-president-obamas-trip-to-myanmar-for-the-east-asia-summit/)].

in a number of leading magazines and newspapers, Aung San Suu Kyi was openly and strongly criticised for failing to exert a leadership role on a number of key issues.

As noted on *The Interpreter* last year,<sup>7</sup> there was a time not that long ago when Aung San Suu Kyi was considered to be without peer and beyond reproach. According to one story in *The Times*, she was ‘the bravest and most moral person in the world’.<sup>8</sup> Her aura began to fade after she was released from house arrest in 2010 and was elected to parliament in 2012.<sup>9</sup> Few observers, however, anticipated the harsh criticism that she is now receiving.

The first shot in the latest salvo against her was fired by *TIME* on 6 November, in an article headlined ‘Aung San Suu Kyi’s Silence on Burma’s Human-Rights Abuses is Appalling’.<sup>10</sup> This was followed on 12 November by a piece in *The Diplomat* by Tim Robertson under the title ‘Aung San Suu Kyi: Colluding with Tyranny’.<sup>11</sup>

On the same day, two other articles appeared. They were a little more measured but were still quite critical of her actions—or lack of them. Jane Perlez published a piece in *The New York Times* under the heading ‘For Some, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi Falls Short of Expectations in Myanmar’.<sup>12</sup> On a lesser-known website, Alan Lerner posted a piece entitled ‘Obama’s Tarnished Saint’.<sup>13</sup>

7 Andrew Selth, ‘Aung San Suu Kyi: A Pilgrim’s Progress’, *The Interpreter*, 7 May 2013, [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/05/07/Aung-San-Suu-Kyi-A-pilgrims-progress.aspx](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/05/07/Aung-San-Suu-Kyi-A-pilgrims-progress.aspx) [page discontinued] [now at [www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/aung-san-suu-kyi-pilgrims-progress](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/aung-san-suu-kyi-pilgrims-progress)].

8 R.L. Parry, ‘Enjoy Suu Kyi Now: Her Saintliness Won’t Last’, *The Times*, [London], 18 June 2012, [www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF12/enjoy-suu-kyi-now.pdf](http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF12/enjoy-suu-kyi-now.pdf) [page discontinued].

9 ‘Aung San Suu Kyi: The Halo Slips’, *The Economist*, 15 June 2013, [www.economist.com/news/asia/21579512-running-president-comes-risks-halo-slips](http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21579512-running-president-comes-risks-halo-slips).

10 Charlie Campbell, ‘Aung San Suu Kyi’s Silence on Burma’s Human-Rights Abuses is Appalling’, *TIME*, 6 November 2014, [time.com/3560353/myanmar-burma-nobel-peace-prize-aung-san-suu-kyi-burma-human-rights-abuses-silence/](http://time.com/3560353/myanmar-burma-nobel-peace-prize-aung-san-suu-kyi-burma-human-rights-abuses-silence/).

11 Tim Robertson, ‘Aung San Suu Kyi: Colluding with Tyranny’, *The Diplomat*, [Washington, DC], 12 November 2014, [thediplomat.com/2014/11/aung-san-suu-kyi-colluding-with-tyranny/](http://thediplomat.com/2014/11/aung-san-suu-kyi-colluding-with-tyranny/).

12 Jane Perlez, ‘For Some, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi Falls Short of Expectations in Myanmar’, *The New York Times*, 12 November 2014, [www.nytimes.com/2014/11/13/world/asia/for-some-daw-aung-san-suu-kyi-falls-short-of-expectations-in-myanmar.html?emc=edit\\_tnt\\_20141112&nid=21134157&ttemail0=y&r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/13/world/asia/for-some-daw-aung-san-suu-kyi-falls-short-of-expectations-in-myanmar.html?emc=edit_tnt_20141112&nid=21134157&ttemail0=y&r=2).

13 Adam B. Lerner, ‘Obama’s Tarnished Saint’, *Politico Magazine*, 12 November 2014, [www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/11/obama-myanmar-aung-san-suu-kyi-112844.html#.VGZR4mccRUb](http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/11/obama-myanmar-aung-san-suu-kyi-112844.html#.VGZR4mccRUb).

As the titles of these and other articles suggest, there has been widespread disappointment over the Nobel Peace laureate's refusal to condemn the continuing persecution of the Muslim Rohingyas and military operations against the Kachin and Shan. She has also drawn fire for appearing to support big business and for trying to develop a relationship with the country's armed forces, which still dominate Burma.

There was always going to be an adjustment in popular perceptions once Aung San Suu Kyi ceased being an icon under house arrest and began participating in the rough and tumble of Burmese power politics. She had been invested with such unrealistic hopes and expectations that she was bound to disappoint many. Also, many of her supporters seem to find it difficult to accept that politics requires difficult decisions and that compromises are often necessary.

It is often forgotten, too, that Aung San Suu Kyi, for all her charisma and popular support both at home and abroad, has few means of actually affecting political change in Burma. The constitution gives the government and armed forces control of almost all the levers of power. In that sense, she is the leader of a small, and to all practical purposes, ineffectual group in the national parliament, which to the surprise of many has adopted a low profile.

Aung San Suu Kyi is caught between two fires. She seems anxious to avoid taking any position that will alienate her predominantly ethnic Burman and Buddhist constituency. However, by failing to speak out on major human rights issues, she risks losing the support of her international backers, on whom she has relied to put pressure on the government, the better to achieve her domestic political objectives.<sup>14</sup>

Aung San Suu Kyi has declined to explain her behaviour, falling back as she often does on broad statements of principle.<sup>15</sup> Whatever the reasons for her refusal to speak out on some important issues, her reputation is no

---

14 Christi Parsons, 'Obama–Suu Kyi Visit in Myanmar Reflects Warmth and Differences', *Los Angeles Times*, 14 November 2014, [www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-obama-suu-kyi-meeting-20141114-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-obama-suu-kyi-meeting-20141114-story.html).

15 Anjana Pasricha, 'Aung San Suu Kyi Explains Silence on Rohingyas', *Voice of America*, 15 November 2012, [www.voanews.com/content/aung-san-suu-kyi-explains-silence-on-rohingyas/1546809.html](http://www.voanews.com/content/aung-san-suu-kyi-explains-silence-on-rohingyas/1546809.html) [page discontinued] [now at [www.voanews.com/east-asia/aung-san-suu-kyi-explains-silence-rohingyas](http://www.voanews.com/east-asia/aung-san-suu-kyi-explains-silence-rohingyas)].

longer what it used to be.<sup>16</sup> No one is yet saying that she has feet of clay, but her image as a principled champion of universal human rights and determined fighter for democracy is certainly taking a beating.

In his article, Tim Robertson cites George Orwell's line: 'Saints should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent.' The sentence, taken from Orwell's 1949 essay *Reflections on Gandhi*, continues, 'but the tests that have to be applied to them are not, of course, the same in all cases'.<sup>17</sup> We need to know more about Aung San Suu Kyi's thinking to get the full picture, but some tests have already been applied and she has not come out of the examination well.

---

16 Tim Hume, 'Aung San Suu Kyi's "Silence" on the Rohingya: Has "The Lady" Lost Her Voice?', *CNN*, 1 June 2014, [edition.cnn.com/2014/04/15/world/asia/myanmar-aung-san-suu-kyi-rohingya-disappointment/](http://edition.cnn.com/2014/04/15/world/asia/myanmar-aung-san-suu-kyi-rohingya-disappointment/).

17 George Orwell, 'Reflections on Gandhi', *Partisan Review*, January 1949, [London: The Orwell Foundation], [www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/reflections-on-gandhi/](http://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/reflections-on-gandhi/).

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.