

## More name games in Burma/Myanmar

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*The long saga of what Australian officials should call Myanmar finally seemed to be over when State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi told a public gathering that she did not mind whether the country was called Burma or Myanmar. However, she sparked a fresh controversy over names by requesting that civil servants and diplomats in Myanmar not use the term 'Rohingya' for one of the country's Muslim minorities.*

Regular readers of *The Interpreter* will know that, over the past few years, this site has closely followed the Australian Government's efforts to grapple with the diplomatic implications of the formal change of Burma's name in 1989 to Myanmar. The indications are that this saga may finally be over.

At first, Australia followed the lead of the US, the UK and other Western democracies opposed to the new military regime and continued to call Burma by its old name. This was also in accordance with the wishes of the country's main opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, who took the view that a country can only change its name if there is a popular mandate to do so.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Laura McQuillan, 'Suu Kyi: It's Burma, Not Myanmar', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 November 2012, [www.smh.com.au/world/suu-kyi-its-burma-not-myanmar-20121122-29wlh.html](http://www.smh.com.au/world/suu-kyi-its-burma-not-myanmar-20121122-29wlh.html).

Aung San Suu Kyi also felt that ‘Myanmar’ was not an inclusive term, as it was merely a literary form of ‘Burma’, which referred only to the majority ethnic Bamar, or Burmans.<sup>2</sup> How her preferred name ‘Burma’—a colonial creation based on exactly the same premises as ‘Myanmar’—was more representative of the country’s 135 or more national races was not explained.

By following this line, Australia was forced to adopt a two-track approach to the country. Canberra’s formal correspondence with the military government always referred to ‘Myanmar’, as required by diplomatic protocol. However, in all official statements and press releases, and on the DFAT website, the Australian Government called the country ‘Burma’.<sup>3</sup>

This policy complicated relations both with the authorities in Rangoon (later Naypyidaw) and with other capitals in the region, where ‘Myanmar’ was readily accepted. However, the mixed approach was deemed symbolically important. Canberra claimed that it helped register concern over human rights abuses by the military government and was a gesture of support for the country’s embattled democracy movement.

This clumsy arrangement ended in 2012 when foreign minister Bob Carr accepted that a confrontationist approach to the military regime made it more difficult to promote meaningful reforms. Australia had fallen out of step with the international community, which increasingly favoured the use of ‘Myanmar’. Carr decided that Canberra would henceforth call the country by its formal name—a rule that was observed during president Thein Sein’s state visit to Australia in March 2013.

This position, however, was unexpectedly reversed in 2014 by Tony Abbott. In what appears to have been one of his ‘captain’s calls’, the new prime minister decreed that, in all ‘internal’ correspondence (including on the DFAT website), the country would once again be called Burma.<sup>4</sup> Only in cases of ‘external’ usage, such as formal diplomatic exchanges, would it be referred to as Myanmar.

2 Peter Lloyd and Tony Eastley, ‘Burma Bans Officials’ Use of “Rohingya” to Describe Minority Ahead of UN Report’, *PM*, [ABC Radio National], 22 June 2016, [www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2016/s4487158.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2016/s4487158.htm) [page discontinued].

3 Andrew Selth, ‘Australia and the Burma/Myanmar Name Debate’, *The Interpreter*, 27 November 2013, [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/11/27/Australia-and-the-BurmaMyanmar-name.aspx](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/11/27/Australia-and-the-BurmaMyanmar-name.aspx) [page discontinued] [now at [www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/australia-and-burmayanmar-name-debate](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/australia-and-burmayanmar-name-debate)].

4 Andrew Selth, ‘Myanmar Becomes Burma, Again’, *The Interpreter*, 14 January 2014, [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2014/01/14/Myanmar-becomes-Burma-again.aspx](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2014/01/14/Myanmar-becomes-Burma-again.aspx) [page discontinued] [now at [www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/myanmar-becomes-burma-again](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/myanmar-becomes-burma-again)].

The reason for this about-face has never been explained. Indeed, the instruction appears to have been issued by the prime minister's office against the advice of the Australian Embassy in Rangoon, DFAT and possibly even the foreign minister's office. To make matters worse, the new policy was applied inconsistently, including by the Prime Minister himself.

It is difficult to see any benefits for Australia in adopting this approach. Indeed, it needlessly offended the Naypyidaw government at a critical time and upset other ASEAN members. Also, it is unlikely to have been appreciated by Aung San Suu Kyi, who by then was herself using the name Myanmar in certain circumstances. The result of the change was confusion and, in the eyes of some knowledgeable observers, a loss of credibility by Australia on Burma-related issues.

After Malcolm Turnbull became Prime Minister last year, there was speculation that common sense would prevail and Canberra would once again accept that, whatever their nature and reputation, all governments have the right to choose the name of their own country. Also, by that time, only a couple of countries (notably, the US) and a number of activist groups still insisted on using 'Burma'.<sup>5</sup>

To add another complication, in March this year, Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD took government after surprisingly free and fair national elections. This led some commentators to wonder whether the country's de facto leader (Aung San Suu Kyi is denied the presidency by the 2008 constitution) would change the name of the country back to Burma (notwithstanding the practical difficulties and administrative costs of doing so).

It now appears this will not happen. In April, Aung San Suu Kyi told the Rangoon diplomatic corps that it does not matter whether her country is called Burma or Myanmar, as 'there is nothing in the constitution that says you must use any term in particular'.<sup>6</sup> (In fact, the constitution clearly states that the country is called the Republic of the Union of Myanmar.)

5 Andrew Selth, 'All Change: Election Result May See Another Round of the Burma/Myanmar Name Game', *The Interpreter*, 18 November 2015, [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2015/11/18/All-change-Election-result-may-see-another-round-of-the-BurmaMyanmar-name-game.aspx](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2015/11/18/All-change-Election-result-may-see-another-round-of-the-BurmaMyanmar-name-game.aspx) [page discontinued] [now at [www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/all-change-election-result-may-see-another-round-burmamyanmar-name-game](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/all-change-election-result-may-see-another-round-burmamyanmar-name-game)].

6 'Aung San Suu Kyi: You Can Call My Country Myanmar or Burma', *Independent*, [Ireland], 22 April 2016, [www.independent.ie/world-news/asia-pacific/aung-san-suu-kyi-you-can-call-my-country-myanmar-or-burma-34651556.html](http://www.independent.ie/world-news/asia-pacific/aung-san-suu-kyi-you-can-call-my-country-myanmar-or-burma-34651556.html).

She told the assembled foreign officials that she personally preferred ‘Burma’ but would use ‘Myanmar’ from time to time, to make everyone ‘feel comfortable’.

As in previous cases when Australian policy on this issue has shifted, there has not been any public announcement, but it would appear that Canberra has quietly gone back to the 2012 rules. The ‘Burma’ country page on the DFAT website has been renamed the ‘Myanmar’ page.<sup>7</sup> All other references to the country—in public speeches, media releases and data sheets—are now to ‘Myanmar’.

For example, when Foreign Minister Julie Bishop addressed Aung San Suu Kyi at the ASEAN meeting in Laos on 25 July 2016, she specifically referred to Myanmar, not Burma.<sup>8</sup> Bishop again referred to Myanmar when announcing Australia’s latest tranche of humanitarian assistance earlier this month.<sup>9</sup> This followed discussions between her and the ‘State Counsellor’, as Aung San Suu Kyi is now called.

Lest anyone think this has all been a storm in a tea cup, important only to those who operate in the rarefied atmosphere of diplomatic protocol, it is worth bearing in mind that in June this year Aung San Suu Kyi instructed all Burmese officials to stop using the term ‘Rohingyas’ to refer to the hundreds of thousands of disenfranchised local residents whom she prefers to call ‘people who believe in Islam in Rakhine State’.<sup>10</sup>

Foreign embassies in Burma and international organisations like the UN have been advised of the State Counsellor’s views, in the expectation that they will respect them. The US Ambassador in Rangoon has since announced that he and his government would continue to use the term

7 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Myanmar* (Canberra: Australian Government), [dfat.gov.au/geo/myanmar/Pages/myanmar.aspx](http://dfat.gov.au/geo/myanmar/Pages/myanmar.aspx).

8 The Hon. Julie Bishop MP, Minister for Foreign Affairs, ‘ASEAN–Australia Ministerial Meeting: Opening Remarks’, Speech, Vientiane, 25 July 2016, [foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/Pages/2016/jb\\_sp\\_160725.aspx](http://foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/Pages/2016/jb_sp_160725.aspx) [page discontinued] [now at [www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/julie-bishop/speech/asean-australia-ministerial-meeting-opening-remarks](http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/julie-bishop/speech/asean-australia-ministerial-meeting-opening-remarks)].

9 The Hon. Julie Bishop MP, Minister for Foreign Affairs, ‘Additional Humanitarian Assistance to Myanmar’, Media release, Parliament House, Canberra, 1 August 2016, [foreignminister.gov.au/releases/Pages/2016/jb\\_mr\\_160801.aspx](http://foreignminister.gov.au/releases/Pages/2016/jb_mr_160801.aspx) [page discontinued] [now at [www.dfat.gov.au/news/news/Pages/additional-humanitarian-assistance-to-myanmar](http://www.dfat.gov.au/news/news/Pages/additional-humanitarian-assistance-to-myanmar)].

10 Peter Lloyd, ‘Burma Leader Aung San Suu Kyi Bans Use of Rohingya Name for Oppressed Muslims’, *ABC News*, 22 June 2016, [www.abc.net.au/news/2016-06-22/aung-san-suu-kyi-bans-use-of-rohingya-name/7534410](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-06-22/aung-san-suu-kyi-bans-use-of-rohingya-name/7534410).

'Rohingya' on the grounds that all such groups have the right to identify themselves.<sup>11</sup> However, the EU has fallen into line, stating that it would avoid use of the controversial term.<sup>12</sup>

Australian officials have referred to 'Rohingyas' many times in the past, in many different contexts. The government's position on Aung San Suu Kyi's latest 'request' is not yet clear, but it is interesting that Bishop's media release on 1 August referred only to aid for 'displaced communities', when the Rohingyas are an obvious target group. Names, it seems, still have the potential to cause diplomatic problems in Burma/Myanmar.

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11 'US Defies Myanmar Government Request to Stop Using Term Rohingya', *The Guardian*, 11 May 2016, [www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/11/us-defies-myanmar-government-rohingya-muslims](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/11/us-defies-myanmar-government-rohingya-muslims).

12 Antoni Slodkowski, 'Myanmar: Rohingya Will Not be Called Rohingya by the EU', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 June 2016, [www.smh.com.au/world/myanmar-rohingya-will-not-be-called-rohingya-by-the-eu-20160622-gppsah.html](http://www.smh.com.au/world/myanmar-rohingya-will-not-be-called-rohingya-by-the-eu-20160622-gppsah.html).

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