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Aung San Suu Kyi's fall from grace

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When she took office in March 2016, Aung San Suu Kyi inherited enormous problems and compounded them by making promises that she could never keep. Also, she had no control over the activities of the armed forces. She remained popular within Myanmar, but increasingly attracted criticism from abroad. This was not for failing to meet unrealistic popular expectations, however, but for disappointing all those who expected a more vigorous defence of human rights.

The people of Myanmar have always been able to capture complex issues in pithy, often humorous, expressions. One joke currently doing the rounds is that, after decades of trying to get into the driver's seat of the rickety old bus that is modern Myanmar, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi has discovered that the steering wheel is not connected, the accelerator does not work and the passengers all want to go in different directions.

Aung San Suu Kyi was never going to meet the expectations of her supporters, both in Myanmar and abroad. They were quite unrealistic, given all the problems she inherited on taking power in March. Every sector of government begged for drastic reform and increased resources. Added to that, several new challenges have arisen over the past eight months that have stretched her inexperienced administration almost to breaking point.

Aung San Suu Kyi compounded these difficulties by making a number of rash promises. For example, she stated that a nationwide peace agreement with the country's armed ethnic groups was her 'single most important goal'.¹ Yet such an outcome was always going to be very difficult to achieve. Another stated aim was to end corruption—a deepseated problem in Myanmar that few believed could be solved easily or quickly.²

Most informed observers have been prepared to cut her some slack, recognising that the new government does not control all the levers of power. The armed forces (or *Tatmadaw*) are arguably still the country's most powerful political institution and they enjoy complete autonomy in military affairs. The economy is dominated by former military officers and their 'capitalist cronies'. Social, ethnic and religious tensions remain high and have the potential to erupt unexpectedly.

Even so, few observers anticipated that Aung San Suu Kyi would fall from grace so quickly. A scan of the headlines in major news outlets and websites reveals an almost uniform chorus of criticism—even, at times, condemnation.

Perhaps the loudest complaint heard against her is that, apart from appointing former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan to lead an advisory commission, she has failed to do anything about the plight of the mostly stateless Rohingya Muslims.³ International concern has grown since October, when militants attacked three Myanmar security posts, triggering a harsh crackdown against the Rohingyas in northern Rakhine State.

David Mathieson of Human Rights Watch was more polite than most when he said: 'Suu Kyi risks shredding what residual credibility she still has on human rights if she fails to speak out.'⁴ She has been accused of abandoning the principles for which she was awarded the 1991 Nobel

1 Shibani Mahtani and Myo Myo, 'Aung San Suu Kyi Calls Securing Peace in Myanmar Her Priority', *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 January 2016, www.wsj.com/articles/aung-san-suu-kyi-calls-securing-peace-in-myanmar-her-priority-1451899867.

2 Shibani Mahtani and Myo Myo, 'Myanmar's Suu Kyi Puts Corruption Fight at Centre of Campaign', *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 October 2015, blogs.wsj.com/frontiers/2015/10/12/myanmars-suu-kyi-puts-corruption-fight-at-center-of-campaign/ [page discontinued].

3 Anushay Hossain, 'Aung San Suu Kyi's Tragic Silence Over Rohingya', *CNN*, 1 December 2016, us.cnn.com/2016/12/01/opinions/aung-san-suu-kyi-failing-rohingya-hossain/index.html.

4 Kayleigh Long, 'Myanmar: Rohingya Muslims Displaced, Starving Amid Allegations of Human Rights Abuses by Security Forces', *ABC News*, 25 November 2016, www.abc.net.au/news/2016-11-25/suu-kyi-under-pressure-on-myanmar-human-rights-abuse-claims/8054976.

Peace Prize.⁵ Other critics have claimed that her government is 'legitimising genocide',⁶ endorsing collective punishment and 'ethnic cleansing'⁷ and threatening regional stability.⁸

In the US, Aung San Suu Kyi already risks losing critical support. Some members of Congress have expressed reservations about President Obama's decision, made during Suu Kyi's visit to Washington in September, to lift all economic sanctions against Myanmar. One congressman has said he was 'appalled by her dismissive reaction' to concerns he raised with her about human trafficking in Myanmar.⁹

In addition to military operations in Rakhine State, the *Tatmadaw* is waging a fierce campaign against four armed ethnic groups in northern Myanmar. Since mid November, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), T'ang National Liberation Army, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and the Arakan Army have launched attacks along the sensitive border with China. There has also been renewed fighting in Shan State.

The KIA attended Aung San Suu Kyi's much vaunted but ultimately unsuccessful 21st Century Panglong Conference in August. The other three insurgent groups were not invited because they refused to lay down their arms before the meeting. In a masterly understatement, a government spokesman said the latest round of fighting would 'complicate the peace process'.¹⁰ This is now effectively in the hands of the armed forces leadership.

5 'Bangladesh Pushes Back Rohingya Refugees Amid Collective Punishment in Myanmar', *News* (London: Amnesty International, 24 November 2016), www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/11/bangladesh-pushes-back-rohingya-refugees-amid-collective-punishment-in-myanmar/.

6 Nyshka Chandran, 'Myanmar's Suu Kyi Under Fire as Rohingya Crisis Escalates in Rakhine', *CNBC*, 24 November 2016, www.cnbc.com/2016/11/24/myanmars-aung-san-suu-kyis-under-fire-as-rohingya-crisis-escalates-in-rakhine.html.

7 'Myanmar Wants Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya: UN Official', *BBC News*, 24 November 2016, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-38091816.

8 Ye Mon and Shoon Naing, 'Duelling Protests as Tensions Rise between Myanmar and Malaysia', *Myanmar Times*, [Yangon], 5 December 2016, www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/24035-duelling-protests-as-tensions-rise.html.

9 Patricia Zengerle, 'US Senator Blasts Suu Kyi's "Dismissive" Reaction on Trafficking', *Reuters*, 15 September 2016, uk.reuters.com/article/uk-usa-myanmar-senator-idUKKCN11K1Z3.

10 'Kachin Independence Army Teams Up with Other Fighters in Myanmar Attack', *Radio Free Asia*, [Washington, DC], 21 November 2016, www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/kachin-independence-army-teams-11212016141619.html.

Aung San Suu Kyi is also being criticised for other reasons. She has failed to reduce the *Tatmadaw's* political power, preventing her from amending the promilitary constitution. Both were major election commitments. Many political prisoners have been released but draconian laws remain on the books, resulting in fresh arrests. Freedoms of speech and the press are still curtailed.¹¹ The poverty level hovers around 26 per cent.

Without making any excuses for Aung San Suu Kyi, it must be recognised that she is in a very difficult position. Security operations in Myanmar are managed by the armed forces, which, under the 2008 constitution, control all military affairs. Her ability to intervene is limited. Also, if her current delicate relationship with the *Tatmadaw* should break down, her ability to govern the country and introduce a range of much-needed reforms over the longer term is jeopardised.

Since Aung San Suu Kyi came to power, armed forces Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing has reminded audiences both in Myanmar and overseas of the *Tatmadaw's* central role in national affairs and its legal right to take back the formal reins of power under certain circumstances.¹² He has also warned of the dangers of an unstable government and restated the need to end all armed conflicts. Most people assume that he was sending messages to the State Counsellor.

Comedians may joke about Aung San Suu Kyi's failure to change Myanmar as quickly as everyone hoped, but the public mood seems to be shifting. The Lady, as she is known, is still seen as preferable to the military leaders of the past, but the euphoria of last year's election landslide has faded. There is now increasing scepticism about the government's willingness to make the necessary reforms and, more to the point, its ability to do so.

The country is not yet at a tipping point. The criticisms heard overseas about the harsh treatment of the Rohingyas are not being made by many people within Myanmar, where anti-Muslim sentiment is strong. The *Tatmadaw's* operations against minority ethnic groups in the

11 San Yamin Aung, 'Analysis: Burma's Military Remains Intolerant of Press Freedom', *The Irrawaddy*, 6 July 2016, www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/analysis-burmas-military-remains-intolerant-of-press-freedom.html.

12 Lun Min Mang, 'Tatmadaw Chief Defends Military's Political Role at EU Meet', *Myanmar Times*, [Yangon], 11 November 2016, www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/23616-tatmadaw-chief-defends-military-s-political-role-at-eu-meet.html.

north have little impact in the central lowlands, where most of the population lives. Grumblings about the slow rate of democratisation and modernisation are not a threat to stability—at least not yet.

Should the current arrangement between Aung San Suu Kyi and Min Aung Hlaing break down, however, it will not matter who is in the driver's seat. The wheels would come off Myanmar's vehicle of state, with the inevitable result.

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