

89

A big step back for Myanmar

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The Tatmadaw's massive overreaction to a series of small-scale attacks by Rohingya insurgents in 2016 and 2017 created a situation in Myanmar in which everyone was worse off. The Rohingyas were of course the greatest losers, but so, too, in different ways were Aung San Suu Kyi's new government, the armed forces and civil society. The democratic transition process in Myanmar, such as it was, was set back years—possibly even decades.

It is always difficult to know exactly what is happening in Myanmar, particularly when eyewitness accounts and reliable reports are dismissed by the Naypyidaw government as 'misinformation' and 'fake news', when false images of atrocities are posted on the web alongside genuine ones, when statistics vary wildly and when passion and propaganda compete with informed and objective analysis for attention in the international news media.

That said, it is clear that, with respect to the current Rohingya crisis, developments in Myanmar over the past year can only be described as a disaster for all concerned that will have far-reaching consequences. There will be no winners. Everyone loses.

Those who stand to lose most are the Rohingyas, as the stateless Muslims concentrated in Myanmar's Rakhine State call themselves. Attacks against three police posts by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) in October 2016, and against 30 police posts and an army post this August,

have resulted in a massive security crackdown. An unknown number of Rohingya villages have been destroyed by the army, police and Buddhist vigilantes. There have been an estimated 1,000 deaths—almost all Rohingyas—and up to 275,000 people have fled to makeshift refugee camps in Bangladesh.¹

These developments have been a political and personal disaster for Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's de facto leader.² Since the security forces launched their 'area clearance operations' in 2016, she has been condemned for failing to speak out against human rights abuses, which have been described by the UN as 'devastating cruelty' and possibly even 'crimes against humanity',³ bordering on genocide.⁴ More recently, foreign commentators have been scathing in their criticisms of her clumsy attempts to deny the latest atrocities and shift the blame for the unfolding humanitarian nightmare. Calls for her to be stripped of her Nobel Peace Prize are growing louder.⁵

As Aung San Suu Kyi's international reputation has collapsed, so, too, has that of her government. It clearly has no control over the country's armed forces (the *Tatmadaw*), which, under the 2008 constitution, act independently in security matters. It also seems afraid of arousing Myanmar's deep-seated anti-Muslim prejudices.⁶ This has left it looking weak and ineffectual, if not complicit in human rights abuses. The report prepared by former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, on which the government had pinned its hopes for a solution to the broader Rohingya issue, has had to be shelved.⁷

1 Max Bearak, 'More Than a Quarter-Million Rohingya Have Fled Burma in the Past Two Weeks, UN Says', *The Washington Post*, 8 September 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/09/08/more-than-a-quarter-million-rohingya-have-fled-burma-in-the-past-two-weeks-u-n-says/.

2 Andrew Selth, *Aung San Suu Kyi and the Politics of Personality*, Griffith Asia Institute Regional Outlook Paper No.55 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 2017), www.griffith.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1088590/Regional-Outlook-Paper-55-Selth-web.pdf [page discontinued].

3 'UN Report Details "Devastating Cruelty" Against Rohingya Population in Myanmar's Rakhine Province', *UN News*, 3 February 2017, www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=56103.

4 Liam Cochrane, 'Myanmar Could be On the Brink of Genocide, UN Expert Says', *ABC News*, 6 September 2017, www.abc.net.au/news/2017-09-06/myanmar-on-brink-of-genocide-un-expert-say/8879858.

5 Jacob Judah, 'Strip Aung San Suu Kyi of Her Nobel Prize', *The New York Times*, 7 September 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/opinion/strip-aung-san-suu-kyi-of-her-nobel-prize.html?mcubz=0.

6 Fred Strasser, 'No Quick Answers on Burma's Rohingya, Mitchell Says', *Analysis and Commentary* (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace, 8 September 2017), www.usip.org/blog/2017/09/no-quick-answers-burmas-rohingya-mitchell-says.

7 *Final Report of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State*, www.rakhinecommission.org/.

The *Tatmadaw* currently seems to have the whip hand. Yet, for it too, developments over the past year can be seen as a setback. Around 2011, the commander-in-chief (C-in-C) embarked on a program to make the armed forces more modern, more professional and better respected. Myanmar's embattled ethnic communities were never persuaded that the high command's mindset had really changed, however, and this view has now been confirmed by the cynical strategy and brutal tactics adopted by the police (which are controlled by the C-in-C) and the army in Rakhine State.⁸

The *Tatmadaw's* reputation inside Myanmar does not seem to have suffered greatly—most locals view the Rohingyas unsympathetically, as illegal Bengali immigrants—but its standing in international circles has fallen dramatically. There is now little chance that Western countries will relax their restrictions on bilateral defence engagement. This is a significant loss for the *Tatmadaw*, which is keen to learn about foreign military policies and practices. Such contacts would have also helped its officers learn about international norms of behaviour and the role of armed forces in democracies.⁹ Any hopes the *Tatmadaw* might have had to acquire Western arms and equipment can be forgotten.

The events of the past year have also been a disaster for Myanmar's civil society. As the International Crisis Group has pointed out, the last anti-Muslim riots were in 2013, but religious tensions have remained high.¹⁰ There have been calls within Myanmar for a peaceful solution to the Rohingya problem but recent developments in Rakhine State have strengthened the hand of Buddhist extremists who have been waiting for an opportunity to reassert themselves. Even if the *Tatmadaw's* prediction of ARSA attacks in Myanmar's cities proves incorrect, there is the risk of further communal violence.

In other ways, too, the Rohingya crisis is a disaster for Myanmar. With the government's gaze and resources focused on Rakhine State, less attention is being paid to other parts of the country and other pressing issues.

8 Andray Abrahamian, 'The Tatmadaw Returns to the "Four Cuts" Doctrine', *The Interpreter*, 4 September 2017, www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/tatmadaw-ominous-return-four-cuts-doctrine.

9 William C. Dickey and Nay Yan Oo, 'Myanmar's Military Holds Key to Further Reform', *Nikkei Asian Review*, 18 August 2017, asia.nikkei.com/Viewpoints/William-C.-Dickey-and-Nay-Yan-Oo/Myanmar-s-military-holds-key-to-further-reform.

10 *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*, Asia Report No.290 (Yangon/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 5 September 2017), www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/290-buddhism-and-state-power-myanmar.

A nationwide peace agreement with ethnic armed groups, for example, seems an even more distant prospect. Fewer funds will be available to fill gaping holes in the budget, in critical areas like health and education. The crisis and declining international confidence in Aung San Suu Kyi¹¹ have already had a negative impact on foreign direct investment and Myanmar's economic growth.¹²

Over the longer term, the Rohingya crisis is a disaster for Myanmar's planned transition from authoritarian rule to a more democratic system of government.

When it announced its intention to launch a violent campaign on behalf of the Rohingyas, ARSA played into the hands of conservative elements in the armed forces. While there is little evidence that it supports a transnational Islamist agenda, ARSA was immediately cast as a member of an international terrorist conspiracy.¹³ This made it a clearly identifiable threat to Myanmar's sovereignty, unity and stability—the three 'national causes' enshrined in the 2008 constitution and, for over half a century, the armed forces' highly publicised *raison d'être*.

As former US ambassador to Myanmar Derek Mitchell has pointed out, the *Tatmadaw's* roles as Myanmar's 'saviour' and protector of the country's majority-Buddhist values have been confirmed.¹⁴ The Rohingya crisis has pushed the generals to the forefront of government decision-making, where their hard line is likely to remain the default policy position. The armed forces' claim to a central place in national political life has been reaffirmed. By the same token, the standing and influence of Aung San Suu Kyi and her quasi-civilian government have been diminished.

11 Peter Janssen, 'Suu Kyi's Fading Allure Repels Foreign Investors', *Asia Times*, [Hong Kong], 6 September 2017, www.atimes.com/article/suu-kyis-fading-allure-repels-foreign-investors/ [page discontinued] [now at asiatimes.com/2017/09/suu-kyis-fading-allure-repels-foreign-investors/].

12 Gwen Robinson and Yuichi Nitta, 'Rakhine Crisis Blights Myanmar Economic Outlook', *Nikkei Asian Review*, 5 September 2017, asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/Economy/Rakhine-crisis-blights-Myanmar-economic-outlook.

13 'Yemeni Al Qaeda Leader Calls for Attacks in Support of Myanmar's Rohingya', *The Irrawaddy*, 3 September 2017, www.irrawaddy.com/news/yemeni-al-qaeda-leader-calls-attacks-support-myanmars-rohingya.html.

14 Matthew Pennington, 'Obama's Myanmar Legacy in Trouble and It's Not Trump's Fault', *The Denver Post*, 2 September 2017, www.denverpost.com/2017/09/02/barack-obama-myanmar-legacy-donald-trump/.

Myanmar has also lost ground in foreign policy terms. Governments of all colours have expressed grave concern over the Rohingya crisis and its international implications.¹⁵ Indonesia even sent its foreign minister to Naypyidaw to speak directly to Aung San Suu Kyi.¹⁶ The UN has been particularly critical of the Myanmar Government's handling of the crisis, including its accusations that NGOs were assisting the ARSA. For the UN Secretary-General, the Rohingyas were 'an undeniable factor in regional destabilisation' that demanded a 'holistic' solution.¹⁷

Given current attitudes in Myanmar, the Rohingya tragedy could drag on for years. ARSA will not achieve its aims, but Muslim anger both within Myanmar and overseas will remain. Religious divisions in the country will harden. Hundreds of thousands of refugees will be left in squalid camps in Bangladesh, unwanted by anyone and facing a bleak future. The *Tatmadaw* will consolidate its political gains, while Aung San Suu Kyi and her government will find it even harder to implement much-needed reforms. The democratic transition process in Myanmar, such as it was, has been set back years—possibly decades.

In these circumstances, no one wins. Everyone loses.

15 'Asian Neighbours Add Pressure on Suu Kyi to Act on Rohingya Crisis', *Nikkei Asian Review*, 5 September 2017, asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/International-Relations/Asian-neighbors-add-pressure-on-Suu-Kyi-to-act-on-Rohingya-crisis.

16 Erwida Maulia, 'Indonesian Minister Meets Suu Kyi as Rohingya Crisis Deepens', *Nikkei Asian Review*, 4 September 2017, asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/Policy-Politics/Indonesian-minister-meets-Suu-Kyi-as-Rohingya-crisis-deepens.

17 Thu Thu Aung, 'UN Secretary-General Calls for "Holistic Solution" in Rakhine', *The Irrawaddy*, September 2017, www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/un-secretary-general-calls-holistic-solution-rakhine.html.

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