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After Shaming Aung San Suu Kyi: Then What?

By Kang Siew Kheng

Synopsis

While the UN has described the latest atrocities in Myanmar on the Rohingya minority as textbook ethnic cleansing, the international reaction of shaming Aung San Suu Kyi for the Rohingya crisis is unhelpful to all parties. ASEAN should consider coordinating action to help Myanmar overcome the complex problem.

Commentary

IN 1991, the international community honoured Ms Aung San Suu Kyi with the Nobel Peace Prize while she was under house arrest. In 2015, her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), won power on a popular electoral mandate. Then, practically overnight, Ms Suu Kyi went from democracy icon to international pariah.

On 4 October 2017, the City of Oxford, where she studied as an undergraduate, decided to withdraw an honorary title it bestowed on her in 1997. This growing disillusionment comes from the sense that Ms Suu Kyi has been too silent too long on the Rohingya issue and not virulent enough when she finally spoke.

Competing Narratives

The scale of the humanitarian disaster is disturbing and haunting. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has condemned the outbreak of violence in Myanmar that triggered the latest outflow of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh as “textbook example of ethnic cleansing”. Human rights advocates, however, seem to be engaged in a campaign to disparage Ms Suu Kyi and Myanmar.

The New Yorker named her “the ignoble laureate”; Amnesty International accused her of “untruths and victim blaming”. No less an icon than Desmond Tutu reportedly wrote

her that “If the political price of your ascension to the highest office in Myanmar is your silence, the price is surely too steep”.

Yet, against the backdrop of media images of what is an ongoing, overnight, crisis, the international community cannot summarily dismiss Ms Suu Kyi’s counter-narrative of an “iceberg of misinformation” or the wider dispute about ground realities.

One story that has emerged in Myanmar social media is that the attacks on the military posts on 25 August 2017 by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) was timed to provoke precisely the kind of harshest possible response from the Tatmadaw military; the attacks came on the day before the release of the Report by Advisory Commission of Rakhine State.

According to this narrative, they were calculated to doom any prospects in the effort, commissioned by Ms Suu Kyi, to map “a peaceful, fair and prosperous future for the people of Rakhine”. For sure, no deemed past wrongs in history can justify present-day violence, but no present-day policy can bring about reconciliation until the old animosities have been addressed.

Complex and Complicated

The Rakhine situation is too complex for megaphone moral outrage. It is a particularly instructive example of bad communal dynamics, rooted in British colonial divide-and-rule strategy, reinforced by generations of politics and complicated by continuing poverty and economic deprivation that affect both the Rohingya and ethnic Rakhine.

It is easy to forget that Ms Suu Kyi’s NLD was elected to power in 2015 amid a growing tide of nationalism and communal mistrust. Ironically democracy unleashed deep-seated grievances that were more restrained by the iron hand of military rule.

Many of Ms Suu Kyi’s electoral base regard the Rohingya as a late political construct, that many of them were transient migrants on a porous and troublesome border, and were now being used to legitimise old claims for greater autonomy and independence. Significantly, in Rakhine State, the NLD did not perform as well as it largely did in the rest of the country.

Impact of Public Shaming

The international reaction to lambast Ms Suu Kyi and Myanmar is unhelpful to all parties. First, what passes for international moral outrage makes the Myanmar angrily defensive. It serves only to dull the voices of those in Myanmar that are against demonisation of a minority. Instead, it feeds the ultra-nationalist rhetoric that a democratic Myanmar faces an existentialist crisis, which Ms Suu Kyi and her party are ill-disposed to address.

Second, the end of decades of isolation and sanctions has fanned expectations of the economic boom promised by democratic rule. But there are now signs that Myanmar’s economic growth has slowed. Reform has also been slow, not least because Ms Suu Kyi was trying to do too much in too little time. If international opprobrium ends in

politically-motivated moves like re-sanctions, it could derail the already very late catch-up in a country that remains one of the poorest in ASEAN.

Third, Ms Suu Kyi has the unenviable task of leading with one hand tied, not possessing all the levers of power, as even her worst critics know. Ultimately her democratically-elected government must find a modus operandi with the military leaders. She needs all the help she can get, inside or outside Myanmar.

Administering a country faced with a multitude of challenges while bringing about national reconciliation is statecraft. It requires political savviness and immense energy for protracted negotiations in a country with a history of communal uprisings that involve not only the Rohingya.

A Role for ASEAN

ASEAN finally issued a predictably anodyne Chair statement on the Rakhine situation following an ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York. Not unexpectedly, Malaysia disassociated itself from the statement. Kuala Lumpur, in early 2017, had hosted a special session of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) that issued a strong rebuke to the Myanmar government. Malaysia is, after all, host to nearly 60,000 UN-registered Rohingya refugees.

Yet, ASEAN must acknowledge that the Rohingya is no longer just a domestic problem, but has important implications for regional peace and stability. Left alone, the Rohingya will continue to be a festering wound and destabilise the entire operating environment and regional order in ASEAN.

ASEAN's dialogue partner, India, is already threatening to deport its Rohingya refugees on the grounds of growing security concerns. Even if one doubts the hand of terrorist elements using the Rohingya as shield, the chaos and scale of humanitarian disaster is fertile ground for radicalisation and recruitment, which is something all ASEAN countries must be concerned about.

Time for Coordinated Action

It is time for ASEAN to consider a coordinated course of action, and perhaps work with vested dialogue partners like China and India, which can also engage Bangladesh. Myanmar needs a regional solution. ASEAN would do well to engage in the kind of quiet diplomacy it is best equipped to do, across the spectrum of relations, including military diplomacy.

The Myanmar who only see the Rohingya as a political construct must eventually get past the prison of history, be persuaded to put behind real and perceived historical injustices, and acknowledge the ground realities of generations of people who call Myanmar home.

Yet this conversation cannot happen with the world heaping such derision on, and threats of new economic sanctions against, Myanmar and its popularly elected

leader. ASEAN can work to counter the potential international isolation of Myanmar that helps neither Myanmar nor the Rohingya.

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