

RACISM IN BURMA

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Introduction

Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy have now taken over the government of Burma - at least those parts not reserved for the military. She has announced that she will make peace in the country her top priority.

This, on the face of it, is great news. More than anything, Burma needs peace: real and enduring peace. Nonetheless, her pronouncement raises a few questions.

Suu Kyi's statements are notoriously vague. Therefore, we need to consider what, specifically, she means by peace. Related to this, we need to address the question of why there is no peace; and, further, how the reasons for the lack of peace can be resolved.

At this point, the second question is the most important. Burma's civil war began in 1948, the year after Aung San was assassinated. One can argue that it was his death which created the seedbed for the war, since he was the natural leader for the newly independent country, and which Burma's different ethnic groups largely trusted.

His death, though, led to a power vacuum, and which was soon exploited. Aung San's fellow Burma Independence Army comrade, Ne Win, used his private army to attack the Karen people in Insein Township north of Rangoon. About the same time, a communist insurgency began, creating a new front in the post-world war geopolitical tension between communism and the West, and with China backing Burma's rebels.

Ne Win ultimately seized power in 1962, and established a military dictatorship. He then systematically began to attack Burma's ethnic nationalities, implementing a genocidal "Four Cuts" policy. The West, which supported him as a bulwark against China, helped arm the new Burma Army. Its war crimes were ignored.

Prior to 1962, there had been many clashes in Burma, notably in the lower part of the country. This changed once the dictatorship was established. The fighting began to shift to the hilly border regions on the margins of the central plains.

These regions are the location of the bulk of Burma's natural resources. Some commentators have included the country in the group of nations that suffer the "resource curse," saying that the fighting is motivated by a desire to control these resources.

While this is certainly a contributing factor in Burma's civil war, it is not the main reason. The military dictatorship is run by members of what is believed to be the country's most populous ethnicity, the Burmans. The border areas are largely inhabited by other groups. The Burman generals in turn are continuing a millennium old practice, first established by Burman kings, of racism against these groups.

Racism is the belief among members of one group that they are superior, and that individuals from other groups are inferior. It is the widest possible and most destructive form of social branding.

Burman racism is the critical issue behind the country's conflict. Burma can never be at peace until the racism is substantially reduced. Suu Kyi, therefore, if she truly wants to work for peace, must begin with the institutionalized and widespread racism. Focusing on other initiatives, however worthwhile they might be, such as equitably splitting the resources, or reforming the Burma Army to include the ethnic resistance forces, will never be enough.

Racism in America

The bad news for Burma, and Suu Kyi, is that fighting racism is actually more difficult than ending a civil conflict. Said another way, the conflict is the symptom, and the racism the underlying social disease.

As the example of the United States illustrates, racist attitudes become embedded in a national population. They reside, like a virus, in an individual's core set of beliefs. Through social conditioning, it is in fact easy to turn children into racists, and from which, if they are even able to recognize their bias, they may struggle their entire lives to escape.

Racism in the U.S., of course, has two foundations. These are the belief that Native Americans were inferior - savages, which opinion justified their conquest and, ultimately, their genocide; and the fact that slaves kidnapped in Africa were not even considered to be human at all. (They were "property.") Today, racism against Native Americans has relaxed, but only because they were so successfully eliminated, and with remnant populations isolated from view in "reservations." It's difficult to be against something to which you are not exposed.

Racism against African Americans, though, and notwithstanding Chief Justice of the Supreme Court John Robert's idiotic observation that it is no longer a problem, is as strong as ever. It has actually experienced a major resurgence in response to Barack Obama's presidency.

Bill Maher has remarked that while not all Republicans are racist, all U.S. racists are likely to be Republican. Republican power-brokers, starting with media outlets from radical-right talk radio to Rupert Murdoch's Fox News, working together with congressional allies, evangelical Christian allies, and the Roberts Republican Supreme Court (most notably through its 2013 gutting of the Voting Rights Act), have instigated the American racism revival.

It is the height of irony (which has been widely recognized), that the party of Abraham Lincoln, which fought slavery, is now dominated by demagogues who promote racism.

It is essential to understand that this did not have to happen. Obama winning the presidency did not have to lead to the egregious expansion of racist attitudes and acts that we have seen. Instead, like a carefully cultivated crop, the new racism was grown, through the efforts of a thousand Republican gardeners, into the now thriving psychological illness that the nation suffers.

Many Republican leaders, though, including political, media and religious, are not in fact racists themselves. But, they have been eager to promote racism and to use it as a weapon to increase their power.

What the U.S. experience shows is that racism (and more generally any widespread attitudes, negative or positive, between different groups) is fundamental. It affects a society profoundly, both preventing real progress and spawning all manner of severe and tragic problems.

It's also notable that a society with a history of one type of racism is much more susceptible to other forms of bigotry, against new groups. In the U.S., this is seen through the relative ease with which Republicans turned their racist followers that hated blacks, against Hispanics and now Muslims. Conversely, societies that have successfully defended themselves against historic patterns of racism find it easier to confront the new forms. Sweden, for example, and even though it has admitted a large number of refugees from the Middle East over the last twenty years, has a small racism problem, and which, as in America, is centered mainly on poorly educated young men.

Therefore, and returning to Burma, if Suu Kyi really wants to see peace, she has to start with the country's ingrained racism. This assumes, of course, that she is not a racist herself. If she is, which her words both in support of the Burman generals and against the Rohingya people seem to suggest, then the quest for peace actually begins with Suu Kyi confronting her own racism. If she is unable to do this, if she doesn't want to or if she is simply too old to change, she will be unable to lead the country to a better and peaceful future.

Racism in Burma

The earliest arrivals to Burma, excluding neolithic residents, were the Pyu, Mon and Karen peoples, and the Arakan in the West. The Pyu, Mon and Arakan in turn established a series of complex social structures, city-states and kingdoms, while the Karen remained village-based and pastoral. Centuries later the Burmans migrated into the country. (They actually adopted Buddhism from the Mon.)

These early Burmans in turn took an aggressive approach toward the other groups, launching wars of conquest against them (and neighboring Siam and Laos), and in the process establishing

their own kingdoms. (The Pyu city-states were destroyed, and the people completely absorbed.) While the motivation for the conquest was certainly the standard objectives of securing land and power, over time this led to the inculcation of a sense of Burman superiority - the country's first notable racism.

This historical racism reached its height in the 18th century, when in 1757 the Burmans perpetrated a genocide against the Mon, and in 1784-85 a second genocide against the Arakan. The Burmans did not engage in systematic eradication of the Karen, though, and instead derided them, as the Native Americans had experienced, as savages.

Their dominance ended with the arrival of the British in the 1820s. It is noteworthy that while Burmans consider the British period to be the nation's greatest stain, the other groups viewed it with relief. Also, large areas of what is now Burma, in the far north (Kachin and Naga areas), and Shan State (where many groups reside, not only Shan), remained outside of Burman control and even British.

The establishment of post-colonial Burma brought these areas formally into the country. Ne Win then began persecuting their residents shortly after he seized power. His Burma Army attacked, leading to massive humanitarian displacement and refugee crises, and which for the Shan, Karenni and Karen peoples achieved the status of genocide as well. Hatred of the Karen in turn was propelled by the fact that the group had been favored by the British.

Finally, in Western Burma, what had been periodic abuse of the Rohingya people developed into systematic, genocidal repression. The British had also at times favored the Rohingya, and actually armed some as a buffer force for their withdrawal from the country during World War II. Following this withdrawal, there was large-scale inter-communal conflict between the Arakan - who backed the Japanese, and the Rohingya, with upwards of 100,000 Rohingya killed. The next major repression occurred in 1978, when Ne Win forced hundreds of thousands to flee the country. This massive forced migration was again imposed in the early 1990s. (Many of these refugees, and their descendants, continue to live - and die - in squalid refugee camps in neighboring Bangladesh.) Now, starting in 2012, new regime motivated pogroms have been carried out against the Rohingya, with the backing of racist Buddhist monks and Arakanese, and which has led to the creation of a network of internal concentration camps

Burma, therefore, has an astonishing and multi-faceted history of racism and genocide. This is the nation's real stain. And, just as the experience of Germany shows following World War II, national disgrace can only be reversed if the underlying racism is systematically and comprehensively crushed.

Recommendations for Aung San Suu Kyi

Assuming, once again, that she is personally not racist, or, alternatively, that she is able to defeat her embedded bias, the path forward for Suu Kyi is clear, to lead Burma down Germany's road to

social recovery. She must implement a two-fold strategy, and accompanied by appropriate policy, government action, and legislation.

Racism is ignorance, and the only cure for ignorance is education. The first arm of the strategy, then, is that the nation's entire educational system must be rebuilt. Since it is already in such bad shape, this is not as daunting as it sounds. New teachers need to be hired and trained and new textbooks written. Fortunately, education is something that the International Community is usually happy to fund. As a payoff for the market access that developed countries and companies now enjoy, they should be forced to contribute to a massive fund to recreate the educational infrastructure. Also, new legislation should be drafted to make encouraging racism a hate crime, and with such legislation enforced against both traditional and social media.

The second arm of the strategy relates to the country's institutionalized racism, meaning the still intact military dictatorship including its cronies. Germany, in a sense, had an advantage because the Nazis were comprehensively defeated, and Hitler killed himself. For Burma, the regime is still in power, and Than Shwe is still alive.

The dictatorship, therefore, is completely unreformed. This was clearly illustrated by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing's recent statement on Armed Forces Day that the regime's attacks in the ethnic homelands, and which have led to horrific atrocities perpetrated by Burma Army soldiers, are completely justified. The dictatorship is still sticking to its basic positions: Burma is a country run by and for Burmans, mainly the elite; the military has the right to attack any time it wants, and to commit any and all crimes against the civilian population; and, this control and impunity is safeguarded in the country's Constitution, and which will never be changed.

The idea that the people who have the guns can be prevailed upon to give up their privilege and power (and racism) is of course far-fetched. Suu Kyi, even though she has praised the generals many times, must understand this deep down. No one now expects her to challenge the military in strong terms, much less demand a new charter, so realistically the prospects for the country are poor, even with a "democratic election." Power will not be transferred, and the racism will not be confronted.

Suu Kyi apparently intends to take small steps, and to try to build some type of track record. This is just kicking the can down the road. There will not be real progress. Even though she is the one who said it, "*hope for the best, but prepare for the worst,*" her own leadership is limited solely to the first idea.

Who are the people of Burma?

Were Suu Kyi to be forthright, the type of leader that the people of Burma both deserve and need, she would organize the following changes.

The military dictatorship took two notable steps, and which should be reversed. The capital was moved to Than Shwe's imperial city, Naypyidaw, and the country's name was changed from Burma to Myanmar.

When you are trying to achieve real political change, symbolic steps are sometimes as effective as substantial action. They signal to the public that a new course is truly underway.

While no-one expects that the new Parliament will not initially assemble in Naypyidaw, at some point it should return to Rangoon, along with the government ministries. Than Shwe's white elephant should be abandoned.

The issue of the name, though, is more problematic. "Myanmar" actually refers to the Burman or Bamar people. It is not even a country name, as, for example, its neighbor Thailand, the land of the Thais. (Myanmar Pyi would be needed to mean the land of the Burmans.) Even worse is the fact that the name of country, one of the most ethnically diverse in the world, refers to only one of its groups - the one with the history of racist conquest.

Indeed, and referring to my earlier comment about how racists brainwash children, using the name Myanmar facilitates the development of a superiority mindset among the country's Burman youth. It is easy for them to jump to the conclusion that Burma is "their" country, and that everyone else is a second-class citizen.

One option would be to return to using "Burma." The problem with this is that it is simply an anglicized version of Myanmar. Not only would the racists angrily oppose its use, because of the British reference, it still would ignore the ethnic diversity.

What Burma needs is a new, ethnically-neutral name. This issue, therefore, should be publicized widely by the new government, and with a call for suggestions from the people (similar to how New Zealand recently asked for suggestions to change its flag). This simple action would demonstrate that the government, and Suu Kyi, really do care about ethnic nationality equality, aspirations and rights.

Moving the capital back to Rangoon and renaming the country might seem obscure steps to take, but they would be extremely significant. Nonetheless, they will take time to organize. There is one thing that the new government can do, though, right now, and which would have a huge impact.

Last week, in its final step, the dictatorship attempted to have the Ministry of Immigration and Population moved within the Home Affairs Ministry, which under the Constitution the military controls. This action, fortunately, was blocked. Many commentators have concluded that the motivation for the proposal related to Immigration - that the military wants to retain the administrative ability to oppress the Rohingya through immigration actions. This, on the face of it, certainly seems plausible. Racists need a common enemy, and the regime has chosen the

Rohingya to fulfill this role. Nonetheless, there is a second motivation, and which observers have completely overlooked: The Department of Population. The entire racist infrastructure of Burma is based on the idea that the Burmans are the majority. However, until the national census was conducted, there was no way to test this claim. Now, though, the people have been counted. The dictatorship in turn has refused to release the ethnic breakdown - one wonders why. But, with the Department changing hands it will lose this ability. The action last week was a desperate attempt to keep the census data secret.

The new Suu Kyi/NLD government, therefore, should publish the ethnic population numbers immediately. It is impossible to govern effectively until you know who the people are. If Burma is to be a country, it needs to establish a national identity. Is it a nation of Burmans, with a sprinkling of other people, or is it a nation of a wide group of ethnicities, and where - by population at least - no single one dominates? This is the key question, not eight states or fourteen, or how to organize a federal structure or army. Everything, certainly in a democracy, starts with the people. Who are the people of Burma? Aung San Suu Kyi, please answer this question!!!

If she will not do this, if like the generals she postpones releasing the data, I guarantee that she is also a Burman racist, to the core.

Confronting the dictatorship

It is clear that Suu Kyi has to confront the military. She cannot put it off forever. While she may postpone demanding constitutional change, publishing the ethnic population numbers is a way to get the ball rolling.

There are many other issues that require action, starting with those that revolve around her beloved rule of law. Burma needs to immediately begin establishing a real rule of law. The era of war crimes, land thefts and all other forms of regime abuse has to stop! Most importantly, and no matter the resentment this causes among the racist monks and Arakanese, the Rohingya concentrations camps must be emptied and the detainees allowed to return to their homes. The first step for the democracy is to end the crimes against humanity! If security is required for this, Suu Kyi should request an international peacekeeping force.

The *New York Times* recently highlighted the contradiction, to put it politely, of having a country run by a Nobel Peace Prize winner, but where crimes against humanity were rampant. This simply is not acceptable. She cannot put this off - try to ignore the issue or say that the time is not yet right. Every day the Rohingya are imprisoned, her fancy silk sarongs, metaphorically at least, will be stained with more and more blood. The Rohingya, as a group, are all political prisoners. Suu Kyi must release not only the recognized political prisoners, the students and other demonstrators, she must free the Rohingya as well.

Following this, she must demand that the military withdraw from its camps and outposts in the ethnic nationality areas. The bombed, burned and mined villages; the arrests, rapes and murders; all must cease. As part of this, the military's budget should be cut, at least in half. The Army exists as a defense against external threats. Burma has no such threat.

Of course, this raises the question, what if the military refuses? Or, for that matter, how do you get the racist police to investigate and arrest other police, soldiers and business cronies?

Once again, you have to ask - demand - the rule of law. Then, if and when the military and the police refuse to act, they should be spotlighted for the public's, and the world's, censure. Viewing social change in the simplest terms possible, progress requires pressure. It is not enough, Lady Suu, to ignore atrocities and hope for the best. While it is true that for the moment you are stuck with a military dictatorship, largely due to your own soft-handed approach - opposing popular revolution, you cannot run Burma hand-in-hand with a murderous mafia, and look the other way. You should think of the people of the country as your children, and with the military as the father. You cannot allow the father to continue raping your children!

Right now, Suu Kyi may think that she has won, and that the people will never abandon her - that they will continue to just bask in her glory. She is wrong. If she does not use the new Parliament to confront the military and to push for real change, the people, as they have already started to do, will turn against her. She has one chance and one chance only. She has actual power now. If she doesn't do the right thing, she will come to be viewed, widely and legitimately, as only the public face of, and the appeaser for, the hated regime.

A lesson in leadership

Suu Kyi has been a leader in waiting since 1988. She will now, finally, get her chance. But, is she prepared for this? Does she have what it takes to be not only an opposition voice, but a competent government leader? It's worth remembering that the most pervasive problem with officials in representative democracies is simply poor leadership.

To be a good leader requires three attributes. These include a well-grounded set of principles; the intelligence necessary to understand what the country needs - how to put the principles into practice; and the courage to follow through. For example, many of the problems that we see with leaders in different countries around the world relate to the first. They simply are not principled. Therefore, their leadership can never be good. In many cases, they were corrupted by the process that they had to undergo to get elected. For example, in the U.S., this means begging for money from wealthy donors for election campaigns, with the consequence that they are beholden to the donors when they are in office.

It all starts with principles, of which there are three that should never be compromised: Rights; Equality; and Democracy itself. Rights include both human rights, and the rights of nature - of other species. For the first, you are a terrible leader if you accept abuse of your people's human

rights. For Burma, Suu Kyi has been silent about the dictatorship's manifold crimes against all the people of the country, but most notably, reflecting its racism, against the ethnic nationalities. Now that she has power, she has no choice. To be a good leader, she must do everything possible to end these abuses.

Regarding the rights of nature, one thing all strong leaders share is a dedication to ensuring a positive long-term future. They focus on environmental protection, first, because other species have rights in and of themselves, without regard to people at all; and second, because future human generations require a healthy environment to prosper. A terrible leader allows businesses to engage in environmental exploitation with the result that the nation's bioregions are destroyed, leaving nothing for the future.

Equality

The second principle, equality, is in fact a human right as well, but it is so important it deserves its own focus. Suu Kyi's father, Aung San, understood this, through organizing the Panglong Conference and with his famous declaration that if the Burmans get one kyat, the ethnic nationalities also get one kyat. The need for equality in Burma is more pressing now than ever, given the almost seventy years of horrific regime racism since his murder.

For many years, there has been a call for a tripartite dialogue in Burma, between the regime, the NLD, and the ethnic resistance forces. This was an example of such equality in action, giving the ethnic groups a full seat at the table. Only through doing this could the ethnic concerns be addressed properly, and also only by combining the pressure of the NLD and the ethnic armies could the dictatorship be forced to yield. Not surprisingly, the generals refused all such entreaties.

Interestingly, the International Community, led by the United States and Europe, also sidelined the ethnic peoples. Diplomats have heaped attention on Suu Kyi, and avoided the ethnic leaders. Indeed, in private meetings at the U.S. Chiang Mai consulate, the ethnic groups were basically told to give up - to surrender. It seems the West's loyalty to the dictatorship, following Ne Win's coup, never really wavered.

Now, though, the ethnic forces - really, the ethnic nationality peoples - have been cast aside. Formally at least, there are only two recognized power centers in Burma: the NLD Parliament, and the military dictatorship. Both of these in turn are dominated by Burmans. The dictatorship, the International Community, and perhaps Suu Kyi as well, have gotten exactly what they wanted.

The ethnic peoples, even though in total they may be more than half the population, have almost no representation. Therefore, Suu Kyi, to be a good leader, has to aggressively counter this. Many ethnic officials should be appointed to the different national ministries and state governments, and the tripartite philosophy needs to be revitalized through implementing a formal

peace process between the ethnic resistance leaders (the UNFC), the Burma Army, and the government leaders.

This is the only way the country can address its racist past. It's also the only way that Suu Kyi can conclusively demonstrate that she is not, personally, a Burman racist.

Democracy

The final principle is democracy itself, which raises the question, what could I possibly have left out?

There is a subtle, but crucial, distinction here. Suu Kyi has been elected by the people of Burma (even if under the current Constitution she is not allowed to be its President). But, democracy is still government by the people. What this means is that Suu Kyi was not chosen to be Burma's benevolent dictator. The people did not say: "*We choose you, and you have the right to make, personally, every decision about our future.*" That's not how democracy works (even though many elected officials try to act like it is). Power still resides with the people. The government is elected simply to create a workable mechanism to put the public's wishes into practice. Suu Kyi has to do what the people of Burma want. And, where there are differences of opinion about what should be done, her role is not to be the judge, exercising absolute power by fiat. Rather, her responsibility is to work to organize a consensus, to find ways to unite the different groups. And, in those cases where this is not possible, she should not automatically choose what the majority wants, but instead, then and only then, decide and implement what is best for everyone. Sometimes leaders are forced to make hard choices, such as to have a country enter a war. In these exceedingly rare cases, every possible option should be examined first, and the nation committed only if there is no other way.

Suu Kyi's history suggests that she does not see her role this way. She definitely views herself not as the conduit for the voice of the people, but as the person entitled to decide. She therefore is failing at this principle. Fortunately, under democracy there are checks and balances to guard against just such an eventuality. It is incumbent upon the new Members of Parliament, even though many were effectively chosen by her, to speak only on the people's behalf, including in those cases where this requires openly opposing her leadership. The core question is how hard she will confront the dictatorship, starting with whether she will end her silence over the regime's atrocities. It is not acceptable that she pushes her pragmatism (as the International Community has done) to the point of sacrificing democracy's principles. Therefore, when she won't speak up and demand change, the MPs, on behalf of all the people of Burma, must do it.

This is the first chance at democracy that Burma has had in over five decades. The new leadership - Suu Kyi and the MPs - have to get it right.