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Building a Movement against Genocide in Myanmar

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In this short piece I want to explore the nature, limits and possibilities of a post-genocide Myanmar. My own view is that Myanmar's civil society, and its capacity to publicly imagine a free, equal and peaceful future, will remain stifled until it acknowledges the state's genocide against the Rohingya. The public imagination in Myanmar is at present deeply fractured and tainted with bigotry, exclusion, and fear. Even for the most progressive and previously oppressed sections of that society the prospect of a truly multi-cultural, democratic Myanmar is one in which the Rohingya are absent.

In November 2010 following her release from house arrest, Aung San Suu Kyi and the party she led promised the hope of a new Myanmar—free from the confinement, cruelty and repression of military rule. This new Myanmar would respect human rights, hold out the possibility of an end to civil war, end the persecution of minority groups and opposition activists, and introduce a new era of free speech, civil rights and democracy.

But it is Myanmar's genocide against the Rohingya ethnic minority that now globally defines Aung San Suu Kyi and the character of human rights in the country. We know about the genocide, not because the government has acknowledged it as a crime of past military regimes that it now urgently seeks to redress—on the contrary Suu Kyi's government has not only continued the legacy of genocidal persecution but has escalated it. We know about the genocide because of the critical work of a small group of organized Rohingya, regional and international civil society organizations, academic research, and investigative journalism.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi presides over a genocide, a range of civil wars, most viciously against the Kachin, lends succor to the ugliest forms of racist nationalism and inscribes that racism with her own hegemonic Buddhist Bamar ambitions. After decades of economic, political, and social isolation, Myanmar's return to the international stage is smeared in blood.

The state's long persecution of its Rohingya ethnic minority entered a new phase when we at the International State Crime Initiative began a 12-month study, investigating the nature of that persecution (Green, MacManus and de la Cour Venning 2015).[1] Our research, and the work of regional NGOs[2] confirmed systematic, widespread, and ongoing violations, including institutional discrimination, torture, sexual violence, arbitrary detention, destruction of communities, apartheid structures of segregation, targeted population control, mass killings, land confiscation, forced labor, denial of citizenship and identity, severe restrictions on freedom of movement and access to healthcare, food, education, and livelihood opportunities, and last but not least, state-sanctioned campaigns of religious hatred. Our evidence demonstrated without any doubt that the Rohingya are currently experiencing the genocidal onslaught[3] that renders the population so physically and psychologically diminished that they are unable to engage in purposeful life.



Camp for internally displaced in the western Rakhine State near Sittwe, May 2016. Image: Reuters

In response the state declared: "The government and people of Myanmar do not recognize the term Rohingya as it is an invented terminology…the Government of Myanmar categorically rejects the unfounded allegations…"[4] Sadly, much of

Myanmar’s progressive civil society agree.

In October 2016 repression against the Rohingya intensified, this time in the isolated Northern Rakhine State (NRS) with widespread killings (including of children and babies), arbitrary detention, disappearances, mass gang-rape, collective punishment, arson, and village clearances by Myanmar’s military and security forces. On-the-ground reports supplemented by a powerful UN ‘Flash Report’ revealed a chilling picture of a trapped, terrified, and desperate Rohingya community, with tens of thousands of Rohingya having fled across the border into Bangladesh.

In August 2017 a Myanmar government-appointed commission dismissed the UN allegations and cleared the state security forces of mass rape, ethnic cleansing and mass murder. Moreover, Aung San Suu Kyi’s government has since denied visas for three UN investigators on the grounds that such an investigation would ‘aggravate’ the situation in NRS.



Rohingya Muslims outside the Burmese embassy in Kuala Lumpur, November 2016. Image: Reuters.

The election of Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) in 2015 elicited much global optimism. Yet in the build up to the 2015 national elections the NLD did not stand any Muslim candidates (contrary to previous practice) and slighted the Rohingya during campaigning, dismissing them as illegal Bengali immigrants unworthy of consideration in electoral and citizenship processes. Since its election victory the NLD's 'barbarism of indifference' has translated into active genocidal practice. The new government, rather than challenging the hate campaigns of ultra-nationalist Rakhine groups and Buddhist monks, has instead been complicit in advancing institutionalized anti-Muslim discrimination in both law and policy. Aung San Suu Kyi has demanded that foreign governments refrain from using the term 'Rohingya', and the government's public statements continue to simultaneously demonize and deny the existence of the Rohingya identity.

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Despite the fact that this is the most significant test of Suu Kyi's leadership, she has remained remarkably indifferent.[5] Rather than visit the scene of the violence or challenge the perpetrators of hate and violence, she and her NLD government have instead fashioned crude denials which at heart blame the Rohingya for their own persecution.

Rather than taking allegations of security force abuse seriously, Suu Kyi's government has adopted military dictatorship-era tactics of blanket denial, an absolute ban on international observation, severe limitations on humanitarian access within the region, the muzzling of the press, and the 'blacklisting' and deportation of human rights activists.[6] Moreover her own website dismissed allegations of security force killings and mass sexual assaults in Northern Rakhine State as "fake news" and "fake rapes."[7]



Imagining a Myanmar where the Rohingya and other ethnic groups share equal rights with the dominant Buddhist Bamar and live as integrated citizens in a society free from discrimination is certainly idealistic, but it also possible. Realizing that imaginary is far more difficult. The barriers to change appear as impenetrable now as under the military junta, perhaps even more so given the market opportunities and guise of ‘democracy’ that opportunistically seduce foreign governments. But those barriers are not, in truth, impenetrable. If we adopt the definition of state crime as “human rights violations perpetrated by state agents in pursuit of organizational goals” (Green and Ward 2004) then we require a social audience to ‘name’, expose, and challenge those crimes. That audience is best represented by civil society.

This framework, however, poses key problems in the context of Myanmar. The Rohingya have few friends inside their own country. Even Myanmar’s large and active human rights community, to whom we might ordinarily look for solidarity and a united struggle, have adopted the regime’s stereotype of the Rohingya as “illegal Bengali immigrants.” For these activists, encouraged by a deeply racist and Islamophobic national impulse, the Rohingya represent an immigration and security

threat, not a human rights issue, and this in turn is used to justify indifference to their suffering at best and complicity with genocide at worst. Rakhine civil society organizations (who at the same time engage in struggles for women's rights and against corporate and military land grabbing) actively promote anti-Muslim hatred.

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If we are to reimagine Myanmar as a peaceful, plural, multi-ethnic democracy we must engage that section of civil society who for decades resisted military dictatorship under conditions of brutal repression and endured the junta's squalid prison cells. There can be no democracy for Myanmar while 1.2 million disenfranchised Rohingya face annihilation. Only a united struggle by local, regional and international civil society activists, in which an end to the genocide is understood as a central platform in all human rights struggles, is capable of building a free democratic Myanmar.

Hearteningly we have seen the small beginnings of this engagement with courageous activists inside Myanmar building alliances in support of their Muslim neighbors. Moreover, Myanmar exiles from a range of political and ethnic communities are beginning to connect in ways not previously envisioned. On March 6th and 7th 2017, under the auspices of the Rome-based Permanent People's Tribunal, the International State Crime Initiative at Queen Mary, University of London hosted the first Tribunal on Myanmar's State Crimes against Rohingya, Kachin and other groups. What was so encouraging and indeed historic was the solidarity shared between the ethnic Kachin and Rohingya diaspora during the tribunal proceedings. And in May 2017 when Aung San Suu Kyi was given the Honorary Freedom of the City of London, Rohingya and Kachin activists stood side by side to protest the award. Both groups had previously pursued entirely separate paths of resistance (and in Myanmar continue to do so). These are very small beginnings, and they are taking place largely outside Myanmar, but they illustrate the possibility and potential of a shared struggle driven by a shared imaginary of a truly democratic Myanmar in which ethnic and oppositional groups overcome historic and state manipulated divisions and hold the state accountable for its myriad crimes.

Notes

[1] The study was based on detailed ethnographic research in Rakhine State and Yangon,

Myanmar and included 176 interviews with members of Rohingya, Rakhine, Kaman, and Maramagyi communities; international NGOs; government officials; local Rakhine civil society actors, activists; diplomats; journalists; lawyers; monks; imams; business-men and women; photographers; and academics.

[2] Human Rights Watch (2013), *All You Can Do is Pray: Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar's Arakan State*; Human Rights Watch (2012), *'The Government Could Have Stopped This': Sectarian Violence and Ensuing Abuses in Myanmar's Arakan State*; Allard K. Lowenstein, *International Human Rights Clinic and Fortify Rights*, (2015), *Persecution of the Rohingya Muslims: Is Genocide Occurring in Rakhine State? A Legal Analysis*; Zarni, M. and Cowley, A., (2014) "*The Slow Burning Genocide of Myanmar's Rohingya.*" *Pacific Rim Law and Policy Journal*, Vol. 23, no. 3; *Al Jazeera* (2015), 'Genocide Agenda'. http://www.aljazeera.com/investigations/genocideagenda.html

[3] See Feierstein's stages of genocide (2014).

[4] *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 9th November 2015.

[5] Neither ASSK nor her president, Htin Kyaw, visited Rakhine state during the crisis. Suu Kyi has commented only that investigations will be conducted fairly and according to the rule of law. Her claim that 'we have not tried to hide anything on Rakhine' can only be interpreted as denial.

[6] On October 31, *Myanmar Times* journalist, Fiona MacGregor, was fired, at the

instigation of the Ministry of Information and following Facebook denunciations by the President's Office spokesman, U Zaw Htay, for publishing allegations of the rape of dozens of Rohingya women by Myanmar Army soldiers. The leading English language newspaper was forced to suspend reporting on Rakhine state.

[7] *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 14 November 2016, page 1.

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