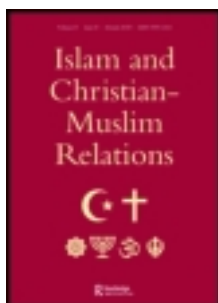


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### A Politician, Not an Icon: Aung San Suu Kyi's Silence on Myanmar's Muslim Rohingya

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## A Politician, Not an Icon: Aung San Suu Kyi's Silence on Myanmar's Muslim Rohingya

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In Myanmar (also known as Burma), the Rohingya are a persecuted Muslim minority living mainly in northern Rakhine State. Aung San Suu Kyi, the iconic leader of Myanmar's opposition party the National League for Democracy (NLD), is championed as the voice of the people. However, on the matter of the Rohingya's persecution she has been notably silent. This article examines the possible reasons for Suu Kyi's silence and argues that Buddhist–Muslim political relations in Myanmar are central to understanding the reasons behind Suu Kyi's position on the Rohingya. It is suggested that various factors, including the history of the Rohingya in Myanmar, the NLD's attitude towards the Rohingya, Suu Kyi's sense of obligation to her father's political legacy, and Suu Kyi's views on ethnicity, are creating a political environment in which Suu Kyi is presented with pragmatic political reasons for staying silent. Given Suu Kyi has the potential to become a future national leader, an understanding of her behaviours towards a sizeable persecuted Muslim minority is important. This is particularly the case when consideration is given to the contemporary pressures on Muslims to embrace radical politics and the implications this could have for Myanmar and the region.

**Keywords:** Myanmar; Burma; Rohingya; Aung San Suu Kyi; Buddhist–Muslim violence

### Introduction

In Myanmar (also known as Burma),<sup>1</sup> the Rohingya are a persecuted Muslim minority living mainly in northern Rakhine State adjacent to Bangladesh (Green 2013; Oberoi 2006). In recent times, they have attracted increased international notice and media attention as deteriorating relations between Myanmar's Buddhist majority and the country's Muslim population flared into widespread violent inter-communal riots during 2012 (Parnini 2013). Human rights organizations estimate that inter-communal violence in mid-2012 displaced around 125,000 mainly Muslim people in Rakhine State (HRW 2013), and saw entire city blocks of the state capital Sittwe laid waste (HRW 2012).

Aung San Suu Kyi, the iconic leader of Myanmar's opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), has been championed as the voice of the people and a "symbol of popular opposition to the government" (Charney 2009, 177) from the time she emerged as a political actor during the 1988 anti-government uprising. In 1991, Suu Kyi, the "personification of democratic ideals," was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (Steinberg 2010, 95). However, on the matter of the Rohingya's situation Suu Kyi has been notably silent. This silence is causing significant disquiet within the international human rights community, which was previously strongly supportive of Suu Kyi's political aspirations (Ingber 2012).

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Given Myanmar now has a quasi-civilian system of democratic government, Suu Kyi has the potential to become a future national leader and exercise significant political influence, regardless of whether she is constitutionally able to be elected to the position of president.<sup>2</sup> Myanmar has a population of around 52–55 million people and is located on the Andaman Sea at a strategic nexus between India and China, which means an understanding of Suu Kyi's behaviours towards a sizeable persecuted Muslim minority is important. This is particularly the case when consideration is given to the contemporary pressures on Muslims in this region to embrace radical politics, and the implications this could have for Myanmar and the region (Hasan 2012).

This article examines the possible reasons for Suu Kyi's silence and argues that Buddhist–Muslim political relations in Myanmar are central to understanding the reasons behind her position on the Rohingya. It is suggested that various factors, including the history of the Rohingya in Myanmar, the NLD's attitude towards the Rohingya, Suu Kyi's sense of obligation to her father's political legacy, and her own views on ethnicity, are creating a political environment in which Suu Kyi is presented with pragmatic political reasons for staying silent.

Any assessment of Myanmar's domestic politics must take account of the limitations imposed by the unreliability of a good deal of domestic writing about the country's politics. This is particularly the case since the 1962 military coup. Domestic and international policies, particularly Myanmar's censorship of publications, has contributed greatly to modern difficulties in assessing the country's politics (Steinberg 2012). However, in 2012, Myanmar's notionally civilian government promised a freer domestic media scene and relaxations of the country's strict newspaper censorship (Kulczuga 2013).

In August 2012, Myanmar's Ministry of Information lifted the requirement that print media submit materials to the Censorship Board prior to publication (Kulczuga 2013), which resulted in a much freer journalistic climate and an increase in the numbers of domestic newspapers. Domestic print editions of formerly underground publications, including *Mizzima* and *The Irrawaddy*, became freely available inside Myanmar, the British Broadcasting Corporation opened an in-country office and on Myanmar's news-stands new privately run newspapers proliferated (Kulczuga 2013; Mizzima News 2013; Tomlinson 2012).

Steinberg (2012, vi) argues that Myanmar's isolationist government created a climate in which foreign scholarly research, despite its obvious drawbacks, became increasingly important because of the “stringent [political] controls over research and publishing for those within the country.” Until 1988, this internal control of academic works meant, in Steinberg's view, that:

all internal research (even in science and medicine) by anyone employed by the state (which meant all academicians) was considered classified until presented at a state-sponsored research seminar and then formally approved for public dissemination. Since 1988, any research publications have had to meet the mercurial conditions of the official censorship board. History was reinterpreted and rewritten to emphasise the role of the Myanmar military. (vi)

Studies of Myanmar necessitate a greater reliance on news reporting and first-hand accounts than would be the case for an analysis of the politics of Myanmar's politically freer neighbours – Bangladesh, India or Thailand. The consequences for this article are that much of the material relied upon is, by necessity, sourced from recent domestic and international news reports, analyses, first-hand testimony and reports compiled by non-government organizations (NGOs) and international organizations, including Human Rights Watch (HRW), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and the Office of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR).

Aid and human rights groups have consistently documented the persecution of the Rohingya by the government and conflict with ethnic Rakhines. During the last three years, HRW has

published two detailed reports documenting these abuses (HRW 2012, 2013). In 2013, HRW documented what it described as “a history of persecution” (HRW 2013, 15) against the Rohingya, stating that the Rohingya face:

restrictions on freedom of movement, education, marriage and employment – rights that are guaranteed to non-citizens as well as citizens under international law. Various other human rights violations have accompanied the persecution of the Rohingya over the years, including arbitrary detention, forced labor, rape, torture, forcible relocations, and other abuses. (16)

Such descriptions of the conditions faced by the Rohingya in Myanmar are echoed by MSF (2007, 1), who describe the Rohingya as “subject to government oppression, such as restriction of movement, forced labour practices, land confiscation and restrictions on marriage and children.” Parnini (2013, 292) writes: “In March 2010, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Burma Tomás Ojea Quintana recommended that the UN should consider establishing an UN-mandated CoI [commission of inquiry].” However, the official Myanmar government line is that the Rohingya are mostly “illegal Bengali migrants from neighbouring Bangladesh” (Kipgen 2013, 300). Debating whether or not the Rohingya are subject to officially sanctioned persecution and discrimination is beyond the scope of this article, which accepts the weight of evidence from NGOs, UN sources and the author’s own observations of the situation in Rakhine State during 2013, supporting the proposition of widespread, officially sanctioned persecution of the Rohingya.

### Contemporary ethnic and religious complexity of Myanmar

Understanding the complex interplay between ethnicity and religion in Myanmar is crucial to understanding why the Rohingya today find themselves stateless and persecuted. This interplay is also critical to an understanding of why Aung San Suu Kyi has not supported the Rohingya in any meaningful way.

However, there are also challenges in accurately assessing the religious complexity of Myanmar. According to Myanmar’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2012), around 65% of the population of modern-day Myanmar are ethnic Burmans, also called Bamar. The Burmans are overwhelmingly, though not exclusively, Theravada Buddhists (Steinberg 2010). The remaining third of the country’s officially estimated population of 52 million is divided among ethnic groups, many of whom have either currently or previously made strong claims to independence in their own right (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2012). This includes around 2.5 million, or approximately 4.5% of the national population, who are ethnic Rakhines (also known as Arakanese), a predominantly Buddhist group but nonetheless fiercely independent from the Burman majority. While official statistics claim that Muslims make up around 4% of the country’s population, *The Economist* argues “this is almost certainly an underestimate” (*Economist* 2007, 48). US Government statistics claim that Myanmar’s population is higher than the official figure, estimating it to be around 55 million (CIA 2013).

The Rakhines are the dominant ethnic group in Rakhine State (previously named Arakan), where there is also an estimated Rohingya population of between 800,000 and one million (Brinham 2012; Kipgen 2013). Myanmar’s government gives a lower number, does not consider the Rohingya to be citizens, and did not include the Rohingya in the last national census taken in 1983 (HRW 2013, 113). While there are significant concerns about the reliability of Myanmar government statistics, including the country’s published population data, these figures are nonetheless useful to this discussion because they provide a general indication of the relative size of each population.

### Historic circumstances contributing to the Rohingya's current situation

The Rohingya's current economic, political and citizenship situation is in large part a consequence of historic circumstances in Myanmar and the region. Rohingya representative organizations claim that their heritage in the Arakan region is centuries old. The Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO), a British-based representative organization of the Rohingya, suggests that Rohingyas have been living in the Arakan area from "time immemorial" and trace their ancestry to "Arabs, Moors, Pathan, Moghuls, Bengalis and some Indo-Mongoloid people" (Islam 2006). However, ARNO acknowledges that the earliest permanent Muslim settlements in the region were probably established in the seventh century. Similarly, the Arakan Rohingya Union (ARU), created and supported by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, claims that the Rohingya's heritage pre-dates "British colonial rule in their native Arakan" and goes back to "several hundred years prior to the arbitrary demarcation of Burma-Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) in 1948" (ARU 2011). The ARNO also claims that Muslim kings ruled Arakan during the fifteenth century (Islam 2006), a claim contested by some who argue that the monarch, King Naramaikhla, claimed to be a Muslim, and that those immediately following him were not actual Muslim converts but rather willingly took on Muslim "royal honorifics" after previously being granted sanctuary by the Muslim Bengal ruler to escape a Burmese invasion (Rogers 2012). Be that as it may, regardless of whether the historic Arakan Kingdom was Muslim ruled or governed by a Buddhist who took Muslim titles, there is a strong historic basis for the Rohingya's modern claim to be long term, if not now indigenous, peoples of Rakhine State.

The arrival of Persian traders on the Arakan coast from the seventh century onwards likely marks the beginning of the Rohingya's history (Kipgen 2013; Myint-U 2006). Intermingling with locals and other arriving traders and travellers over hundreds of years, these settlers eventually developed into the modern Rohingya. Myint-U (2006) describes the Rohingya's ancestors as being traceable to the earliest days of Arab, Indian and Moorish trader settlements along the Arakan coast from around this time. Tran (1996) too explains that merchants stopped and settled in the coastal area west of the Arakan Mountains, and that, geographically separated from the central Burmese plains, these communities developed along social and religious lines different from the population in the remainder of the area forming the main landmass of modern Myanmar. According to Parnini (2013, 281), "Their history traces back to the early seventh century, when Arab Muslim traders settled the area" and "it is also recognized that they are physically, linguistically and culturally similar to South Asians, especially Bengali people."

An appreciation of Islam's strong historic influence in Arakan is crucial to understanding the current plight of the Rohingya. These patterns of migration explain why the Rohingya are of a different religion from both the majority population of Rakhine State and the bulk of Myanmar's population. It also explains why the Rohingya are generally different in appearance, with darker skin, than both these populations.

By the eighteenth century, the creation of the Burmese Konbaung Dynasty by the revered Burmese King Alaungpaya was the beginning of the end of independent Arakan. Alaungpaya reunited a fractured and dispirited Burma and laid the groundwork for the invasion of Arakan by his son Bodawpaya in 1784 (Harvey 1967). By the early nineteenth century, the Burmese were at the peak of their power having "crushed their Siamese foes and even resisted the Manchu Chinese invasions. They were extremely self-assured, pushing westward" (Myint-U 2011, 249). However, having taken Arakan, Assam and Manipur, they found that these military successes in territory of commercial interest to the East India Company attracted the attention of the British colonial administration in India. The military achievements of this

Burmese dynasty are a great source of Burman pride; the dynasty's founder Alaungpaya is considered one of the three great Burmese kings and there is a large statue of him in the Myanmar capital, Nay Pyi Taw (Selth 2012).

Burmese westward expansionism into British administered areas, and failures of the Burmese and British to reach any lasting agreements for positive relations, precipitated three Anglo-Burmese Wars beginning in 1824. This conflict ended with the capitulation of the Burmese and British political control of the entire country from 1885 (Steinberg 2010, 26). The ultimate humiliation for the Burmese came when the British sent the last Burmese king into exile in India (LeRoy 1944).

This is the history that has contributed to many of the long-standing animosities and attitudes within Myanmar that have left the Rohingya disliked by a large proportion of Myanmar's majority Buddhist population. Central to the Rohingya's current situation as a stateless people are contemporary perceptions by the Myanmar government, and shared by many ethnic Burmans and Rakhines, that the Rohingya do not have a long-term connection to Myanmar and are mostly recent illegal Bengali migrants (Cheung 2012).

However, this was not always the case. During Burma's democratic period following independence in 1948, Rohingyas played a full role in Burmese society, had full citizenship rights, could hear their language broadcast on official radio courtesy of the Burmese Broadcasting Service and could serve in Parliament (Rogers 2012). However, in the view of Burma's military junta, who ruled the country from the 1962 coup until the 2010 multi-party elections, the Rohingya were illegal Bengali migrants from India or East Pakistan, as Bangladesh was then known. This view was manifested in policy terms in the stripping away of the Rohingya's civil, political and economic rights during the tenure of the military government (Rogers 2012). The attitude of Myanmar's present day, notionally civilian government towards the Rohingya is little different and no less controversial in the estimation of the international community. Brinham (2012, 40), for example, states:

Recent events in Rakhine State should not be viewed in isolation; the Burma security forces have a long history of discrimination and systematic human rights abuses against them. President Thein Sein's remarks in July 2012 that the "only solution" to the troubles in Rakhine State was either to send stateless Rohingya to third countries or to contain them in UNHCR-administered camps caused outrage within the international human rights community.

The citizenship issue is central to the Rohingya's current existence as a virtually stateless people and is a major cause of their current plight. And it fuels conflict with the ethnic Rakhine. The dominant ethnic group in Rakhine State, the Buddhist Rakhine, regularly find themselves in violent disputation with the Muslim Rohingya (Kipgen 2013). As a group, the Rakhines crave independence from Myanmar in their own right and a common view among Rakhines and other Myanmar citizens is that the bulk of the Rohingya arrived in the region during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, leading many to believe the Rohingya to be "Bengali Muslims from Bangladesh" (Kipgen 2013, 300).

In 1982, Burma's military junta revised the nation's Citizenship Law and excluded the Rohingya from the national list of ethnic groups. In Cheung's (2012) view, this, combined with

onerous evidentiary requirements to apply for citizenship caused Rohingya to become stateless and more vulnerable to arbitrary denial of rights. Then in 1991–1992, after the disputed multi-party elections won by the National League for Democracy, the Myanmar military commenced another campaign called *Pya Thaya* (or Prosperous Country), which began with a build up of military forces and formation of a border task force, called *Nay-Sat Kut-kwey Ye* (or Nasaka) which consisted of police, military intelligence and immigration/customs officials. The intensified post-election clampdown led to a second exodus. Some 250,000 Rohingya crossed into Bangladesh while another 15,000 ultimately made their way to Malaysia. (52)



The Burmese junta effectively denied the citizenship of people who had lived in the country for generations. “The state of Burma (now Myanmar) at one stroke denied citizenship to its Muslim population in Arakan, who are now dispersed around the world and many of them are living as Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh ...” (Mohsin 2010, 7). Describing the racial policies of the junta, Mohsin goes on to say:

The entire population of Myanmar is color coded. Following the launching of Operation Nagamiri (Dragon King) in 1977, which continued for over a decade, almost the entire population of Myanmar was mapped, provided with identity cards.

These cards are all color coded, which determines the citizenship status of the bearer viz: Pink, those who are full citizens; Blue, those who are associate citizens; Green, those who are naturalized citizens and lastly, White, for the foreigners. No cards were issued to the Rohingyas. The government of Myanmar, including the majority Burman-Buddhist population of the country upholds the view that, the Muslim population of the Rakhine state is mostly Bengali migrants from the erstwhile East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, with some Indians coming during the British period. So they are regarded as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. (7)

There was no improvement in the treatment of the Rohingya throughout the 1980s and their sympathies for the democratic opposition following the 1988 uprising did little to endear the Rohingya to the junta or improve relations with the Rakhine. Following the 1988 democracy uprising, it was reported that:

Rohingyas supported the democracy movement, and like Madam Aung San Suu Kye [*sic*], had been victimized. However, the Military regime in Rangoon (now Yangon), the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), charged that Rohingyas were not bonafide Burmese citizens and that Muslim-majority Bangladesh was their true home. (Tran 1996, 29–30)

From this time, the junta began a strategy to push the Rohingya from their homes, using tactics described by Lay (2009) as including:

all sorts of physical abuse and economic obstacles. Including among them are restriction of movement, which eventually creates barriers for their daily activities, education and work; forced labor; confiscation of land; obstruction of marriage; and the barring of mosque and graveyard renovations ... Campaigns of terror, crimes against humanity and extermination have been perpetrated against the Rohingya in a systematic and planned way ... Today, this group is increasingly jobless, homeless, without land of their own and the most illiterate section of Burma's population. The restrictions on freedom of movement, marriage and education have dashed any future hope of development for the Rohingya, including forming families, all while they live in subhuman conditions amidst abject poverty. Humiliating restrictions on movement – even on travel from place to place within the same locality have affected all normal activities in all fields, crippling the Rohingya socially, economically and educationally. (58)

### **Why is Suu Kyi silent on the Rohingya?**

The reasons for Aung San Suu Kyi's near silence on matters related to the Rohingya's welfare can be explained by a number of factors, including the history of the Rohingya themselves, Suu Kyi's own views about minorities, and the constraints of domestic electoral politics. The position of Myanmar's democratic opposition is ambiguous at best and at worst a mirror of the military's current and historic position. Suu Kyi did not make a clear statement of support for the Rohingya's interests during outbreaks of communal violence in Rakhine state throughout 2012 and 2013, as she routinely has for other minorities finding themselves in similar situations (Green 2013). Instead, Suu Kyi referred publically to the importance of supporting the “rule of law” (Green 2013) when making decisions about Myanmar citizenship.

The Rohingya's history in Myanmar is a significant contributor to their current statelessness, their political isolation from Myanmar's democratic opposition and its leader, and their unpopularity with both Myanmar's majority Buddhist Burmans and with the Rakhine State's

majority population, the Buddhist ethnic Rakhines. It is this unpopularity that makes it difficult, for basically political reasons, for Suu Kyi to support the interests of the Rohingya.

Suu Kyi leads a political party with aspirations and the stated aims of winning votes throughout the newly democratic Myanmar and ultimately forming a national government (NLD 2012). With this goal in mind, Suu Kyi must be careful to not alienate the voters she and her party will rely upon for future electoral support. She would be mindful that around 65% of the population of Myanmar are ethnic Burmans and that they are overwhelmingly Buddhists. The remainder of the population is made up of various minority groups, with Muslims accounting for around 4–5% of the population. These population figures demonstrate the likely political dominance of ethnic Burmans at the next election and illustrate why Suu Kyi's decision to remain silent on the situation of the Rohingya may be motivated by political pragmatism. However, this pragmatism should not necessarily come as a surprise. A strong indication of it can be found in the conversation she had with visiting American Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2011. Surprising many, Suu Kyi reportedly told Clinton she would rather be seen as a politician than as an icon (Ebbighausen 2012).

Among the most significant reasons for the Rohingya's unpopularity in Myanmar are the centuries old rivalries between various groups in Rakhine State. Centuries of intermittent conflict and war contributed to patterns of population displacement, such that various groups, both Muslim and Buddhist, have historic claims to connection with the area (Harvey 1967). The most recent Burmese conquest of Arakan in the eighteenth century marked a Burmese military and territorial high-point in the region, later reversed by a series of wars with the British. This reversal significantly dented Burman pride, leaving them resentful of the British as well as those they had previously defeated, the forebears of the Rohingya. This resentment was increased by perceptions that the British administration privileged darker-skinned people, often of Indian origin and frequently Muslims, during the colonial period (Myint-U 2011). This perception had some basis in reality as the British not only imported significant numbers of administrators from the sub-continent but also encouraged migration into Burma from other parts of the British controlled territories nearby, and this helped fuel the persistent notions of the Rohingya as relatively recent "Bengali" migrants.

These anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya attitudes and resentments have germinated over centuries and are unlikely to dissipate quickly. It is almost certain that Buddhist resentment, if not hatred, of the Rohingya and now increasingly of Muslims throughout Myanmar, will feature as a prominent issue in the country's next general election campaign (Al Jazeera 2013). This is a worrying political environment for the Rohingya, who can now be reasonably characterized as poor, stateless and, politically speaking, virtually friendless. The Rohingya's unpopularity is creating a political environment in which support for their interests may come at the political cost of lost support from Myanmar's majority population, the Buddhist Burmans. In these political circumstances, it appears Suu Kyi's silence on matters relating to the Rohingya's welfare is based not on a lack of time to consider these matters, as no doubt many Rohingya hoped, but rather on other, more banal, considerations. Suu Kyi's apparent determination to be politically pragmatic does not easily lend itself to public support for the Rohingya.

### **Suu Kyi enters parliament but remains silent on the Rohingya's situation**

As expected, once Suu Kyi was allowed to participate freely in the political process, she easily won election to the lower house of the Myanmar parliament at an April 2012 by-election for the Kawhmu Township constituency in Yangon Region. Her first speech to the parliament was significant both to the international community and to the citizens of Myanmar. The international community viewed it as an indication that strategies to encourage Myanmar's



leadership towards continued reform were working. For Myanmar citizens, it indicated that their country was on a path towards long-term change.

Suu Kyi used her first speech to call for laws to protect the interests of Myanmar's minorities. Al Jazeera (2012) reported that Suu Kyi used the speech to call for, "... an end to discrimination against ethnic minorities as part of the 'emergence of a genuine democratic country' ...". Suu Kyi went on, "To become a truly democratic union with a spirit of the union, equal rights and mutual respect, I urge all members of parliament to discuss the enactment of the laws needed to protect equal rights of ethnicities." Suu Kyi's speech referred to:

soaring poverty rates in Chin, Kachin, Shan and Rakhine states, noting that protecting minority rights required more than just maintaining ethnic languages and cultures ... The high poverty rates in ethnic states clearly indicate that development in ethnic regions is not satisfactory – and ethnic conflicts in these regions have not ceased ... (Al Jazeera 2012, paras 4 and 5)

However, significantly – and a point not lost on the media – Suu Kyi did not refer during her momentous speech to the initial outbreak of communal violence in Rakhine State between Buddhists and Muslim Rohingya, which at that stage had left around 78 people dead and had prompted a "strong military crackdown" (Al Jazeera 2012). This omission, was particularly jarring to the international media, long accustomed to Suu Kyi championing the rights of Myanmar's minorities, and was made all the more striking because she chose to specifically address the needs of some other minorities within her speech.

Ominously, international media outlets such as Al Jazeera began to report that "Most Myanmar people consider the Rohingya to be Bangladeshi exiles ..." and that "President Thein Sein recently told the UN that the solution was either to send millions of Rohingya to another country or to have the UN look after them ..." (Al Jazeera 2012, paras 8 and 10). Shortly after Suu Kyi's first parliamentary speech, more concerns were raised by the human rights community and commentators when Suu Kyi seemed to take the government's side in a local dispute in Monywa, north of Yangon, where locals strongly opposed the construction of a copper mine. Suu Kyi chaired the government-sponsored investigation commission, which "... admitted that the project lacked environmental protection measures and would not provide jobs for locals, but should nonetheless continue in order to encourage foreign investment and maintain a positive relationship with China ..." (Hodal 2013). This outcome surprised many, who began to openly question Suu Kyi's political judgement. For decades, Suu Kyi's speeches and public statements had been heavy on rhetoric supporting ordinary citizens in opposition to government policies and practices. Now, Suu Kyi, as an elected official, was appearing to defend the government's position against the interests of local citizens. For many, in Myanmar and the international community, this was an unexpected reversal.

The Nobel Laureate, once considered a messiah who could do no wrong, has come under fire in recent months not just from critics but members of her own party as well, many of whom balk at her pacifying approach towards, and so-called "fondness" for, the military, which still comprises one-quarter of the government. (Hodal 2013, para 8)

In Myanmar's new, freer media environment, the press reported this news throughout the country. International news reports critical of Suu Kyi were until this time unusual

as the Burmese opposition leader has gone from being a democracy icon to a practicing politician, a process that has obliged her to adopt public positions on a wide range of contentious issues. Criticisms are now being leveled at Aung San Suu Kyi from many quarters, both within Burma and outside it. Questions have even been raised about her future leadership role, something that would have been unthinkable not long ago. (Selth 2013, para 2)

Suu Kyi also faces a challenging political environment within the NLD.

### The NLD and their relationship to the Rohingya

Many believe the NLD's ageing organizational leadership has little desire to support the Rohingya and risk alienating the nation's Buddhist majority, with whose support they hope to win the national elections scheduled for 2015. Young members of the NLD, as well as members in some regional branches of the party, are impatient with the old-guard leadership, many of whom were already middle-aged when they were leaders of the 1988 People's Revolution 25 years ago (Fisher 2013). However, this disquiet is more about control of the organization than due to any sense that the old guard are charting the wrong policy course. According to Fisher (2013), the NLD is "criticised as ageing, ineffective and out of touch." Suu Kyi has routinely backed her party's old-guard leadership and, describing the outcome of the 2013 NLD conference, which reduced the average age of the NLD executive to 63 years of age, explained to the media, "It's impossible to leave the old, experienced members behind" (Gyi 2013). This is despite the fact that half of the Myanmar population are under the age of 27 (Fisher 2013).

Some analysts also question the NLD's capacity to function as an alternative government. Not only has Suu Kyi's party leadership been the victim of arbitrary arrest and imprisonment by the Myanmar government, but the NLD more generally has been a victim of the government's decades-long neglect of the nation's education system. The consequences of this are that party activists and leaders often lack political and policy development skills (Randolph 2013). In many ways too, the NLD was stuck in a time-warp during the period of Suu Kyi's house arrest – internal policy debates were effectively frozen throughout this period – but, as is understandable in a political party seeking a catch-all mandate in a country of around 60 million people, debates have quickly re-emerged (BBC 2013). However, possibly the biggest political challenge Suu Kyi faces in her new parliamentary role is associated with the outbreak of violence in Rakhine State in 2012.

### Suu Kyi's attitudes and political position contributing to her lack of support for the Rohingya

The Rohingya's history has contributed to their unpopularity in Myanmar, ensuring that support for their interests comes with a potentially high electoral cost. However, there may also be other factors contributing to Suu Kyi's virtual silence on the Rohingya. They include Suu Kyi's (1984) own stated attitudes towards religion and ethnic politics, her commitment to her father's political legacy (Bernstein 2011) and her commitment to the success of her own political party, the NLD and its ageing organizational leadership (Gyi 2013). Each of these factors is likely influential on her decision to be silent on matters related to the Rohingya's welfare.

According to Suu Kyi, her political involvement is strongly influenced by the political legacy of her father, Aung San (Bernstein 2011). Aung San was a Burmese independence hero and founder of the nation's influential army. Significantly, his credibility as a founder of independent Burma is based, in large part, on his role at the 1947 Panglong Conference, where Burma's ethnic minorities agreed to join a federal Burmese union rather than continue to pursue their own plans for independence (Naw 2011). These minorities later found themselves trapped inside a military-run Burmese nation-state dominated by an ethnic Burman Buddhist majority (Lay 2009).

Suu Kyi has spoken regularly about her father's influence on her involvement in politics. It is likely that her current political positions are informed by this commitment to a federal nation-state, but one where the ethnically Burman and religiously Buddhist majority population, of which she and her family are a part, will necessarily dominate. Suu Kyi's (1984) own writings and speeches about minority issues, while rhetorically supportive of their rights, nonetheless

suggest she has a strong Burman Buddhist identity. Both these factors make it possible that Suu Kyi will take political positions consistent with the interests of the Myanmar population's majority group, Burman Buddhists. These positions can be presented, in a democratic sense, as simply supporting the will of the majority of the people rather than as part of any anti-minority agenda. However, with such a substantial Burman majority within Myanmar, democratic arguments will always be significantly stacked in their favour. In Myanmar, the democratic will of the majority will virtually always be the will of Burman Buddhists.

Many of these perspectives on ethnic and religious matters are likely also shared by the NLD's ageing leadership. Many of the NLD's leaders are part of the "88 Generation" of opposition figures who participated in the 1988 uprising against the military junta (Gyi 2013). These NLD organizational leaders are predominantly ethnic Burmans and Buddhists who have lived their lives in a country with a repressive political culture and, until recently, limited access to international media. These figures have not publically criticized Suu Kyi for her failure to speak out in support of the Rohingya and it is reasonable to assume that they support her position. It is also probable that Suu Kyi's failure to speak in support of the Rohingya, and risk alienating Burman political voters, is motivated in part by her sense of moral obligation to these figures who supported her during her years of house arrest, and in part by her sense of obligation to their joint-project – the political viability of the NLD, which she helped establish (Suu Kyi 1995).

It is also worth considering just how personally and politically isolated Suu Kyi is, having spent a large proportion of the past 25 years under some form of house arrest with limited access to domestic, let alone international, media (BBC 2010). Suu Kyi may now be personally free from arrest but in many ways she remains hostage to her political circumstances. She leads a fractious NLD with an ageing organizational leadership that will seek a nation-wide mandate at the next Myanmar general election from a constituency overwhelmingly unsupportive of the aspirations of the Muslim Rohingya. An expert in political rhetoric, Suu Kyi has in recent times struggled to marry her previous lofty and idealistic statements with the political realities of elected office. Some might suggest that, with time, Suu Kyi will change her position on the Rohingya. However, she has already had a considerable amount of time to consider their situation and, with the exception of rejecting the government's "Two Child Policy" imposed on Rohingya communities (Green 2013), she has shown no likelihood of coming to a position of significant support for their welfare, let alone their desire to have their Myanmar citizenship returned.

### **Conclusion: the consequences of Suu Kyi's silence**

The consequences of Suu Kyi's silence are potentially dire for the Rohingya. They are now not only regularly persecuted by the Myanmar government and reviled by their close neighbours, the ethnic Rakhine Buddhists, but they are also not citizens of Myanmar, and are unwelcome in Bangladesh or Thailand and increasingly politically isolated.

For Suu Kyi, the consequence of failing to support the humanitarian cause of the Rohingya is that much of the gloss has come off her political image (Green 2013). Suu Kyi is appearing more and more like "just another politician" and less like the international icon of democracy, freedom and human rights that she once was. This development also leaves Myanmar in a precarious political position. Despite the widespread domestic unpopularity of supporting the aspirations of the Rohingya, the fact that Suu Kyi has not spoken in their support has given licence to anti-Muslim feelings in other parts of the country (Al Jazeera 2013). Incidents such as the alleged mistreatment of Buddhists by Muslims are now much more likely to quickly descend into riotous violence. This was the case in May 2013, when anti-Muslim riots broke out in

north-east Myanmar following an alleged serious assault on a Buddhist woman by a Muslim man, displacing tens of thousands of Muslims in the regional town of Lashio in Shan State (Ferrie 2013).

Myanmar's uneasy ethnic balance appears to be growing increasingly unstable and this is also a concern to other ethnic minorities. While the Rohingya have long supported the democratic opposition and the NLD, no doubt expecting this would lead to political support when needed, their expectations have not materialized. Other minorities are in a similar position, having worked closely with the NLD since 1988. They surely are now likely to question whether NLD support will be forthcoming if they were to find themselves in similar strife. There has historically been armed opposition to the national Myanmar government by minorities including the Karen, Kachin, Shan, Chin and Wa (Rogers 2012), and recent developments may well lead groups like the Rohingya to consider whether their interests would be better served by rejecting the democratic approach and taking up more radical, possibly violent, methods to defend their interests. Such developments would contribute to a very unstable political and strategic environment in Myanmar, and the consequences of this for the international community are significant.

Any internal destabilization will be of concern to Myanmar's near neighbours, especially those who have close economic ties with the country – Bangladesh, China, India and Thailand. Myanmar's minorities are predominantly concentrated in the border areas abutting these countries, so they will be particularly sensitive to any internal destabilization involving the minorities. Suu Kyi's silence is also of significant concern to the international human rights community. Her silence on the Rohingya, despite their obviously dire humanitarian circumstances, is a disappointment to these groups, who expected better from her. However, the lack of a viable alternative champion in Myanmar and the fact that Suu Kyi does remain a strong humanitarian voice in other matters (Al Jazeera 2012), leave the international human rights community conflicted and, as time passes, more and more organizations, long used to criticizing the Myanmar military for its human rights failings, are raising concerns about Suu Kyi's position on the Rohingya. Green (2013, 97) argues that Suu Kyi's "wilful silence on racism in Burma suggests only a form of cynical politicking." It is difficult to disagree with Green's point here, but it is important to remember that, while Suu Kyi is justifiably in danger of losing her aura of "democratic icon," the real victims are the Rohingya, whose dire circumstances surely warrant better politicians than democratic Myanmar has so far provided.

## Notes

1. This article uses the name "Myanmar" to refer to the country from the time its name was officially changed by the military junta in 1989. In referring to the country's history prior to 1989, the name "Burma" is used. To be consistent, the same practice is followed when referring to the country's inhabitants – prior to 1989 they are described as "Burmese" and after the name change as "Myanmars." The contested nature of many name changes by Myanmar's government means many towns, cities, geographic features and even states are referred to and commonly known by their former and more familiar names. This article makes efforts to preserve the meaning of these texts and avoid confusion by including both the former and the official name where necessary.
2. At the time of writing, Clause 59(f) of Myanmar's Constitution bars from the presidency any Myanmar whose spouse or children are foreign citizens. Since Suu Kyi's two sons hold British citizenship, the presidency would appear beyond her unless there is constitutional change. While, Suu Kyi's political party remains committed to changing this part of the Constitution, potentially clearing the way for her to become president in the future, Suu Kyi will likely continue to exercise significant political influence as leader of the NLD even without constitutional change.

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