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OPINION ASIA

Burma's Buddhist Chauvinism

Violence against the Rohingya reveals a deep-rooted xenophobia.

By William McGowan

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Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi extols Buddhism as a source of personal strength, allowing her to endure 15 years of house arrest at the hands of Burma's generals. Buddhist precepts such as loving kindness and compassion can also guide Burma's democratic transition, she says, by fostering reconciliation with the military.

Yet Burma's Buddhist tradition also has a nationalistic and at times hateful side, as the violence since June against Rohingya Muslims in the western state of Rakhine demonstrates. A sense of racial and religious superiority among majority Burman Buddhists has poisoned relations with the 40% of the population made up of non-Burman minorities.

This enmity has not only fueled civil war, it could pull the country's political reforms off course. The military is using the Rohingya issue to build its popularity with Burman and Rakhine Buddhists. This puts Ms. Suu Kyi in an increasingly difficult position.

Buddhist monks protest against the Rohingya minority. ASSOCIATED PRESS

The anti-Rohingya violence, some of it committed by Buddhist mobs and some by the Buddhist-dominated security forces, led to scores of deaths, the burning of settlements and a refugee exodus of 90,000 into neighboring Bangladesh. There, up to 300,000 Rohingya refugees still languish in makeshift camps from the last anti-Rohingya pogrom 20 years ago—part of

what the United Nations calls "one of the world's largest and most prominent groups of stateless people."

According to the U.N., the Rohingyas, who number about 800,000, are "virtually friendless," subject to forced labor, extortion, police harassment, restrictions on freedom of movement, land confiscation, inequitable marriage regulations, a de facto "one child" family policy, and limited access to jobs, education, and healthcare. A 1982 law denies them citizenship, based on the presumption that they are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, even though many have lived in Burma for generations.

There's also their darker skin color, which makes them "ugly as ogres" by comparison to the "fair and soft" complexion of Burmans, according to the Burmese consul general in Hong Kong in 2009. Burmese President Thein Sein has said that the "solution" to the Rohingya problem is to put them into U.N.-administered internal camps, or expel them.

Many in Burma's pro-democracy community hold similar views, including leading figures in Ms. Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy. Ko Ko Gyi, who was imprisoned for his strategic role in the 1988 student uprising and now functions as a mentor to younger democracy activists, called the Rohingya "terrorists" who infringed on the country's sovereignty. Like other opposition figures, Ko Ko Gyi denied that the Rohingya should be counted among the nation's 135 recognized "national groups." NLD spokesman Nyan Win simply said: "The Rohingya are not our citizens."

Monastic opposition to the government, which boiled over in the 2007 "Saffron Revolution," has posed a significant challenge to the military's popular legitimacy by depicting it as an enemy of Buddha *sasana*, or righteous moral rule. The regime has tried to deflect that challenge by finding outside enemies, stressing that Buddhism is the religion of "true Burmese" and its purity is under threat. The result is a Buddhist majority that might rally behind Ms. Suu Kyi and the monks for greater democratic rights, but is less keen about extending those same rights to others.

As the violence against the Rohingyas played out, the newly "liberated" Internet was filled with racist invective. Using a pejorative for dark-skinned foreigners, one commenter declared, "We should kill all the *Kalars* in Burma or banish them, otherwise Buddhism will cease to exist." A nationalist group set up a Facebook page entitled "Kalar Beheading Gang," which attracted 600 "likes" by mid-June.

In Europe to receive her belated Nobel Peace Prize when the Rohingya crisis peaked, Aung San Suu Kyi was like a deer caught in headlights. When asked if the Rohingya should be treated as citizens, she answered. "I do not know," followed by convoluted statements about citizenship laws and the need for border vigilance. Nowhere did she or the NLD denounce either the attacks or the racist vitriol that followed them, or express sympathy for the victims.

According to some analysts, Ms. Suu Kyi's reluctance to speak out reflected

concern for her own parliamentary district, where anti-Rohingya feeling runs high. Others note the fierce racism of Buddhists in Rakhine, a state that plays a key role in the NLD's wider electoral strategy.

The pinched response left many observers downcast. Journalist Francis Wade, who has followed the democratic transition in Burma closely, wonders whether Western observers have "overromanticized" the struggle between the NLD and the junta and if the pro-democracy movement ever had the "wholesale commitment to the principle of tolerance" many presumed.

The stakes are high. If ethnic and religious tensions long held in check by military authoritarianism boil over, Burma could easily become another Yugoslavia. The specter of "disorder," which the military has long invoked to justify its heavy hand, could lead it to slow the pace of reform or even roll it back. In 1962, minority unrest, largely provoked by the establishment of Buddhism as the state religion, provided a pretext for the military coup that led to 50 years of isolation.

As Ms. Suu Kyi herself wrote in a 1985 monograph on the Burmese "racial psyche," Buddhism "represents the perfected philosophy. It therefore follows that there [is] no need to either to develop it further or to consider other philosophies." In trying to forge a sense of national identity in a nation that has never known one, that attitude is a huge obstacle.

Mr. McGowan is a New York-based writer.

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