

PEACE BUILDERS, GENOCIDAIRES & OTHERS IN MYANMAR

Notes for David Kilgour

Universal Peace Federation Breakfast Ottawa Oct. 31, 2017



Permit me to say at the outset that Burma/Myanmar and its people have been on my mind for years, especially since the brother of a parliamentarian elected in 1990 with Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) was forced to flee for his life from the military in Rangoon and ended up living for a period in our home in Edmonton. He opened my eyes wider to the true nature of the tragedy in Burma ongoing since 1962.

The world watched in horror in 1988 when Ne Win's regime murdered thousands of pro-democracy demonstrators and imprisoned hundreds more. In 1990, we all shared in the euphoria of Daw Suu Kyi's and the NLD's extraordinary victory in the first elections in more than a generation. With a unified voice, the peoples of Burma overwhelmingly chose the way of open, democratic and civilian rule. The democratic miracle occurred despite the regime's continuous efforts since 1962 to silence dissent, bar opposition leaders from standing for office, and placing Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest for many years.

The 1990 election was never recognised by Burma's military. They kept Aung San Suu Kyi under house-arrest, but her spirit could not be broken. She was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize for selfless devotion to Burma and she garnered the respect of millions of people around the world. Her book, *Freedom From Fear*, won world-wide attention. She worked tirelessly while under house-arrest and while free to press the regime to enter into dialogue with Burma's democratic forces. The democratic international community welcomed her release.

BERTIL LINTNER



The Swedish journalist Bertil Lintner, whom I know and respect, has been writing about Burma for decades and was barred from Burma by the military decades ago. His book, *Burma in Revolt*, notes that in 1948 Burma was a promising democracy with a vigorous economy and a higher standard of living than virtually all of its neighbours. Today, it is one of the poorest of the world's least-developed nations and is ruled by a "medieval military dictatorship in power since 1962."

Lintner's book quotes Aung San, Daw Suu Kyi's father. On the night of his election as the President of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (Burma's first-ever nationally elected governing party) in January of 1946, he said, "By national unity, we don't mean only unity; we mean the unity of the entire people, irrespective of race, religion, sex and sectarian and party interests, in action and not in words for national ... objectives."

These words hold true today. Aung San Suu Kyi is a hero for many people, but she readily admits that she does not speak for all people in Burma. Burma is a culturally and ethnically rich country that needs national reconciliation as much as it does democracy. One day, representatives of all of Burma's ethno-cultural groups will hopefully be included in a true national dialogue.

About a week ago, Lintner wrote that in the initial stages of the crisis, international critics tended to blame State Counselor Suu Kyi for the crackdown on the Rohingya. "Even an experienced writer such as Nicholas Kristof wrote an article for the *New York Times* on September 9, which began by saying that 'Aung San Suu Kyi, a beloved Nobel Peace Prize winner, is presiding over an ethnic cleansing in which villages are burned, women raped and children butchered'."

Lintner reminded readers that Suu Kyi "has no power over the wholly autonomous military, which is under the exclusive control of Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlai... What Myanmar has experienced since has not been so much a transition from dictatorship to democracy but rather the emergence of a new hybrid political system that maintains military control over all important organs of power, including all security related ministries, while the elected government is responsible for health, education, agricultural policies and, to some extent, foreign policy.

Before elections were held in 2010, a new constitution was drafted under military auspices and promulgated after a fraudulent referendum in May 2008. The first chapter of the constitution states that one of the 'objectives' of the 'Union' is to enable 'the Defense Services to...participate in the National political leadership role of the State'."

However, to paraphrase Lintner: Daw Suu Kyi's could, without challenging the military, have gone to Rakhine state to meet the democratically elected local government. It would have shown the public that there is a civilian component to Myanmar's governmental structure. She could visit local hospitals to meet victims of the violence from all religious communities in the area, Muslims as well as Buddhists and Hindus.

A series of coordinated attacks by an insurgent group on more than 20 police stations in Myanmar's western Rakhine State on Aug. 25 resulted in a massive overreaction by the Myanmar military. Huge numbers of Rohingya families have since crossed the border into Bangladesh. The obscure group Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, or ARSA, also managed to harm severely Myanmar's international relations just as the country was emerging from decades of isolation. The reputation of Daw Suu Kyi was much harmed as well for her failure to condemn the army's so-called "clearing operations" in Rakhine State.

Such criticism no doubt pleased the party-state in Beijing, annoyed by Myanmar's drift from a close relationship with China toward improved ties with the west. Following the massacres in 1988, China offered trade agreements, bilateral aid, and military sales. Myanmar offers access to the Indian Ocean. Oil/gas pipelines, from the Bay of Bengal through Myanmar to Yunnan province, shorten supply routes from the middle east, allowing China to avoid the potentially vulnerable chokepoint of the Strait of Malacca.

Lintner adds that since the Aug. 25 attacks. "ARSA (has) brought a profound impact on the region's geopolitical balance, perhaps a goal in launching those August attacks. The west is losing ground, with the refugees and Bangladesh as victims, while China and India scramble to take advantage of the crisis to advance their respective security and business interests. Unless the west's rightful condemnation is accompanied by a nuanced practical approach to the Rohingya issue, terrorism may have found a new frontier in Asia while reinforcing Beijing's position in the region"

DALAI LAMA OPPOSES VIOLENCE

Unsurprisingly, the Dalai Lama has urged Aung San Suu Kyi to find a peaceful solution to the crisis in Myanmar. "I appeal to you and your fellow leaders to reach out to all sections of society to try to restore friendly relations throughout the population in a spirit of peace and reconciliation," the world's much-loved and best-known Buddhist leader said in a letter to her. He added that Lord Buddha "would have definitely helped the Rohingyas" and he felt "very sad" about the violence.

CHRISTIAN VIEW

Christianity Today (CT) in its current edition notes that the "Muslim community is not alone in their hard times," Chaudhry Amon Emmanuel, a Pakistani Christian social activist and youth leader, *CT* in Pakistan. "We stand by them for their basic right to live. We urge [the] Myanmar government to stop these atrocities on [an] immediate basis." The All Pakistan Christian League decried the "inhumane treatment" of the Rohingya population, saying, "We stand with our brothers and sisters in this hour of persecution. We urge the world leadership to unite and put an end to these atrocities."

The archbishop of Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital, visited refugees in September, and Pope Francis, a vocal supporter of the Rohingya, will visit Bangladesh and Myanmar later this fall. Catholic relief charity Caritas has been on the ground in Bangladesh for the past month.

Thank you.