



HOW SUU KYI CAN CHANGE THE ROHINGYA NARRATIVE

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It is strange how public perceptions of Aung San Suu Kyi in the wake of the Rohingya crisis have tended to wildly swing between having too many expectations and having none at all. Both these contrarian commentaries have unwittingly ended up reinforcing an already polarised narrative. What is however conspicuously missing from these accounts is, if and how Suu Kyi can navigate these difficult transitions. If she is willing to signal course correction before it is too late, Suu Kyi may yet have a small window of opportunity to change the Rohingya narrative.

Much is made of the fact that Suu Kyi today finds herself caught between a rock and a hard place. Some of this can be explained by the fact that she functions within an asymmetric political arrangement that has institutionalised a parallel power structure. In today's Myanmar, the military controls key ministries such as home, defence and border affairs besides occupying the mandatory 25 percent seats in Parliament. But this structural weakness notwithstanding, what is often missed is the fact that Suu Kyi continues to wield enormous political capital on account of her personal

stature as well as the fact that her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) won a landslide victory in the 2015 elections by securing 77 percent votes. It will be interesting to see if and how she (re) positions herself from here and what sort of trade-offs she will be willing to make by way of damage control.

Arguably, one of the most important ways Suu Kyi can put her political capital to good use is by resetting the future directions of a peace process that has come under considerable duress. To her credit, she did initially set the right tone by making peace and reconciliation between the military and the ethnic armed groups as the political priority of her new government. Towards this end, she took the initiative to set up the Independent Commission on the Rakhine headed by the former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, with a mandate to suggest recommendations to improve the state's development. If she wishes to remain a credible player in the long run, Suu Kyi will have to also start subtly distancing herself from the military's securitised, hardline position and the sectarian agendas being pushed by right-wing Buddhist

groups. But being a Theravada Buddhist in a Buddhist majority country as well as being part of a political setup where the military is a powerful institutional actor, this is easier said than done. Ultra-nationalist Buddhist groups such as the MaBaTha and the 969 Movement with their strident rhetoric against ethnic minorities raises the trickier question of how state power will negotiate the interface between religion and politics in the long run. In a country in which 89.8 percent of the population are registered as Buddhists, these raise concerns of a slide towards unchecked majoritarianism. What adds an element of a heightened sense of urgency is the fact that at 72, Suu Kyi may not have the luxury of

time to make too many mistakes. She has the responsibility to pass the baton to the next line of political leaders who can carry forward the democratic agenda in a severely conflicted country. If she reneges on this, the resulting political vacuum would be one which both the military and the right wing forces will be eager to fill. What is worse, power sharing is set to get a whole lot trickier and messier with key political actors already positioning themselves for the 2020 general elections.

Any deterioration in the security situation and instability will also end up strengthening the military's position and allow it to (even more) forcefully deploy the narrative of being an indispensable stabilising force in the country. This also explains why the military persists with its rigid precondition to the ethnic armed groups of signing ceasefire deals prior to any political dialogue process. But is such a rigid precondition necessarily in the interests of Suu Kyi and the larger democratic forces? What is more, expecting ethnic armed groups to sign ceasefire deals in a climate vitiated by continued state violence against ethnic minorities will be highly unrealistic and delusional. A straw in the wind can be seen in the way the NLD fared in the recently held by-elections for 19 parliamentary seats. An indication of the growing disaffection within the ethnic minorities can be reflected in the landslide victories that the ethnic Shan political party, the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy won over the NLD candidates. Is the performance of the NLD in these elections a performance audit of her fledgling government? It is certainly hard to read it any other way at this point. The trappings of a democracy without delivering on social, political and economic rights for all sections of society could turn out to

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be a high-cost, low-returns optic for Suu Kyi.

Last but not least, the Rohingya crisis could be a valuable opportunity for Suu Kyi to signal her intent to be a credible interlocutor. What lends this a measure of promise is that she recently publicly affirmed her government's support for a verification process for the return of refugees from Bangladesh. What is also encouraging is that Myanmar and Bangladesh have agreed in principle to draw up a plan for repatriation of refugees based on the lines of a bilateral agreement signed in 1992. But the real litmus test of Suu Kyi's assurance will lie in her capacity to make sure that the repatriation process ensures security and safety

of the returnees. Her government's insistence on verification as a precondition for repatriation, has also stoked further anxiety given the fact that Myanmar's official narrative continues to treat Rohingyas as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. A rigid verification-based repatriation process runs the risk of seriously jeopardizing their right of return given that only an estimated 7,548 out of the one million Rohingyas in Rakhine hold national verification cards. Can repatriation be reduced to such a simplistic numerical exercise? It may be pertinent to recall the Rakhine Commission's warning that unless ethnic grievances and their statelessness are addressed, the Rakhine faces a 'real risk' of radicalisation. This is clearly not a far-fetched conclusion considering that Rohingyas are not included in the 135 officially recognised ethnic groups. More than anything else, the trends towards radicalisation of the Rohingyas that the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army represents is in fact the symptom and not the cause of the crisis that it is being made out to be.

If she is willing to imaginatively reframe the Rohingya narrative in the coming days, it could tick several political boxes for Suu Kyi: from offsetting centrifugal forces, strengthening state stability to shoring up her own image as a leader with a long reputation of speaking truth to power. Seen against the larger backdrop of her country's troubled transition from authoritarianism to democracy, her own transition from icon to politician could yet see a redeeming act. ■

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