

Myanmar 2017 | 7 facts you need to know

By Melinda Bak | September 2017

1880 Words

1. A Rock and A Hard Place

Human Rights groups are sounding the alarm on ethnic cleansing as Rohingya Muslims flee Myanmar by the thousands, seeking shelter in neighboring Bangladesh. Meanwhile, Aung San Suu Kyi, the nation's chief, a former dissident and Nobel Peace Prize recipient, is a leader caught between a rock and a hard place.



Rohingya refugees take shelter from the rain in a camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, September 2017. Cathal McNaughton / Reuters

2. Military Autonomy

Myanmar's constitution is oddly set up to allow the military not only autonomy but *more power than the president*. So, while the Myanmar military brutally beats, rapes and murders tens of thousands of Rohingya Muslims, burning homes and driving others from their villages, say firsthand witnesses, the president has little more than back-door-influence to reign in the generals.



A provision once meant to safeguard against despot leaders, the constitutional edict granting the Myanmar military autonomy has created a renegade army beholden to no one. It was an edict born of prior rebellions against imperialism and homegrown dictators (in 1945, 1947, 1962, 1990 and 2011). Each time that the military shifted from pro-government cooperation to anti-government-resistance, the people experienced liberation. As a result, popular memory casts the military in the role of esteemed freedom-fighters whose outside-the-law operations go unquestioned and are even revered by swaths of beholden citizens.

In question is whether a military whose culture celebrates government insubordination can learn the ways of collaboration; and move the country forward toward democracy rather than backward into despotism.

3. Military vs Muslims

Justifying their need to cleanse the country of Muslims, the military points to atrocities committed by the Arakan Rohingya (Muslim) Salvation Army (ARSA) who attacked police posts and an army camp, killing 12 people on August 25. But, Muslim residents say that it's the other way around; that soldiers along with Buddhist and Hindu mobs have attacked them; burning villages, maiming, murdering more than a thousand in recent days, and driving more than 400,000* into exile. [**2018 update: more than half of the Rohingya residents from the northern Rakhine State have now been murdered or driven from their homes, with more than 700,000 forcibly displaced, many driven out of Myanmar and into Bangladesh refugee camps.*]

The Rohingya, who have long been denied nationality and basic rights and freedoms by the Government of Myanmar, have been reduced to non-persons in the minds of many in Myanmar. Relegated as unworthy of protection; ethnic cleansing and genocide are allowed, while the world looks on.

The men who came to kill her and her children were also her neighbors, Arafa Khatun tells [CNN reporter Kathleen Prior](#). Seven of her eight children are now missing. "The Rakhines and the Hindus, they joined with the military. I watched them coming over the hill, like a team. As they came towards us to attack, I saw faces that I recognized. I knew them, yet they were killing us."

The loosely configured ARSA, which appears to be without international ties to larger terrorism networks, maintains that they are only fighting back against years of sweeping discrimination against the Rohingya people. In turn the Myanmar Police, Army and Airforce have not only reinforced an apartheid-like system in the Rakhine State, separating Muslim and Buddhist communities, but have fueled the fires of discrimination by meting out violence with impunity.

Following the August 25, 2017, ARSA attack on authorities, armed soldiers went village by village, indiscriminately shooting civilians in the face, torso, legs – maiming, injuring, killing and instilling fear – which left survivors running for their lives; running for the Bangladesh border. Inciting citizens to take up arms against their neighbors, knife-wielding civilians have brutally hacked their way into homes, joined the military in gang-raping, and burning Rohingya people and property.

A culture of genocide appears to have overtaken a country and a presidency that once held so much hope.

4. From Military Dictatorship to Military Tyranny

Aung San Suu Kyi's government (representing the National League for Democracy) is only a year old, having assumed power in 2016. Her government follows on the heels of decades of brutal military dictatorships that were notorious for creating the world's largest supply of heroin, conscripting children into the military, engaging in human trafficking and perpetrating violence against minorities.



After five decades of dictatorial rulers, the landslide victory of Aung San Suu Kyi seemed to usher in a new era with high hopes for reform.

Perhaps underestimated was the influence the military held not only over the people, but also over the office of president. In fact, the military has a stranglehold on Parliament, and unlike the office of President, governs Myanmar's Defense, Border Affairs, and Home Affairs – exercising ultimate control for the Police Force.

For Aung San Suu Kyi, trying to keep democracy alive in a country veering between mobocracy and military despotism – while the world watches Myanmar's unchecked genocide – exceeds what is meant by "between a rock and a hard place." Facing an unchecked and tyrannical military, constraints on presidential power, and decades of disenfranchisement for an entire people group who have now become the scapegoats for the country's collective angst; the conditions have been ripe for genocide for some time.

The question is, though Aung San Suu Kyi is Myanmar's answer to removing tyranny from the presidential ranks, does she have the political skill and fortitude to remove that same tyrannical mindset from her people and military?

While Aung San Suu Kyi is the first woman ever elected to the President's office in Myanmar, her official title is only that of State Counselor. Though she won an 86% majority, Aung San Suu Kyi, who functions like a president, is not referred to by that title because her late husband and children are foreigners; which under the Myanmar constitution makes her ineligible for the title.



the movie, *Beyond Rangoon*, gives a powerful glimpse into Suu Kyi's struggle on behalf of democracy in Myanmar

Speaking at a public gathering on September 19, 2017, Aung San Suu Kyi said that efforts to resolve the conflict in Rohingya have been complicated by "**allegations and counter-allegations.**" In the capital city of Yangon (Rangoon), this seemed to satisfy jubilant crowds who reveled in a party-like atmosphere. Meanwhile, U.N. accusations of ethnic cleansing went unanswered as Aung San Kyi used the speech to defend the nation's military forces while excusing herself from U.N. conversations on Myanmar, scheduled for the same week.

No doubt, Aung San Suu Kyi has been warned that speaking against the autonomous and vindictive military has been ruinous for more than one Myanmar leader. The unreformed Myanmar Military is renowned for "widespread and systematic" human rights violations, including beatings, slave camps and mass graves, says [Amnesty International](#).

5. Chief Rebel & Ruler

Buddhist leaders, who represent Myanmar's majority, support the military while the civilian government, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, appears indifferent to genocide in her midst, lest her intervention alienate the majority and send the country into a political tailspin.

Faced with the challenge of creating a new national narrative, Aung San Suu Kyi would do well to reclaim her old rebel platform: **"We talk to those who disagree with us. That, again, is what democracy is about. You talk to those who disagree with you; you don't beat them down."**

While there were hints of her old rebel narrative in this week's speech, her words had the vacant sound of a subjugated leader who no longer has the will to lead her people to higher ground.



"We have to make sure those allegations are based on solid evidence before we take action," Aung San Suu Kyi said, explaining why she wasn't stopping the genocide. "We want to find out why this exodus is happening. We'd like to talk to those who have fled, as well as those who have stayed."

Aung San Suu Kyi's reluctance to lead her people away from a genocide-mindset has brought down international condemnation; including calls to revoke her Nobel Peace Prize. Aung San Suu Kyi, seeking to maintain popular support from a largely Buddhist nation with prejudicial underpinnings, appears to be legitimizing the persecution; not unlike her predecessors.

6. Creating a Genocide Culture

Though the Muslims of Rohingya have inhabited the coastal city of Myanmar since the 8th Century when it stood at the center of cultural exchange, along the Silk Road, today this group is blamed for the country's countless ills. Muslims, referred to only as "Bengalis" by the Myanmar government, face a campaign of dehumanization; the known precursor to genocide.

Once victims are identified (by ethnicity, race, nationality, religion) and are accused, not individually but as a group, then group-punishment is deemed righteous. In Myanmar, Muslims were stripped of citizenship and civil rights in 1982. Once leaders became publicly complicit with group punishment (explaining to the masses why it's justified), and once military action against the offending group became sanctioned - the machinations for genocide were set in motion.

When the first wave of ethnic cleansing took place (back in 1978), the Myanmar army launched "Operation Nagamin (Dragon King)," sending 200,000 fleeing from their homes and into Bangladesh. There, the Bangladesh military trained and armed the Rohingya people to fight for a Muslim state. Although today's Bangladesh government view the Rohingya Muslims as unwelcome extremists, not all living in Rohingya have been radicalized. **"The only real solution is to get Myanmar to accept us as citizens and let us stay in our homeland with honor,"** Mohammed Fayaz, a Rohingya refugee in Bangladesh told the news magazine [Indiatoday](#).

7. A Persecuted Leader Keeps Silent



Surely, the injustice of this persecution can't be lost on Aung San Suu Kyi who spent 15-years under house-arrest between 1989 to 2010, seeing her husband only five times before his death in 1999.

Persecuted, beaten and imprisoned, for two decades, Aung San Suu Kyi stood up to the ruling military junta, becoming one of the world's most prominent political prisoners and advocates for a free and democratic government. That was before she was voted in as president.

While nation-states and human rights groups call for Aung San Suu Kyi to take a stand and stop the Rohingya genocide, Aung

San Suu Kyi's perceived indifference may be the result of minding a delicate balance in this fledgling democracy, lest it fall back into totalitarian hands.

The question remains; can she reign-in a fiercely independent military while recalibrating the public narrative



away from historic prejudice that foments genocide and toward a democracy that tolerates differences?

Archbishop [Desmond Tutu](#), a fellow peace prize holder, [published an open letter](#) on September 8 (2017), addressing Aung San Suu Kyi on social media, "If the political price of your ascension to the highest office in Myanmar is your silence, the price is surely too steep ... It is incongruous for a symbol of righteousness to lead such a country."

Aung San Suu Kyi has paid a high price for her freedom and her office. Now the world is hoping she will be just as fearless in protecting the freedoms of others. Constraints on presidential power, a mob-narrative dehumanizing an entire population, and a tyrannical military – have stacked the deck against anyone's success in Myanmar. Perhaps what Aung San Suu Kyi has underestimated is the force of the world to stand with her in recreating a country that tolerates differences, protects vulnerable communities, advances accountability and life for all.

Myanmar Update | You Can Help

September 4 | [United Nations](#) aid to Myanmar was blocked by a military which does not welcome the UN's strings-attached delivery of food and medicine. When the UN goes in with aide, it includes a fact-finding team to appraise the situation, something most of us see as a good thing. Similarly, the [World Food Programme](#) has had to suspend



distributions to parts of Myanmar's Rakhine state, leaving as many as 250,000 internally displaced people and vulnerable individuals and families without access to food. One option for helping is to support the [International Rescue Committee](#) (IRC) who has been in the region since 2014; for reference - Charity Watch rates the IRC with an A+ and Charity Navigator gives it 4-stars.