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Burma / Myanmar: History and reality of the discriminatory policies against Rohingya people - 'Sri Lanka and Myanmar are ethnocratic states'

Tuesday 10 October 2017, by [ABEYWARDANE Bashana](#), [ZARNI Maung](#) (Date first published: 9 October 2017).



'Enemy of the State' screamed the banner headline of a Burmese national newspaper in September, featuring full page photograph of Maung Zarni. More hatred follows, a week later.

"These publications are run by a web of cronies, military propaganda division and racist monk or laymen's networks", says Zarni.

Born, lived and university-educated in Mandalay, Burma and now exiled in UK, Maung Zarni is a Buddhist-influenced Burmese scholar and human rights activist of 30 years. As the founder of the Free Burma Coalition, he has relentlessly campaigned against the military rule for decades. But for his lone opposition to the genocidal onslaught against the Rohingya people, his country has just branded him a 'state enemy' and 'national traitor'.

"I say I am Buddhist, but I am influenced by so many progressive traditions of thoughts and politics. My parents and teachers - the good and humane ones - are key pillars of my activism: they taught me how to be a fully human, that is, compassionate, truthful and sensitive to injustices", he remarks retrospectively.

"I am nothing special. I just live my values and my analyses", affirms Zarni.

After serving as a member on the Peoples Tribunal on Sri Lanka in December 2013 [1], Zarni initiated the Peoples Tribunal on Myanmar last month, which found the Myanmar government 'guilty of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.'

As the anti-Rohingya sentiments [2] insidiously making inroads in Sri Lanka, the JDS spoke to Dr Zarni.

Interviewed by Bashana Abeywardane

Bashana Abeywardane - Over the past few years, we have witnessed a growing international outcry about the atrocities committed against Rohingya muslims in Myanmar. But the discriminatory policies against Rohingya people have been in place for a long time, without being challenged by any international body. What triggered the sudden wave of condemnation?

Dr. Maung Zarni: Yes, the policy of genocidal persecution was adopted as early as 1966 when General Ne Win made a radical shift first within the country's most powerful ruling institution of the Armed Forces (or called Tatmadaw in Burmese). First the Tatmadaw leadership in effect expelled over 300,000 people of Indian sub-continental origin, of all faiths, through its radical economic nationalization of 1964: Uganda that expelled Ugandans of Indian ancestry may have been inspired by Ne Win's racist policies in the 1970's! Second, the generals quietly adopted the Muslim-cleansing policies within the military. And third, they reframed as "national security threat", Rohingyas, the only Muslim community with a distinct ethnic identity with their own borderlands region next to the then East Pakistan (or since 1971, Bangladesh) and as a 'demographic Muslim threat' to the predominantly Buddhist country. This was the complete reversal of the official recognition and acceptance of Rohingyas as an integral ethnic community of Burma, with full citizenship that the military itself had adopted officially a decade earlier. The anti-Rohingya policies were accordingly implemented to change the demographic character of the Rohingya region of Northern Rakhine by launching the scheme to transfer Buddhist populations there.

When that population transfer strategy failed, the military-ruled state launched the first large scale, centrally organized campaign of terror under the false pretext of "illegal immigration check" in Feb 1978, resulting in nearly 300,000 Rohingyas fleeing the country, possibly half of Rohingya population, within a span of a few months.

UNHCR, Islamic Conference (pre-OIC), USA, etc. knew about this even back then. The second wave of what you might call 'ethnic cleansing' came in 1991-92, similarly large number fled to Bangladesh again. This time, the exodus was the result of the increasingly pervasive, institutionalized strategies of persecution, which included a laundry list of rights abuses, from forced labour, severe restrictions on freedom of movement, marriage, illegalization of the new-born Rohingya babies, land confiscation, summary execution, rape, daily physical and mental abuses, arbitrary arrests, etc.

As a matter of fact, one of the main rationales behind UN creating the Special Rapporteurs on human rights situation in Myanmar in 1993, was these documented extreme abuses.

So, UN and powerful countries knew well about what the military leaderships have been doing to the Rohingyas. But in the Cold War era, the military in Burma was seen as an anti-Communist semi-ally by the West and in the post-Cold War era, the mainstream democracy opposition under Suu Kyi was the West's priority, not the ethnic persecution by the military.

When the third wave of violence against Rohingyas broke out it did have the communal dimension, and the quasi-civilian "reformist" government of ex-general and President Thein Sein, and its allies such as the International Crisis Group, were able to frame the violence against Rohingyas - 860f the death and destruction were borne by the Rohingya community vis-a-vis Rakhine Buddhists - Buddhist-Muslim local sectarian conflict, not unexpected in transitional societies ala Yugoslavia break-up.

This time it is radically different: 500,000 Rohingyas fleeing in 5 weeks, all captured and live-cast by the Rohingya victims themselves in the social media. The images of horror reach people's homes via TV and mobile phones around the world. World's conscience was pricked: it has just witnessed the first Social-Media-age, biblical exodus of humans, fleeing genocidal killings and arson.

I think there is genuine concern about this kind of state behavior, whatever the legal name of Myanmar's crimes.

The UN has confirmed that almost half a million Rohingya people have fled to neighbouring Bangladesh in the wake of the latest military crackdown. Media reports based on satellite imagery analysis have further revealed that at least 200 Rohingya villages have been burnt down. But the government of Myanmar has repeatedly deny any hand in it while putting the blame on Rohingya militants. What is exactly happening in Rakhine state?

Zarni: Like I said, Myanmar state has done away with its earlier pretence of "communal violence" and openly engaged in the persecution of genocidal proportions, with provable genocidal intent. In so doing, it is using the convenient excuse of Rohingya "terrorism". By terrorism, Myanmar really is talking about the desperate and angry Rohingyas revolting, using very primitive weapons such as machetes, spears, sticks and a small number of homemade bombs and guns, against decades-long inhumane conditions maintained to destroy their communities and their lives. The blatant attempts to paint Rohingya sitting ducks choosing to fight back and die fast deaths, instead of the slow death in life-destroying, policy-induced conditions, are not really credible. Not even the United States Gov, that is leading this so-called 'global war on (Muslim) terror', buys Myanmar's official narrative that the army is engaged in national defence in the face of this Rohingya "terrorism".

In a paper you have co-authored with Alice Cowley, you conclude that the 'Rohingya have been subjected to a process of slow burning genocide'. Naming mass atrocities as 'Genocide' always make the global powers and institutions unhappy, as they are more interested in selective application of the term. For example, Kofi Annan who led the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, said last year that he would 'not describe the violence being committed against Myanmar's Rohingya minority as genocide'. How do you defend your position?

Zarni: Kofi Annan is the least credible man to be able to decide what constitutes a genocide, given that he was a guilty bystander in the Rwandan genocide of 1994. In fact, as head of UN Peacekeeping Operations based in NYC, Annan infamously concealed what is known as "genocide telegram" sent to him by his Peacekeeping Force in Rwanda. He knew that the most powerful member Government at the time - Clinton Administration - had no appetite to stop the imminent genocidal killings. He let 800,000 Tutsi and other victims get slaughtered to keep his bureaucratic career. As with powerful governments and policy makers not accepting the case for genocide, former US Ambassador to UN, journalist-cum-legal-scholar Samantha Power made her name, documenting a long record of categorical failures by US Government in the face of what she calls "Problem from Hell", genocides.

Neither UN nor the international community, which my friend and senior colleague Gregory Stanton calls "a myth", has a good record of preventing or ending genocides, since the Turkish genocide of Armenian Christians in 1915.

The last thing I would defer to on naming mass crimes committed by nation-states and their governments is UN and its powerful member states. The Security Council itself is made up of governments that are the world's largest merchants of death, not promoters of peace or humanity.

Power is deceitful. It knows facts and truths. But its readings of facts/truths is predicated on its calculations of self-interests. Expect nothing truthful from these powerful entities that lord over the entire humanity on the planet.

As far as the wretched of the earth is concerned, UN and these governments are complete failures. Saving lives and preventing mass atrocities have never been seen as strategically beneficial. They are powerful, no doubt. But they must not be allowed to play this "arbiters" of truth.

Some have expressed their shock over the silence maintained by Aung San Suu Kyi over the plight of Rohingyas, while the others have come forward to absolve her from being accused of complicity on the basis that she only holds limited power. How do you explain Suu Kyi's notable silence?

Zarni: Suu Kyi is not silent. She has spoken on Rohingya persecution, both before and after she came to semi-power in 2015. She is a well-documented anti-Muslim racist - and colonial towards Burma's non-dominant groups such as Shan, Kachin, etc. It is true she only has limited power and she does NOT control the military, which is above the Society and electoral politics. But she uses her limited power to deny, dismiss and cover up the genocidal persecution of Rohingyas. Genocide is not simply gassing people by the hundreds of thousands or machine-gunning down entire ethnic, racial, religious or national group or population, in whole or in part. It is a systematic and pervasive attempt at exterminating the group, from its roots - physical sense of the community, its shared identity, its history, etc. The ministries she and her civilian government control are Foreign Affairs, Social Welfare, Information, Immigration, Culture, etc. are all involved in de-humanising, excluding, marginalising, ghettoising and illegalising Rohingyas as a group. They are also involved in producing Fake News and whitewashing the military's atrocities against Rohingyas.

Suu Kyi is not guilty, if by that we mean she does NOT pull the trigger. But again Hitler didn't kill a single Jew.

You have highlighted the common structural characteristics manifested through discriminatory policies and state sponsored racism in countries what you called as 'Buddhist triangle' that include Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand. What parallels and commonalities do you see among these countries?

Zarni: The most important commonality is the essentially racist, colonial, unitary nature of what scholars call states in these countries: Buddhism is used as the foundational ideology of national identities in these states; power is concentrated in the hands of the dominant ethnic group at the center; the ethno-religious relations between centre (Buddhist majority) and the non-Buddhist or non-dominant ethnic group are colonial. So these are all ethno-cratic states, which operate with the stated or hidden overarching objectives of domination, subjugation and control over those who are considered "marginal" communities. Their specific strategies and trajectories of oppression, discrimination and persecution differ, but overall the framework within which they operate are racist and colonial. Myanmar and Sri Lanka are the most extreme cases wherein racialised internally colonial state morph into semi- or fully-genocidal bureaucratic monsters.

Another parallel between Sri Lanka and Burma is how the two national communities of dissidents against the authoritarian Sinhalese and Burmese states succumbed to the majoritarian myopic version of nationalism. You have the case of Sinhalese students and marginalised youth in southern Sri Lanka, led by Peoples Liberation Front (JVP), that rose up against the United National Party government in the late 1980's, who later joined the racist Sinhalese state against the Eelam Tamils. We have in Burma the most celebrated Burmese dissidents, from Aung San Suu Kyi down the so-called 88 Generation student leaders who close ranks with their former jailers and torturers, that is,

the military leaders, against the persecution Rohingyas and Muslims. This is deeply troubling. It shows how cancerous ethno-nationalisms of the majorities in Sri Lanka and Burma has become.

The so-called Buddhist majorities in these places themselves succumb to the cancer of "Buddhist" nationalism, which is an oxymoron because in textual and philosophical Buddhism there is no such thing as "essentialized and real" Me, or You, let alone "my country" "my state" "my government". It was Gotama himself who is believed to have prophesied that Buddhism will be destroyed by its own adherents. I think he is right: these Theravada Buddhist societies are destroying themselves as they attempt to subjugate, colonialise or otherwise destroy their scapegoats - be they Eelam Tamils, Southern Thais of Malay ancestry or Myanmar Rohingyas.

You are known as a longstanding dissident campaigner who has firmly resisted decades of military rule in Myanmar. At the same time, you have been consistently raising your voice against the ongoing atrocities against Rohingya Muslims in the country. While many in your generation who opposed the military rule in the past seemed to have reconcile with the current state of affairs, what made you to continue your opposition?

Zarni: I am not always opposing the military. There was short period in my activism - from 2004 to 2008 - when I succumbed to my own personal delusion that maybe there were good, patriotic generals who would do the right thing - to change the path of our national self-destruction. In those years, I attempted to work with the generals, at enormous cost to my reputation, by openly promoting the view that the Burmese - and world - needed to talk to the generals and worked with them, if progress was to be made for the people. This is the policy which Suu Kyi and the West are pursuing. I discovered that I was wrong, after intense engagement with the top military leadership: it is the entire military as an institution, its ideological and corporate orientation that is the crux of the problem.

The military today is coterminous with the State. Both remain stuck in this racist, colonial and economically predatory space. But in 2008, when the military blocked even emergency aid to Myanmar Cyclone Nargis victims - nearly 2 million victims, in the lower Burma - that I reached my conclusion that we have a situation and the institution which are beyond reforms.

I have been enormously privileged to be exposed to the outside world for so long that I feel the least I can do is to use my privilege to fight on the side of the wretched of my country, and other national communities such as Eelam Tamils.

Dr Maung Zarni

P.S.

* Print 09 OCTOBER 2017 BY BASHANA ABEYWARDANE:

<http://www.jdslanka.org/index.php/interviews/international/717-sri-lanka-and-myanmar-are-ethnocratic-states-dr-maung-zarni>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.ptsrilanka.org/panel-of-jurors/>

[2] <http://www.jdslanka.org/index.php/news-features/politics-a-current-affairs/716-video-shows-sri-lanka-buddhist-monk-rallying-mob-to-burn-un-safe-house>