

# Griffith Asia Institute

## Regional Outlook Paper

AUNG SAN SUU KYI AND THE POLITICS OF PERSONALITY

Andrew Selth

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## About the Author

### Andrew Selth

Andrew Selth is an Adjunct Associate Professor at the Griffith Asia Institute. He has been studying international security issues and Asian affairs for 45 years, as a diplomat, strategic intelligence analyst and research scholar. During this time, he has been an Adjunct Associate Professor in the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University (ANU), a Visiting Fellow at the ANU's Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, a Chevening Scholar at St Antony's College, Oxford University, an Australian Research Council Fellow at Griffith University and a Harold White Fellow at the National Library of Australia. Dr Selth has published six books and more than 50 peer-reviewed works, most of them about Myanmar (Burma) and related subjects. He has also contributed to the public debate on Myanmar through articles in newspapers, magazines and various online fora, notably the Lowy Institute's *Interpreter* and the ANU's *New Mandala* blogs.

# Contents

Author's Note .....	1
1. Honours and Accolades .....	3
2. All Change .....	7
3. International Reaction .....	10
4. Conclusion .....	13
Notes and References .....	14

# Author's Note

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After the Myanmar armed forces crushed a nation-wide pro-democracy uprising in September 1988, the country's official name (in English) was changed from its post-1974 form, the 'Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma', back to the 'Union of Burma', which had been adopted when Myanmar regained its independence from the United Kingdom in January 1948. In July 1989 the new military government changed the country's name once again, this time to the 'Union of Myanmar'. At the same time, a number of other place names were changed to conform more closely to their original pronunciation in the Burmese language. In 2008, after promulgation of a new national constitution, the country's official name was changed yet again, this time to the 'Republic of the Union of Myanmar'.

The new names have been accepted by almost all countries, the United Nations and other major international organisations. A few governments, activist groups and news media outlets, however, still cling to the old forms, apparently as a protest against the former military regime's human rights abuses and its refusal to introduce a genuinely democratic system of government. The old names were also believed to be the strong preference of then opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who was held under house arrest for almost 15 years by the military regime. Questioned about the official name of the country soon after her party took office in 2016, the State Counsellor stated her continuing preference for the colonial-era term 'Burma', but said that both names were acceptable.<sup>1</sup> In this paper the official names have been used, although 'Burmese' has been retained to describe the dominant language of the country. Such usage does not carry any political connotations.

The armed forces effectively ruled Myanmar from the 1962 coup but, from 1974 to 1988, they exercised power through an ostensibly elected 'civilian' parliament. On taking back direct control of the country in September 1988, the armed forces abolished the old government structure and created the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which ruled by decree. In November 1997, apparently on the advice of a United States-based public relations firm, the regime changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), but continued to rule through executive fiat. In 2008, it held a constitutional referendum, which was followed by carefully managed elections on 7 November 2010. The resulting national parliament, consisting of both elected officials and non-elected military officers, met in January 2011. A new government was installed under President Thein Sein in March that year.

On 8 November 2015, a new general election was held which, by most accounts, was reasonably free and fair. The result was a landslide for Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), which secured 390 of the 491 seats (or 79.4%) contested at the Union level.<sup>2</sup> It secured 255 seats in the 440-seat lower house (*Pyithu Hluttaw*) and 135 seats in the 224-seat upper house (*Amyotha Hluttaw*). The armed forces are allocated 25% of the seats in both houses, but this gave the NLD a majority in the combined Union Assembly (*Pyidaungsu Hluttaw*). As a result, it was able to elect a new president in 2016 and pass a law creating the position of State Counsellor for Aung San Suu Kyi (who under the 2008 constitution is unable to become president).<sup>3</sup> The national charter states that the president 'takes precedence over all other persons' in Myanmar but, even before the elections, Aung San Suu Kyi had made it clear that she was going to be 'above the president' and act as the country's de facto leader.

After the United Kingdom dispatched troops to the royal capital of Mandalay and completed its three-stage conquest of Burma (as it was then called) in December 1885, Yangon (formerly Rangoon) was confirmed as the administrative capital of the country. It remains the commercial capital, but in October 2005 the SPDC formally designated the newly built city of Naypyidaw (or Nay Pyi Taw), 327 kilometres north of Yangon, as the seat of Myanmar's government. Where they appear in this paper, the terms 'Yangon regime', or in some cases simply 'Yangon', are used as shorthand for the central government, including the military government that was created in 1962 and re-invented in 1974, 1988 and 1997. The government after 2005 is referred to as the 'Naypyidaw regime', or 'Naypyidaw', to reflect the administrative change that took place that year.

Another term used in this paper is *Tatmadaw* (literally 'royal force'), the vernacular name for Myanmar's tri-Service (ie army, navy and air force) armed forces. In recent years, this term has gained wide currency in English-language publications on Myanmar. While the term 'Defence Services' usually refers only to the armed forces, it is sometimes used in a wider context to refer to the armed forces, the national Myanmar Police Force, the 'people's militia' and sundry other paramilitary forces. On occasion, the Myanmar Fire Services Department and Myanmar Red Cross have also been included in this category.

This Regional Outlook is a revised and expanded version of an article entitled 'Fallen idol', which was published in the quarterly literary journal *Mekong Review* in August 2017.<sup>4</sup>

# 1. Honours and Accolades

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There was a time, not so long ago, when Myanmar State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi was hailed by the international community as ‘the bravest and most moral person in the world ... the immaculate heroine who allows us all to feel a little better about human nature’.<sup>5</sup> As a political prisoner for almost 15 years, she was widely lauded for her moral and physical courage, her unwavering commitment to the principles of universal human rights and her steadfast advocacy of peaceful political change. From world capitals to the smallest villages of Myanmar, from the highest in rank to the lowest in social status, the charismatic opposition leader with ‘orchids in her hair and iron in her will’ was an inspiration to millions.<sup>6</sup>

In recognition of her sterling qualities, Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought in 1990, the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 (for her ‘non-violent struggle for democracy and human rights’),<sup>7</sup> the International Simon Bolivar Prize in 1992, the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding in 1993, the Companion of the Order of Australia in 1996, and the Olof Palme Prize in 2005. In 2008, she was awarded the United States (US) Congressional Gold Medal, the country’s highest civilian honour. When it was finally presented to her, in 2012, President Barack Obama expressed his admiration for ‘her courage, determination and personal sacrifice in championing democracy and human rights over the years’.<sup>8</sup> For most of this time, she was being held under house arrest in Yangon by Myanmar’s military junta, the Orwellian-sounding State Law and Order Restoration Council, and its nominal successor, the State Peace and Development Council. After her release in 2012, she was given the Vaclav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent, and France awarded her the Legion d’Honneur.

There have been other honours too. In 2012, Aung San Suu Kyi was invited to address both Houses of the UK Parliament, the first person not a Head of State to be granted that privilege. In his speech of welcome, the Speaker of the Commons described her as ‘the conscience of a country and a heroine for humanity’.<sup>9</sup> Almost two dozen universities have granted Aung San Suu Kyi honorary doctorates. One was her alma mater, Oxford University, which in 2012 embraced ‘a daughter whose silence had sounded louder than the jabber of politics and clang of military power’. The university declared: ‘out of deep darkness your little lamp has shone across the planet; your stillness has moved the world’.<sup>10</sup> In awarding her a degree from the Australian National University in 2013, Chancellor Gareth Evans called Aung San Suu Kyi ‘an exemplar of quiet courage and determination in the face of oppression, and a champion of the peaceful path towards a better and more just world’.<sup>11</sup> In a ceremony at the University of Sydney the same year, she was described as ‘an inspiration to those who love freedom around the world’.

There were other factors that made her seem special. To stay in Myanmar and pursue her political calling, she sacrificed her personal life, her UK-based family rarely being able to visit her. In 1999, when her devoted husband Michael Aris was dying of cancer, she did not go to his bedside for fear of being refused entry back into Myanmar. Her commitment to the cause of democracy and human rights in her native country was total. She was also intelligent, well-educated and well-travelled. It was relevant too that she was a striking woman, always impeccably dressed in traditional Myanmar costume, with a command of the English language, a quiet dignity and a winning smile. Everyone who met her seemed to be struck by her presence, poise, and personality.<sup>12</sup> Hailed by feminists as a ‘warrior woman’, she made a strong impression on many statesmen.

Female politicians too fell under her spell, one writing: 'Her dignity, her strength and her determination to focus on the future of her country and its people was — without exaggeration — spellbinding'.<sup>13</sup>

Ironically, another reason for Aung San Suu Kyi's wide appeal was that, during her long periods under house arrest, her ability to communicate with the outside world was very limited. This left her supporters free to project onto her their own views and even, at times, to claim that they were speaking in her name. When able to do so, she wrote and spoke eloquently in terms of moral principles and Buddhist precepts, citing broad concepts like human rights, democracy and the rule of law. She had a talent for pithy sayings, like 'It is not power that corrupts, but fear', and 'justice is a dream, but it is a dream that we are determined to realise'.<sup>14</sup> She rarely addressed specific issues in any depth. Even later, when campaigning for election to Myanmar's national parliament, she offered few detailed policies or strategies for reform. This meant, in effect, that she provided a blank canvas on which her admirers could paint their own ideals and aspirations, and to see in her the answer to all their prayers, both high and low. In the minds of her followers, she came to represent whatever they wanted her to be.

Aung San Suu Kyi also made her presence felt through popular culture. Her face was emblazoned on everything from T-shirts to tea towels, fridge magnets to key rings. After Barack Obama's visit to Myanmar in 2012 (and a ban on showing her image in public was lifted), a wide range of memorabilia appeared on the streets of Yangon, including a mug which reproduced a photo of the two in an awkward embrace.<sup>15</sup> Pictures of her hang in major galleries and posters of her abound, many incorporating inspiring statements she has made over the years. She has been depicted on the postage stamps of almost a dozen countries, and on the cover of *Time* magazine four times.<sup>16</sup> She has also been the subject of about two dozen biographies, at least two plays, some mediocre poetry and a wide range of musical compositions. Pop concerts have been devoted to her. At those staged by the Irish band U2, entire audiences were issued with paper masks of her face to wear. Several CDs, one with contributions from the likes of Paul McCartney, Eric Clapton and Sting, have been dedicated to her.<sup>17</sup> In 2011, a feature movie by the French director Luc Besson, starring Michelle Yeoh as *The Lady*, portrayed her as a secular saint.<sup>18</sup>

Aung San Suu Kyi was pleased to be recognised by so many august institutions, and was clearly flattered by the extravagant praise heaped upon her by distinguished global figures, well-known artists and her many other supporters. However, she remained modest in the glare of the resulting publicity. 'We human beings', she once said, 'are so riddled with imperfection'.<sup>19</sup> On numerous occasions, she told audiences that she was 'a politician, not a democratic icon'. She begged her many admirers: 'Please don't forget that I started out as the leader of a political party. I cannot think of anything more political than that'.<sup>20</sup> She also cautioned them: 'let me assure you that I am no saint of any kind: this I find very troubling, because politicians are politicians, but I do believe there are honest politicians and I aspire to that'. As a political practitioner, she saw herself as operating on the basis of 'compromise based on principles'.<sup>21</sup> She frequently reminded the public of Myanmar's many 'unresolved issues' and after the transition to a 'disciplined democracy' began in 2011 she warned against excessive optimism.<sup>22</sup>

The world, however, and the Western democracies in particular, refused to take her at her word. Governments, international organisations and activist groups of all kinds raised her high on a pedestal, as a living symbol of the peaceful struggle for democracy and human rights in Myanmar, against 'one of the most oppressive and secretive regimes in the world'.<sup>23</sup> Her courage was described as 'legendary'.<sup>24</sup> For many, she was

seen almost as an ethereal being, remote, pure and beyond reproach. Buddhists in her own country considered her a near-*bodhisattva*, whose enlightened work and suffering deserved the utmost reverence.<sup>25</sup> Asian leaders tended to be more cautious in their public endorsement of her, but she counted US President George W. Bush and UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown among her most ardent fans. The latter described her as 'a true hero of our times' who defined the meaning of courage.<sup>26</sup> 'Star struck' celebrities like the singer-songwriter Bono championed her cause.<sup>27</sup> Hollywood movie stars led public campaigns for her release from house arrest.<sup>28</sup> When access was possible, politicians and others flocked to her door, seeking a photo opportunity and the right to say that they had met her.

Aung San Suu Kyi was not just admired, she was idolized. Wherever she went, both within Myanmar and outside it, she was given what journalists liked to describe as 'a rock star welcome'. This cult of personality helped her become a household name around the world and boosted her cause, but it had a downside. In journalistic and even academic circles she was rarely subjected to the same level of critical analysis as other world figures, or members of the military government she opposed. When more objective Myanmar-watchers dared to point out examples of her occasional poor judgement and tactical missteps, or suggested that, like everyone else, she had flaws in her character, they were subject to an avalanche of abuse.<sup>29</sup> One outspoken critic who wrote disparagingly about The Lady (as she became widely known), and the tunnel vision of her more extreme supporters, was sent a death threat. This had the effect of silencing many commentators aware of her imperfections, or who disagreed with some of her decisions. Even professional analysts began to self-censor what they wrote about her.<sup>30</sup>

To be fair, they did this not just out of fear of being attacked by Aung San Suu Kyi's legion of supporters, who were adept at using the power of the Internet and social media to spread their messages. Serious observers of Myanmar were aware that to openly criticise Aung San Suu Kyi risked giving the military regime ammunition to use against her. For years, a virulent campaign was waged against the opposition leader in the state-run news media, where she was cast as a traitorous renegade who had turned her back on her own people. Countless stories and cartoons, including jibes about her marriage to a foreigner and her schooling abroad (in India and the UK) were published with the aim of undermining her popularity with the Myanmar people. Anything written by foreign commentators in the international press, or said by them in public, that could be used to support the regime and bolster its case against Aung San Suu Kyi, was seized upon and shamelessly exploited.<sup>31</sup> With that danger in the back of their minds, more critical and aware foreign observers tended not to write openly about her shortcomings as an alternative leader of Myanmar.

Doubtless, in private counsels and confidential reports prepared for senior officials, diplomats and strategic analysts took a hard-headed approach and produced unvarnished assessments of Aung San Suu Kyi's character, political skills and suitability for high office. Presumably, they also warned that, should she ever find herself in a position of real power, she would inevitably be forced to choose sides between contending factions, and make hard decisions about contentious issues, in ways that would leave some of her admirers dissatisfied. She would not be able to please everyone, or avoid controversy, simply by referring to broad principles and abstract concepts. However, for obvious reasons, the recipients of such assessments were unlikely to share them with the public. Some senior officials may have even been reluctant to accept them.<sup>32</sup> Thus the net effect of the world-wide campaign being

waged on her behalf was to strengthen the popular image of her as being without fault or peer, existing above the grubby political fray.

Throughout this period, Aung San Suu Kyi was not a passive bystander. As opportunities permitted, she shrewdly exploited both her reputation as a campaigner for human rights and her considerable personal appeal to win support for democratic change in Myanmar. She took full advantage of the influence she exercised with governments and powerful individuals to pursue her cause.<sup>33</sup> She also used these assets to further her own political ambitions which, despite occasional denials, seemed from an early stage to be aimed at the country's leadership. She felt strongly that it was her destiny to follow in the footsteps of her father, Myanmar's independence hero Aung San, who was assassinated in 1947. Notwithstanding accusations of treason by the military regime, and the negative impact of sanctions on many people in Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi urged foreign governments and international organisations to apply diplomatic and economic pressure on the SLORC and SPDC.<sup>34</sup> This was not only to make the generals surrender political power but also, after 2008, to amend the national constitution so that she could become president.

In 2008, Thai Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej was strongly criticised when he accused Europe of using Aung San Suu Kyi as 'a political tool'.<sup>35</sup> However, there is no denying that it suited the Western democracies and some other governments to promote Aung San Suu Kyi as an almost divine figure, emblematic of the noblest aspirations. President George W. Bush, for example, was happy to have someone like her to help justify his policy of exporting democracy around the world.<sup>36</sup> International organisations and activist groups too found it useful to hold her up against Myanmar's military leaders. In crude propaganda terms, a 'beautiful and charming' woman with a good education and high ideals made a perfect foil for the tough, male-dominated military establishment, routinely caricatured by its opponents as a gang of corrupt and uneducated thugs, obsessed with the instruments of power.<sup>37</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi's well-publicised Buddhist piety contrasted nicely with their reported 'primitive' superstitions.<sup>38</sup> In the tabloids and the tea shops, the struggle for democracy and human rights in Myanmar was cast as a cosmic battle in which goodness and light was pitted against the forces of darkness.<sup>39</sup>

## 2. All Change

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All this changed utterly in 2015, when the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, won a landslide victory in a relatively free and fair general election. In March 2016, a new government was sworn in. Because her two children were foreign nationals, a clause in the 2008 constitution prevented Aung San Suu Kyi from becoming president. However, a loophole was found that permitted the NLD to create a new position for her, that of State Counsellor. The constitution clearly states that the president 'takes precedence over all other persons' in Myanmar but, even before the elections, Aung San Suu Kyi had made it clear that she was going to be 'above the president', and act accordingly.<sup>40</sup> 'I will run the government', she is reported to have said.<sup>41</sup> In exercising this role, she was still constrained by the national charter, which is heavily weighted in favour of the armed forces (*Tatmadaw*). However, in April 2016, after a struggle stretching back almost 30 years, half of which was spent under house arrest, she assumed the mantle of her revered father, and become Myanmar's de facto leader.

Expectations that Aung San Suu Kyi and her party would immediately sweep away the remains of 50 years of military rule and introduce wide-ranging political, economic and social reforms, however, were soon disappointed. This was hardly surprising. There was no way that she could satisfy all the hopes and dreams invested in her over the years. The harsh realities of power in Myanmar, notably the country's 'fiendishly complex' problems and the continuing influence of the armed forces made that impossible.<sup>42</sup> Most thoughtful Myanmar-watchers knew that the new government needed to be cut some slack, and allowed time to settle in. As former US ambassador to Myanmar Derek Mitchell has written, 'Opposing oppressive state power and running a government are two vastly different skills'.<sup>43</sup> There were bound to be teething problems, and grumbles at the slow pace of change. That said, few people expected that Aung San Suu Kyi would fall from grace so quickly, or become the target of so much bitter invective, mostly from the same foreigners and foreign institutions which had once idolised her.<sup>44</sup>

Aung San Suu Kyi has come under fire for many reasons since she took office. One has been her apparent endorsement of continued military operations against ethnic minority groups, mainly in the country's north.<sup>45</sup> Over the past year, the Tatmadaw has intensified its counter-insurgency campaign against the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in Kachin State and increased the tempo of its operations in neighbouring Shan State. Attacks have been launched against smaller armed groups like the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army and the Arakan Army. Together with the KIA, they formed the 'Northern Alliance' which was based along the Chinese border. The Tatmadaw has also launched operations against a splinter armed group in eastern Karen State, an area which for a long time had been reasonably peaceful. This heightened military activity has disillusioned many in the minority ethnic communities, which voted for Aung San Suu Kyi in the expectation that she would be able to rein in the generals.<sup>46</sup> Rather than end the fighting, however, Aung San Suu Kyi has praised the 'valiant efforts' of the armed forces and urged ethnic groups to lay down their arms.<sup>47</sup>

The main reason for the public change of heart about Aung San Suu Kyi, however, outside Myanmar at least, has been the brutal treatment meted out by the country's security forces since October 2016 to the mostly stateless Muslim 'Rohingyas' (as they

identify themselves) in Rakhine State.<sup>48</sup> The armed forces and national police have launched 'area clearance operations' against local Rohingya communities which have caused hundreds, possibly even thousands, of casualties.<sup>49</sup> These operations followed attacks by a small group of Muslim militants against three Border Guard Police posts on 9 October and the murder of a senior Myanmar Army officer on 12 November.<sup>50</sup> In recent months, an estimated 70,000 refugees have fled across the border into Bangladesh to escape the crackdown. After a preliminary investigation, including a series of interviews in Bangladesh, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) reported 'devastating cruelty' against the Rohingya population by the Myanmar authorities and 'the very likely commission of crimes against humanity'.<sup>51</sup> The UNHRC called for a fact-finding mission to go to Myanmar and investigate the situation more closely.<sup>52</sup>

Aung San Suu Kyi has almost no control over Myanmar's security forces or their operations, a fact often overlooked by her critics. However, since taking office she has repeatedly refused publicly to address the Rohingya issue in any substantive way. To the UNHRC's proposal, Aung San Suu Kyi responded in terms eerily reminiscent of the former military regime's responses to international concerns about her own treatment. She stated that 'we must work ourselves for our country's responsibilities, because we are the ones who best understand what our country needs'.<sup>53</sup> To her mind, a UN inquiry into the security forces' treatment of the Rohingyas was 'not suitable for the situation of our country'.<sup>54</sup> Despite the enormous differences between the two communities, and their circumstances, she has persisted in equating the suffering of Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar. She has been careful not to single out any ethnic or religious community for blame but, when pressed, she has suggested that community relations have broken down due to a scarcity of resources and 'a climate of fear' arising from 'a worldwide perception that global Muslim power is very great'.<sup>55</sup>

Asked by foreign reporters why she has not used her enormous moral authority and political capital to speak out against human rights abuses in Rakhine State, or to express concern over the suffering of the Rohingyas, she (or her spokesmen) have denied that any abuses have occurred, or referred to various bureaucratic mechanisms currently in train, such as an advisory commission led by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.<sup>56</sup> Her government has accused the international press of repeating unsubstantiated rumours and peddling 'fake news'. In response to accusations of sexual assault by the security forces, a banner reading 'fake rape' was posted on her official Facebook page.<sup>57</sup> Despite Aung San Suu Kyi's 20-year campaign to persuade the international community to exert pressure on the former military regime, a spokesman for her government has even stated that 'urging a country's leader to do something was an act of interference' in its internal affairs.<sup>58</sup> Inside Myanmar, the government has leaned on news media outlets daring to challenge the official line. Some journalists have been dismissed for writing about alleged human rights violations by the Tatmadaw and the government's inaction.<sup>59</sup>

To make matters worse, doubts had already been raised over Aung San Suu Kyi's attitude towards Muslims. During communal riots in Rakhine State in 2012, and attacks against Muslims elsewhere in Myanmar in 2013, she remained silent. This prompted a prominent activist to accuse her of siding with 'well-organised, anti-Muslim racists'.<sup>60</sup> During her visit to the US in 2016, one Congressman said he was 'somewhat appalled' at her 'dismissive reaction' to human rights issues he had raised with her.<sup>61</sup> In 2015, she excluded all Muslims from running as NLD candidates in the general elections.<sup>62</sup> In 2016, she reportedly made an anti-Muslim comment after being pressed by a BBC interviewer to condemn sectarian violence.<sup>63</sup> The same year, she asked all civil servants

and foreign diplomats in Myanmar not to use the term 'Rohingya'. She preferred the term 'people who believe in Islam in Rakhine State', a formulation that denied them a separate ethnic identity, and thus a claim to Myanmar citizenship.<sup>64</sup> This was a popular position in Myanmar, where there is little affection for the Rohingyas. However, to many observers she came across as a chauvinistic ethnic Burman prepared to pander to extremist Buddhist monks whose avowed aim was the expulsion of all Muslims from the country.<sup>65</sup>

### 3. International Reaction

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In those circumstances, it is little wonder that the international community has reacted so strongly to recent developments. One Western journal has decried the ‘betrayal of hope’ in Myanmar, while another stated bluntly ‘Aung San Suu Kyi is letting her own revolution down’.<sup>66</sup> Over the past year, she has been accused of supporting collective punishment, of ‘legitimising genocide’ and endorsing ‘ethnic cleansing’.<sup>67</sup> Several pundits have labelled her a coward, and a ‘democratic dictator’.<sup>68</sup> She has been described as ‘the kinder, gentler face on Burma’s tyranny’.<sup>69</sup> One observer has suggested that ‘In truth, Burma’s version of democracy seems to mean a reduction in the country’s degree of authoritarianism, not a qualitative change to its political system’.<sup>70</sup> Another commentator has raised the bizarre prospect of a Nobel Prize winner presiding over a string of ‘concentration camps’ full of Rohingya refugees.<sup>71</sup> More soberly, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights stated in December 2016 that the Myanmar government, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, had taken a ‘short-sighted, counter-productive, even callous’ approach to the Rohingya crisis.<sup>72</sup> The *New Republic* voiced the thoughts of many when in the same month it asked, ‘Is This the Real Aung San Suu Kyi?’.<sup>73</sup>

Particularly damaging to Aung San Suu Kyi’s international reputation was an open letter sent to the UN Security Council in December 2016 by over a dozen of her fellow Nobel laureates, raising the harsh treatment of the Rohingyas in Myanmar.<sup>74</sup> The signatories of the letter expressed their concern at ‘a human tragedy amounting to ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity’. Their frustration at Aung San Suu Kyi’s lack of action to address the crisis was palpable. The letter continued: ‘Daw Suu Kyi is the leader and the one with the primary responsibility to lead, and lead with courage, humanity and compassion’.<sup>75</sup> Asked directly about this letter by a BBC interviewer in April 2017, and the accusation by her fellow Nobel laureates that she had failed the most fundamental test of humanity, Aung San Suu Kyi replied simply ‘that is their perception’. She then proceeded to describe a number of long term policy initiatives that bore little relation to the specific charge levelled against her, or the current situation in Rakhine State.<sup>76</sup> It did not help dispel the impression of someone out of touch with reality, refusing to face the facts, or worse.

In discussing all these developments, it has become the conventional wisdom among Aung San Suu Kyi’s supporters, and some others, that she faces two major constraints.<sup>77</sup> Firstly, to condemn the security forces would jeopardise her fragile working relationship with the Tatmadaw’s Commander-in-Chief. Given the power sharing arrangement forced upon her by the 2008 constitution, a modus vivendi between the civilian administration and armed forces is essential for the government to function effectively. Should it break down, Aung San Suu Kyi’s chances of achieving a nation-wide peace agreement with the ethnic minorities would be even slimmer, and the enormous obstacles she faces in implementing the NLD’s reform program would increase markedly.<sup>78</sup> Secondly, Aung San Suu Kyi is aware that the overwhelming majority of the Myanmar population favour a strong line against Muslims. There is a particular antipathy towards the Rohingyas, who are widely seen as illegal ‘Bengali’ immigrants. This view is being encouraged by well organised extremist monks.<sup>79</sup> Open support for the Rohingyas, or even Muslims more broadly, would risk alienating her core constituency, which is overwhelmingly Buddhist.

Most observers have acknowledged these political realities, and the hard choices that Aung San Suu Kyi needs to make to preserve her domestic power base and pursue her vision for a peaceful, prosperous and democratic Myanmar.<sup>80</sup> However, few outside the country have

seen them as justification for such a pragmatic, even cynical, approach to the Rohingya issue. Her current relationship with the armed forces Commander-in-Chief is difficult to read, but there is a strong feeling among foreign commentators that she could do more to persuade him to curb the excesses of the security forces. After all, that would also be in the interests of the Tatmadaw and police. She could try to use the constitutional provisions relating to states of emergency to exercise greater civilian oversight of military operations. A number of observers have also questioned Aung San Suu Kyi's failure to capitalise on her strongest asset, namely her enormous popularity within Myanmar, which she could use to try and change popular perceptions of the 'threat' posed by Muslims.<sup>81</sup> It would not harm her domestic political position or her relationship with the armed forces to preach greater tolerance and mutual respect among all the peoples of Myanmar. It could also reduce the risk of future internal instability.

David Mathieson of Human Rights Watch was kinder than most when he wrote that Aung San Suu Kyi's silence on all these matters was 'baffling to an international audience that persists in casting her as a human rights icon'.<sup>82</sup>

Aung San Suu Kyi's collapsing personal reputation has international implications. As the *New York Times* editorialised in May 2016, 'her halo has been a central factor in Myanmar's reacceptance into the world community after decades of ostracism'.<sup>83</sup> There are now calls for the reimposition of economic sanctions, which were lifted by Barak Obama in September 2016. ASEAN leaders have warned that the Rohingya crisis could affect regional peace and stability.<sup>84</sup> Major human rights organisations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have been scathing in their condemnation of the NLD government and its leader. Foreign governments seem happy to host visits by Aung San Suu Kyi (who is also Myanmar's Foreign Minister), and she is still given occasional awards, but there is now a different atmosphere. The 'sycophantic adoration' that marked her overseas tours is seen much less often now.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, when she travels abroad, there are often demonstrations against her.<sup>86</sup> In 2013, for example, her public appearances in Australia were boycotted by the local Kachin community and in 2016 she cancelled a visit to Indonesia because of planned protests by Muslims concerned about their co-religionists in Myanmar.<sup>87</sup> Protests by overseas Rohingyas have become the norm.

Aung San Suu Kyi's apparent blindness to the dire state of affairs in parts of Myanmar, and the wider implications of her behaviour since taking office, have shocked and disappointed many foreign observers. However, it does not fully account for the extreme nature of some of the comments made about her in recent months, and their often highly personal tone.

Particularly in the case of human rights campaigners and former advocates of Aung San Suu Kyi in Western capitals, there seems to be a strong sense of loss, even betrayal. They feel badly let down by a figure who was once considered the custodian of their most treasured ideals, someone who was different from other politicians, someone in whom all people of goodwill could place their complete trust.<sup>88</sup> Almost like spurned lovers, these former admirers now seem to be lashing out with extra force against someone once held dear, giving a particularly sharp edge to their comments. Some criticisms may be personal in other ways too, as politicians and activists who were once vocal champions of Aung San Suu Kyi try to distance themselves from their fallen idol, lest they too become targets for criticism, or are accused of having been credulous or naive.<sup>89</sup> Others have simply withdrawn. Notable acolytes like former First Lady Laura Bush and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, for example, have chosen to remain silent about the more controversial aspects of Aung San Suu Kyi's accession to power and her attitude towards the Rohingyas.<sup>90</sup>

One possible result of this backlash against Aung San Suu Kyi has been a far more critical analysis of contemporary events in Myanmar than might otherwise have been the case. For example, a spate of reviews in journals and online, examining the NLD's first year in office, was almost uniformly negative.<sup>91</sup> There were a number of good reasons for this, but it is worth asking whether so many pundits would have been quite so critical, and unwilling to make greater allowances for the fledgling NLD administration, if Aung San Suu Kyi was still held in such high regard. Also, foreign commentators now seem more willing to refer to Aung San Suu Kyi's imperious nature, remoteness and tendency to micromanage both the NLD's and the country's affairs. Concerns had been raised about her idiosyncratic personality and 'questionable' leadership style before, but words like 'arrogant', 'inflexible' and 'dictatorial' are now common.<sup>92</sup> She is accused of crushing those in her party with competing aspirations, or who disagree with her on policy matters.<sup>93</sup> Since taking office she has granted few interviews, but foreign journalists now seem more prepared to raise difficult subjects with her, and challenge her directly on controversial issues. Even diplomats have described her as 'very conscious of her own importance' and 'prickly to deal with'.<sup>94</sup> In the past, their public pronouncements were rarely as frank.<sup>95</sup>

## 4. Conclusion

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Myanmar studies have always attracted strong views. Particularly since 1988 there has been a history of polemics, biased reporting and emotive commentary. Some scholars and popular pundits have been the victims of harsh personal criticism, often on the basis of political and moral considerations rather than evidence-based analysis.<sup>96</sup> More recently, the plight of the Rohingyas, and Aung San Suu Kyi's controversial approach both to the current crisis in Rakhine State and to government more broadly, have aroused similar passions and lent themselves to equally strident reports. In such a highly charged environment, it is imperative that the facts (as far as they can be discerned, and drawn from reliable sources) are assessed as clearly and objectively as possible. If the past is any guide, however, that will be difficult. The stakes are high, both in terms of the developments currently taking place in Rakhine State, and in Myanmar more broadly. As so often in the past, those with the strongest views will shout the loudest, making it hard to hear more balanced analytical voices. Inevitably, this will affect popular perceptions of Aung San Suu Kyi and her historical legacy.

Whatever may emerge from the future analysis of modern Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi's reputation as a champion of universal human rights has been irreparably damaged. Most history books will probably record her as a fallen star, an idol whose feet were found to have been made of clay. Her extraordinary achievements over decades, both as a prisoner of conscience and an inspiration to millions in Myanmar and elsewhere, will be forever cast in shadow. However, it is worth keeping in mind that she had so far to fall because the international community raised her up so high. She was rarely judged against the same criteria as other world figures. Granted, there was an element of political opportunism on both sides, but less journalistic hyperbole and more measured scepticism along the way might have resulted in a more balanced view of her natural strengths and weaknesses. If her many foreign admirers had been able to see her more as a real person, with human failings, and a tough politician with an unblinking eye on the ultimate prize, as much as a democratic icon and reflection of their own ideals, they may not feel quite so angry and disappointed now.

Perhaps George Orwell was right when he wrote in 1949 (about Aung San Suu Kyi's hero Mahatma Gandhi), 'Saints should always be judged guilty until they are proven innocent'.<sup>97</sup>

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