

# The Rohingyas, Aung San Suu Kyi, and the Maligning of Myanmar

by Hugh Fitzgerald



According to most of the world's media, an unfathomable tragedy has been slowly unfolding in Myanmar. The Buddhist majority, inflamed by sinister monks, has been persecuting, killing, even massacring, members of the entirely inoffensive Muslim Rohingya minority in the northern state of Rakhine (formerly, and in some places still, known as "Arakan"). The term "Rohingya" refers, as Professor Andrew Selth of Griffith University has noted, to the **"Bengali Muslims who live in Arakan State...most Rohingyas arrived with the British colonialists in the 19th and 20th centuries."** Some call the attacks a "genocide."

According to almost all reports from non-Burmese, these

attacks on the Rohingya are completely indefensible and, indeed, inexplicable, the result of hysteria – assumed by one and all to be without any conceivable justification – whipped up by Buddhist monks, headed by a sinister senior monk, Ashin Parathu, who has been accused by *The Guardian* of “stoking religious hatred across Burma. His paranoia and fear, muddled with racist stereotypes and unfounded rumors, have helped to incite violence and spread disinformation.”

Particularly disappointing for many reporters has been what they regard as the unforgivable silence of Aung San Suu Kyi, currently the head of the Myanmar government. For Aung San Suu Kyi was formerly the leader of the nonviolent opposition to the Burmese military, placed under house arrest by the generals, then freed and awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. For more than two decades she was, for her continued defiance of the generals, and willingness to endure that house arrest, a darling of the international media. She has held a number of important government posts and is now both Foreign Minister and State Counsellor (equivalent to Prime Minister) in Myanmar.

But in her continuing refusal to condemn outright the attacks on the Rohingya, and in her insistence that in Myanmar there has been “violence on both sides,” Aung San Suu Kyi is now seen by many outside Myanmar in quite another light. Many have criticized Aung San Suu Kyi for her silence on the 2012 Rakhine State riots, when Buddhists attacked Muslims, and castigate her for what they see as her general indifference to the ongoing mistreatment of the Rohingya by Burmese Buddhists. Twenty-three Nobel laureates and other “peace activists” signed a letter in November 2016 asking Aung San Suu Kyi to speak out about the Rohingya: “Despite repeated appeals to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, we are frustrated that she has not taken any initiative to ensure full and equal citizenship rights of the Rohingyas,” their Open Letter states. “Daw Suu Kyi is the leader and is the one with the primary responsibility to lead,

and lead with courage, humanity and compassion.”

Prime Minister Suu Kyi has refused to address accusations that the Muslim Rohingya may be victims of crimes against humanity, and in an interview with the BBC’s Misha Husain she refused to condemn violence against the Rohingya and denied that Muslims in Myanmar have been subject to ethnic cleansing. **She insisted that the tensions in her country were due to a “climate of fear” caused by a “worldwide perception that global Muslim power is very great.”** And apparently, according to some reports, she was angry that the BBC had chosen a Muslim to interview her.

What shall we make of this attitude from someone who had previously been put on a Nobel Peace Prize pedestal? Has she metamorphosed from being a moral exemplar to becoming a moral monster who needs correction, someone who, as researchers on state crime at St. Mary’s University in London claim, is “legitimising genocide”? It’s not surprising that for the giddy globe’s Great and Good, as *The Economist* put it, her “halo has even slipped among foreign human-rights lobbyists, disappointed at her failure to make a clear stand on behalf of the Rohingya minority” and to “give details on how her government intends to resolve the violence faced by the long-persecuted Muslim minority.” Or might it just be conceivable that the well-educated Burmese liberal Aung San Suu Kyi knows more about the Rohingyas, and the past history of Muslims in her own country, Myanmar, than do her critics, and that that knowledge makes her more studied and nuanced in her judgments, more doubtful about the Rohingya claims of innocent victimhood, and more sympathetic to the fears of the Buddhists of Myanmar?

If we examine the last 150 years of Burmese history, we may find that Madame Suu Kyi has more of a point than her foreign critics think. In 1826, after the Anglo-Burmese War, the British annexed Arakan (Rakhine State), where many of the 1.3 million Rohingyas now in Myanmar still live, to British India.

And they began to encourage Indians, mainly Muslims, to move into Arakan from Bengal as cheap farm labor. They continued to encourage this migration throughout the nineteenth-century. In Akyab District, the capital of Arakan,, according to the British censuses of 1872 and 1911, there was an increase in the Muslim population from **58,255 to 178,647, a tripling within forty years.** At the beginning of the 20th century, migrants from Bengal were still arriving in Burma at the rate of a quarter million per year. In the peak year of 1927, 480,000 people arrived in Burma, with **Rangoon in that year surpassing New York City as the greatest migration port in the world.** And many of these migrants were Indian Muslims.

The Buddhist Burmese looked on helplessly at the arrival of these hundreds of thousands of Muslims, but there was nothing they could do against the policy of their British colonial masters. During World War II, the British retreat in the face of the Japanese led to a power vacuum, and simmering inter-communal tensions erupted, with the Arakanese Massacres of 1942, when 50,000 Buddhists were killed by the Rohingyas in Rakhine (Arakan) state. The Buddhists managed to mount a resistance, and some claim that they killed as many as 40,000 Rohingyas in revenge raids.

In May 1946 Rohingya leaders met with Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the Muslim leader who founded modern Pakistan, and asked that part of Rakhine state be annexed by East Pakistan. Then, when Jinnah refused to interfere in Burmese matters, they founded the Mujahid Party in in northern Arakan in 1947. The aim of the Mujahid party was initially to create an autonomous Muslim state in Arakan. The local *mujahideen* – that's what the Rohingya warriors proudly called themselves – fought government forces in an attempt to have the mostly Rohingya-populated Mayu peninsula in northern Rakhine State secede from Myanmar (then Burma), and after that secession, the Rohingyas hoped that territory would be annexed by East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh). Fighting between the Rohingya and

the Burmese state, then, is not a new thing; it has been going on intermittently since 1947. The Rohingya revolt eventually lost momentum in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and many of the Rohingya surrendered to government forces.

But the Muslim insurrection by the Rohingya did not disappear. It was revived in the 1970s, which in turn led to the Burmese government mounting, in 1978, a huge military operation (Operation King Dragon) that inflicted great damage on the *mujahideen*, and bought a decade of relative calm. But again the Rohingya rose up against the Burmese state, and in the 1990s the “Rohingya Solidarity Organisation” attacked Burmese authorities near the border with Bangladesh. In other words, this insurgency by the Muslim Rohingya has been going on – waxing and waning – for more than half a century. It is in that context that Buddhist fears of a Muslim takeover of northern Myanmar should be viewed, and taken seriously. The Burmese monks who have recently been whipping up anti-Rohingya sentiment, and attacks on them, are not behaving out of motiveless malignity; they are keenly aware of all this history. [They do not want the Rohingyas to obtain citizenship](#), for they fear – as so many outside Myanmar do not comprehend – being swamped by Muslims outbreeding the Unbelievers. They look around the world, see that 50 million Muslims are now in Europe, that everywhere in the world Muslims are outbreeding Unbelievers, and don’t want the same thing happening to Myanmar, which they regard as the last real redoubt of Buddhism.

For them the Rohingyas are not a true indigenous people of Myanmar, but the descendants of the Muslims who began arriving from East Bengal in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The very term “Rohingyas” only came into common usage in the last few decades. Today’s Rohingyas belong, for the Buddhist monks in present-day Myanmar who are leading the anti-Royingya campaign, to the same people who attacked Buddhists in Rakhine State in 1942, killing 50,000. They are descendants of the same people who,

as self-described Jihadist warriors ("*mujahideen*"), conducted a violent Jihad against Burmese authorities that began in 1948 and lasted more than a decade, in order first to make Rakhine an autonomous state under Muslim control, and then to have it annexed by Pakistan. For these Buddhist monks, the Rohingya are simply Bengali Muslims who migrated south to northern Burma, and are merely the local branch of the world-wide Muslim *umma* that has been in continuous warfare against Buddhists and Buddhism for centuries, and is again becoming more aggressive and violent all over the world.

When those Burmese monks look next door to India, they remember that in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Muslim invaders pillaged Buddhist monuments and monasteries, leading to Buddhism's final decline in that country. The monks know too that the last large group of Buddhists still remaining in the subcontinent, in the Chittagong Hills tract in Bangladesh, are [in danger of completely disappearing](#) because of repeated attacks by Muslims.

They remember the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan by the Taliban, and that gigantic act of cultural vandalism reminds them of the thousands of Buddhist temples and statues and stupas and monasteries that were [destroyed over the centuries](#) by the Muslim invaders of India and its neighbors.

And then they think, too, of what Muslims have done to Hindus, in Pakistan, and Bangladesh, and especially in Kashmir, where 50,000 families of Kashmiri pandits, Hindus indigenous to Kashmir, have been forced out – to escape death – by Muslims. The mass killings of the Pandits, which almost no one in the West seemed to notice or care about, were taken note of by the Buddhists in Myanmar. They read about such things as this:

*The days that followed the night of January 19, 1990 saw Kashmiri Pandits being killed in scores every day. Atrocities against KPs had become the order of the day. From Budgam to*

*Brijbehara, from Kupwara to Kanikadal there was hardly a day when Kashmiri Pandits haven't been killed. Most brutal forms of torture from gouging out of eyes, to cutting genitals, to burning bodies with cigarette butts and even chopping off body parts were used to kill Pandits. Sarwanand Kaul Premi, a noted scholar had nails hammered in place of his tilak. BK Ganjoo was killed in his home and his wife was asked to eat the rice soaked in his blood. Sarla Bhat a nurse was gang-raped before being killed and her naked body was thrown on the street. The killers of Ravinder Pandita of Mattan danced over his body. The bodies of Brijlal and Choti were tied to a jeep in Shopian and dragged for 10 km.*

*Girja Tikoo, a school teacher in Bandipora, was gang-raped before being killed. There are hundreds of such stories. One can almost write a book on the people who suffered at the hands of the terrorists while the meek and feeble Indian state looked the other way. A notorious terrorist named Bitta Karate alone killed more than 20 Pandits and had no shame accepting the same. ...More than a thousand Pandits were killed, tortured and raped.*

*The exodus meanwhile carried on.*

The Buddhists of Myanmar also noticed the long-running terrorism of two Muslim groups, Abu Sayyaf and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, in their attempt to gain independence for Muslim-majority islands in the Philippines, and have been responsible for more than 100,000 dead. And they know about the more than 30,000 attacks by Muslim terrorists since 9/11, against many different indigenous non-Muslims – Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, atheists – in China, India, Australia, Bangladesh, Russia, Israel, Great Britain, France, Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, the United States, and the persecution and killings of Christians by Muslims in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Pakistan, Nigeria, Algeria, Afghanistan, Tunisia, Somalia, Yemen. And

every day brings fresh news, from somewhere in the world, of atrocities committed by Muslims, whether members of the Islamic State, or of Al-Qaeda, or of other groups under other names, or by lone-wolf *muhajideen* determined to fulfill their duty to engage in violent Jihad and kill Infidels. And they begin to think, given that so many powerful countries in the West seem unable to handle their domestic Muslim problems, and the unwillingness of the non-Muslim peoples to band together in a counter-Jihad, that they can rely only on themselves, and that history teaches them that they must strike preemptively, by way of encouraging the Rohingyas to leave Burma for the Bengal from which, the Burmese believe, the Rohnigyas originally came.

Is it any wonder that those Buddhist monks feel that it is they, their religion, their Buddhist culture, that are now imperiled, by Muslims following the same texts as those who put a virtual end to Buddhism in India, and who have carried out attacks on the last remnant of Buddhists in present-day Bangladesh, and destroyed so much of the art and artifacts of Buddhist culture in India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, China? For these monks, who are aware of how destructive a triumphant and triumphalist Islam has been for Buddhism, it is the Buddhists in Myanmar who are on the permanent defensive and, some believe, to protect themselves should preemptively strike against, and attempt to drive out, the local representatives of Islam, an aggressive and fanatical faith.

This recapitulated history is not meant as approval of any unprovoked attacks on the Rohingya. It is to suggest, rather, that before condemning the Buddhists of Myanmar with such ferocious certainty, one ought to consider the history of the Muslims in that country, when and from where they arrived, and how they have behaved toward the indigenous Buddhists over the past century. History tells a tale far more complicated than is acknowledged by those issuing these blanket denunciations of the Burmese Buddhists. If those who are now demanding of



Aung San Suu Kyi, with such self-righteous indignation, that she “must” speak out about the Rohingya, were to learn a bit more about the history of Myanmar, they might not be quite so ready to denounce her. She knows what the Muslim migrant-invaders have meant for the indigenous Buddhists, and she is not unsympathetic to the fear so many Buddhists in Myanmar now feel, not because of a present threat, but of what the past has taught them about Muslim behavior, and not only in their own country, and what they fear the future may bring.

Should the history of Muslim-Buddhist relations in Myanmar be better known, with journalists taking it upon themselves to learn about, and then to transmit, this history, it is possible that the “international community” would address the current violence quite differently. Imagine the effect on Myanmar’s anxious Buddhists if those now lecturing them so unsympathetically instead demonstrated by their statements that they were well aware of the flood into Myanmar of Muslim migrants over a half-century, recognized that the inter-communal violence in 1942 had started with attacks by the Muslim side, conceded that the Rohingyas had tried for many years, as self-described *mujihadeen*, to seize part of Myanmar and to make it an autonomous Muslim state, and that this past, as well as the actions of Muslims toward Buddhists and Hindus, deeply affected how the Burmese Buddhists viewed their own situation.

That might help calm the Burmese Buddhists down, make them feel less anxious, now that their fears were not being cavalierly dismissed but given a sympathetic hearing. And they, in turn, might cease to attack, as they have been, the Rohingyas. After all, anyone who looks around the world today cannot avoid noticing that Muslims have been aggressively on the march, and while terrorism garners the most attention, their chief weapon is relentless demographic conquest, the very weapon that Muslims have wielded, for more than a century, in Myanmar, until the Buddhists, sufficiently

alarmed, began recently to push many of them out.

Aung San Suu Kyi has steadfastly refused to denounce Myanmar's Buddhists, a denunciation ardently desired by those who know so little of that country's history, and she has suffered for it.

Instead of continuing to malign Aung San Suu Kyi, why not give her a chance to explain publicly why she thinks so many Buddhists are anxious about the Rohingyas. In her BBC interview mentioned earlier, she referred to a "climate of fear" (among Myanmar's Buddhists) caused by a **"worldwide perception that global Muslim power is very great."** Isn't that "worldwide perception" correct? Isn't that "climate of fear" one that many people, not just in Myanmar but in the most advanced states of Western Europe, now experience? Let her tell the story of the Muslim Bengali immigrants, of the Arakan Massacres of 1942 and of the Rohingyas fighting the Burmese government as **mujihadeen** for more than ten years, and take seriously her suggestion that all this recent history ought to be taken into account by those so quick to pronounce judgement on the conflict between the Buddhists and the Rohingyas. Giving the Buddhists that kind of hearing should bring an increase in calm, if they feel that their fears are now being taken seriously. It will be good for the Buddhists who now feel besieged in Myanmar, and salutary for Unbelievers elsewhere to be reminded that Muslim aggression is directed not just against the West, but against all the rest. Surely hearing this history lesson is worth a try.

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