The rights of the Rohingya degraded steadily over time from being citizens – part of the fabric of society, in the government and Parliament – to being a threat

Aung San Suu Kyi at a speech
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Understanding Myanmar: History and Current Perspectives

A Conversation with Derek Mitchell

Interviewed by Maia Brown-Jackson

Fletcher Security Review: Thank you for speaking with me. One of the many pressing human security issues the world faces today, and one that seems perpetually intractable, is that of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar's Rakhine State. Given your expertise in the area of Asian security, could you put this conflict into some context for us? Where does it fit into Myanmar's national history? What is the local and regional context in which the Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims find themselves?

Derek Mitchell: There are layers upon layers here to consider. The Rakhine people used to have an independent kingdom of its own for some three hundred and fifty years. This independence lasted until the late eighteenth century when they were overrun by the Burmans. British colonialism overtook that just about fifty years later. The Rakhine have a very strong sense of their identity, and a sense of victimization; a sense that they were overrun by outsiders, and that they need to protect their heritage. They are very bitter towards the Burmans.

There were always Muslims in the Rakhine State. They would flow naturally back and forth from South Asia and they were brought in over the centuries as well. But the major influx of Muslims came in after the beginning of British colonialism. During that period, there was only one administrative rule between India and Burma. This lasted until 1937 and meant that there was effectively no real border. The British brought in a lot of Muslims, a lot of South Asians, and a lot of Indians to run the country. This influx of people began to impinge, to some degree, on what people in the Rakhine area felt was their homeland. This is all to say that the issue of Muslims in Rakhine State, these people who eventually became known as Rohingya, are viewed as a legacy of British colonialism, which itself is viewed as a degrading and demoralizing moment for the country.

In 1942, when the Japanese invaded, that gave an excuse for sides to be taken. The Rohingya Muslims sided with the British, and the Rakhine sided with the Japanese as liberators. That caused the Rakhine and Muslims to fight, and there were massacres on each side in 1942. This led to resentment. This has been a pattern over time. Once Burma became independent, the border became a solid border and the Rohingya became a group of Muslims with their own ambitions for autonomy, much like many other ethnic groups in the country. During the time of partition between India and Pakistan, there was a movement involving the Rohingya to carve off a part of northern Rakhine State to become part of eastern Pakistan, what later became Bangladesh. That movement—a violent jihadist movement, that started in the late 1940s—was associated with separatism and Islamism. It became a political movement to some degree and the name Rohingya developed to give the people a kind of identity.

The Rakhine did not accept the idea of carving out territory. It was always at the back of their minds that the Rohingya population was not assimilating. This, and other political tensions, particularly the military takeover in 1962, caused the Rakhine to start to view the Rohingya as a problem. They became more nationalist. In this context, the rights of the Rohingya degraded steadily over time from being citizens – part of the fabric of society, in the government and Parliament – to being a threat. The Rakhine, for various reasons, still feel threatened by the Rohingya. They feel the demographics are against them, that the Rohingya have multiple wives in order to have large families and demographically overwhelm the Rakhine in their own territory. That sense of victimization and vulnerability, along with a sense of national pride, is very deep seated. It goes back centuries to being overtaken by Burmans and is now projected onto the Rohingya.

With the opening of free speech, the Burmans, particularly the monks, say they feel Buddhism is under siege. They point to history: *look at Indonesia, look at Afghanistan, look at Bengal, those were Buddhist territories, and they are now Muslim. Islam is on the march, and we are*

the last bastion of pure Buddhism in the region. Mandalay is a center of Buddhist culture and learning. We need to protect ourselves from this march of Islam through the region. They view the Rohingya as a vanguard of the conspiracy to take over the country.

There is fear, not just among Rakhine as a small subset of Burma, but the broad Buddhist community, including monks that say, *we cannot trust Muslims. Any Muslims. There are many different types of Muslims in the country, but the Rohingya are not assimilating, do not look like us, do not speak our language. When a Rohingya arson group attacked in August, that just validated the idea that they are aggressive, separatist, radical, and trying to undermine our security. We must respond aggressively against these illegals, and non-Burmese*. While the rest of the world recoils at the violence and the brutality, the Burmese see this context.

FSR: Just as a clarification, how would you describe the implications of calling the country and the people Burma and Burmese versus Myanmar?

DM: There are various ways of looking at that. The military changed the name from Burma to Myanmar in 1989. Burma was the name given to it by the British. In the Burmese language, the formal name for the country was Myanma, but the colloquial name was Bama. So both have some resonance in the Burmese language. I am just old fashioned, I like the name Burma. Aung San Suu Kyi likes the name Burma. It used to be a litmus test. If you were a human rights advocate, you called it Burma, because you did not want to accept the military junta's change. Nowadays though, most people in the country call it Myanmar. Aung San Suu Kyi has said you can call it either one. I tend to call it Burma when I am here and Myanmar when I am there. Some people find it offensive if you use the colonial name. Myanmar is the more accepted name nowadays.

FSR: Speaking of Aung San Suu Kyi, she has received a great deal of criticism from international groups like Human Rights Watch for her silence on the threat to the Rohingya. At first, analysts were saying that her initial silence was due to upcoming elections but at this point why do you think she has not taken action given the context that you just explained?

DM: She could have said more generally about the principles underlining this new country as it was forming. Beyond the Rohingya, this goes to equal justice, equal protection, human rights. Should she have done more in speaking out on these big issues and defining the principles of the country for the past two years? She understands very well the problem of Rakhine State and she also recognizes how sensitive the Rakhine are about this issue. It is just very complicated.

The day the Rohingya attacked last August was the day Kofi Annan came out with recommendations for the future of Myanmar, and Aung San Suu Kyi immediately

Refugee camp in Rhakine State, Myanmar (DFID / CC BY-SA 4.0)

embraced those recommendations. Those recommendations go to citizenship, they go to security, to all the things you care about, to human rights, dignity. She has said that they are committed to those recommendations, committed to a process to do right by the Rohingya. Hours later, this Rohingya group attacked, and the military responded in a way that Aung San Suu Kyi could have no control over. The conditions were created and shaped for her. She then had to react and respond, and find out what the facts were. I am sure she is getting one set of facts from the military and some of her advisors, while other facts are being brought to her by the human rights community. In her environment, she must decide what is true and what to do about it.

The fact again, from her perspective, is that the country was attacked. There was a group, with connections to Pakistan and connections to Saudi money, that attacked security forces on Burmese soil. It is tough for her to simply defend people that are not—and the Rohingya are not—viewed as legal. Now it does not mean she could not speak out and say, in a more effective fashion, that everybody deserves equal treatment, there are innocent people involved here, we should make sure that they are protected, that there is no summary justice, that is not what our new democratic country should be about. She could have spoken up about that. If she wanted to do that, I am sure there are a few political people around her that would have told her that is very tenuous politically. The military would not have liked it. They would have felt like she was not protecting them, and her priority is, for better or for worse, to get along with the military. She feels that is the way to continue this democratic process, and the way she will get to the next stage on constitutional change, that there is no solidifying the democracy unless the military accepts it, because they allow constitutional change. She feels she has to defend the honor of the military, which had been offended by this attack.

Also you have to think, okay, what if she did say that. She cannot control what security forces do on the ground, she has no good information. What really would have changed? We would have felt better about her if she had said all this, and I agree she probably should have said more, but what she says is that we should be thinking about the solutions to this. She is focused primarily on how to solve this, rather than how to talk about it or how to bear witness to it. I agree, you need to bear witness to it. What she has failed at is communication and understanding how deeply felt this is internationally. She does not get that she is in a political position now and must communicate this. All she focuses on, which speaks to her personality, is what are the real facts (very difficult to get), and a solution. I think she questioned, *how would my speaking like that help solve it? In fact, it would make it harder for me with my people, harder for me with the military, and the fact is there's trauma all over the country*. She and many people in Burma would say, *why are people internationally so obsessed with the Rohingya*? The Rakhine have suspicions about that. *Why not the Kachin or the Shan who also have hundreds of thousands of IDPs, and have suffered atrocities like rape as a weapon of war? Why is it just these Rohingya, who we don't even think are part of our country, and who actually are a threat to us*? There are a lot of elements that go into why she does not respond the way the international community wants her to. She is a very practical person, very bottom-line, solution-minded.

FSR: Given that the primary conflict we hear about involves the Rohingya, but, as you point out, there are many different ethnic minority groups present, what other conflicts might emerge?

DM: There are conspiracy theories about what the military really wants, which is a question mark. The military generally does not want democracy to succeed. They believe they will lose from that somehow. They want to keep things off balance, or they simply want to undermine the National League for Democracy (NLD). To do this, they can create conflicts. Ethnic conflicts. The conspiracy idea is that they want to have a Rohingya conflict to play saviors of the country, and create a problem for Aung San Suu Kyi's international reputation. Then the commander-in-chief of the armed forces could potentially win an election in 2020, or say the democracy experiment has failed and take over again. Democracy could lead to more conflict because the military will see it in their interest to demonstrate that democracy cannot deliver. I do not have a particular opinion on that.

The fact that Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD do not necessarily have credibility with or command authority over the military, due to the military feeling that it must alone deal with security threats, means that the military may be able to create more instability in ethnic areas by attacking the Kachin or the Shan in order to undermine the prospects for peace. If there were a for-

Rohingya displaced Muslims (Seyyed Mahmoud Hosseini / CC BY 4.0)

mer military person leading the country, this might be different. Trust between the NLD, Aung San Suu Kyi, and the military is critical in order to lower the chances of conflict moving forward. Aung San Suu Kyi has tried but failed today, because the relationship is very bad. In democratic transitions there is more conflict than not.

FSR: How do you think Aung San Suu Kyi might be able to gain more political power domestically? Or at least more credibility with the military.

DM: She needs to deliver for the people. Her strategy has been to try to mollify the military. She has not been focusing on the economy, and she should. She has not focused much on delivering reform for the parliament, getting rid of legacy laws, and improving human rights, free speech and such. In fact, there have been some regressive new laws. Civil society feels less respected, strangely, under Aung San Suu Kyi than it did before, in the previous regime.

Though the relationship with the commander-in-chief of the military is important, her focus should be on delivering for the people in the country. This means getting rid of legacy laws that continue the repressive ways of the past. A new kind of politics, which is not dictating but discussing and listening and going out and talking to people. Getting feedback, particularly from the ethnic areas, is necessary. Minority ethnic groups feel that she is carrying the water for the military when she comes and talks to them, rather than caring or listening to their voice. These groups voted for her and are very disappointed in her inability not just to deliver peace, but also to demonstrate respect for their perspectives. Not to mention economics, jobs. She has not focused on that.

Her party controls an absolute majority in parliament. They cannot change the constitution without the military but they can pass whatever law they want and whatever economic policy they want to pursue—they can do it! If she had economic policies that facilitated investment and created jobs, that gave people a sense things would get better, then she would have the people with her – she would demonstrate democracy delivering. The military would see that she is delivering and then she could deal with them from a position of strength. Simply working and compromising with the military, she is losing the people, which is her fundamental strength. This is undermining her strategically.

FSR: Do you think there are lessons that can be applied from ethnic violence we have seen in other regions, like Sri Lanka, Iraq, or Rwanda?

DM: I am not sure. I think it is a pretty unique environment. People have come in from Nepal and Colombia who have experienced this transition to democracy. They were astounded by the complexities of Burma's peace process. You are not just dealing with two, three, or four groups, you are dealing with twenty-two different groups, at least.

Different ethnic armed groups have somewhat similar demands, like autonomy, but not exactly the same requirements. Frankly they have problems among themselves. The Shan and the Kachin do not necessarily get along. With the Shan State, you have multiple different groups who are fighting each other over things like identity, autonomy, political rights, and language rights. Then you have local militias, not just ethnic armed groups. The complexity of Burma's peace process is exceptional in the world. It blows people's minds when they see it. They have to learn what federalism means, about the different types of federalism, and how to build restorative justice, not just retributive justice. There are lots of things to learn from the international community, but no particular place that is analogous.

My generation looked at Burma as a human rights issue. It was a pretty simplistic issue for us. It was the lady and the junta. That made it enjoyable in some way. Easy. You had the Nobel Peace Prize winner on one side, on the other side a brutal military junta that oppressed the people and violated human rights. But as you learn about the country, and you look at the place as it is, people seeking democracy, you see just how extraordinarily complex it is. They need economic reform, political reform, and they have to make peace. In their history, it has always been through military conquest. There are dozens of ethnic groups that have to reconcile. The Rohingya is the issue currently defining the country in the way Aung San Suu Kyi used to for the international community. As awful as that is, and as much as it deserves attention, it is one component of an extraordinarily complex environment of trauma, of underdevelopment, of political transition, and of economic development.

They have been isolated, and they are vulnerable. They are surrounded by two of the largest countries in the world, China and India, 170 million Muslims across a porous border. They have their fifty-one and a half million people surrounded by three billion. Their identity is vulnerability and insecurity, and therefore they need to protect themselves from outsiders. Of course, they were colonized as well. They are protecting themselves from big powers, maintaining their sovereignty. They are as afraid of China coming in as they are of Muslims coming in. The difference is, the Muslims have attacked. People in Myanmar look at the headlines and they have a very simplistic view, as many in the world do, about the Islamist threat.

Not to mitigate the humanitarian challenges around the Rohingya, but it must be understood in the context of the pantheon of challenges Burma faces. A solution is much more difficult and complex than identifying the problem and people are focused much more on identifying the problem. There are underlying issues beyond citizenship status. How do we really help the Rohingya? That is where Aung San Suu Kyi frankly has not been trying her best, but she is also very, very frustrated with the international community, so she is blocking them out. That is not helpful either. We are kind of stuck while it just gets worse and the division gets deeper and wider.

FSR: Thank you so much. That was really illuminating.

Derek Mitchell

Derek Mitchell is senior advisor to the Asia Program at the U.S. Institute of Peace. Ambassador Mitchell was confirmed by the U.S. Senate on June 29, 2012, as the first U.S. ambassador to the Republic of the Union of Myanmar in 22 years. He took up his post in July 2012, and departed March 2016. Ambassador Mitchell has authored numerous books, articles, and opinion pieces on Asian security affairs. He received an M.A. in Law and Diplomacy from the Fletcher School at Tufts University and a B.A. from the University of Virginia.