

Growing up a Proud Racist in Burma

Written by Maung Zarni

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MAUNG ZARNI, SEP 12 2012

Like millions of my fellow Buddhist Burmese, I grew up as a proud racist. For much of my life growing up in the heartland of Burma, Mandalay, I mistook what I came to understand years later as racism to be the patriotism of Burmese Buddhists. Our leading and most powerful institutions, schools, media, Buddhist church and, most importantly, the military, have succeeded in turning the bulk of us into proud racists.

Around the world, supporters of democracy in Burma have been shocked to learn of the 'ethnic cleansing' of the Muslim Rohingyas in Western Burma and the attendant popular racist venom that is being spat at these most vulnerable stateless people[1].

President Thein Sein has characterised the events as 'communal violence'[2], a deliberately misleading term designed to conceal the State's involvement in the massacres of the Rohingyas. The damning new Human Rights Report states emphatically:

"Burmese security forces committed killings, rape, and mass arrests against Rohingya Muslims after failing to protect both them and Arakan Buddhists during deadly sectarian violence in western Burma in June 2012. Government restrictions on humanitarian access to the Rohingya community have left many of the over 100,000 people displaced and in dire need of food, shelter, and medical care" [3].

For nationalists, the cliché "to be Burmese is to be Buddhist" is still a given, especially those in the ruling military clique. While having deep roots in our turbulent history, the current resurgence of Burmese racism, both official and popular, is, no doubt, a direct result of half-century of racist military rule.

Largely due to the country's international isolation under military rule, Burmese society as a whole remains deeply illiberal and potently ethno-nationalistic, in spite of the ritual pronouncements of democracy and human rights by an elite class of dissidents. Even a quarter century after Aung San Suu Kyi called for the 'revolution of the spirit', nothing spiritually progressive has taken root in the popular Burmese psyche[4] – including among the country's noble dissidents. Burmese human rights defenders who spent half of their lives in military jail houses, Buddhist monks and the Burmese Buddhist diaspora are all singing from the same song sheet on issues of race. On this issue, they all stand alongside the country's Neanderthal generals and ex-generals.

One wonders what has resulted from the loud liberal rhetoric of human rights coming from noble dissidents when it comes to the persecuted Rohingyas? Where has the loving kindness of monks gone, who only five years ago flooded the streets of Rangoon and other urban centres of Burma chanting Loving Kindness for all sentient beings?

As a former racist who grew up thinking that any individual and any group deemed to pose a threat to national sovereignty and our Burmese "Buddhist" identity should be "gassed", I feel a deep chill in my spine thinking about what my society is in effect evolving into.

First, President Thein Sein reportedly told the visiting head of the United Nations High Commission for the Refugees (UNHCR), Antonio Guterres, that his government is prepared to either expel the 800,000 Rohingyas en masse to any third country willing to take them, or segregate them in camps where entire Rohingya communities, on the basis of

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their ethnicity, religion and citizenship status, could be quarantined, clothed and fed by the United Nations.[5]

Second, despite the presence of many educated presidential advisers, the country's reformist generals and ex-generals aren't being called on, not even nudged, to rethink their anachronistic nationalism. Quite the opposite is happening. According to the New Yorker, Burmese presidential adviser and writer Thant Myint-U said:

"Abstract moral arguments weren't going to cut much ice. And they were deeply cynical of Western rhetoric on human rights. The argument we made that got the most traction was: 'We're falling so far behind our neighbors economically— China and India—that, unless we change, politically as well as economically, it's going to be disastrous'" [6].

This unholy alliance between liberally-educated presidential advisers and the Burmese junta is cemented by economic nationalism – not human rights, nor liberal humanitarianism.

Last but not least, key international players in Burmese politics, such as the country's former ruler Britain and the United States, looked the other way for two full months while Burma's state-sanctioned racial violence against the Rohingya was raging on. For instance, British Foreign Secretary William Hague waited until 13 August to speak out, whereas the 'communal violence' broke out in early June[7]. It took another 10 days for the United States Ambassador to follow suit. The West's primary interest in the full scale re-engagement with the 'reformist' military is primarily for their own strategic and commercial interests vis-à-vis a fast rising China.

It is still the primary responsibility of the Burmese themselves to resolve Burma's long-standing and emerging challenges including ethno-religious conflicts, be they the war against the Kachin in Northern Burma or the state-sponsored violence in Western Burma. There is an urgent need to explain, expose, disrupt and eventually end the toxic merging of Burma's governmental and popular racism against the Muslim Rohingya.

Burma's military strong men have demonstrated neither the political will nor intellectual vision or capacity needed to resolve our post-colonial problems. Instead, they have shown time and again their sinister resolve to continue exploiting society's ethno-religious differences, be it against the Chinese – as in the case of state-induced anti-Chinese riots of 1967 – or Muslims in general, and the Rohingya Muslims in particular.

There are pockets of Burmese citizens, of all different faiths and ethnic backgrounds, who fully appreciate our cultural, religious and ethnic diversity to be our strength. Their voices, inside Burma and in the diaspora, calling for ethnic peace are currently being drowned out by the loud chorus of ethno-racial fanaticism which pervades Burmese and English-language social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Burmese chat rooms and, not surprisingly, the state media itself.

It is all the more important that conscientious Burmese in the diaspora and within the country work hard and together against the troubling ideological merger between popular racism with the military state's closeted fascism. If racism and fascism are learned behaviours, we must create civic educational initiatives that will enable our less informed citizens sedated on a ground-swell of racism to unlearn their racism.

Racist majoritarian democracy is no longer a viable design for our democracy.

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[1] See *New York Times* “Ethnic Cleansing in Myanmar”, 12 July 2012

[2] Exclusive Interview with President Thein Sein, The Voice of America Burmese Service, 14 August 2012. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2L2-QRCs5s0&feature=relmfu>

[3] “The Government could have stopped this”, 1 August 2012

[4] See Sanitsuda Ekachai, “This is racism, not Buddhism”, op-ed, *The Bangkok Post*, 5 September 2012 &

William McGowan, “Burma’s Buddhist Chauvinism”, op-ed, *Wall Street Journal*, 3 September 2012

[5] “UN refugee chief rejects call to resettle Rohingya”, *Associated Press*, 12 July 2012

[6] “Burmese Spring”, 6 August 2012

[7] See *British Foreign and Commonwealth Office*, “Foreign Secretary stresses need to end violence in Burma”, 13 August 2012 . And also see See *Wall Street Journal*, “U.S. Ambassador in Myanmar Speaks Out on Rohingya”, 24 August 2012.