

Why Anarchists Don't Support Aung San Suu Kyi

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The February military coup in Myanmar successfully ended the country's experiment with liberal democracy, toppling the government of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), which won majorities in Myanmar's 2015 elections. While the coup was carried out with surgical precision, the military (Tatmadaw) clearly underestimated the level of resistance that the country's civilian population would put up, including the formation of militia groups and the forging of ties with the preexisting armed forces of Myanmar's insurgent ethnic groups. Having emerged from decades of military rule, Myanmar's people are no stranger to the implications of unbridled dictatorship at the hands of strongmen such as General Min Aung Hlaing and the State Administration Council (SAC).

Yet this resistance is not without its divisions. Unity is difficult for a movement that has emerged among forces that have frequently found themselves at odds. While some in Myanmar have expressed support for the National Unity Government — a coalition formed by the NLD and its parliamentary representatives, this support is far from unanimous. A number of minority groups have long decried the complicity of Suu Kyi and the NLD in the Tatmadaw's genocidal activities. The fact that both the NLD and Tatmadaw are firmly based in the ethnic Bamar majority has been a strong factor in this distrust felt by minorities towards the state authorities and the desire for a federal union that respects minority interests, with the rights of secession and autonomy, is strong. As it stands, the electoral system in place before the coup could be described essentially as a 'first past the post' — 'winner takes all' arrangement that favoured the majority Bamar's representatives while ensuring that ethnic political parties were more-or-less excluded from power.¹

As early as May 2016, six months after the elections that brought it to power, the NLD's unwillingness to confront ethnic concerns was under fire. At a Yangon meeting of the United Nationalities Alliance, Khun Tun Oo, a former political prisoner and prominent Shan politician, noted that "(ethnicities) voted (for the NLD) with high expectations, and the result is clearly shown in the Rakhine issue ... We can no longer rely on the NLD."² Throughout its brief tenure in power, the NLD has often faced the accusation of representing only Bamar interests. This was at its most striking when Suu Kyi refused to lift a finger to oppose the Tatmadaw's ruthless ethnic cleansing campaign against the mainly Muslim Rohingya people from 2016, which saw tens of thousands killed and hundreds of thousands displaced, as well as consistent reports of mass rape and infanticide.³

To the contrary, her government put restrictions on access to information, claimed that reports concerning atrocities were 'fake news', suppressed a film critical of the Tatmadaw, denied Muslims the right to run in elections and flat-out denied that there was any sort of conflict whatsoever.⁴ Suu Kyi was so concerned with preserving the status quo, in fact, that in 2017 she claimed that "terrorists" were responsible for an "iceberg of misinformation" and thanked the Tatmadaw for upholding the "rule of law"⁵ When again confronted on the issue at The Hague in 2019 by the Republic of Gambia and the International Court of Law, she denied the atrocities altogether with the claim that Gambia had delivered "an incomplete and misleading factual picture."⁶ Oddly, the visible presence of hundreds of thousands of refugees as well as satellite and photographic evidence has rendered her defence of the genocide less than convincing. Suu Kyi has been subsequently stripped of various titles and awards, including her honorary Canadian citizenship, Amnesty International's highest award and the Freedom of Oxford and Dublin, as well as calls to cancel her Nobel Peace Prize and a building named after her at the University of Queensland.

Suu Kyi's international popularity has however enjoyed something of a resurgence internationally since the coup. It is a reality that Myanmar as a whole is a lot worse off with the NLD removed from power. As has been noted

¹ <https://english.shannews.org/archives/22200>

² <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/commentary/have-ethnic-groups-lost-faith-in-the-nld.html>

³ <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/rohingya-exodus-still-growing-six-months-into-crisis> <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/msf-6700-rohingya-killed-month-myanmar-violence> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/rohingya-burma-myanmar-children-beheaded-burned-alive-refugees-bangladesh-a7926521.html> <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/rohingya-methodically-raped-myanmars-armed-forces>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/09/free-speech-curtailed-aung-san-suu-kyis-myanmar-prosecutions-soar> https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/why-aung-san-suu-kyi-isnt-protecting-the-rohingya-in-burma/2017/09/15/c88b10fa-9900-11e7-87fc-c3f7ee4035c9_story.html?utm_term=.56ceec0783a6n <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/28/the-new-burma-is-starting-to-look-too-much-like-the-old-burma/> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/03/no-vote-no-candidates-myanmars-muslims-barred-from-their-own-election> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/19/aung-san-suu-kyi-myanmar-rohingya-crisis-concerned>

⁵ <https://news.sky.com/story/aung-san-suu-kyi-from-symbol-of-human-rights-to-fighting-claims-of-genocide-12205035>

⁶ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-12/myanmars-leader-says-the-world-has-it-wrong-on-the-rohingya/11791338>

by Will Howard-Waddingham, “Suu Kyi may not have been able to resist the genocide even if she had wanted to because it was the military, not her, that held ultimate political power in the country.”⁷ According to this line of reasoning, some have suggested that her only course of action was to maintain her position in government and attempt to keep the Tatmadaw from power for as long as possible. As Howard-Waddingham notes, however, “(c)ollaboration in genocide is a crime regardless of one’s power to stop it ... The overthrow and jailing of a democratically elected leader for protecting a group of her citizens could have brought meaningful international attention to the Rohingya’s suffering.”⁸

Potentially fatal for Suu Kyi and the NLD, however, is not the disapproval of liberal democratic institutions abroad but the disillusionment of the Bamar people themselves. The Tatmadaw’s indiscriminate assault against thousands of Bamar protestors in urban centres like Yangon and Mandalay has shocked many in the country’s dominant ethnic group and brought about a new identification with the plight of its minorities. The experience of slaughter and displacement, once an abstract and far-away concept that few gave thought to, suddenly found itself literally on their doorstep. In the words of one Bamar youth in Yangon, “(s)ince the coup started, we all faced the same thing, the same tragic incidents all over the country ... It doesn’t matter if we are Burmese, Kachin, Chin, or any ethnic group. As long as we are living in Myanmar, we have the same rights and we need the same freedom, so federal democracy is a must.”⁹ Cynicism towards Suu Kyi and the NLD is now becoming more common. As Yangon anarchist Kyaw Kyaw notes, “(s)ilence is violence ... The problem is complicated, sure – but if she stays silent, does it mean that she supports violence? If you don’t say anything about humanity or rights, you are being violent.”¹⁰

A growing rift is subsequently opening “between groups led by an older generation of protesters from the 1988 student uprisings who called for the release of democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi and elected officials and a return to the previous system of governance and a diverse group of protesters who united under the General Strike Committee of Nationalities.”¹¹ This latter group is growing in strength, calling not just for the complete dismantlement of the Tatmadaw but the upending of the constitution, which maintains the right of the central government to own and regulate all of Myanmar’s land. Suu Kyi herself is no stranger to these laws, having been appointed in 2013 to oversee the investigation of a conflict over a Chinese joint-venture copper mine worth US\$1bn. This confrontation, in which police deployed white phosphorus, tear gas and water cannons against protesters occupying the site, saw Suu Kyi side against the people, recommending in her report that the project continue and that police remain undisciplined for their vicious assault.¹² It is not difficult to see how many in today’s protest movement may have little sympathy for her and her ousted government.

It is our hope that the civil disobedience movement transcends the parliamentary model. As noted earlier, while parliamentary democracy may be preferable to Tatmadaw authority, it does not represent much of an alternative for minorities who suffer ethnic cleansing no matter who sits in the capital. This is often the case across the world, when people have placed their hopes in forces that have ostensibly stood for liberation only to have them dashed upon the realisation of those force’s victories. Discussing the end of apartheid in 1991, Subversion noted that the “key to domination, to oppression, to alienation, is to make the dominated participate in their own domination, the oppressed in their own oppression, and the alienated in their own alienation. All this allows a higher level of abstraction to ensure an expanded reproduction of capitalist social relations.”¹³ We must also resist the temptation to glamorise many of the guerilla movements struggling against the SAC, as the territories they control often simply resemble rival states with their own capitalist economies embedded firmly in the global market. It is encouraging to see many people in Myanmar turn their back on the pre-coup system. It is also inspiring to see the apparent growth of anarchist groups in Yangon and Mandalay. From abroad we can help the resistance by demonstrating our support

⁷ <https://rdi.org/democracy-examined/2021/6/22/myanmars-coup-doesnt-exonerate-aung-san-suu-kyi/>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <https://www.tbsnews.net/world/protests-unite-myanmars-ethnic-groups-against-common-foe-224047>

¹⁰ https://www.punkethics.com/rebel-riot-interview/?fbclid=IwAR1GCwgSxheuzZt3pDfsi_blnIphr60sFAQ7Xu7co31dJC9KVtJQZ7PBZg

¹¹ <https://www.tbsnews.net/world/protests-unite-myanmars-ethnic-groups-against-common-foe-224047>

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/12/burma-confirms-phosphorus-crackdown-mine>

¹³ <https://www.autistici.org/tridnivalka/mandela-v-the-working-class-subversion-1991/>

for Myanmar communities in our own cities and by showing Myanmar people at home our solidarity through various actions, which are frequently re-posted on resistance social media sites.

We have observed among many leftists and anarchists on various social media platforms a tendency to voice support or at least tolerance for the NLD. While not nearly as bad as the despicable 'anti-imperialist' (read Stalinist) support for the Tatmadaw in groups like the bizarre Meanjin-based Workers League, endorsement of the NLD should be avoided. This is not saying that it should be combated – the vast majority of its supporters are committed to freedom and many have already laid down their lives fighting the Tatmadaw. Instead what we have hoped to demonstrate in this article is that its leaders, most prominently Aung San Suu Kyi, have been complicit in the crimes of the Tatmadaw and should subsequently be viewed in light of that. As anarchists, we do not view things in terms of lesser or greater evils. Should the SAC be overcome, the return to any position of authority by Suu Kyi, even within the framework of a multi-ethnic federal union, should be fiercely resisted. Though they may play an important role in breaking the SAC, the NLD's membership must hold accountable their leaders for their complicity in genocide and the suppression of ethnic and worker's and peasant's rights. Anarchist Communists Meanjin reiterates that the path to human liberty cannot be found in parties and parliaments but only through the autonomous action of the people themselves.

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