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Democracy Must Be Defended: Reflecting on Myanmar's Coup

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PATRICK VERNON, FEB 4 2021

On 1 February 2021, alleging election fraud in the November 2020 election, the Burmese military (Tatmadaw) seized control of power, arresting Aung San Suu Kyi and spelling the end of a period of democratic government since 2011 (BBC News, 2021b). In the immediate wake of the coup, the Tatmadaw has come under intense criticism from the US, with newly inaugurated President Joe Biden indicating that sanctions could be reinstated and that the US is noting which countries "...stand with the people of Burma in this difficult hour" (Biden, 2021). Furthermore, the G7 and the EU have also been extremely quick to issue a joint statement condemning the coup as an unacceptable affront to democracy in Myanmar (UK Government, 2021). Whilst China has vetoed a U.N. Security Council resolution condemning the coup (BBC News, 2021a), the quick response from Western leaders and threats of economic sanctions are notable in two key ways. Firstly, this immediate outpouring of criticism and calls for quick action stands in stark contrast to the international community's slow response in criticising genocidal violence against Rohingya Muslims, which has displaced over 725,000 people (Human Rights Council [HRC], 2018, p.8). Secondly, abhorrence at Suu Kyi's removal from power seems incongruous with recent attempts to apportion responsibility for the Rohingya Genocide to her and her civilian government.

In response, this article looks at international criticism of Aung San Suu Kyi for genocidal violence in Myanmar, specifically in the Human Rights Council's independent report on Myanmar (2018), due to this being the single most authoritative document on the genocide. It argues that the attribution of responsibility for genocidal violence to Aung San Suu Kyi rested upon characterising her within heteronormative notions of failed motherhood. This is because such characterisations recognised that Suu Kyi had already been imprisoned, and had no legal power to call the Tatmadaw to account. Such expectations, this paper argues, assume that Suu Kyi should have spoken out in an act of exceptional self-sacrifice: an expectation that is inherent to notions of maternal responsibility. Calling attention to the way in which such characterisations of Suu Kyi depoliticised the international community's inaction, this paper argues that the international community's response to the recent coup d'état highlights a greater concern for the idea of democracy than for the death and displacement of thousands of Rohingya Muslims.

Context

By August 2017 it was clear that the Rohingya was being targeted with genocidal intent, after decades of oppression at the hands of the Tatmadaw (HRC, p.8). Seeing the granting of power to ethnic minorities as damaging to Myanmar, the Tatmadaw last initiated a coup on the 2nd March 1962 (Charney, 2009, p.108). This led to the creation of Myanmar, previously known as Burma, and nearly four decades of military rule, characterised by civil war and the oppression of ethnic minorities such as the Rohingya. Although a new constitution was created in 2008, this saw the military retain control of the state security apparatus and exemption from judicial or parliamentary oversight (HRC, 2018, p.4). Nonetheless, the reintroduction of democratic reforms from 2011 and the holding of elections in 2015 was met with widespread praise and the easing of sanctions (BBC News, 2015, 2016). Despite this apparent advancement of democracy, the brutal oppression of ethnic minorities has worsened throughout, with violence notably increasing after 2012 (HRC, 2018, p.7). This violence, which has included the burning of villages (ibid, p.8) and the widespread use of rape and sexual violence (ibid, p.15) has resulted in most Rohingya being displaced to cramped refugee camps in Bangladesh (Wright et. al, 2018).

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In general, the international community has been extremely reluctant to respond to the genocide. Whilst crises in Libya, Syria, the Ivory Coast, Mali and Sudan have triggered a range of diplomatic and military responses under the authority of the U.N. Security Council (Bellamy, 2015, p.28), the Rohingya Genocide has not to date. Although the U.K. secured a Security Council Presidential statement highlighting the responsibility of the Government of Myanmar to uphold human rights in November 2017 (U.N. Security Council, 2017), no binding resolutions have been passed and no further collaborative action has been taken by the council. Indeed, it is only recently that the U.K., Belgium, the Dominican Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Tunisia, and the United States have collaboratively worked externally to the council in calling on the Government of Myanmar to end hostilities in Rakhine State, in light of the rising number of COVID-19 cases and the further deteriorating humanitarian situation (UK Government, 2020).

Furthermore, it is notable that as recently as November 2020, the UK government has praised Myanmar for a peaceful electoral process, with an added caveat that the UK was disappointed that minority groups were disenfranchised (UK Government, 2020). This reflects the notion that the UK has focussed on "the so-called democratic transition in the country at the expense of other issues." (Jones, p.24, 2017). Whilst Western powers such as the US (Kanno-Youngs, 2020), Canada (Canadian Government, 2019), Australia (DFAT, 2018), the UK (UK Government, 2020) and EU (European Union Council, 2019) have recently enforced a travel ban and asset freezes on certain Tatmadaw individuals, these measures were too little and too late to have any impact on the treatment of the Rohingya. Furthermore, a number of responses from the international community have explicitly called upon Aung San Suu Kyi to speak up on behalf of the Rohingya, despite her having little control over the military. In light of Suu Kyi's recent detention and removal from power, such calls now seem even more problematic. The remainder of this article is dedicated to consideration of the purpose behind framing the genocide as a responsibility of Suu Kyi and the impact that this has had.

Apportioning Responsibility

The Human Rights Council's report of the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar (2018) is the most authoritative document on the perpetration of genocidal violence in Myanmar. Based upon visits to Rakhine state, interviews, satellite photos, and statements by Burmese military officials (HRC, 2018, p.16), the report concluded that genocidal violence has been committed against the Rohingya. Discussing the attribution of blame for the perpetration of genocide, the U.N. Human Rights Council identify the Tatmadaw, and six specific military commanders, as those holding primary responsibility (2018, p.17). This in itself is unsurprising given the direct involvement of these agents in the perpetration of violence. What is surprising is the extent to which the report pins blame upon Aung San Suu Kyi and her civilian government (ibid). Here, it is stated that due to the spreading of false narratives, the denial of the wrongdoing of the Tatmadaw, blocking independent investigations, and overseeing the destruction of evidence, "the civilian authorities have contributed to the commission of atrocity crimes." (HRC, 2018, pp.17-18). Indeed, this characterisation initially seems to be true when looking at Suu Kyi's interviews with international journalists on the issue. In 2016, for example, she played down the extent to which there was a crisis, and in 2017 she argued that "ethnic-cleansing" was too strong a term to use, instead portraying 'the crisis' as an inter-ethnic conflict between Buddhists and Muslims stemming from historic tensions (BBC News, 2018). Such statements point towards an attempt to cover-up the actions of the Tatmadaw and deny the existence of the genocide, if taken in isolation from the social context in which they were made.

Here, it must be remembered that the civilian government in Myanmar had extremely limited powers due to it being bound by a constitution they cannot change, which entrenches Tatmadaw political control (HRC, 2018, p.4). Indeed, this distribution of control is acknowledged by the Human Rights Council in its attribution of responsibility to Suu Kyi. This occurs through the assertion that she could have used her "...moral authority, to stem or prevent the unfolding events, or seek alternative avenues to protect the civilian population." (HRC, 2018, p.17). In essence, she should have spoken out or 'done something', but the report is unsure of exactly what. When analysing this suggestion, it must be remembered that Aung San Suu Kyi has herself been the victim of significant human rights violations at the hands of the Tatmadaw, who placed her under house arrest for fifteen years due to her pro-democracy campaigning. Resultantly, it is more than possible that Suu Kyi has restrained her desire to criticise the Tatmadaw on the basis that she fears having her own human rights curtailed once more. Moreover, in light of Suu Kyi's recent arrest by the Tatmadaw, it seems even more likely that criticism of the military would have resulted in her detention. Of course,

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Suu Kyi may have actively been trying to cover-up the genocide, and to suggest that this cannot be the case is a gendered assumption. That being said, the report's (HRC, 2018) attribution of blame to Aung San Suu Kyi alongside its failure to substantively criticise the U.N.'s inaction seemingly invokes heteronormative[1] logics and requires further attention.

When discussing the responsibility of the international community for the occurrence of the genocide, the report acknowledges that the U.N. lacked a joined-up approach; many agencies "...have continued to prioritise development goals, humanitarian access and quiet diplomacy" despite Tatmadaw violence: an approach it acknowledges has failed (HRC, 2018, p.18). The report goes on to thank entities which have cooperated with the Human Rights Council but states its regret for the lack of cooperation from others (ibid). This constitutes a partial acknowledgement of responsibility for the U.N., but it fails to name those parties whom the report sees as guilty, and logistics are portrayed as the crux of the problem. As opposed to holding genocidal intent like Suu Kyi, agencies which have not cooperated with the Human Rights Council are seen as misguided agents, flawed insofar as they thought an individualised response was better.

In 2005, seeking to prevent exactly the kind of atrocity such as the Rohingya Genocide from occurring, the U.N. World Conference established the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect, also known as 'R2P', in international law (U.N. General Assembly, 2005). This stated the obligation of each U.N. member state to protect its populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity (U.N. General Assembly, 2005, p.30). It further pledged "...to use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other peaceful means..." to prevent the aforementioned crimes from occurring, and "...to take collective action, in a timely and decisive manner..." through the U.N. Charter, and Chapter VII[2] if necessary, where peaceful means have failed (ibid). It is consequently safe to say that the U.N. did have, and continues to have, more capacity than any other global institution to alter the course of The Rohingya Genocide. Admittedly, a resolution calling for the perpetrators of atrocities to be held accountable has been passed by the U.N. General Assembly (2017). Whilst marking a collective intention to take action, this resolution is non-binding on U.N. member states and little impactful action has been taken by states over the last few years. Moreover, there have been limited attempts to pass legally-binding U.N. Security Council resolutions, with the aim of halting the oppression of the Rohingya, but these have failed due to a lack of cooperation from Russia and China (U.N. Security Council, 2007; Nichols, 2018). As opposed to citing obstructive states and the global political climate as reasons for collective U.N. inaction, the report lays blame for failing to stop the genocide squarely at the feet of a woman who has already suffered for fifteen years at the hands of the Tatmadaw. Regardless of the political barriers to U.N. action on Myanmar, the statutory ability of the U.N. to act, contrasted with the lack of such a provision for Myanmar's civilian government, indicates that the attribution of responsibility in the report is misguided at best.

The Failed Mother

Looking at how the report and other international narratives have attributed blame to Aung San Suu Kyi for the occurrence of the genocide, these have tended to deploy the notion of a moral obligation to speak out, given her constitutional inability to use the powers of her office to constrain the Tatmadaw. In conjunction with the aforementioned attribution of blame in the report, Zeid Raad Al Hussein, the head of the Human Rights Council until August 2018, stated that Suu Kyi should have resigned her position by now. He further states that she should have said "Thank you very much, I will resign, I will go back into house arrest – I cannot be an adjunct accessory that others may think I am when it comes to these violations." (BBC News, 2018). This sentiment is reflected in Western media discourses (e.g. see: Ellis-Peterson and Hogan, 2018; Ruffles, 2018), which imply that Suu Kyi had a moral obligation to re-sacrifice her own human rights for those of 'her people'. Although more subtle, Western leaders have also called on Aung San Suu Kyi to take personal responsibility for the Rohingya, for example by choosing to facilitate repatriation efforts under the auspices of the U.N. (Johnson, 2018). These calls for action ignore the very real constraints on Aung San Suu Kyi, and have come in the place of a lack of independent action outside of the United Nations Security Council, as occurred in the Balkans and Syria, for example. Whilst I do not intend to advocate such action, the depoliticising effects of noting Aung San Suu Kyi's failure to speak up or 'do something' is noteworthy.

Indeed, the rhetoric surrounding Aung San Suu Kyi, entailing the assumption of normally exceptional self-sacrifice,

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arguably relates to the subject position of 'mother'. This is a figure that is central to heteronormative reproduction and is associated with an undying obligation to put one's children before one's self, due to an essential focus upon futurity (Edelman, 2007, p.2). Reflecting upon the portrayal of women's violence in global politics, Gentry and Sjoberg note that women are always framed in one of three ways; as a mother with a great capacity for nurturing, as an irrational monster who commits violence, or as a whore defined by excessive sexuality (2015, p.12). Again, variations of this narrative have been reproduced in Western articles on Suu Kyi's premiership, with The Telegraph asking "Aung San Suu Kyi: Burmese military prisoner, or monster?" (Simpson, 2017), for example. Furthermore, these discourses have intensified since 2019, when Suu Kyi argued that genocide had not been committed in Myanmar at the International Criminal Court (e.g. see: Addis, 2019).

Framing Suu Kyi in these terms offers a binary choice between seeing Suu Kyi as an embodiment of the vulnerability routinely attributed to women, or as an aberration due to her holding violent intent that is normally considered to be 'male behaviour'. This representation of Suu Kyi constitutes what Lisa Downing calls an "identity category violation" (2018, p.374), pushing her into the realm of monstrosity/unintelligibility due to the apparent incompatibility of her actions and perceived identity. Reflecting on the attribution of responsibility to Suu Kyi on the sole basis of moral obligation, it seems as though she has been framed as a 'mother' who has failed in her inherent maternal obligations, especially given the lack of attention paid to the international community's inaction. This oversight of global responses to the genocide depoliticises the inaction of the international community, and more specifically the U.N., which is presented as a well-intentioned but poorly coordinated body. By contrast, Suu Kyi's genocidal intent is presented as a necessary conclusion through reference to the idea that *she ought to have sacrificed her human rights* due to her perceived identity.

Conclusion

Placing responsibility for the Rohingya Genocide and the wellbeing of Rohingya refugees at the feet of Aung San Suu Kyi, in the place of concerted international diplomatic or military action, indicates that there is a gendered narrative at play. This narrative frames Suu Kyi's moral obligations to take action as having primacy over those of the international community. Given that the international community is obliged to defend human rights under the UN Charter, has the ability to use any diplomatic or military means under Chapter VII, and has a history of pursuing ad-hoc approaches to intervention when a Security Council impasse exists, this is plainly absurd. This contrasts with Suu Kyi's government having no legal capacity to take action due to a constitution that was drawn up by the military, Suu Kyi having previously been imprisoned by the military, and having since been detained because she won an election.

Narratives calling on Suu Kyi to do something, indeed anything to end the violence (e.g. HRC, 2018, pp.17-18), point towards a depiction of Suu Kyi as having a maternal obligation to criticise the Tatmadaw, as speaking out would have likely ended democratic government in Myanmar and resulted in her even earlier imprisonment. Furthermore, the difference between the international response to the genocide and the coup is problematic for another reason. The international response to the Rohingya Genocide has been slow, extremely limited and cautious, resulting in it having no impact whatsoever on the death, rape and displacement of thousands of Rohingya Muslims. This contrasts with a swift condemnation and possible forthcoming sanctions in response to the overthrow of democracy in Myanmar. Whilst the recent election of Joe Biden to the White House undoubtedly has a role to play in this, it poses the pressing question: 'Is democracy more worthy of defending than populations at risk of genocide?'

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[1] Heteronormativity refers to the existence of heterosexuality as the established social norm, characterised by binary understandings of sex and oppositional sex attraction (Steans, 2014, p.28).

[2] Chapter VII is the section of the U.N. Charter which gives the U.N. Security Council the power to authorise economic/diplomatic/military sanctions, alongside the use of military force, to resolve disputes (U.N. Security Council, 2019).

About the author:

Dr Patrick J. Vernon is a Lecturer in Gender and War Studies in the Department of War Studies at King's College London. Their research studies the role of gendered, sexual, and racialised representations in discourses and

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practices of security. They are particularly interested in the study of political violence from the micro to the global level, having researched topics including online abuse, hostile media representations of minoritised groups, bordering practices, genocide, and humanitarian intervention. Patrick has published work in journals including *Millennium*, *International Studies Review*, *International Political Sociology*, and *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*.