



HALL OF INFAMY

AUNG SAN SUU KYI

JOB: State Counsellor of Myanmar

REPUTATION: Human rights champion turned genocide apologist

How could it happen? For decades Suu Kyi led a mostly nonviolent struggle against a vicious military dictatorship in Myanmar. She endured 15 long years of house arrest, violent attacks and the ruthless suppression of her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). Suu Kyi and the NLD won a landslide in 1988 (overturned by the military) and again in 2015, when the military was forced into a semi-free election. She was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1991 for her commitment to nonviolent resistance. She withstood long-term separation from her husband and children in the UK – she could not travel outside Myanmar knowing that the military would never agree to her return. When she did achieve political victory in 2015, she held office under a constitution that allowed the military to appoint 25 per cent of the members of parliament (including key cabinet posts), effectively blocking any constitutional change. Despite this, Myanmar today is considered a unitary parliamentary republic with the ever-popular Suu Kyi as State Counsellor, but usually referred to by the people as *Amay Suu* (Mother Suu) or simply ‘the Lady’.

Was this a deal with the devil or a necessary compromise to wean power away from a military habituated to running the show since 1962? The proof of the pudding is, as they say, in the eating, and for most human rights advocates this pudding is

proving pretty unpalatable. Whether it’s journalistic freedom or the right of activists to assemble, democratic change is still decidedly limited. Censorship and repression are commonplace, particularly when it comes to controversial topics such as the brutal treatment of the 1.1 million Rohingya Muslim minority. They have been denied citizenship and are widely seen as illegal ‘Bengalis’ even though they have lived in Myanmar for generations. The Rohingya have been subject to what the military terms ‘clearance operations’ – actually a campaign of village burning, rape and extra-judicial killing. Since 2016 the vast majority have been driven into neighbouring Bangladesh. Suu Kyi has consistently denied the atrocities, even appearing before the International Criminal Court in the Hague in 2019 to defend the military against charges of genocide and ethnic cleansing. While she resists referring to the widely scapegoated minority as Bengalis, neither will she use their preferred name – Rohingya.

Suu Kyi’s alliance with the military needs to be seen as more than simple opportunism. Often when responding to the icon status bestowed on her by

Western media Suu Kyi insisted she was primarily a politician. More ominously she declared herself someone who ‘does not hold to nonviolence for moral reasons, but for political and practical reasons’. Myanmar has 135 official ethnic minorities, many of whom chafe under the authoritarian imposition of military rule run out of the remote capital Naypyidaw. Suu Kyi, along with most of the military hierarchy, is a member of the dominant Bamar or Burman people.

She herself comes from a military background. Her independence-hero father Aung San established what has today become the modern Myanmar army before being assassinated by rivals back in 1947. On her fateful return from the UK in 1988, when she became a leader of the democratic opposition, she was reportedly encouraged by dissident figures from Myanmar’s fractious military. Suu Kyi’s identity as part of the Bamar Buddhist elite has helped her navigate tricky political shoals. Her attitude towards Myanmar’s sovereignty and how it is exercised has become increasingly defensive and uncritical as she has moved from dissident outsider to nationalistic insider. She may yet regret having once famously proclaimed: ‘Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it.’ ●



LOW CUNNING: *In 2019, she met with Viktor Orbán, the autocratic leader of Hungary, publicly allying with him on the challenge of managing Muslim immigration.*

SENSE OF HUMOUR: *She has needed a good one and perhaps appreciated the joke making the rounds after her 2015 electoral triumph. ‘After decades of trying to get into the driver’s seat, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi has discovered that the steering wheel is not connected, the accelerator does not work and the passengers all want to go in different directions.’*

Sources: *The Atlantic; BBC; The New York Times; The Interpreter; The Guardian; Nikkei Asian Review; The Progressive; Now This World.*

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