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Burma / Myanmar persecution of Rohingya: Aung San Suu Kyi: damned by her silence

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Her failure to condemn the persecution of Rohingya Muslims has led to the Burmese politician's dramatic fall from grace

Perhaps no one in the modern world has been so admired as a moral icon, then fallen so far in global estimation, as Aung San Suu Kyi. The Burmese democracy champion turned politician made her name as an implacable fighter for human rights. She sacrificed her family life, her freedom and, for stretches, her health, in a battle for the soul of her country and the future of her people. Then, after emerging triumphant and untarnished from more than two decades of struggle, she has stood by as hundreds of thousands of her fellow Burmese are persecuted, massacred and driven from their homes because of their religion.

Aung San Suu Kyi has broken her silence on spiralling abuses against the Rohingya Muslim minority, described as “ethnic cleansing” by UN officials, only to defend the government that she is part of, sparking fierce criticism from former friends, allies and supporters.

“It is incongruous for a symbol of righteousness to lead such a country,” Archbishop Desmond Tutu said last week in a letter to his “dearly beloved younger sister” [1]. He’s the latest of several Nobel peace prize winners to publicly rebuke their fellow laureate. “If the political price of your ascension to the highest office in Myanmar is your silence, the price is surely too steep,” he said.

Like so many others who knew 72-year-old Aung San Suu Kyi during her struggle, and millions more who admired her, Tutu seems almost as baffled as he is disturbed by her stance. Her powerful intellect and capacity for empathy, her willingness to put others’ rights ahead of her family life and freedom, all make the apparent ease with which she is now turning her back on human suffering and extreme injustice almost incomprehensible.

Terrible personal loss is not an abstract ideal for Aung San Suu Kyi. Her father, a general and hero of the struggle for independence against Britain, was assassinated when she was two and her beloved older brother died in a drowning accident five years later. As an adult, she experienced first hand the brutal power of an oppressive state, when she spent 15 years under house arrest, prevented from saying goodbye to her dying husband or seeing her two sons for long years at a time.

When she delivered her Nobel lecture, two decades after being awarded the prize, she mentioned the “great sufferings” addressed in Buddhist theology and dwelt on two she had come to know intimately: “To be parted from those one loves and to be forced to live in propinquity with those one does not love.” She continued: “I thought of prisoners and refugees, of migrant workers and victims of human trafficking, of that great mass of the uprooted of the Earth who have been torn away from their homes, parted from families and friends, forced to live out their lives among strangers who are not always welcoming.”

Her decision to separate the suffering of the Rohingya from that of other peoples, after years of insisting that human rights are a universal birthright and fighting “to make our human community safer and kinder”, appears to mark the start of a disturbing new chapter in an extraordinary life.

For her first 43 years, Aung San Suu Kyi was an extraordinary ordinary person, the daughter of a national hero who remained fairly private and focused on her family. In the space of a few months, in 1988, she would become a national hero and international icon, her name mentioned in the company of moral giants such as Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela.

Born in Yangon in 1945, she was educated at international schools in the city until the age of 15, when her mother was appointed ambassador to India and the family moved to Delhi. She won a place to study PPE at Oxford in 1964, where she met Michael Aris, the British academic who would become her husband.

Once married, the couple worked for several years in Bhutan, then returned to Oxford to start a family. Aung San Suu Kyi resumed her academic and writing career and presided over a warm and loving household in the city until a phone call in 1988 brought her back to Myanmar. It was a summons to the bedside of her mother who was seriously ill after a stroke. Aung San Suu Kyi later said she had not anticipated the transformation that this call would trigger, but she would never return to her Oxford home or to her family life.

Her mother’s illness coincided with a period of national convulsions as protests against the military dictatorship gathered force. Aung San Suu Kyi, who had inherited from her father a powerful if ill-defined sense of political destiny, was persuaded to join the opposition by activists keen to harness the power of her family name. It was a dramatic political apprenticeship. She made her first speech to a rapturous reception in August, co-founded the National League for Democracy within months, was jailed by the summer of 1989 and awarded the Nobel peace prize barely two years later.

In 1988, her husband and sons, then aged just 11 and 15, had come out to Yangon to discuss whether she should enter politics, braced for her decision to stay in Myanmar. Aung San Suu Kyi had warned Aris before their marriage that one day she might take up politics. “I made him promise that if there was ever a time I had to go back to my country, he would not stand in my way,” she told the New York Times at the time. “And he promised.”

Initially, both Aung San Suu Kyi and the Myanmar authorities appear to have underestimated each other. The military junta thought they were dealing with a political dilettante who would be easily crushed and dispatched back to England.

Privations in the early days of detention included malnutrition so severe that her hair began to fall out. The authorities reminded her that she was free to leave Myanmar, while restricting visas for her family, calculating that the pain of separation would force her into an impotent exile. She agreed with their political analysis and chose to put family second, even as Aris battled cancer alone in 1999, and then her sons struggled after his death. Notable for her self-control, one of the few occasions Aung San Suu Kyi is reported to have broken down was when a rare call with her dying husband was cut off.

She believed the regime would succumb to the powerful protest movement sooner rather than later and her political career might be measured at most in years. Instead, their decades-long standoff would make her perhaps the most famous political prisoner in the world and define the regime jailing her as international pariahs. She seemed an almost perfect leader, who responded to house arrest by playing the piano and taking up meditation. Her bravery, eloquence and beauty fed the legend that would see her life made into a film starring Michelle Yeoh and push the increasingly

isolated military leadership to make concessions.

In 2010, she was finally released from house arrest and in 2012 allowed to contest a byelection, which she won easily. Finally, certain that she would be able to return, Aung San Suu Kyi left Myanmar again to collect the awards that had stacked up during her detention. Everywhere, she was greeted with adulation; at the Houses of Parliament, the Speaker, John Bercow, introduced her as “the conscience of a country and the heroine of humanity”. But a few voices of dissent had started to raise concerns about her apparent lack of concern for the Rohingya.

As the violence mounted steadily, so did criticism of Aung San Suu Kyi. Some defenders tried to argue that she was gagged by temporary political concerns ahead of crucial 2015 elections, because she had to hold on to the votes of nationalist Buddhists. A new constitution rigged in the military’s favour already gave the generals who had ruled for decades control over key ministries and barred her from the presidency, so her candidates for parliament needed every vote they could get. But three years later, her NLD won a landslide in elections and she took over a host of portfolios from the foreign to the energy ministries and a newly created role as state counsellor. Yet as attacks on Rohingya intensified, so did her conspicuous silence.

The universally acclaimed champion of human rights has shuffled down a uniquely disturbing path, the only Nobel peace laureate to turn apologist for the most grotesque abuses of basic rights inside her own country. Her exact motivations remain opaque but the only thing she obviously stands to lose by speaking out is the support of the military power brokers who still ultimately control Myanmar and the only thing she could obviously hope to gain by her silence is more power and influence.

Contemplating her next move, Aung San Suu Kyi might do well to look back over her own advice to politicians and despots, set down when she could still count herself among a small pantheon of modern-day secular saints. “It is not power that corrupts but fear,” she wrote in *Freedom From Fear*, perhaps her most famous work. “Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it.”

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P.S.

* The Observer profile. The Guardian. Sunday 10 September 2017 00.05 BST Last modified on Sunday 10 September 2017 17.06 BST:
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/10/aung-san-suu-kyi-myanmar-rohingya-human-rights>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/08/desmond-tutu-condemns-aung-san-suu-kyi-pr ice-of-your-silence-is-too-steep>