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by Sarah Goldfeder
September, 2017

POLICY UPDATE

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Prepared for the Canadian Global Affairs Institute
1800, 421 – 7th Avenue S.W., Calgary, AB T2P 4K9
www.cgai.ca

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ISBN: 978-1-988493-59-6



The plight of the Rohingya is nothing new. In a country of 135 recognized ethnic groups, the Burmese Buddhist majority has historically distrusted and targeted religious minority groups. Having been denied citizenship rights, the Rohingya have been essentially stateless for generations. The government sees them as squatters or worse, and to other governments they are unwanted refugees. Even under the military regime, Bangladesh, India and Malaysia declined to offer the Rohingya any sort of legal status, thus exacerbating the situation for the past 50 years.

Ten years ago, on Sept. 25, 2007, the governing junta led by General Than Shwe opened fire on groups of Buddhist monks marching in the streets of Rangoon. The monks were popularly considered the voice of the people and were protesting national policies that had driven up the price of rice, cooking fuel and gasoline to the point where the average Burmese family could no longer afford transportation or food. The monks marched for days, galvanizing support within the country and intriguing the global imagination. But the whispers of hope for real change were silenced in a moment outside of the Shwedagon Pagoda. The world dubbed it “the Saffron Revolution” for the colour of the monks’ robes. It was a misnomer from the beginning, as the term “revolution” implies change, but the reality for the people of Burma remained the same.

Back in September and October of 2007, the world watched what was unfolding in Rangoon. Groups rallied for a free Burma and sold T-shirts with the likeness of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. As the government culled the monasteries and tamped down protests in the cities with curfews and military law, the world paid attention for a moment. By November, other global crises overtook the headlines, and in the end, the world’s attention moved on. Likewise, the Rohingya’s brutal reality was first brought to international attention in 1978, when Bangladesh complained that it was being forced to “repatriate” Burmese Muslims. In 2012 the latest barrage of reports began with the riots and dramatically exposed the division between the Rakhine and the Rohingya in the westernmost state.

The Burmese have a reputation as a gentle people oppressed by military leaders, but that belies a darker history. The government recognizes 135 ethnic groups, and the largest seven each have their own states, where if they’re not the plurality, then they are the largest minority. While the government recognizes ethnic diversity, Burma’s legal system has always favoured one belief system over the others, in many ways to the exclusion of other religions. In addition, immigration and naturalization are all but unheard of, creating an essentially closed society. The combination of these factors has led to an insularity that is in some ways endearing, but in others destructive.

The situation in Burma is preventable. But the Western world has had an attentiveness deficit. To enter the discussion now with a call for sanctions, responsibility and change, rings hollow in a country that has become used to being ignored. Going back to Ne Win, the man responsible for the 1962 coup d’état that defined Burma for 50 years, this country has seized global attention in



fits and starts. If the world really wants to encourage this nascent government to develop humanitarian policies that protect minorities, then prolonged, sustained, philosophic intervention is required. Burma's religious minorities have suffered too long. Right now, any call for sanctions is short-sighted. Sanctions will only replay the script that defined the early 2000s.

In 2012, the last round of sanctions finally appeared to have worked, driving down the profits that lined the pockets of the generals and their cronies and physically isolating their children, limiting their prospects for education and professional fulfilment. Elections were held, albeit with the usual first-time-in-a-generation issues. Perhaps more importantly, Myanmar opened for business. Fifty years of digital technology and industrialization were accelerated, and within months, a cash economy became a global economy. Despite this success, the real effect of those sanctions was to provide China and North Korea with a beachhead into this natural resource-rich and underdeveloped land. To press pause on development again by re-engaging sanctions will only cause the government of Htin Kyaw to further entrench its position and move closer to its old allies and business partners.

Is there a solution? Not without sustained, progressive involvement. While national sovereignty is clearly a consideration, the world needs to be clear that it is a government's responsibility to ensure that the people inside its borders are provided a safe environment in which to thrive and grow. We must be clear that disenfranchising or dislocating a group based on its religion is not acceptable. There may be no way to establish a peace between the Rakhine and the Rohingya, and it may be that intervention includes establishing a process to initially separate the two. But creating dialogue with a vision of peaceful cohabitation is what democratic societies do. It is not enough to find a process for the Rohingya to be accepted into other Muslim-majority nations.

True leadership requires more than rhetoric. Yet, no high-level envoy from the United States, Canada or the European Union has shown up. Hollow claims of concern and leadership will not be sufficient to fix this situation. Western democracies may end up ceding this space to Prime Minister Modi, who in his visit last week echoed the identification of Rohingya as terrorist insurgents, adding a voice in reinforcement of the narrative of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Hands-on engagement will be the only way that Canada, the United States or others guide a fledgling democracy out of this crisis. Threats and coercion will only encourage more threats and coercion.

► About the Author

Sarah Goldfeder is a Principal at the Earncliffe Strategy Group in Ottawa, where she provides high-level insight on the inner workings of the U.S. and Canadian governments, including how they work together on important issues. With 15 years of experience in the U.S. federal government, Sarah most recently served as Special Assistant to two U.S. Ambassadors to Canada, fostering bilateral relationships at the most senior levels. Her understanding of the interplay between state and federal governments complements her service within the U.S. federal bureaucracy. She has expertise in a wide range of policy issues, which has enabled her to provide practical short and long-term advice on managing the economic, cultural and political dynamics in North America.

Prior to her arrival in Ottawa, Sarah spent three years in Mexico as a Foreign Service Officer, cultivating a deep understanding of U.S./Mexico border issues and appreciation for a region revitalizing itself after years of violence and fear. Her experiences have convinced her of the potential for a stronger, more cohesive partnership across the North American continent. In her work, she seeks to maximize the region's ability to advance the movement of people, goods, and services; the supply, production, and use of energy; and balancing the energy and environment equation. Sarah has also served in Southeast Asia, giving her a global perspective on North American policy development and an appreciation of the opportunities available both within and beyond the Western hemisphere.

Sarah is a North American nomad, with a father from Brooklyn, a mother from Chicago, and a life lived in eight states, six countries, and three continents. She calls the West her home, having studied at the University of Oregon in Eugene, Oregon and Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colorado.

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