

Myanmar's Parliamentary Elections: Democracy on Trial

News:

On Sunday 8th November, Myanmar held what has been hailed by Western governments and the international community as a landmark parliamentary election and a “historic democratic process” after five decades of military rule. It has been praised as a ‘milestone’ in Burma’s transition to democracy and a reflection of the extent of the democratic reforms made by the country. However, behind the fanfare of these so-called ‘landmark’ elections, anti-Muslim hatred has been stoked or ignored by various competing political parties for the sake of winning power, and the intense persecution and discrimination against the Rohingya Muslims has continued unabated. The ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) passed anti-Muslim laws and harnessed anti-Muslim sentiment propagated in the run-up to the polls by extremist Buddhist nationalists and radical monks who support the party, to gain favour amongst the Buddhist majority electorate. Meanwhile, the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by the West’s golden girl for democratic change in the country, Aung San Suu Kyi, chose intentionally to ignore the ongoing genocide against the Rohingya, failing to speak out against it. All this has taken place against a background of increasing repression and deteriorating living conditions facing the Rohingya which the international community has pushed to the sidelines of the political discourse related to Myanmar so as not to over-shadow the elections which they view as a victory for democracy.

Comment:

The Rohingya Muslims have served as the ‘sacrificial lamb’ in this ‘historic’ democratic process which has merely exposed the inherent flaws of ‘Democracy’. Firstly, how can any system which permits politicians and parties to fuel suspicion and hatred against ethnic or religious minorities in order to win power, ever be viewed as a successful model by which to govern societies? The USDP is by no means alone in employing anti-Muslim sentiment to win votes in democratic elections. It is a tool that has been used by politicians in a number of Western democratic states, including France, the UK, Australia, and Canada to win over xenophobic sectors of their electorate, accepted under the liberal umbrella of ‘pluralism’ or ‘freedom of expression’. The attacks on Islam by the National Front in France, or the anti-Muslim rhetoric of Australia’s former Prime Minister Tony Abbot, or the demonization of the niqab by former French President Nicholas Sarkozy and former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper are simply a few examples of the use of religious hatred within secular states to win elections – all of which was tolerated by their ‘democratic’ systems.

Secondly, what does it say about democracy, when the National League for Democracy, and its leader Suu Kyi, the democracy icon, chose to ignore the ethnic cleansing of a religious minority and played along with the anti-Muslim fervour within the country to win a few votes? Mark Farmaner, director at Burma Campaign UK commented regarding the NLD response to the anti-Muslim feeling being stoked by ethnic Buddhists, *“The response from the NLD has been lose-lose on this issue because instead of confronting Buddhist nationalism and calling for a tolerant multi-ethnic multi-religious country, the NDL has copped out to the nationalists and the extremists monks.”* When Suu Kyi visited the Rakhine state in

October for campaigning she failed to even visit the internment camp for the Rohingya in the province or express how she would stop the apartheid treatment of Muslims. Clearly there are few electoral gains to be made in speaking out for a stateless oppressed minority who have been denied the vote under Myanmar law. Furthermore, in a press conference held in Yangon on Thursday 5th November, when asked if she would condemn the genocide of the Rohingya Muslims, Aung San Suu Kyi told the international media, *"It is very important that we should not exaggerate the problem."* This was just days after two reports from international experts were published regarding the genocide that the community was facing. A clinic of Yale Law School for Bangkok-based NGO Fortify Rights stated that it had found, *"strong evidence that genocide is being committed against Rohingya."* And a report by the British Research Institute which was the result of an investigation by the International State Crime Initiative at Queen Mary University of London, stated that Myanmar's Rohingya population is in *"the final stages of a genocidal process"* comparable to that in Nazi Germany in the 1930's and Rwanda in the 1990's. In addition, the UN High Commissioner for refugees has already warned that it expects another exodus of Rohingya from Myanmar to start soon in the fast-approaching 'sailing season' – a result of the appalling, squalid conditions they face in the internment camps and their continuing lack of freedom of movement and access to employment, education, and medical treatment. What does it say therefore about a system whose staunch advocates view the seeking of power as supreme over speaking against oppression, or standing for humanity and people's dignity and basic rights?

Regardless of the NLD's landslide victory in these elections, it is democracy that has been on trial, and the verdict is that it is a defective political model. Indeed, any system that favours political expediency over moral principles only holds promises of dangers and failures for society. In stark contrast, the Prophet (saw) never compromised or left a single Islamic principle when seeking political authority to implement Islam as a system within a state. This is the nature of Islamic politics where moral values, including standing against oppression can never be discarded for the sake of power or political gains. This same principle is embraced by the Islamic political system, the Khilafah, where inciting hatred against any race, ethnicity, or religious community is not tolerated for any purpose, and where minorities are protected and guaranteed their rights rather than used as fodder to feed the political appetites of power-hungry politicians.

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