

Burma's Aung San Suu Kyi and the fraud of human rights imperialism

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The plight of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims fleeing the Burmese military's rampage in the western state of Rakhine is a devastating exposure of the fraud of human rights imperialism practiced by the US and its allies and their chief political asset in Burma (Myanmar)—Aung San Suu Kyi.

The brutality and scale of the military operations have occasioned a great deal of hypocritical handwringing in the UN and by those who have aggressively promoted Suu Kyi as a “democracy icon.” Despite the media and humanitarian agencies being barred from the operational area, there is substantial and mounting evidence that the Burmese army has been systematically torching villages and there are numerous eyewitness accounts of soldiers gunning down civilians.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres yesterday described what was taking place in Rakhine state as “ethnic cleansing,” saying: “When one-third of the Rohingya population had to flee the country, could you find a better word to describe it?” The UN Security Council issued a statement that “expressed concern about reports of excessive violence” and appealed for steps to “de-escalate the situation,” protect civilians and resolve the refugee problem.

British Foreign Minister Boris Johnson last week joined the chorus of international appeals to Suu Kyi to use her influence to rein in the military. “Aung San Suu Kyi is rightly regarded as one of the most inspiring figures of our age, but the treatment of the Rohingya is alas besmirching the reputation of Burma,” he declared.

If the military's ethnic cleansing had taken place a decade ago, when the Burmese junta had Suu Kyi under house arrest, the reaction would have been quite different. There would have been ringing condemnations from Western imperialism of the “rogue

regime,” denunciations of its long history of human rights abuses and moves for even tougher diplomatic and economic sanctions against Burma.

Why is Washington now soft-peddling the latest military outrages in Burma? As is the case around the world, the US has never had the slightest interest in promoting basic democratic rights in Burma. Rather, its attitude toward the Burmese military dictatorship was always determined by economic and strategic interests—in particular, Washington's hostility to the junta's close ties with China.

As the Obama administration began to ramp up its “pivot to Asia” against China throughout the Asia Pacific, the Burmese junta, facing a mounting economic and social crisis at home, signalled a shift away from Beijing in 2011 and a willingness to find a political role for Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD).

It was as if a switch had been flicked. Virtually overnight, Burma was designated in the US and international media not as a rogue state, but as a “developing democracy.” A string of top American officials trooped in, culminating in a visit by President Barack Obama in 2012. Sanctions were progressively dropped and Suu Kyi became a roving ambassador for the junta, hustling for investment and aid.

The victory of the NLD in the carefully managed elections in 2016 and installation of Suu Kyi as de facto head of government was universally hailed by the establishment media, middle-class liberals and various pseudo-left organisations as the flowering of democracy. In reality, the military remains in charge: it appointed officers to a quarter of the parliamentary seats and installed serving generals to the key cabinet posts of defence, home affairs and border affairs.

Suu Kyi and the NLD went along with this charade

because their basic concern was never with democratic rights as such. Rather, the NLD represents those sections of the Burmese bourgeoisie whose economic interests were stifled under the military junta. Aligned with Western imperialism, they sought to open up the country to investment.

Moreover, the NLD, Suu Kyi included, is just as mired as the military in the reactionary ideology of Burmese Buddhist supremacism, which has repeatedly been exploited to sow religious and ethnic divisions among working people. As hopes for an economic boom in Burma have faded, the military, with the NLD's backing, has escalated violence against Muslim Rohingyas, who long have been used as a scapegoat for the country's problems.

Suu Kyi and the NLD have taken no steps to address the lack of fundamental rights for the Rohingya minority, who are branded as "illegal immigrants" from Bangladesh. Despite having lived, in many cases for generations, in Burma, they are not citizens and thus have no rights or access to social services.

Suu Kyi has openly defended the military's ethnic cleansing campaign, justified in the name of the "war on terrorism" and the need to suppress Rohingya militias that have sprung up in response to the army's outrages. After criticism from the Turkish president last week, Suu Kyi lashed out against "fake news photographs" and "a huge iceberg of misinformation" that creates problems "with the aim of promoting the interest of the terrorists."

The events in Burma are a graphic example of the cynical use of "human rights" to promote the interests of imperialism. But it is far from the only one. Time and again, the demonisation of leaders and regimes over "human rights" has been exploited as the pretext for illegal wars of aggression and regime-change operations. The US and its allies, supported by various liberals and pseudo-left groups, have laid waste to Iraq, Libya and Syria, leading to millions of deaths in a bid to shore up American hegemony in the strategic, energy-rich Middle East.

The situation in Burma underscores the basic conclusion drawn by Leon Trotsky more than a century ago in his Theory of Permanent Revolution, and confirmed by the Russian Revolution in 1917: the organic inability of any section of the bourgeoisie in countries with a belated capitalist development that are

dominated by imperialism, such as Burma, to establish basic democratic rights. That task falls to the working class, in the fight to take power at the head of a revolutionary movement as an integral component of the struggle for socialism internationally.



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