

# Burma's "democracy icon" Aung San Suu Kyi defends ethnic cleansing of Rohingya

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Amid a growing international outcry, Burmese political leader Aung San Suu Kyi defended the military's murdering and pillaging of the country's Rohingya minority in a televised address on Tuesday. She offered empty condemnations of human rights violations, in order to obscure and justify the systematic ethnic cleansing underway by the army.

Suu Kyi offered a thoroughly distorted and duplicitous explanation of the violence in Rakhine state, where the army has forced hundreds of thousands of Rohingya people to flee the country in the past month. The state counselor blamed Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) insurgents for causing violent rifts after "several months of seemingly quiet and peace." She branded them as a terrorist organization that acted against the benevolence of the government and army. The rest of the Rohingya people were referred to only as "Muslims."

This account may as well have come from Burmese military officials, who have justified their pogroms against Rohingya for years in the guise of defending the nation against "illegal immigration" and terrorism. The ARSA attacks, which are minor by comparison to the army's brutal operations, are the outcome, not the cause, of military state repression.

Suu Kyi said: "It is not the intention of the Myanmar government to apportion blame or abdicate responsibility. We condemn *all* human rights violations and unlawful violence." With this cynical statement, she sought to brush over the military's decades of gross human rights abuses against the Rohingya, as well as the broader Burmese population.

Suu Kyi effectively gave the military the green light to continue their "clearance operations," claiming it was bringing "peace, rule of law, and development" to the Rakhine state. She promised humanitarian access

and a limited refugee acceptance process, but asked the world to offer more patience and understanding. Just weeks ago, when the army began the onslaught against the Rohingya, Suu Kyi praised the police and security forces for their "great courage" in handling the situation. She bluntly denied reports that the army's violence constituted ethnic cleansing and refused external investigation or aid.

From the end of August, interviews, satellite imagery and first-hand observations clearly demonstrated the fallacy of Suu Kyi's statements. The Burmese military systematically targeted the Rohingya population, burning entire villages and murdering civilians. Over 300,000 have fled across the border to Bangladesh, living in horrid conditions in some of the world's largest refugee encampments.

As the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya provoked public outrage, world leaders and the establishment media issued their own muted criticisms of Suu Kyi, who has been promoted for decades as a "democracy icon" and awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres last week called on Burmese officials to "de-escalate the situation," protect civilians and resolve the refugee problem. European leaders issued similar statements, with Britain placing extra emphasis on its concern for the reputation of Burma and Suu Kyi.

This week Guterres, in his opening statement to the UN General Assembly, "took note" of Suu Kyi's positive statements, but reiterated his hope that "the authorities in Myanmar must end the military operations, and allow unhindered humanitarian access."

Numerous media commentaries, written more in sorrow than in anger, have pointed to Suu Kyi's duplicity and thinly-disguised apologetics for the military's gross abuses. The British-based *Financial*

*Times*, for instance, declared that the Nobel-prize winner's speech "fails the Rohingya test."

The United States, which has stayed nearly silent in the past month, expressed hopes of building "tighter relations" with Burma despite the current situation.

However, no-one openly condemned Suu Kyi nor offered any explanation as to why the much-hailed figure has rapidly transformed into an apologist for the very military apparatus that kept her under house arrest for decades.

Suu Kyi and her NLD opposed the military junta not because of its human rights abuses but because it stifled opportunities for sections of the Burmese capitalist class, blocked foreign investment and was oriented to China, not the West. The US and its allies backed Suu Kyi precisely because she was a staunch advocate of their economic and strategic interests.

Once the military junta signalled a shift away from China in 2011, Washington's attitude also changed. Burma was no longer denounced as a rogue state but praised as "a developing democracy." The Obama administration's efforts to woo the Burmese military were part of its broader "pivot to Asia" throughout the region against China.

The US backed the NLD government, formed after the 2016 elections, despite the fact that the military still holds key levers of power—including all the security ministries, defence, home affairs and border affairs. Like the military, Suu Kyi and the NLD are mired in the Burmese Buddhist supremacy and anti-Rohingya chauvinism that exudes from their justifications of the ethnic cleansing.

For the US and its allies, the brutal "clearance operations" are nothing more than a temporary embarrassment and potentially a tool to pressure the government if it tilts toward closer relations with Beijing. So long as this "democratic" government protects their geostrategic and economic interests, no significant action will be taken to pressure it to end the human rights abuses.



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