

The Lady has no voice

By Bunn Nagara



Secretary of State John Kerry in May 2016. – AFP

Myanmar Foreign Minister Aung San Suu Kyi, pictured during a visit by US

THE Myanmar of today was ruled by the aggressive and expansionist Konbaung Dynasty from the mid-18th to the late 19th century.

Konbaung kings attacked India's Assam and Manipur Kingdoms, the Mon Kingdom to the south, and the Siamese Kingdom next door. They even irritated Qing Dynasty China, but despite battlefield victories they were no match for the Middle Kingdom.

After repeated attacks on Siam in the final decades of the 18th century destroying the capital of Ayutthaya, Siamese General (later King) Taksin drove the intruders back and built the new capital of Thonburi in today's Bangkok.

Defeated and disoriented by the Siamese on its eastern border, Myanmar turned to raiding Laos – and attacking Arakan on its western border fronting the Bay of Bengal.

King Hsinbyushin defeated Arakan's Kingdom of Mrauk U in 1785, driving 35,000 local people into Chittagong in today's Bangladesh as refugees to escape persecution.

Myanmar's dominant Bamar ethnic group killed many native Arakanese, and deported many of the survivors to central Myanmar. Arakan was renamed Rakhine, meaning "land of the dark-skinned beings," believed in reference to the dark-complexioned people there.

Throughout history, many Myanmar Muslims living in Rakhine have been exploited and abused while being left powerless. In the 16th century, those of Bengali lineage were conscripted, enslaved or shunted elsewhere like chattel.

However, Myanmar's expanding territorial ambitions rubbed against the interests of British India. British firepower defeated the Myanmar army in all three Anglo-Burmese Wars throughout the 19th century, ending the country's dynastic rule.

The result was a subdued British Burma. But that did not extinguish the independent country's ambitions from 1948.

While Myanmar Muslims were generally victims of discrimination, the Rohingya community in particular still suffer the most. Deprived of basic human, civil and political rights, they are denied citizenship and face daily restrictions on movement, marriage and childbirth.

Since 2012 and especially in the last quarter of this year, the Rohingyas have been subjected to genocide.

Documentary and witness evidence shows widespread, systematic and state-sponsored murders, arson of whole villages, rapes, torture, forced labour, arbitrary arrests and detention, and deportation – or simply being pushed out to sea.

In the process, the Rohingyas often become victims of human traffickers. Thus Myanmar authorities also actively and wilfully contribute to a regional problem.

After Rohingya homes had been burnt down by agitators, starving families were denied food rations in the hands of the authorities.

Rohingya children cannot attend schools, and the sick cannot access clinics, hospitals or other medical services.

By killing the Rohingya population, Myanmar is conducting Stage One genocide.

By restricting Rohingya marriages and childbirths to stop future generations, state authorities are practising biological genocide.

And by insisting Rohingyas are non-persons and rejecting even the name “Rohingya”, extremist private and government groups are undertaking comprehensive genocide.

It amounts to a calculated policy of extinguishing the Rohingya people permanently, including their deletion from history.

Anti-Rohingya propaganda is strong and outrageous. And genocide depends on erasing a people's very being.

The Rohingyas themselves lack education and are preoccupied with survival. To right the wrongs, it is vital to learn about Rohingya history and culture – and document and popularise them.

The fact that the majority of the Bamar perpetrators are “Buddhist” and the Rohingya are Muslim creates an impression of inter-faith conflict. That is a fiction that only compounds the tragedy and assists in the genocide.

By making the conflict look like a battle of “us” versus “them”, more Buddhists who form the country's majority may be susceptible to anti-Rohingya propaganda, made to feel threatened, and be recruited to the cause.

Talk of such a Rohingya threat is an outright lie. At its height, the mostly penniless and uneducated Rohingya population was no more than 2% of Myanmar's 50 million, and even that meagre proportion has dwindled through killings, forced deportations and voluntary migration.

For centuries before, the Burmese state was actively killing people and desecrating sites in other Buddhist countries in the region. Its lust for power and material gain has been enough motivation to overcome any sense of common religious identity or interests.

Meanwhile, although discrimination of other Muslim groups in Myanmar also exists, their plight is not as severe as the Rohingyas'.

The reasons seem simple enough, and they relate to the Rohingya community's very vulnerability. Being mainly farmers, the people lack strong political organisation and effective coordination for defence.

Their land is also on the cusp of Myanmar and Bangladeshi territory, allowing for the convenient excuse that they are no more than illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

And ironically, their victimisation has also resulted from their passivity. Unlike many of Myanmar's 135 other ethnic groups that had waged war against the government, Rohingyas have not been fighting back.

Only lately have there been reports of a few sporadic outbursts against isolated police outposts. But even these are minor and uncoordinated.

A legal excuse of Myanmar officials is a 1982 law banning citizenship for Rohingyas. They may claim to be only observing that law, but nobody has been able to justify the law itself.

Since Myanmar is a Buddhist-majority country, what of Buddhist law itself? By any measure, every act against the Rohingyas clearly violates Buddhist teaching.

The militant Ashin Wirathu, in a monk's robe, has been recruiting monks released from jail after the 2007 "saffron revolution" when the monkhood took to street protests against the military government.

Since then, Wirathu has obtained funds to give the released monks supplies, an income and propaganda to turn them against the Rohingyas rather than the government.

Meanwhile, former President Thein Sein has since 2011 showcased some reforms to the sufficient satisfaction of the West to lift sanctions against Myanmar.

In this performance he was helped assiduously by Aung San Suu Kyi, the former opposition leader, "icon" of human rights and democracy, and now supposedly the country's most powerful politician.

But even after suffering years of persecution herself, she is now parroting the statements of the previous military regime on the Rohingyas.

Even senior members of her party are among the racist extremists targeting Rohingyas. And she is still ineligible for the coveted presidency, being unable to amend the Constitution to allow for that.

So she may still have to toe the line until that day. Meanwhile, Rohingya lives will just have to be collateral damage.

Alternatively, she may be just as hard-hearted as the meanest of her compatriots. When cornered on the subject, she reportedly admitted that she had "always been a politician."

If so, she certainly had the whole world fooled – even the Nobel Prize Committee itself, although that does not take much nowadays.

She and the rest of the government would then be pushing the Rohingyas to the brink. Islamist militants abroad have tried to infiltrate the community to foment terror attacks against the state but have so far been rebuffed.

That situation may change. Then Myanmar would again be a source of deadly conflict for the entire region.

And a famous nationalist's daughter would shame the family name and be a blot on the regional landscape.

Bunn Nagara is a Senior Fellow of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia.