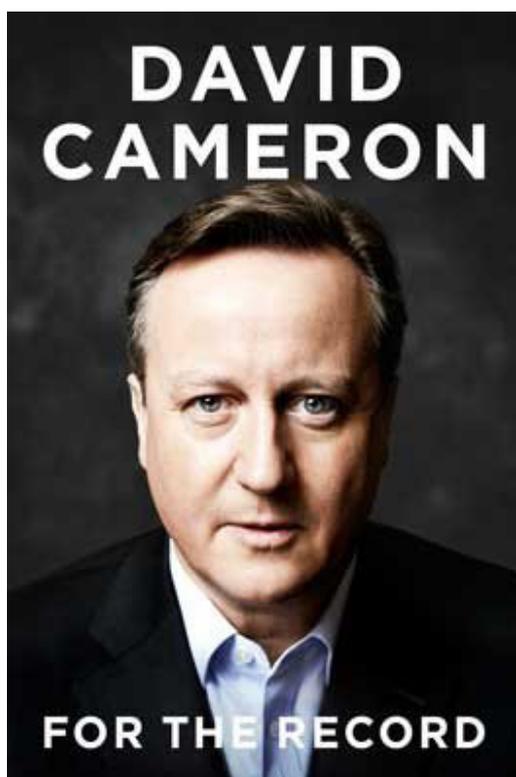


## David Cameron and Burma: No lessons learned

As British Prime Minister, David Cameron made critical decisions on international policy towards Burma which helped to create the conditions whereby the Burmese military believed they could get away with genocide of the Rohingya, and continue human rights violations against other ethnic groups.

Yet in his autobiography there is no reflection on the catastrophic mistakes he made. Instead, in the few lines and one paragraph David Cameron devotes to Burma, it is in the context of how the country disappointed him.

“I wasn’t unused to having my hopes dashed when it came to foreign affairs,” writes David Cameron in ‘For The Record’.



“Indeed, 2013 brought further disappointment – as well as atonement, frustration and sadness – in my dealings with other countries.

“The disappointment came from Burma. I had visited the long-time military dictatorship a year earlier, just after it had taken its first steps towards democracy by holding by-elections. No UK PM had visited Burma since independence in 1948. I met pro-democracy campaigner Aung San Suu Kyi, who would soon run for the presidency, and reflected on what an amazing story hers could be: from fifteen years of house arrest to transforming her country into a real democracy.

However, by the time she came to visit London in October 2013, all eyes were on her country’s Rohingya Muslims, who were being driven out of their homes by Buddhist Rakhines. There were stories of rape, murder and ethnic cleansing. The world is watching, I told her. Her reply was telling: “They are not really Burmese. They are Bangladeshis.” She became de facto leader in 2015, and the violence against the Rohingya went on.”

There are quite a lot of errors and omissions for so few sentences. Cameron neglects to mention that when he visited Burma in 2012 it was with a trade mission. He claimed that they just happened to be with him and it wasn’t an actual trade mission, but several companies with him went on to be first movers into Burma when sanctions were lifted.

Bringing a trade mission to Burma at that time was significant and controversial because EU trade

sanctions were still in place. The main purpose of the trip was to announce the UK would support the EU suspending sanctions. This was despite the democracy movement in Burma, and in exile, stating it was too early in Burma's 'reform' process to lift sanctions.

The decision by the UK was a very significant one, as the UK was the lead country on Burma within the EU and had fought hard to get limited EU sanctions in place and then resist pressure from Germany, Austria and others to lift those sanctions even before 'reforms' began. With the UK no longer prioritising human rights in Burma, EU policy shifted decisively towards a softer approach towards the military-backed government, with trade, not human rights, as the main focus.

With David Cameron abruptly and prematurely doing a u-turn on Burma policy, Aung San Suu Kyi was left with a difficult choice. She could state that she thought the move was premature and look like she was losing a key ally, even worse in the context of the Obama administration moving in the same direction, or go along with it. She went along with it, surprising her own party leadership with her backing for suspending sanctions.



Following Cameron's visit to Burma, the EU suspended trade sanctions for one year. Cameron also neglects to mention that the EU highlighted three main areas where progress needed to be made for that suspension to continue. The release of political prisoners, addressing conflict in ethnic states, and an improvement of the situation of the Rohingya.

In 2013 when the suspension was up for review, although most political prisoners were released, many remained in jail and repressive laws remained on the books. Although a peace process had been launched, conflict had actually increased, as had the most serious human rights violations associated with conflict. Rather than improving, the situation of the Rohingya had got dramatically worse, with two waves of violence against the Rohingya which left over 100,000 people in squalid camps where the government was severely restricting aid. President Thein Sein even asked the UN for help in deporting all Rohingya to third countries.

Despite this, David Cameron's government supported the permanent lifting of sanctions and was aggressively promoting trade, in particular for British companies to win contracts working for the military-backed government. Our briefing paper at the time, 'The European Union Must Not Abandon Human Rights Benchmarks', provides more detail and is available here:

[https://burmacampaign.org.uk/burma\\_briefing/the-european-union-must-not-abandon-human-rights-benchmarks/](https://burmacampaign.org.uk/burma_briefing/the-european-union-must-not-abandon-human-rights-benchmarks/)

Cameron describes how Aung San Suu Kyi would 'soon run for the Presidency'. Burma has a Parliamentary election and technically no-one can run for the Presidency. As he should remember, because he said it himself at the 2013 meeting he writes about: "It would be completely wrong for elections to be held under a constitution that really excludes one person – who happens to be the leader of democracy in Burma – to be excluded from the highest office in the land."

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/david-cameron-and-aung-san-suu-kyi-press-conference>

Cameron states that after by-elections Burma had 'taken its first steps towards democracy'. The by-elections were under the 2008 Constitution which is not democratic and cannot be changed without permission from the military. Aung San Suu Kyi stated on her 2013 UK visit: "People assume too readily that we are on the path to democracy... it's nothing like that at all. The constitution was drawn up to assure the military a very special place in the politics of the nation and that's not democratic."

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-asia-24649955/aung-san-suu-kyi-burma-not-on-road-to-democracy>

David Cameron agreed, stating after the meeting in London that the constitution must be changed, including the bar on Aung San Suu Kyi becoming President, saying of the upcoming elections in 2015: "Those would be no elections at all in my view. Those would not be democratic elections. The constitution has to be changed in that way and in other ways..."

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/david-cameron-and-aung-san-suu-kyi-press-conference>

When the 2015 election did happen, without a constitutional change that would allow Aung San Suu Kyi to become President, or any other constitutional changes, Cameron had changed his tune again, stating: "These landmark elections are an important step towards democracy in Burma and a triumph for Burmese people, who have clearly voiced their desire for change."

<https://www.mizzima.com/news-election-2015-election-news/british-prime-minister%25E2%2580%2599s-statement-myanmar-elections>

In his book, Cameron continues: "However, by the time she came to visit London in October 2013, all eyes were on her country's Rohingya Muslims, who were being driven out of their homes by Buddhist Rakhines."

This sentence is problematic in for two reasons. One is that in 2013 the main focus of attention was in fact on general anti-Muslim violence which had swept across Burma, not violence specifically targeted at the Rohingya.

The second is that it was not only Buddhist Rakhines who were attacking Rohingya. This is part of the false narrative the British government promoted, claiming that what was taking place was communal violence. It wasn't. The Cameron-led government ignored the role of the military-backed government in fomenting, enabling and encouraging the violence, and that state bodies took part in the violence against the Rohingya.

"The world is watching, I told her. Her reply was telling: "They are not really Burmese. They are Bangladeshis." She became de facto leader in 2015, and the violence against the Rohingya went on."

Another error, Aung San Suu Kyi became de facto leader in 2016, not 2015.

Aung San Suu Kyi's response uses the same racist language that is used to justify violence, even to the point of genocide, against the Rohingya. Aung San Suu Kyi's racist prejudice against the Rohingya in particular, and her prejudice against Muslims in general is no longer new information.

What is new information is how much David Cameron personally knew about her racism and prejudice. Publicly, Aung San Suu Kyi had been more careful in her language. Her response to the violence against the Rohingya had been to talk of the rule of law and immigration controls, which many people in Burma understood was an endorsement of the view that Rohingya were illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. This fact was missed by most western media, who instead focussed on her supposed silence.

After hearing Aung San Suu Kyi come out with this overtly racist comment, did Cameron in any way challenge her and review the support his government was providing to her? Here is what he said after hearing this "telling" racist comment:

"I'm one of your greatest admirers, for everything you've done for your country, but also everything you stand for in the world. Your example, your perseverance and your belief is a huge inspiration to people across Britain and people around the world. We wish you well with everything that you are doing and want to do everything we can to support you."

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/david-cameron-and-aung-san-suu-kyi-press-conference>

David Cameron's government continued to provide uncritical support to Aung San Suu Kyi, and continued to support the military-backed government and the Burmese military. Cameron even personally offered free training to the Burmese military without any conditions at all on respect for human rights, despite the Burmese military continuing to violate international law on a daily basis.

The training programme was finally suspended in September 2017 during the military offensive against Rohingya civilians which UN investigators concluded was genocide. Our briefing paper from when the training was announced is available here:

[https://burmacampaign.org.uk/burma\\_briefing/training-war-criminals-british-training-of-the-burmese-army/](https://burmacampaign.org.uk/burma_briefing/training-war-criminals-british-training-of-the-burmese-army/)

Cameron's government literally put human rights at the bottom of its priorities in Burma, moving human rights from first position to the lowest sixth position of the Foreign Office website page of British government priorities in the country, then pushing human rights back up the list after questions from journalists.

Trade was the top priority, in particular winning contracts from the military-backed government itself, leading Cameron's government to be particularly obsequious.

Under Cameron, the government went from prioritising human rights to prioritising trade, and then actively downplaying human rights problems in the country as the reality did not fit with the picture Cameron's government was trying to present.

Our 2014 Briefing Paper: Parliamentary Questions, Avoiding Embarrassing Answers, detailed how the government appeared to have a deliberate strategy of avoiding giving clear answers to questions to avoid scrutiny and having to provide information which would have raised questions about flaws in government policy.

[https://burmacampaign.org.uk/burma\\_briefing/parliamentary-questions-avoiding-embarrassing-answers/](https://burmacampaign.org.uk/burma_briefing/parliamentary-questions-avoiding-embarrassing-answers/)

In its human rights reports on Burma, the government deliberately downplayed human rights violations in the country, giving a false and misleading impression of the situation.

Our 2014 Burma Campaign Briefing Paper: Downplaying human rights violations in Burma, detailed how they went about this:

[https://burmacampaign.org.uk/burma\\_briefing/downplaying-human-rights-abuses-in-burma/](https://burmacampaign.org.uk/burma_briefing/downplaying-human-rights-abuses-in-burma/)



Undoubtedly though, the Cameron government's approach to the Rohingya was to have the most serious short term consequences. Time and time again the Cameron-led British government, along with other members of the international community, failed to act on escalating violence and persecution of the Rohingya, and kept backing down, with diplomats even backing down to racist demands of the military-backed government not to call Rohingya people Rohingya. As persecution of the Rohingya increased, not only were sanctions lifted, but aid, trade, advisors and even military training and equipment were offered.

This helped create the impression that the international community was prepared to tolerate and treat as separate human rights violations against the Rohingya. It created the impression that the international community saw the Rohingya as expendable for the so called greater good of the lie that was the military promise of a transition to democracy. In effect, a green light was given.

Burma Campaign UK detailed these policy failures in our evidence to the British Parliament International Development Committee and Foreign Affairs Committee inquiries into the Rohingya crisis in 2017. It is available on our website here:

<https://burmacampaign.org.uk/detailing-eu-complicity-in-rohingya-crisis-parliament-publishes-burma-campaign-uk-evidence/>

Three years on from David Cameron being British Prime Minister, and seven years on from key decisions that he and others in his government made, does it really matter what a few lines in Cameron's autobiography say? It matters a lot.

Cameron was an interventionist on policy towards Burma, taking a personal interest, setting the general direction of travel, and at times making key policy decisions himself. Three months before Cameron visited Burma, his Foreign Secretary William Hague had visited and taken a stronger line on lifting sanctions, stating all political prisoners would have to be released and other conditions met before the lifting of sanctions.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/burmamyanmar/9000293/Burmas-opposition->

[prepares-for-the-unexpected-after-Aung-San-Suu-Kyi-agrees-to-contest-elections.html](#)

Perhaps Cameron's blasé approach to fact checking in his autobiography reflects a general approach of his while in government, but that is not the real issue.

The key point is that there is no reflection or consideration on Cameron's part on the possible role he played in facilitating the conditions for genocide to happen, and in enabling a brutal military dictatorship to transition to a new system designed to entrench and prolong its power. Governments and international leaders now express shock at what happened to the Rohingya, and disappointment at how the so-called transition to democracy has turned out. They even express mild disappointment with Aung San Suu Kyi, although they continue to pump aid to and through her government. Not one government has actually done an honest review of its policies to see what mistakes were made and what lessons can be learned.

Even now, the British government still does not accept that it has made any mistakes in policy towards Burma or could have done anything differently that might have helped prevent what happened to the Rohingya. The British and other governments, led by people who dedicated their lives to getting into positions of power, suddenly cast themselves as powerless observers when things go wrong.

Two British government departments, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and the Department for International Development, which played critical roles in crafting and implementing British policy on Burma, still refuse to accept they got anything wrong. They have not conducted any genuine internal review into their policies and approach.

One Foreign Office official, giving evidence to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on the Rights of the Rohingya for their inquiry in 2019, even tried to deny anyone had warned of what might happen to the Rohingya:

<https://burmacampaign.org.uk/reports/a-new-shape-of-catastrophe-two-years-on-from-the-2017-rohingya-crisis/>

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and the Department for International Development, in their responses to the reports of the Foreign Affairs Committee and International Development Committee following their inquiries into the Rohingya Crisis, rejected most recommendations and refused to accept mistakes had been made.

Their responses are available here:

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/international-development-committee/inquiries/parliament-2017/dfids-work-on-bangladesh-burma-17-19/>

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/foreign-affairs-committee/inquiries1/parliament-2017/inquiry/>

In 2019 the United Nations did conduct an independent review, and it found 'systematic and structural failures' in the UN approach. The review is available here:

<https://www.un.org/sg/sites/www.un.org.sg/files/atoms/files/Myanmar%20Report%20-%20May%202019.pdf>

The criticisms were accepted by the UN Secretary General:

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/06/1040681>

This has not been repeated anywhere else.

The failure of David Cameron, the British government, and other key players such as those in the Obama administration, to even look at whether they might have made mistakes, has very serious repercussions. In part this relates to those individuals making such significant mistakes being held accountable. So far, in the one instance where a review found a person had made mistakes, there were no consequences.

The former UN Resident Co-ordinator in Burma, Renata Lok-Dessallien, was found by the UN review to have downplayed human rights concerns, misrepresenting the situation to further her own development agenda, (just as the British government had to further its own agenda). The consequences? She now enjoys the more senior UN position of UN representative for India.

If the British government won't accept it made any mistakes, how can it learn any lessons? Not only lessons that could be used in policy towards Burma, but also towards atrocity prevention in general.

After the initial shock of what happened in 2017 has passed, it has been alarming to see how quickly things literally returned to business as usual. There have been no significant changes in policy towards Burma. The only consequence the military has suffered is that a dozen or so soldiers have had their holiday options limited by visa bans.

Not one country has implemented the recommendations of the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar.

As Burma heads towards elections in 2020, governments are once again gearing up to support elections which will exclude the Rohingya and many other Muslims. Support is still being given to Aung San Suu Kyi's government despite her racism, her implementation of apartheid against the Rohingya, and her refusal to give the Rohingya their right of citizenship. The Rohingya are still being treated as expendable for a so-called greater good. More than a million Rohingya live in squalid camps in Bangladesh, driven from their home by genocide.

And David Cameron is disappointed.

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**for Human Rights, Democracy  
& Development in Burma**