

Ten Questions for Aung San Suu Kyi (and myths debunked)



4th May 2017

Statement by Burma Campaign UK

Burma State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi arrives in the UK on Friday 5th May as part of a week-long visit to Europe, having also visited Belgium and Italy.

Here are ten questions that British government ministers and officials and politicians should put to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi during her visit to the UK:

1. Why have you kept almost 200 political prisoners in jail, including Lahaipai Gam, who the UN has stated is detained in violation of international law?
2. Are you refusing to provide full co-operation with the UN Fact Finding Mission into recent violence in Rakhine State because you are afraid of the truth being revealed?
3. Why are you keeping many restrictions and limitations in place on the delivery of humanitarian assistance to Rohingya in Rakhine State, including on food, medical care and education for children?
4. Why have you left in place so many repressive laws, including 66d of the telecommunications act, which is being used to penalize free speech and leading to widespread self-censorship of media?
5. Why haven't you appointed any other women to any of the 21 different Union minister positions?
6. Why haven't you appointed any Muslim ministers and why didn't you field Muslim candidates in the election?
7. Why did you appoint a man accused of raping ethnic Chin women, Thura U Aung Ko, as Union Minister for Religious Affairs and Culture, and have you ordered an investigation into these allegations?*
8. Why is your government still employing the visa blacklist to ban human rights activists from Burma, including Burmese activists who used to campaign for your release?
9. Now that there are so many sources documenting widespread rape of Rohingya women by the Burmese military, including by the United Nations, do you regret denying these reports were true and even having a flashing 'Fake Rape' sign on your Facebook Page?
10. Around 100,000 people in Kachin and northern Shan States have been displaced by conflict and are not receiving all the food, shelter, medical care and education for children that is needed. Do you know what the funding shortfall is, how much has your government contributed towards this, and are you asking European countries to increase funding to meet the needs of these displaced people?

Comment, briefing & analysis from Burma Campaign UK

Myths and falsehoods

1. Aung San Suu Kyi has been silent over human rights violations against the Rohingya.

Aung San Suu Kyi has not been silent. She has frequently spoken about the situation. Unfortunately, much of what she has said has not been positive.

She has dismissed human rights violations against the Rohingya as false and fake news. When there were multiple sources documenting mass use of rape against Rohingya women by the military since October last year, her office was denying the reports were true and she even had a flashing 'Fake Rape' sign on her Facebook Page.

Aung San Suu Kyi has also repeatedly said that evidence compiled by legal experts that human rights violations against the Rohingya could amount to ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity are exaggerations.

She presents the issue in Rakhine State as being of two communities in conflict, and as if she is trying to be a neutral arbitrator to resolve the mistrust. This is a massive oversimplification of the situation and ignores the fact that the Rohingya are subject to human rights violations and discrimination from the state, including the laws her government has kept in place and the operations of the military. Military offensives and national and state level laws and policies cannot be blamed simply on tensions between local communities.

Aung San Suu Kyi has also spoken about the Rohingya issue in terms of immigration and the rule of law, and is more rigorously implementing the discriminatory 1982 Citizenship Law, rather than repealing or reforming it.

2. Aung San Suu Kyi is restrained by what she can do on the Rohingya by public sentiment.

The argument that taking steps to improve rights for the Rohingya could trigger unrest and further violence makes little sense, as failing to act decisively has led to increasing tensions, prejudice and especially of suffering for the Rohingya. If Aung San Suu Kyi was genuinely worried about this, she could do much more to start to tackle hate speech, tackling those who are stirring up hatred and violence in the first place. She has also chosen not implement plans to tackle hate speech and promote religious tolerance which the UN have suggested, such as the Rabat Plan of Action.

Many people assumed that the reason Aung San Suu Kyi was previously evasive and virtually silent on abuses against the Rohingya and other Muslims was an electoral calculation. That is in fact accusing her of being pretty cold and calculating, deciding that winning the election was more important than trying to defend a minority facing severe persecution.

Elections are now over. The election result demonstrated that if this was her calculation, it was unnecessary anyway. Her virtual silence didn't stop Thein Sein's government and allies such as Ma Ba Tha relentlessly branding the NLD as pro-Muslim. The NLD still won an overwhelming majority. They could have lost a significant percentage of votes and still won.

Aung San Suu Kyi has cited Mahatma Gandhi as a source of inspiration. He is famous for his struggle against British colonial rule and his hunger strikes. In fact, he went on hunger strike more often against the actions of his own supporters than he did against British rule. He was willing to challenge their actions and prejudice, even if it upset his own supporters. To date, Aung San Suu Kyi appears unwilling to do the same.

3. Aung San Suu Kyi is limited in what she can do because the military are looking for an excuse to retake power.

The argument that she has to tread carefully to avoid upsetting the military generals and present them an excuse to retake power is hollow. The entire reform process has been planned and implemented by the military completely on their terms without any compromise at all on their part. The situation in Burma now is what they want, it is their design. They spent more than a decade putting the current political system in place, the last thing they want is to retake direct control. It will undermine years of work. They have as much to lose as anyone if they resume direct control.

Instead of facing criminal sanctions, Min Aung Hlaing, the head of the military, spent last week on a red carpet tour of Germany and Austria being offered gifts, luxury dinners, sightseeing trips, and taken to visit military suppliers.

In any case, Aung San Suu Kyi was not afraid of crossing one of the main red lines of the military, making herself effective President by creating the State Counsellor post.

If the military really wants to retake direct power, they can do so at any time, manufacturing any excuse.

4. Free media access in Rakhine State can't be given because of dangers to Rohingya who are interviewed.

Aung San Suu Kyi has defended restrictions placed on the freedom of media to access Rakhine State and report on what is going on by citing two examples of Rohingya villagers being killed after being interviewed. If these villagers were killed because of what they said to media, it is probably due in large part to the way that her government insisted the media be allowed to visit.

Instead of allowing journalists unrestricted access to visit individually where they wish, the government only permitted journalists to go on state organised visits as part of a group of journalists with military, government officials and others present. Those interviewed were interviewed in front of everyone with local or passing people being able to observe, and so their identities were exposed. Journalists allowed unrestricted access could have been more discreet and sources could have been protected.

This week media and human rights organisations gave the NLD government just 8 out of a maximum 60 points for efforts to improve freedom of expression.

5. Kofi Annan's Commission is already investigating the situation, there is no need for a Fact Finding Mission or international investigation.

Aung San Suu Kyi has been stating this but she knows better than anyone, as she prepared it, that the mandate of Kofi Annan's commission does not allow him to investigate human rights violations. It does not allow him to say who is responsible for human rights violations and make proposals for ensuring justice and accountability, which is the mandate of the Fact Finding Mission.

Kofi Annan stated in September 2016: "We are not here to do a human rights investigation or to write a human rights report."

6. Need time and space to address problems

Of course there are a great many problems which will take a long time to resolve, but there are also many things that could be done quickly which would have a big impact. This includes releasing political prisoners, repealing repressive laws, and allowing freedom of expression.

You don't need a year-long investigation by Kofi Annan to know that placing severe restrictions and conditions of the delivery of humanitarian assistance to displaced Rohingya is wrong. Stopping displaced Rohingya children accessing education and healthcare cannot be justified and those restrictions can and should be lifted immediately.

Aung San Suu Kyi could order a single bill in Parliament to repeal a swathe of repressive laws but she chooses not to.

Aung San Suu Kyi can decide today to release all political prisoners but she chooses not to.

* Notes:

Allegations of rape by Government Minister Thura Aung Ko were revealed by the Chin Human Rights Organisation in their report, 'Threats to Our Existence': http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/images/uploads/Threats_to_Our_Existence.pdf

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