

AN INTERVIEW WITH MATTHEW J. WALTON

# Intersecting Political, Ethnic, and Religious Realities in Myanmar

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*Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) won a landmark electoral victory in 2015, but the subsequent democratic transition in Myanmar has been anything but smooth. The response from the NLD leaders to a variety of domestic issues and the increasing violence in Rakhine State has drawn sharp criticism from the international community and disappointed many who had been hopeful for a democratic Myanmar. NBR spoke with Matthew J. Walton (St. Antony's College, University of Oxford) to better understand the complexity of the intersecting political, ethnic, and religious realities in the country.*

**Aung San Suu Kyi's international reputation has recently dimmed as many are critical of her response to the crisis in Rakhine State. What aspects of the backlash are warranted, and which are seemingly out of her control?**

This is an important question to clarify. The military is not under Aung San Suu Kyi's control in any meaningful way, nor can she realistically do anything to control it. The constitution is written in a way that gives the military complete autonomy, in addition to control of many other parts of the government. Aung San Suu Kyi is constrained by wanting to have a good working relationship with the military, and one assumption is that she is reluctant to criticize or call them out because of that.

On the other hand, many have understandably expressed concerns over her relative silence about what is clearly a mounting humanitarian disaster in

Rakhine State. And while Aung San Suu Kyi has not been in control of actions by the Tatmadaw (military), she and her State Counsellor Office have been contributing in unproductive ways. She has doubled down on "fake news" claims regarding actions within Rakhine State. Spokespeople from her ministry have themselves shared certain media accounts that have been debunked, which has not been helpful. It is not just her silence; it is also the active undermining of journalists and international organizations trying to investigate that is exacerbating the issue.

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**Can you discuss how ethnic, political, and religious pluralities coexist in Myanmar and how these identities have changed and shaped the current realities?**

One project that I am involved with is the Myanmar Media and Society (M.MAS) Project. It seeks to emphasize the fact that peaceful interreligious coexistence has been the norm throughout the country during most of its history. The project has collected oral histories detailing memories of peaceful interreligious coexistence in Myanmar. The M.MAS Project looks to complicate the equation of contemporary violence and tension with the anti-Muslim or anti-Indian riots of the 1930s, or even the fighting between Buddhists and Muslims in Rakhine State after Burmese independence in 1948. Such tension certainly existed, and Muslims have frequently been discriminated against; however, the tensions that we've seen since 2012 have not been characteristic of day-to-day relationships. The history of interreligious coexistence is something easily forgotten during these moments of heightened tensions.

One of the ideas that we are trying to push back against is the sense that these are primordial and unchanging antagonisms by reminding people that is really not the case. This is difficult when groups like Ma Ba Tha (the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion) or monks like Ashin Wirathu are pushing that line and stoking such antagonism. The idea that the protection of Buddhism is only achieved by discriminatory policies against Muslims is in some ways the base of support for groups like Ma Ba Tha. But this base is not necessarily a network that they have built from the ground up; instead, it has been grafted onto preexisting Buddhist community groups.

While it is important not to dismiss the anti-Muslim aspects of the group, it is necessary for people to recognize this movement as deeply imbedded in Burmese society for reasons other than or in addition to anti-Muslim sentiment. For

example, when one digs deeper into the Ma Ba Tha women's groups and looks at all the activities they do that have nothing to do with anti-Muslim policies, it should give us pause that some women affiliated with Ma Ba Tha self-identify as feminists and see the work as empowering. This is a clear indicator that we need to better understand what this organization is, how it operates, and how it resonates with people in a nuanced way. To their credit, the staff at the U.S. embassy in Yangon have understood that message.

**In terms of mitigating conflict throughout Myanmar, can you detail the progress made and the hurdles that still must be overcome? What are possible steps forward in the northern peace process and in Rakhine State?**

I, along with many colleagues, have been arguing that the formal peace process has mostly dealt with ethnic armed groups and ethnic armed conflict, but you must work to incorporate religious and communal conflict as well. All of these issues are intrinsically connected and the solutions must be seen holistically.

The current situation for the Rohingya seems bleaker than it has ever been. At the moment, I think it is fair to say that broadly across society Myanmar has never been more united than it is now against the Rohingya and against the idea that they should have a place in the country, let alone citizenship. Twice in the past when large groups of Rohingya were expelled, Bangladesh and the military government at the time were pressured to repatriate the refugees in what ultimately ended up being a partially forced repatriation process—which was not very positive. Aung San Suu Kyi says that her government will begin the verification process, but practically there is little room to move forward on that issue, even if the half million people that have left would consider returning to Myanmar.

We have just begun to see members of ethnic armed groups and ethnic organizations, though perhaps still not feeling solidarity with the Rohingya, recognizing the fact that the tactics the military has been using against the Rohingya are the same ones that have been deployed against other ethnic groups for decades. That being said, it is very important that the dynamics of the Rakhine State conflict be explicitly addressed in the peace process. Frankly, the prospects of that happening are unfortunately not great. Even the idea of bringing up religion—which to many people signifies a debate about Buddhism as the national religion rather than the place of religion in a religiously plural Myanmar—was a nonstarter during the last round of peace negotiations and was quite controversial.

In northern Myanmar, it is a good sign that the groups have continued to talk even as alliances have shattered and reformed. I think you have two main problems. First, the mechanism for monitoring the ceasefire is still weakly outlined. There is not significant community involvement or engagement, nor do the groups have credible commitments from the actors involved. It is fair to say that we are going to see continued skirmishes and a resumption of hostilities unless the monitoring process is developed in a very detailed way with enhanced resources and international attention devoted to the issue—which will be difficult when international attention is now focused on Rakhine State.

Second, the internally displaced persons crisis exposes a lack of political will to solve the problem. There is no good reason that the more than a hundred thousand displaced people across the Kachin and Shan States have not received more support over the last six years. International agencies have wanted to be involved, but the Myanmar military and government have often prevented them from giving aid.

**While announcing his policy in Afghanistan, President Trump stated that the United States would no longer be in the “business of nation building.” What ramifications might this mindset have for U.S.-Myanmar relations, and how would you expect it to affect the level of engagement from U.S. policymakers?**

In some ways, it may be positive for Myanmar that the country is not high on the Trump administration’s list of priorities—at least that was the case until the Rohingya crisis began. Thus far, I do not have the sense that the current analysis within the Trump administration takes into account the complexities and nuances that are essential to understanding the story in Myanmar. Equally, I am cautious as to what it might mean for an NLD government under Aung San Suu Kyi that has become increasingly exclusionary to certain groups to have an ally in a Trump government that has pursued a similarly nationalist policy. While I was not always satisfied with policies from the Obama administration, one thing we did see was not just outreach at all levels of the government, and even some levels of the military, but a real recognition of contributions from civil society that were not necessarily recognized by the Myanmar government.

The current challenge is that most members of the U.S. Congress who have supported Myanmar throughout its transition are becoming increasingly disillusioned with Aung San Suu Kyi and might feel that their past work toward a democratic Myanmar was a waste. I don’t think they should feel this way, nor should they disengage. There is room for U.S. policymakers to be critical while still remaining supportive of continued efforts at meaningful reform.

Engagement with the Myanmar military ought to be undertaken warily, especially in light of its involvement in the abuses occurring in Rakhine State. There are

also reasons to rethink targeted sanctions on military officers. Under the current circumstances in Rakhine State, I can't support revitalizing the International Military Education and Training program. Positive engagement with the Myanmar government, however, should continue. ♦

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