

**Myanmar: Words like “genocide” have consequences**

BY David i. steinberg

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On March 21, the US Department of State declared that the actions by the Myanmar government against the Rohingya Muslim ethnic minority in 2017 were genocide. The Myanmar military’s role had been defended in the International Court of Justice in The Hague in 2019 by the then-state counsellor and government leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, now jailed after the February 2021 military coup. If, then, it was genocide the whole power structure in Myanmar must bear responsibility, even if the despicable actions were solely committed by the military.

“Genocide” is an exceedingly strong word, and perhaps no other in the modern era has such a negative connotation. It is inaccurately used simply to evoke the mass horrors of intentional death through wars. But it must be used sparingly, or its emotional influence and accuracy will be diminished. Its meaning importantly includes the systemic intent to eliminate or destroy a people based on their culture, religion, ethnicity, or other bond. Many despicable acts of destruction, murder, rape, arson, pillaging, war crimes, or crimes against humanity horrify us, and there is no doubt that these were committed against the defenseless Rohingya inside Myanmar on the border, forcing many to flee to Bangladesh.

But was the intent of the Myanmar military to wipe out the Rohingya? I think not. It was a brutal, unforgiveable assault on a people to drive them across the border to Bangladesh, whatever atrocities individual commanders may have ordered. It is not happenstance that the Myanmar authorities refuse to use the term “Rohingya” and declare that they are not citizens, calling them Bengalis and brutally assaulting them to achieve the authorities’ aim of driving them out of the country. This was a horrendous act of ethnic cleansing and completely unjustified. The anti-Rohingya and, more generally, anti-Muslim riots and prejudice have been fanned throughout the Buddhist population by a virulent right-wing branch of the Buddhist clergy.

The Rohingya and the Muslims of Rakhine State (a province in Myanmar) are not newcomers, although the Burmese blame the British for unrestricted immigration into Burma when it was governed as a province of India until 1937. Muslims lived in the region for centuries, and Arakan (renamed Rakhine by the Burmese) was an independent kingdom until conquered by the Burmese in 1785. A separate, current rebellion by Buddhists in the region, the Arakan Army, operates an administration and aims to restore a significant degree of autonomy to the province, or even independence, while promising rights to the Rohingya, who have been denied basic liberties for many decades.

US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken announced at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC that the Myanmar government was committing genocide. But the Holocaust was different from the horrors imposed on the Rohingya—not only in the magnitude of the disaster but also when it comes to intent, for the Holocaust expressly sought as state policy to eliminate the Jews, not only to expel them. This is not apparent in the Myanmar case. The US action may appeal to some members of Congress and place the United States in a morally defensible position. But if the desired effect was also to delegitimize the Myanmar military, it does so at the expense of the previous civilian government, for however much they may rightly complain about the military’s domination, dictatorship, and excesses, and however much they now deplore what has happened, they gave their imprimatur to the tragedy through their leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. Whatever her personal views may have been, this was a dual political ploy—appealing to the mass prejudice of the Buddhist majority in the country against the Rohingya and Muslims in general, and to placate the military and their strong antipathy to her. She specifically said that she was not a democratic icon, as the international media continuously proclaimed, but a Burmese politician. She effectively illustrated her position.

We may modify the use of the term “genocide” when used to describe, not justify, the elimination of a cultural aspect of a society—cultural genocide. So, Uyghur Muslim culture is under attack in Xinjiang province in China, as China wants compliant farm and factory labor, but only under Chinese cultural domination. That is, the elimination of a culture (and the political opposition it implies) but not its people, who could be useful to the state apparatus.

We should not confuse injustice, murder, and crimes against humanity for genocide, for in doing so we degrade the past and make policy formation to counter atrocities all the more difficult. Myanmar authorities must bear responsibility for their atrocious acts in appropriate international fora and law, and internally as well, but not for genocide.

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