Facing the Rohingya Crisis, Myanmar’s Elite Speak With One Voice

The dire plight of refugees, asylum-seekers and economic migrants fleeing Myanmar and Bangladesh has captured global attention in recent weeks, as Southeast Asian nations struggle to cope with the influx of thousands who have languished in unimaginable conditions on rickety boats in the Andaman Sea, often for months at a time without adequate food and water supplies.

Facing a perilous journey in hope of finding relief from persecution and poverty, the tragic predicament facing these migrants has forced regional policymakers into an ethical quandary. Moreover, the grim discovery of mass gravesites and people-smuggling camps deep in the jungles of northern Malaysia underscore the seriousness and scale of the region’s human trafficking problem.

At the root of the ongoing crisis is Myanmar’s treatment of the Rohingya community, a Muslim ethnic minority group whose citizenship was rescinded in a 1982 law passed by the then-ruling military junta. Although records of Rohingya settlements date back centuries, Myanmar has asserted that they are illegal immigrants with no right to citizenship, subjecting the community to institutionalized discrimination with limited access to education, healthcare and freedom of movement.

Myanmar’s right-wing ethno-nationalism

Led by a nominally civilian government still largely controlled by senior military officers, Myanmar has undergone a series of liberalizing political reforms since 2011 that have loosened restrictions on the media environment and allowed the opposition – the National League for Democracy (NLD) – to contest in elections. Significant inflows of foreign investment have followed since with headline 8 percent GDP growth, while relations with the US have thawed significantly as evidenced by President Barack Obama’s two state visits to the once-reclusive Buddhist-majority country.

These partial liberalization measures have also given rise to an eruption of anti-Muslim chauvinism and virulent ethno-nationalism, with hardline Buddhist monks often taking the most bigoted and scornful positions against the Rohingya, whose presence they equate with an advancing tide of radical Islam. The ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) have fanned the flames of popular chauvinism, gaining support among the general public with policies that officially deny the existence of the Rohingya as a recognized ethnic minority community.

Myanmar’s military junta, which ran the country for over five decades, had long encouraged a sense of racial and moral superiority among the majority Burman Buddhists, some 60 percent of the country’s 51 million population. Defending the purity of an ancient and uniquely Burman form of Buddhism has long been at the center of Myanmar’s state narrative. It is against this backdrop that the scapegoating of a small Muslim minority in the face of a pervasive Burman ethno-nationalism should be understood.

Silence from the Opposition

Ahead of the country’s first general election in the post-reform period slated for November, Myanmar’s President Thein Sein issued an executive order in February that denied voting rights to those with temporary residence cards...
that many Rohingya hold in the absence of citizenship. Sein’s government has also introduced a controversial birth control law, which was strongly supported by Buddhist extremists who espouse hate speech and pejorative language against Muslim minorities, who account for some 4 percent of the population.

Clashes and fiery communal violence swept through the western Arakan state capital of Sittwe and surrounding localities in 2012, pitting mobs of Muslim Rohingya villages against ethnic Rakhine Buddhists, leading to over 280 deaths. Over the past three years, some 140,000 displaced Rohingya have been crowded into squalid internment camps, while an estimated 120,000 Rohingya have fled to neighboring countries.

Stateless and segregated, life without access to basic services has led many Rohingya to flee, entrusting their fate to human traffickers paid to take them by sea to Thailand and Malaysia. A report by the UN refugee agency said that 25,000 Rohingya and Bangladeshis boarded smugglers’ boats between January and March this year – almost double the number over the same period in 2014. These statistics clearly reflect the increasing desperation of the Rohingya community.

As tragedy unfolds, amid the institutionalization of discrimination and the flourishing of hateful Islamophobic discourse, opposition leader and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, herself a member of the Burman Buddhist elite, has remained silent. Once the darling of Western rights advocates for her human rights activism against the then-ruling military junta, she is increasingly viewed as a politician who has betrayed her principles by failing to denounce religious bigotry and communal chauvinism in Myanmar for fear of antagonizing voters and powerful Burman lobby groups.

Suu Kyi – the popular daughter of Myanmar's late independence hero, Aung San – is said to hold “anti-Rohingya" sentiments and has generally been reticent to endorse minority rights for other groups, such as the long-marginalized Chin and Kachin minorities that embrace Christianity. After winning a seat in parliament following her release from house arrest in 2010, her primary focus has been advocating for constitutional reform to change provisions that bar her from seeking the country’s presidency because her sons hold foreign (UK) citizenship.

While Suu Kyi won’t be contesting in the November polls, her NLD party is expected perform strongly enough to secure to a Parliamentary majority. The USDP government led by Thein Sein has been trying to broker a nationwide ceasefire agreement with armed ethnic groups that have fought for federalization and equal rights for decades. To win over ethnic minority political parties in Parliament, military representatives have endorsed proposals to grant broad power-sharing rights for minority-led regions.

The main obstacle to preventing the exodus of Rohingya communities is their statelessness and lack of official recognition. Since the Rohingya lack any semblance of political representation in Parliament or elsewhere, there is a major lack of incentive for either the NLD or USDP to strike a conciliatory position on normalizing the status of the group in the run-up to a pivotal general election. Given the political landscape and popular anti-Rohingya sentiments of the electorate, it is unlikely that any major party would lobby in their defense.

**The Resettlement Process**

Not only have Myanmar’s ruling and opposition parties failed to articulate a solution to the Rohingya issue. They have entirely failed to acknowledge their country’s role in the mass exodus. Both the Obama administration and neighboring ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) governments have been reluctant to pressure Myanmar to improve conditions for the Rohingya, while the latter grouping are now grappling to deal with the consequences of its discriminatory policies.

Indonesia and Malaysia have offered shelter to some 7,000 refugees and migrants on condition that the international community repatriate and resettle the migrants within one year. Given the challenges that refugees currently face in being repatriated, a process that can often take years, there is a real possibility that international agencies may not be able to deliver on their promises. In light of these realities, ASEAN governments should reassess their policies toward refugees.

Malaysia is already home to some 46,000 Rohingya migrants, but like Thailand and Indonesia, it doesn't recognize asylum seekers and refugees, having not signed the UN Refugee Convention. Due to its robust economy, Islamic culture and large Rohingya population, Malaysia is often the choice destination of those taking to the high seas, though they inevitably find themselves living on the margins of society once arriving. Unable to work legally or send their children to public schools, most live in squalid conditions, making ends meet as illegal laborers.

Without formal refugee status, irregular migrants are susceptible to arrest and exploitation. The reluctance of many
ASEAN governments to recognize asylum seekers is grounded in their limited capacity to manage large populations of temporary migrants, as well as concerns that liberal migration policies will encourage ever-larger exoduses of asylum seekers and economic migrants.

These are legitimate concerns. However, if those deserving of refugee status are unable to be repatriated in a timely fashion, countries like Malaysia should take the initiative to offer a protected status and work permits to migrants waiting to be repatriated so they can make a more dignified contribution before they are resettled elsewhere. Access to formal work and education are vital to helping refugees get back on their feet.

The ongoing migration crisis underscores the need for ASEAN governments to pressure Myanmar to stabilize living conditions for the Rohingya with a view toward preventing any further mass migration. Since Myanmar’s political establish has proven to be consistently unwilling to acknowledge its role in the Rohingya crisis, it behooves the governments of the region to push for a discussion that is desperately needed on status recognition and eventual citizenship for this truly unfortunate community.

Nile Bowie is a political analyst based in Malaysia who has written for a number of publications, his expertise lies in a number of areas, with a particular focus on Asian politics and geopolitics, especially for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.