

The Times - 4 February 2021

“Thunderer” Column

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Aung San Suu Kyi is flawed but needs our support

Pariah or heroine? Genocide denier or human rights defender? Apologist for a brutal regime or champion of democracy? Aung San Suu Kyi has been, allegedly, all these. Few now can be sure they know who she truly is. But as Burma’s democratically elected leader she remains that benighted country’s best hope.

I have known her for eight years and I do not believe the international community has recognised the extreme difficulty of the challenge she faced. As de facto leader of a government controlled by the generals, she was forced to strike a balance between what she wanted — to move her country closer to a true democracy — and what was required of her — to put an acceptable face on a dictatorial military regime.

Just how difficult that balance was has now become clear. The international community has reacted with outrage to her arrest and detention in this week’s coup. But will it now respond to her cry for help, ramp up the pressure on the generals as she has requested, and provide the support she and her country so urgently need? Or will it abandon her and her people?

I have made several visits to Burma at her invitation, first in 2013 to advise on her plans to redevelop Rangoon Hospital and reform the country’s health service, then in 2017 to join a five-member international forum she established to monitor the restoration of Rakhine state and the return of the Rohingya Muslims. I went most recently in 2019 to assist with her efforts to secure the release of two Reuters journalists detained while covering events in Rakhine.

While the international forum was ultimately doomed, the journalists were released and pardoned, and work on Rangoon Hospital and health service reform continues. She was doing, in other words, what she could. And that she has now been abruptly cast out of power proves just how difficult that was.

I was appalled by the atrocities committed in Rakhine, as were all civilised people. My great-grandfather and his sons were killed in the Ottoman genocide of 1915; I have no intention of defending abuses by one population of another. Suu Kyi was morally at fault in publicly defending the army’s actions. But none of us can know her reasons or the pressures on her and I believe we must do whatever we can to promote democracy in Burma, however difficult the struggle is to bring about change.

Suu Kyi needs our help. Without it, her country and her people will find themselves isolated, forgotten and forced to live under a brutal military regime for years to come. We cannot stand by and let that happen.

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