

Equality or Animosity: Where will the Democratic Uprising Take the Rohingya?

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***Myo Min** outlines the potential and limitations of anti-coup protesters' solidarity with the cause of the Rohingya.*

In the aftermath of Myanmar's military coup on 1 February 2021, hundreds of thousands of people from almost every ethnic group, including people from the Rohingya community, have marched in the streets nationwide in opposition to the military's power grab. Some activists hope that the protests present [a turning point for the persecuted Rohingya](#) minority, given that some Burmese seem to be changing their views of their Muslim countrymen, who they considered to be illegal migrants before. But reinstating a democratic system will not automatically turn the situation in favor of the Rohingya. The reason for this? Buddhist Nationalism.

For decades, Myanmar ethnic minorities, who speak their own languages and have distinct cultures, have faced persecution at the hands of the military. The state has also continuously waged military campaigns against some groups, most notably the Rohingya, a mostly Muslim minority group indigenous to Rakhine State. More than 750,000 Rohingya have been forced to flee to neighboring Bangladesh since 2017, when the military's brutal campaign against the group led to the burning of villages, mass-murder, and rampant sexual violence. A United Nations human rights report concluded that the campaign was conducted with "[genocidal intent](#)."

Following the military's campaign, Aung San Suu Kyi boosted her own image as the protector of the Bamar—the dominant majority ethnic group—before the domestic audience by defending the Tatmadaw against charges of genocide [at the ICJ](#). Ultimately, neither the military nor the NLD defended the Muslim Rohingya minority in this Buddhist-majority country.

On February 8, the third day of the general strikes, I entered into a group of protesters with a placard that read "Rohingya stand for Democracy." I walked together with them around Tamwe and Mingalar Taung Nyunt townships, singing slogans for almost one hour. The reaction I got was neutral. When, the next day, we—myself and a group of Rohingya youth—went on to protest next to Sule Pagoda with vinyl placards bearing demands such as "reject the military coup" and "abolish the 2008 constitution," we received a similar reaction. We received no particular attention from the crowd, although we used the term "Rohingya," which has, in the past, been incredibly controversial in Myanmar. We were not met with criticism or threats because of the unity that the military coup had inspired. It now binds together the many different factions that oppose military rule.

The day became a significant turning point for the Rohingya community in Yangon. Before, we had been too concerned to openly identify as Rohingya. But, in the aftermath of the coup, there was a need for solidarity and a show of unity amongst all people in Myanmar. This is what led us to overcome our fear of harassment. The initiative of a few protesters openly identifying as Rohingya encouraged others to join too. On the ground, our feelings of tension were palpable—

this was a rare moment of equality, but one mixed with nervousness. The forthcoming support those first few protesters received online, however, helped inspire even more members of our community to come forward and step out of the shadow of persecution. Once more, we showed the degree of our commitment to the land of Myanmar, and that we stand together in the struggle for our country's future.

Nascent Solidarity with Rohingya

Despite the importance of opposing the coup, the fate of the Rohingya remains uncertain, especially as hundreds of thousands of Rohingya continue to live in squalid conditions. The question is whether current debates around democracy can also change the public's perception of the Rohingya issue. In other words, now that people across the country are demanding an inclusive government and federal democracy, will their demands include all minorities—even the Rohingya?

Although it is too early to answer this question, the street protests have given us valuable insights. In the streets, a small group of protesters, mainly student groups such as the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) and others in their circle, as well as ethnic minorities, are rooting for the abolishment of the 2008 Constitution and the removal of authoritarian structures once and for all. These groups call for the establishment of a new and inclusive political system.

The demands of the majority of protesters, however, are different. They campaign for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, chairman of National League for Democracy (NLD), other political leaders, and the implementation of 2020 general election results under the 2008 constitution. Aung San Suu Kyi has used tactics with „ethno-racial characteristics“ and ignored democratic values and minority rights abuses in the last five years, while she led the civilian government. In a twisted turn of history, Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD, and most protesters have become protectors of the constitution they once opposed. The majority of the protesters coming to the streets to oppose the coup do so because they feel denied the government they voted for, not because they stand opposed to the grave human rights abuses that have been committed in Myanmar for decades.

Yet, there is hope that the current wave of protests will be a critical juncture that might inspire ethnic majority Bamar to take a more humane approach towards Rohingya. The Bamar themselves are experiencing feelings of being oppressed in their own country, emotions similar to those that have long weighed on the Rohingya. The ongoing uprising has also brought together a diverse mix of Myanmar's more than fifty million people. It is not the first diverse uprising, however. The 1988 Uprising and the 2007 Saffron Revolution which were quelled through brutal crackdowns at the armed forces' hands included members of the different religions, ethnicities, and age groups. They took place in hundreds of villages, towns, and cities in Myanmar. Most members of the NLD cabinet were victims of military abuse and political prisoners. Yet, this experience did not translate into social cohesion nor strong alliances between Bamar and ethnic minorities once the NLD was in power. Generation Z, primarily credited with organizing the protests today, is also inspired by the past's protest events. But will they draw different conclusions from their time in the streets?

Some protesters calling for justice today show regrets over their treatment of the Rohingya in the past. Some have posted apologies to Yanghee Lee, the former UN Special Rapporteur who was hailed by the human rights community as a “champion of justice for Rohingyas,” though

widely vilified in Myanmar. Open demonstrations of solidarity with Rohingya joining the anti-coup protests and public apologies for past actions are powerful symbols. Some posts have been shared widely on social media and have been taken up by foreign journalists to signal protesters' commitment to democratic rights.

Equality is still an Uphill Battle

But there is another side that is visible within Myanmar, but which has received little attention abroad. On February 11, a group of monks protested against the coup alongside the public in Hlegu Township, Yangon, holding a placard saying, "we don't want a military government that will repatriate the Bengalis." This referred to the [speech made by General Min Aung Hlaing](#), chairman of the State Administration Council, after the coup. A popular post on Facebook asked, "Do you know why the Rohingya issue is world-famous? They are extremely talented in acting as if torture and injustice are being done to them in front of the camera. We have to adopt the same tactics, such as breast/chest-beating and crying and making grieving faces. You have to make faces in the pictures that portray the country as in the dark. Unless there is this trend, going on the streets will be useless. Are we all together for this trend when taking photos? So, let's do dramas."

Some of these posts received more than a thousand likes and shares within a few hours. These demonstrate that the fate of Rohingya will not be overturned within days by a single event, although the Rohingya community is showing solidarity with the majority at this moment. The hatred against them has been planted for generations. And it is essential not to forget here the influence of Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar. The country itself is built upon this rhetoric, and its history goes back to its [colonial past](#). Notably, while the [Rohingya have shown immense support](#) for the democratic movement, people of the Rakhine Buddhist community have been ambiguous. Protests against the coup were held in just a few [townships](#) with small numbers of people.

Rakhine politicians and armed group leaders show clear support for the military government. While the entire country was banging pots and pans at 8 pm every night to protest the military coup, on Twitter, Dr. Nyo Twan Awng, vice commander in chief of the Arakan Army (AA), called for a cheers campaign among the Rakhine community. He deleted the tweet later on. Ironically, this is the same armed group that has been fighting for the self-determination of Rakhine State, to adopt the "Way of Rakhita (ethnic Rakhine)." It is unclear whether the AA is aligning with Tatmadaw or has its own strategy. In any case, the Rohingya's bold stance for democracy is not only a stance against the military, but it is one that also contradicts the position of powerful armed groups. This likely increases the threat to the future livelihood of the Rohingya in Rakhine.

For the protesters to be successful, they need to stand united against the military. This unity needs to be built on a shared belief in democracy and human rights rather than on ethnicity or religion. But whether the protests will be successful or not, those protesting for democracy in Yangon, Mandalay, and all over central Myanmar should remember the ethnic minorities that stood with them. For minorities like the Rohingya, who have their home in a state where many support the military, the consequences of supporting democracy will likely be severe. And even if the protests are successful in establishing a democratic government under a democratic constitution, achieving a future that recognizes the Rohingya as citizens and ensures equality for all citizens of Myanmar will remain an uphill battle.

(Featured image courtesy of the author)

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