

'This is ethnic cleansing. It's not just a bump in the road' – Mark Farmaner



*In November last year, the [South Asia Centre](#), alongside LSE's SU Human Rights society and the LSE SU South Asia society co-hosted 'Rohingya: Ethnic Cleansing and the International Community's Response', a panel discussion on the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar. Panellist **Mark Farmaner**, of [Burma Campaign UK](#) spoke with **Rebecca Bowers** about the escalating crisis and why the current inaction of the international community is legitimising the ongoing violence against the Rohingya.*

[The pope failed to refer to the Rohingya on his recent visit to Myanmar...](#) what are the implications of such high-profile figures failing to acknowledge what's going on?

We were just suggesting that he try and work to get an agreement to work with the government on [the Rabat plan of action](#), the UN plan of action for tackling religious intolerance and hate speech – something practical like that. Because we knew he was never going to change Aung San Suu Kyi's mind or General Min Aung Hlaing's mind so you know, we could work on something like that, but it all got taken over by his decision to not use the word 'Rohingya'. It should have been a no brainer.

Such high profile figures failing to acknowledge what's going on and not using the word 'Rohingya' is what led us to the current ethnic cleansing campaign, which is consistently backing down to internationalists and the government and the military, which just emboldens them over and over again so we have seen this gradual escalation since 2012. In 2012 you had this huge escalation and attacks against the Rohingya in June and October, and in following that, a series of measures. So when there were no consequences for what happened in 2012, then we saw the government going further and further. So first they started making more... don't use the word 'Rohingya', diplomats backed down, stopped using the word 'Rohingya', excluding the Rohingya from the census, we still funded the census, we reported the census. Over and over again, every time we backed down the government went further. They realised they had more space. Because the attitude of the international community was general direction of travel was good, 'let's welcome these positive reforms', so the Rohingya became a sort of inconvenience and [were] treated as effectively expendable. One British government minister says 'oh you know, you've got... you're bound to have bumps in the road'. You know, this is ethnic cleansing. It's not just a bump in the road. So it really does matter. Not using the word 'Rohingya'. This is part of the strategy of the government and the military. Denying their identities is part of them saying they don't belong in Burma and is a justification for the human rights violation and the ethnic cleansing campaign that has taken place right there at the root of everything and as soon as international figures buy into that they are legitimising that. The government is portraying that as saying 'see we have international support on this'.

We have people like yourself and Dr Daniel Aguirre from the panel, and Mabur [Ahmed of Restless Beings] as well, who have been working with the Rohingya for quite a few years now. Why is it that seemingly for the last few decades your efforts to raise awareness of this have fallen on death ears, or it's just a continuing legacy of this policy of appeasement that's going on?

There's awareness. We have always had this approach from the international community to look at what's going on in Yangon or Naypyidaw and not focus on ethnic views. So the military attacks that have just happened against the Rohingya in August and September are not new. The military have been doing that to other ethnic groups for decades and getting away with it. And the focus of the international community has always been what happen to Aung San Suu Kyi and the majority Burmese and not what's happening to the minority population. So whilst the military and persecuting and carrying out military attacks against ethnic minorities the international community did nothing but when in '88 there was the big student uprising and the students who were marching in the streets of Yangon were shot and attacked then there's international outrage and a process of introducing sanctions.

The whole time after '88 there were military offences, they were targeting ethnic groups, there was never an international response, but if something happened in Yangon, there was. So when there was an attempt on Aung San Suu Kyi, there was an attempt on her life in 2003, when she travelling around the country, and she was put in detention again, we saw international sanctions, international action then. In 2007 when the monks were marching and that protest was crushed, we saw international action. But in between in 1992 when there was [a Bogolay massacre of Karin in the delta](#), there was no international response at all. In 2006 when the military were carrying out a big military operation in part of Karin state, they displaced in a period of six months, over 80,000 people which in those days was a large amount, although it pales in comparison to what is happening now. But they carried out this military offensive... there was nothing from the international community... no sanctions or anything from the international community. But at the same time, the dictatorship allowed Aung San Suu Kyi, who was under house arrest at the time, to repair a hole in the roof of her house, and that made international headlines. It was reported everywhere. Diplomats were going wild. There was all this speculation. Is this a sign of change? You know, is this a big significant move and everything. Meanwhile, children are being shot, people are being skinned alive in Karen state, and nothing.



A Rohingya boy in a refugee camp. Image source: Steve Gumaer, [Flickr](#), CC BY-NC 2.0.

That's always been the approach of the international community, but with the Rohingya it's more... that feeds into it generally, what happens in ethnic states, there's much worse human rights violations there, and but with the Rohingya then, you've got the added complication of this escalation happening at a time when there were reforms taking place and the international community bought into those reforms big time.

Now ourselves and many others were warning that this is not a genuine process, this is rigged by the military, but the international community for a whole range of different reasons... human rights falling down their agenda; Obama more interested in containment with China and North Korea; a change of government within the UK which no longer cared about human rights and whether they dropped human rights as a priority within Burma (they were the ones holding the line within the whole of the EU), and so you had the international community then, you know, I'm sure many of them were not stupid, they knew what was happening wasn't a genuine process, but it was good enough for them and... but what's happening in Kochin and Shan state, where there's increased conflict there, and what's happening in Rakhine State, is inconvenient, but they weren't going to... by now, they've got companies going in, they've got trade offices, that's their main priority.

The Rohingya have had a double whammy of a change of political climate and the changing priorities of the international community in Burma, deciding that you know, as one foreign office official told us 'as long as the general direction of travel is good', so.. and that's continued now. Min Aung Hlaing has paid no price at all for what he's done, so he's got away with it. There's not a single new sanction introduced against him. The UK has suspended a military training program that they should never have started in the first place, and that's it. The EU have not done a single thing. They're boasting about how they have suspended invitations to senior military figures and that's it. That's not even a visa ban which is the EU's lowest possible measure that they can do. So he's got away with it, which means he's going to do it again.

Because you recently wrote about the military coup myth and how it's been used as a convenient excuse by the international community. Do you mind just elaborating on that a little for our readers?

So one of the things the government of Burma has been trying to avoid international pressure, and international governments have been hiding behind as well is this military coup threat myth, which basically... if Aung San Suu Kyi and the government do too much... if they gave rights to the Rohingya or anything like that.. it could trigger a military coup or if the international community puts on too much pressure, it could trigger a military coup. This is completely false because the current political system in Burma was entirely created by the military.

They were facing in the past, a combination of international pressure and sanctions, and at the same time, every decade, every generation, there was a new uprising. Burma was falling behind it's neighbours which it looked down on, who were more technologically, economically advanced than they were, and they were, militarily they were under strength with equipment, under strength with recruits, moral was very low, and so they realised they had to change, so they bought in a new constitution which effectively bought in two governments. They knew that they would have to roll out free and fair elections and they knew that Aung San Suu Kyi would win those elections and they knew they would have to give that to get the sanctions and everything else, domestic and international pressure lifted, so they created this constitution which creates two governments so they farmed off the things they don't care about much, agriculture and education, to the government and the economy, which is going to be a burden, that way if things don't go well with development the government get the blame, and they kept themselves as independent, they kept control of the police and the security services, border affairs, they control the equivalent of the home office there, and they also kept control of large parts of the civil service through the home office. They have an administration department there, so it's not like the other countries where you might have local authorities or councils or organisations there so... a lot of it is organised centrally in Burma so even the ministries that are under the control of Aung San Suu Kyi have to work through military controlled civil servants, which means it's very easy for them to obstruct change that they don't like. And then in parliament, they have to guarantee 25% of seats in parliament to avoid any constitutional change because you need more than 75% of MPs to vote for constitutional change, so they've got a veto over any change of their constitution and even as an extra failsafe in their constitution, they can take over the government again legally for very vaguely defined reasons of national security or unity, which could mean anything up to them. So they could take over at any time if they want to, but only if their interests are really threatened. So their interests are not threatened at the moment. I think they probably can't believe what they are getting away with.

They probably thought they were going to have a much tougher time from Aung San Suu Kyi and the international community. They've been able to carry out 2 major military operations against the Rohingya, [displacing around 800,000 people in total](#) and they've got away with it. There's now nearly a million Rohingya in Bangladesh and they've got away with this completely and they've not paid any price. They've still got Austria and Germany who have agreed with military co-operation and training programs, there's still European companies selling equipment to the military, just this year we've seen for the military I think Germany, Austria, China, Russia, Japan, Nepal, Lao, Thailand, Vietnam, all agreed to increase military co-operation with Burma, despite them being under investigation by the UN for war crimes and crimes against humanity. So everything's gone really well for the military. Their budget has been increasing by about \$100 million dollars a year since the reform process has began 7 years ago. The last thing they want to do is retake power. Because if they retake direct control then they lose everything they've gained. The people will hate them again. At the moment they are more popular than they have ever been. They're defending the nation against the Bengali illegal immigrants (as Rohingya are often referred to in Myanmar) and they're not under threat any more of an uprising domestically, internationally all of the sanctions against them are lifted except for the few countries that still have arms embargoes, and even those countries that have arms embargoes are selling them other military equipment, and so they're sitting pretty. If they retake direct control of the population then they lose all of that. The population will hate them again, sanctions will be imposed against them.



Buddhist monks holding an anti-Rohingya sign Image source: Prachatai, [Flickr](#), CC BY-NC ND 2.0.

So it's not in their interest?

Absolutely. They've spent years putting this current system in place. It's working for them. So to retake the country, especially over an issue like Rohingya which we've seen this massive military response from them, but at the end of the day, is the Rohingya issue, is one of the issues they consider to be really critical of what they consider to be the national unity? It's not. You know, so they are much more concerned about armed insurgencies, other areas, ethnic states where there is a history of organised arms groups which control large parts of territory and in the past who have wanted independence. They're a real threat. You've got the Wa, who have got an estimated 20-30,000 soldiers. The Rohingya armed organisations has a few hundred unarmed people attacking police stations with spades and sticks and sharpened bicycle spokes, so if you look at what's really a threat... so the military know.. they hate the Rohingya, they want to get them out, they don't like them, they don't like muslims, they see them as foreign, they know that carrying out this attack against the Rohingya is making them more popular, but it's not one of those top issues for them in terms of what they would define as a threat to their interests.

So if there was greater pressure from the international community in this issue they may change that?

They've paid no price. The key thing is what happened last October. Last October they were taken by surprise. An armed attack group carried out an attack on a border police station and they responded the way they always do to anything like that, they sent in soldiers they burned villages, they raped, they killed, it's standard, that's what they've been doing to the Karen, the Karenni, Shan, and the Kachin for decades. That's their classic standard response. But when they carried out that operation, Min Aung Hlaing learned three things: one, great upsurge in popular support within the country because people hate the Rohingya and he's driving them out, the surprising thing... two, Aung San Suu Kyi defended the military operation, denied human rights violations were taking place, and acted as a lightning rod for what international criticism there was, which was mainly directed at her, not him, and thirdly, he paid no price, internationally. [So even as his soldiers were raping and killing in Rohingya villages he was speaking at a prestigious meeting of EU military heads, and later on he was invited to Austria and Germany and he was invited to Italy and taken around military suppliers.](#) So he learned these three things from that. That he can get more popular, Aung San Suu Kyi will defend him and act as shield for criticism and internationally, he can do almost anything.

So they waited for the next attack and as pretext they wanted to use that for a much larger operation to drive the Rohingya out, what Min Aung Hlaing has described as 'the unfinished business' with the Rohingya, seeing it as a colonial legacy issue, and got away with it. So now that he's got away with that again, despite all this international outrage, he's paid no price. So he's going to be.. next time there's another attack, he's going to carry out a similar military operation. It'll have to be on a smaller scale because there aren't that many Rohingya left in the country. But he's also going to be re-evaluating how much leeway and space he has to operate against other ethnic groups. So where he's held back from very large scale offensives against the KIA (the Kachin armed organisation), he's going to be looking again at that situation, he's going to be looking at northern Shan state again, not against the KIA but against other armed ethnic organisations there and re-evaluating there what he can actually get away with, and because he's probably thinking 'I can get away with a lot more than we realised'. You had military dictatorship in Burma since 1962 and they did gradually escalate pressure against the Rohingya through a series of policies and laws, but it happened slowly over decades, and they used two policies to try and drive the Rohingya out: deliberate impoverishment and denial of human rights and human rights violations. But they never dared do what they have done last October and this. This is a time where it's supposed to be reforms and positive. Even under the darkest days of the previous military dictatorship, they never dared to do what they've done now. So what changed? What changed is the attitude of the international community. The consistent messaging that you can do what you want to the Rohingya, we can look the other way, so long as what we think there is positive change in other areas.

So in a way it's legitimisation that is going to have implications for so many other minorities in the country as well....

Yes. You got.. you're seeing the military is involved in different ways as well. It's not just what they've done against the Rohingya, it's not just what's likely to happen in other ethnic states, you're seeing them being bolder in their criticism and moves against journalists and critics, and other domestic criticism within the country, their obstruction of the criticism of the government on things they don't like, so they're feeling more and more confident and so whereas before they were feeling more pressure to go along with certain things, you know, they're not. They've always taken a very hard line on the peace process, but they're taking a much tougher line now than they have in the past. In the past they've said we've got our principles here but we're prepared to negotiate, but now they're taking a stronger stance in their approach there on the peace process so I think this is going to spill over into a whole range of areas and Aung San Suu Kyi's perceived weakness in the face of what's happened with the Rohingya and because they are just... they're bullies, they push it as far as they can go. And what's happened is that the international community has usually been afraid of these bullies and not sure what they're going to do and backed down, but the few occasions when they have been stood up to, they do back down like bullies do. But at the moment everyone is still backing down to them. They're feeling pretty cocky at the moment, so they're going to push it in lots of different areas.

So what is Aung San Suu Kyi's role in this right now? To what extent is she constrained by the military or could she influence this?

Well she has constitutionally she's got certain defined powers and then obviously there's political considerations as well, so she has appeared to have made a decision that she wants to befriend and persuade the military that she and civilian rule, and being under civilian government control, is not a threat to their interest and that's what a professional army should be. And so she won't criticise them or anything at all, publicly she won't. Not just on the Rohingya issue but on the military attacks on the Kachin and the Shan, she's praised the military for what they are doing rather than condemning what they are doing and putting pressure on them to stop. So she can't control the military, she can't order them to stop these attacks, but what she does have is the power to mobilise international pressure and domestic pressure, and the military really care about that.

You look at Min Aung Hlaing's Facebook page. He updates it every day and his Twitter feed. And he's got it in Burmese and English translation. Every international diplomat he meets there's a picture. Every foreign trip meticulously documented in pictures. Descriptions – who said what at what meeting, and they've got their own media in Burma, lots of social media. He's got more followers on his social media, Min Aung Hlaing, than Aung San Suu Kyi does on her councillor page. So they really care about these things. A big win for the reforms has been international acceptance. Because they feel that this status was never acknowledge when there was direct military rule and they were pariahs, this was a humiliation for them, because they are very arrogant, they see themselves as being very important and they deserve the love of the people and they deserve international respect so getting that international recognition and going on these international visits for Min Aung Hlaing has been very important and he's boasting about it to the population in Burma as well, with all these posts documenting everyone sees, showing his status. So this status and this acceptance is very important to him. If that starts to be withdrawn then he's not going to like that, and that will be another factor because there's no single thing. It's very easy if you say 'oh we're going to have economic sanctions against military identities' that's going to have a very limited impact and if you say 'oh the British government supports an ICC referral' but at the moment Russia and China will block it so that's going to have a very limited impact. So it's about all of those things together combined that do have an impact.

If you can get the series of measures that are available and use those, that will have an impact. You start taking away some of the gains that they've made, that they're enjoying and it's going to be more painful because the previous military dictatorship had been sanctioned for so long, many of the senior officers have never experienced that. So they didn't know what they were missing. So Min Aung Hlaing will miss his red carpet treatment and he will miss the special dinners that are being hosted in his honour if individual countries start to take those sorts of measures if he starts to become a pariah then that's something that might start to influence his behaviour, but as long as he pays no price then he's just going to become more and more emboldened.

You can also [read the event report](#) and [watch the panel video](#). An interview with panellist Mabrur Ahmed is also available [here](#).

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About the Authors



Mark Farmaner has 30 years of experience in advocacy and research on human rights and development. He was involved in the anti-Apartheid campaign, worked for the development agency Christian Aid for 7 years, and has 20 years' experience working on Burma at [Burma Campaign UK](#). He has worked closely with civil society organisations and activists from Burma providing training and support. For the past ten years Mark has also been on the board of the Phan Foundation, which provides funding to grassroots community organisations in and from Burma.



Rebecca Bowers is a blog editor at the South Asia Centre and a final year PhD student in the Anthropology Department at the London School of Economics. Rebecca's research explores the lives of female construction workers and their families in Bengaluru, India.