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Suu Kyi's New Role: Challenging Tasks Ahead

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Synopsis

After being feted during her tour of Europe Myanmar's opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi is facing some politically difficult challenges at home. There is an increasing pressure on her to address Myanmar's domestic crisis vis-à-vis the minorities.

Commentary

After a three-week long tour of Europe, Opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi has returned to a Myanmar that is going through a critical time. The ethnic violence that erupted in June 2012 between the Rakhine Buddhists and the Rohingya Muslims has claimed more than 80 lives and displaced approximately 90,000 people.

Though the situation was quickly brought under control by the Thein Sein government, there is a demand from the rights groups on Suu Kyi to address the issue and work for a sustainable solution. But it will not be easy for Suu Kyi to bring about a significant change as she will have to deal with the unfavourable majority view on Rohingyas, a reality she cannot ignore. Suu Kyi's stance on the Rohingya issue will be influenced by three key factors: the public opinion in her own constituency, the view of her party members, and the populist mainstream opinion in Myanmar.

A sensitive issue

Though ethnic conflict is not a new phenomenon to Myanmar the recent riot in the Rakhine state and the outflow of Rohingya refugees to neighbouring Bangladesh brought Myanmar's minority issues under closer international scrutiny.

The Rohingya issue is a politically sensitive one in Myanmar's society but at the same time it is of immense significance for Suu Kyi's political career. This is possibly a reason why her reaction on the Rohingya issue was cautious, which dismayed many human rights activists. Her responses in the coming days will be more important as these will give a strong message to the people of Myanmar, its neighbours, international development partners and investors on how she is going to deal with the minorities from her own position.

Myanmar is currently going through a transition to democracy as the reformist government is signalling a change in the pattern of governance. One can term it as a soft democracy. In the April 2012 by-elections Suu Kyi's party the National League for Democracy won 43 of the 44 seats it contested. Though Suu Kyi will not

have a handle on the national administration till the 2015 elections, she needs a clear a viable strategy from now to address expectations of economic progress and development before resentments pile up.

The Rohingyas in the Rakhine state and also in the refugee camps in Bangladesh want Suu Kyi to address the issue and take a firm and clear stance to solve their problem. But the social and political reality in Myanmar is rather complex and Suu Kyi apparently has limited political options at this moment.

There exists a highly negative dominant Bamar majoritarian public attitude towards the Rohingyas in Myanmar, reflected in the racist undertone in Myanmar's Burmese language blogs and commentaries. Rohingyas are still considered as "outsiders" by the Burmans and some minorities. The state has not been able to integrate them in the society and give them an opportunity to develop and often failed to protect the Rohingyas from ethnic persecution.

Factors that influence Suu Kyi's stance

There are several reasons to believe that Suu Kyi finds herself in a difficult position regarding the Rohingya issue. Firstly, because her constituency, the rural township called Kawhmu, is known to have an extremely anti-Rohingya stance. Therefore it will not be easy for her to do something that will cause resentment in her own constituency.

Secondly, as some observers have noted, even among some key members of her own party the National League for Democracy (NLD) there exists a very negative perception about the Rohingyas. Thirdly, at this point in time it will be very difficult for Suu Kyi to take a position which might upset the majority of the population or go against populist mainstream opinion.

While talking to the press Suu Kyi said that the lack of communal harmony in Myanmar is rooted in cultural and religious differences which take time to sort out. But with rule of law, immediate problems could be minimised. It is not often that the world hears about her policy on ethnic minorities. But there is one development that might help to understand her broader approach to the minorities. In May 2012 during her visit to Thailand, she visited the Myanmar's Karen refugee camps. This has created a positive impact on the minorities and has created new optimism. The Rohingyas also desire Suu Kyi to address them. But at this moment, it seems to be a bridge too far.

High expectation of harmony and coexistence

With an unprecedented level of popularity at home and abroad what Suu Kyi faces today is high expectation from every segment of Myanmar society especially from the minorities like the Rohingyas. Undoubtedly this is the crucial time for her work for building an inclusive society based on tolerance and pluralism. But one must not forget that Suu Kyi needs time.

The next few months will be crucial not only for Myanmar's historic transition but also for Suu Kyi's image and political future. Suu Kyi alone cannot solve the complex ethnic problems of Myanmar that has existed for decades, but what she can do is to work for better and inclusive legal safeguards to protect the minorities. Nevertheless there is optimism in Myanmar and beyond that her immense popularity might be instrumental in bringing about public opinion in favour of ethnic harmony and coexistence.

As a Member of Parliament, Suu Kyi is now part of Myanmar's state establishment which is challenged by nearly two dozen armed ethnic insurgencies of various scales and intensities. Her ultimate challenge will be to work towards restructuring Myanmar, keeping it unified while addressing the demands of the minorities which make up a third of the population.

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