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Aung San Suu Kyi is no longer ‘a symbol of hope’



Aung San Suu Kyi speaks at the ASEAN Business and Investment Summit in Singapore on Nov. 12. (Athit Perawongmetha/REUTERS)

by Kumi Naidoo

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Aung San Suu Kyi once asked Amnesty International “to not take either your eyes or your mind” off Myanmar as she led a struggle against the country’s repressive military junta.

We did exactly as requested.

And when she ultimately rose to become the *de facto* [leader of Myanmar’s civilian-led government in April 2016](#), we carried on watching — first with hope, and then with horror.

We watched as the release of scores of prisoners of conscience gave way to renewed political arrests and clampdowns on freedom of expression. We watched as Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) — [elected in a landslide](#) by voters from all walks of life — cultivated narratives of hate that have fostered discrimination and intolerance rather than celebrated the country’s diversity.

And we watched when she failed to condemn or even acknowledge [the atrocities against the Rohingya](#) population in Rakhine state — as [the military killed thousands, tortured men and boys, raped women and girls](#), and forced hundreds of thousands out of their homes and country.

We watched keenly, but never silently.

Since Aung San Suu Kyi came to power, Amnesty [has documented](#) war crimes and other human rights violations by the military in Kachin and northern Shan states in the north of the country. As is often the case, civilians are those who suffer the worst. But instead of alleviating their suffering, her government has joined the military in restricting humanitarian access to people in need.

We have exposed how the Rohingya have been trapped in a vicious system of state-sponsored, institutionalized discrimination that amounts to apartheid, stripped of their citizenship, segregated from society and unable to move freely or access schools and hospitals. The situation is exacerbated by the administration stirring up hostility against the Rohingya, calling them “terrorists,” and accusing them of burning their own homes and of “faking rape.”

We have gathered — and published — extensive, credible evidence implicating Myanmar’s military commander in chief, [Senior General Min Aung Hlaing](#), and 12 other named individuals, most of them high-ranking military or police officers, [in crimes against humanity committed against the Rohingya](#). A [United Nations report](#) concluded that these crimes may also constitute genocide.

And this week, [we revoked Amnesty’s highest human rights honor](#) — the Ambassador of Conscience Award — from Aung San Suu Kyi herself.

It was when she received this award in person in 2012, two years after being released from long years of house arrest, that she requested we observe what was to come. Irene Khan, then in the role I now hold as secretary general of Amnesty, [described](#) Aung San Suu Kyi as “a symbol of hope, courage and the undying defense of human rights.”

But while Amnesty worked to keep up its side of the bargain, Aung San Suu Kyi did not keep hers.

Instead, she has turned her back on the very principles — human rights, justice, dignity — for which she was honored. Allowing Aung San Suu Kyi to continue to bear the title of Amnesty International’s Ambassador of Conscience would make a mockery not just of the award but of all those who dedicate their lives in pursuit of universal human rights.

Yet while our decision to revoke this award was made with great sadness, it was not made without hope. Growing up as an activist in South Africa, I have been part of a struggle against a brutal apartheid regime myself. I was arrested several times; my younger brother was imprisoned; my best friend was murdered.

Each of us made sacrifices. Some were far greater than others. But the struggle was never solely about any one person. The battle for human rights never is.

Similarly, the struggle for justice in Myanmar is far bigger than Aung San Suu Kyi. It will continue — and is continuing — in villages, towns and cities across the country.

The world must not forget that human rights issues in Myanmar go beyond the Rohingya. Others continue to suffer abuses, discrimination, and crushing poverty and its impacts — much of which traces to the all-powerful military and its power over almost all aspects of political, economic and social life in the country.

Although her party does not control the military, Aung San Suu Kyi has allowed herself and her government to become a shield for military abuses.

“I never knew how many people cared for us and our cause. This award shows me I will not be alone,” Aung San Suu Kyi said in 2012. Those who cared then still care now, and that’s why the people of Myanmar will never be alone in their fight against repression.

Alongside them, Amnesty International will redouble our efforts to fight injustice, with or without Aung San Suu Kyi.

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