

MYANMAR 2018: BOTCHED TRANSITION AND REPATRIATION PLAN

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The year was defined by the Rohingya crisis, which lingers on and remains unresolved. The agreement signed by the governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh in November 2017 had several aborted starts in 2018. Both governments came under the pressure of China to deal with the repatriation of the Rohingya refugees bilaterally, without the involvement of other (international) parties. What was evidently a forced repatriation plan was eventually halted in November. The outcry of human rights and refugee organisations continued unabated, as did western outrage against State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, widely seen as callous and complicit in the military's atrocities against the Rohingya. As ties with the United States worsened, China's economic clout in Myanmar was consolidated, as evidenced by the expansion of economic projects and Beijing's leverage on Nay Pyi Taw during the crisis. At home, however, Suu Kyi remained personally popular. Despite some efforts at rebooting, her government's performance has oscillated between ineptitude and incompetence. Some personnel reshuffles and new strategic plans notwithstanding, its shortcomings remain well-known, being plagued by personalisation, the centralisation of decision-making and over-reliance on loyalty, to the detriment of expertise and professionalism. The NLD's cohabitation with the military has continued, but no open rifts have thus far surfaced.

1. Introduction

In response to the series of terrorist attacks in August 2017 by the Rohingya militant organisation named the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), the Myanmar military carried out what it termed 'clearance operations', which in the space of a few weeks in September, and involving mass rape, arson and indiscriminate killings, led to one of the greatest refugee crisis in recent decades.¹ Approximately 750,000 Rohingya (representing the majority of this stateless, largely Muslim ethnic group) fled Rakhine state seeking refuge on the other side of the border, in the Chittagong district of eastern Bangladesh. The fallout within Bangladesh was that this impoverished South-East Asian country was confronted with a crisis with

1. Matteo Fumagalli, 'Myanmar 2017: The Rohingya Crisis between radicalisation and ethnic cleansing', *Asia Maior* 2017, pp. 227-243; Nicholas Farrelly, 'Assessing the Rohingya crisis', *New Mandala*, 13 June 2018.

which it could barely cope. Within the borders of Myanmar, physical destruction across Rakhine state was observed, yet there was also widespread support across most segments of Myanmar society for the way in which the authorities handled the crisis.

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Of course, dealing with the Rohingya crisis and the repatriation issue was not the only issue faced by the Myanmar government in 2018, but the fallout from the violence continued to cast a long and dark shadow on the country's international image. Domestically, Aung San Suu Kyi remained personally popular, despite an overall poor government performance. Being about halfway into the National League for Democracy's (NLD) term in office, it is now a good time to assess the performance of the government in terms of its domestic, economic and foreign policy. Its performance has been rather disappointing. Always bound to disappoint in light of the unrealistically high expectations that accompanied it, the government led de facto by Aung San Suu Kyi has combined ineptitude, centralisation and personalisation of decision-making. Substantial time has been spent on drawing up strategic plans, and less on actually building up human capacity, expertise and turning plans into practice.

This article is structured as follows. First, it revisits developments in domestic policy. Stalled progress in the peace process and increasingly fraught relations with ethnic Rakhine suggest that despite some efforts at rebooting, transition has stalled.² The subsequent section reviews the mixed picture insofar as the economy is concerned. Lastly, it examines how the country's international ties have been affected by the crisis, enabling China to consolidate its already strong influence.

2. *Domestic policy*

The beginning of the year appeared to bear significant semblance to the late summer days of 2017, as ARSA carried out a new terrorist attack on

2. Justine Chambers & Gerard McCarthy, 'Myanmar transformed?', in Justine Chambers, Gerard McCarthy, Nicholas Farrelly, Chit Win (eds.), *Myanmar transformed? People, places and politics*, Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018, pp. 3-22.

5 January.³ However, that was the only episode of its sort of 2018. With most of the Rohingya population abroad and focused on survival, it proved difficult for militants to mobilise ordinary Rohingya against Myanmar-related grievances, especially when living in Bangladesh. The issue was of course far from settled.

On the occasion of the 43rd Singapore lecture delivered in Singapore in August 2018, State Counsellor and de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi appeared to be at her rhetorical best, excelling at capturing the intricacies of Myanmar's transformation while glossing over some of the key responsibilities of her own administration.⁴ Whilst referring to the current political trajectory as an 'intricate transition' and the fact that 'without peace [our] transition could not blossom and bear fruit',⁵ Suu Kyi has stubbornly refrained from acknowledging the disproportionate pain suffered by the Rohingya. Some concessions were made under international pressure, as the authorities established a so-called 'Independent commission of enquiry', chaired by Rosario Manalo a former foreign minister of the Philippines, on the violence in Rakhine state.

Tensions in Rakhine remained high, with relations between the central NLD-led government and local ethnic Rakhine increasingly fraught. The local Rakhine political parties appeared to be preparing for the 2020 parliamentary elections⁶ and commenced an early campaign based on grievances against a Bamar nationalist government.⁷ The more radical elements joined the ranks of the Arakan Army, the Rakhine militant organisation that constitutes part of the Northern Alliance, the umbrella group which brings together ethnic armed organisations like the United Wa State Army (UWSA) that are vehemently more opposed to Nay Pyi Taw's peace process. The government now appears to be mired in a three-cornered fight with the Rohingya and the ethnic Rakhine community.

At a broader level, throughout 2018 Myanmar had ample opportunities to reboot its government through personnel changes and long-overdue policy initiatives (see the following section on the economy). The nomination of a new president was one such opportunity for a reset. Htin Kyaw, who had held the largely ceremonial position since March 2016, suddenly resigned on 21 March. Swiftly, Win Myint was sworn in on 30 March. Widely known for being authoritative and outspoken, Win Myint, who held the deputy position

3. 'ARSA claims recent attack in northern Rakhine', *The Irrawaddy*, 8 January 2018.

4. Aung San Suu Kyi, *Democratic transition in Myanmar: Challenges and the way forward*, 43rd Singapore Lecture, Singapore, 21 August 2018, available at <http://www.globalnewlightofmyanmar.com/democratic-transition-in-myanmar-challenges-and-the-way-forward>.

5. *Ibid.*

6. 'Arakan Front Party rallies for 2020', *The Irrawaddy*, 14 November 2018.

7. '«Refugees» citizenship demands «impossible»: Myanmar gvt', *Frontier Myanmar*, 20 November 2018.

in the NLD, was rumoured to be an ‘anointed successor’ to the now 72-year old Aung San Suu Kyi, widely known for being ‘allergic’ to delegating tasks. Yet, the new president has thus far failed to make any significant impact. This is also possibly due to the fact that his staff is small and largely reports directly to Suu Kyi herself. Born in Danubyu in the Ayeyarwady Delta, Win Myint, a long-time political activist, was elected three times (first in 1990, then in the 2012 by-elections and finally in 2015).⁸ A member of the NLD central executive committee since 2010, Win Myint has been secretary of the Lower House’s ‘rule of law, peace and tranquillity committee’, and speaker of the lower house since 2016. His inauguration speech offered indication of both where his priorities lie and his more outspoken nature relative to his much more muted predecessor: ‘[t]hose government institutions which are lagging behind in the transformation process will need to be put under tight management controls.[...] more efforts need to be exerted to prevent human rights violations. [...] measures need to be taken to return confiscated farmland to farmers and to give compensation [...]’.⁹

Aung San Suu Kyi’s flagship project, the peace process, made no substantial progress, as violence continues across the country, especially in Kachin and Shan states. The military ascribed blame to the ethnic groups for the on-going skirmishes between the armed groups and the Tatmadaw. The 3rd session of the 21st century Panglong Union Peace Conference was held in mid-July, in the hope of making headway with its objective of bringing the many armed insurgencies to an end and forge a lasting peace among Myanmar’s ethnic groups.¹⁰ The event was attended by the 10 ethnic armed groups that have signed the nation-wide ceasefire agreement as well as government and military officials and the representatives of groups that are not NCA signatories. Violence in Kachin and Shan states, among others, has significantly hindered process. Two groups, the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), have temporarily withdrawn from the process, citing the need to consult with their members on the issues stalling the negotiations.¹¹ Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing stated that ‘delaying the peace process is further drowning [our] country, which has already lagged behind in development’¹².

Towards the end of 2018 Myanmar held a small number of by-elections, but it is impossible to draw any broad conclusions from the contesta-

8. ‘Who is U Win Myint, Myanmar’s likely new president?’, *The Irrawaddy*, 26 March 2018.

9. ‘I promise that you will see with your own eyes the changes that you have yearned for as I walk along this path together with you’, *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 31 March 2018.

10. ‘Myanmar opens new round of delicate peace talks with ethnic armies’, *Radio Free Asia*, 11 July 2018.

11. ‘Next peace talks slated for next month or early 2019’, *Myanmar Times*, 26 November 2018.

12. ‘Myanmar opens new round of delicate peace talks with ethnic armies’.

tion of just 13 seats out of a total of 1,156.¹³ Growing popular disillusionment with the National League for Democracy meant that of 11, the party only retained six, with the others being gained by the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP, 3 seats) and the Chin League for Democracy, with the Shan National League for Democracy retaining one and the Arakan National Party (a nationalist party in Rakhine) losing its seat to an independent.¹⁴ What this indicates is a widening chasm between the NLD, by now perceived as spearheading Bamar nationalism, and the country's ethnic minorities.

The atmosphere in the country remained tense and un conducive to reconciliation after the 2017 violence. Most Myanmar citizens obtain their information through social media.¹⁵ Facebook and other social media have facilitated the spread of rumours and have yet to face up to their responsibilities. If anything, they are exacerbating the situation, as the recent scandal engulfing the CEO of Twitter on vacation in the country shows, as he praised its beauty and hospitality of its people while foregoing the venom spread through social media.¹⁶

The decline in media freedom in Myanmar has been widely noted.¹⁷ In fact the issue appears to be twofold, with the effect of reducing the quality of debate and information in the country. On the one hand was the government's reliance on colonial or military-era laws to stifle dissent. The Official Secrets Act – dating back to 1923! – was used multiple times to hinder the work of journalists, as in the case of the two Reuters journalists, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, who were arrested in December 2017 on the charge of possession of illegal official documents and sentenced to seven years in prison in September 2018. As noted elsewhere,¹⁸ the two journalists were arrested for reporting on the crimes perpetrated by the Myanmar military in its operations against the Rohingya in 2017. The journalists appealed against the court ruling in a case that drew worldwide criticism, but little sympathy from the Myanmar government.¹⁹

On the other hand we should mention the widespread reliance on social media for information. A large proportion of Myanmar's popula-

13. Of the 13 constituencies 5 were for seats in the lower and upper house (one in the Amyotha Hluttaw and four for the Pyithu Hluttaw) and the remainder for state and regional hluttaws. Han Too Khant Paing & Richard Roewer, 'Testing the water: the 2018 by-elections and Myanmar's political future', *Tea Circle*, 19 December 2018.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Lisa Brooten, 'Myanmar's media landscape needs more than press freedom', *East Asia Forum*, 18 April 2018.

16. 'Twitter CEO accused of ignoring plight of Rohingya in tweets promoting Myanmar', *The Guardian*, 9 December 2018.

17. 'Myanmar media landscape needs more than press freedom'.

18. 'Myanmar 2017', p. 242.

19. 'Lawyers for Reuters journalists files appeal to overturn sentence', *Myanmar Times*, 6 November 2018; 'Myanmar court hears appeal of convicted Reuters journalists', *Myanmar Times*, 24 December 2018.

tion owns a mobile device (typically a smartphone). Although print media are widely available across the country (as are TV and radio), it is the Internet (and Facebook most notably) that has become the main source of information (there being 18 million users in the country).²⁰ The problem, as is widely noted in the literature, is the fact that groundless, unverified information – rumours – circulate unchecked and unverified and so contribute to the venomous atmosphere of hatred and nationalism. Of course, hate speech has not been created by Facebook or Twitter, but it has been enabled by it, with social media contributing to the current atmosphere of radicalism and nationalism that is so widespread in the country.²¹ Finally, in late 2018 Facebook appeared to respond to pressure to crack down on hate speech, closing Facebook pages, accounts and groups linked to the Myanmar military, including the page of Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing.²²

The quality of Myanmar's Internet connection may have improved tremendously in recent years,²³ but the quality of debate has most certainly not.²⁴ Although cohabitation between the formally civilian government led by the NLD and the military continues, there appears to be little evidence of open rifts between the two, aside from the initial displeasure of the armed forces with both the decision to create the state counsellor position and the way in which this was rushed and pushed through the legislature in 2016.

20. 'Why Facebook is losing the war on hate speech in Myanmar', *Reuters*, 15 August 2018.

21. 'Facebook among firms named on Myanmar's human rights «dirty list»', *The Guardian*, 12 December 2018; John Reed, 'Hate speech, atrocities and fake news: the crisis of democracy in Myanmar', *Financial Times*, 22 February 2018; Francois-Guillaume Jaeck, 'What role has social media played in facilitating the spread of hard-line nationalist sentiment in Myanmar?', *Tea Circle*, 13 June 2018; Ashley S. Kinseth, 'Genocide in Modern Myanmar: Social Media and the Proliferation of Hate Speech in Myanmar', *Tea Circle*, 10 May 2018; Mish Khan & Sam Taylor, 'Facebook in Myanmar: a human problem that AI can't solve', *Tea Circle*, 6 November 2018.

22. The Internet giant shut down 18 Facebook pages, one Instagram account and two Facebook pages linked to the military in August, and it subsequently closed down another 13 pages. Finally, in December it removed 425 pages, 17 groups and 35 accounts (and another 15 Instagram accounts) on the grounds of spreading hate and disseminating unfounded information online in an organised fashion. 'Facebook shuts hundreds more pages linked to Myanmar military', *The Irrawaddy*, 19 December 2018; 'Pressure mounts for Rakhine solution', *Myanmar Times*, 21 December 2018.

23. Basheerhamad Shadrach, 'Upgrading Myanmar's internet connection', *East Asia Forum*, 16 June 2018.

24. 'Myanmar's media landscape needs more than press freedom'; Yaw Bawm Mangshang, 'Myanmar's freedom of expression as a broken promise of the NLD', *Tea Circle*, 30 May 2018.

3. *The economy*

Akin to the other issues examined in this article, in which the performance of Myanmar's government has been less than impressive, blame has been ascribed to poor management and leadership. Aung San Suu Kyi has surrounded herself with advisors (and ministers) better known for their loyalty than their competence.

A brief focus on foreign direct investment (FDI) highlights how Myanmar's opening in recent year has been a mixed blessing.²⁵ From a purely quantitative perspective, Myanmar's performance is strong, topping the league of the 40 least-developed countries (LDCs),²⁶ with US\$ 4.3 billion of FDI in 2017. This built on a decade of positive data in this area, with FDI at a meagre US\$ 1.4 bn in 2012-13 up to US\$ 9.5 bn in 2015-16 for a total of US\$ 27.7 billion for the 2011-2016 period.²⁷ The Thilawa Special Economic Zone appeared particularly promising, as investment in the region by 150 companies from 17 different countries, as the government expects investment in Thilawa to exceed US\$ 1.7 billion.²⁸ Singaporean, Chinese and Japanese companies appeared particularly keen on moving some of their manufacturing to Myanmar. A shift from a quantitative to a more qualitative assessment reveals a different picture, however. In the period between 2016 and 2018 – thus during the NLD's tenure in office – FDI was clustered in a few key sectors, with oil and gas attracting 56% of the country's overall foreign investment for that period. Manufacturing attracted 25%, with hotel and tourism and agriculture attracting a meagre 4% and 1%, respectively.

There were some promising developments in the energy sector.²⁹ Home to reserves of about 1,820 billion cubic feet of natural gas and 139 million barrels in oil, Myanmar's hydrocarbons sector holds considerable promise for the country's economic future. It is therefore no surprise that the bulk of foreign investment has been channelled to either oil, gas or power sectors (about 56% in 2018).³⁰ Particularly attractive to foreign investors from India, China, Australia, the Netherlands and Korea is the development of offshore oil and gas fields, some of which are located off the coast of Rakhine state. Thus far

25. Zaw Myat Lin, 'Foreign Direct Investments and their implications for sustainable human development in Myanmar', *Tea Circle*, 14 November 2018.

26. 'Myanmar tops poor nation FDI league as China cash flows in', *Nikkei Asian Review*, 21 November 2018.

27. 'Foreign Direct Investments and their implications for sustainable human development in Myanmar'.

28. 'More foreign companies invest in Thilawa Special economic zone', *Myanmar Insider*, August 2018.

29. Thal Sandy Tun, 'Two steps backward to move forward: The energy sector moves in the right direction', *Tea Circle*, 1 May 2018; Paing Soe Hlaing, 'The birth of the liquefied petroleum gas market in Myanmar', *Tea Circle*, 10 December 2018.

30. 'Foreign Direct Investment and their implications for sustainable human development in Myanmar'.

the government's priorities lie in importing liquefied natural gas for domestic consumption and export local gas to generate hard currency.³¹ Despite some promising changes in terms of realising the country's natural resource wealth's considerable potential, as Gabusi notes especially in relation to the country's periphery, profound challenges and problems remain, including pertaining to issues of resource access and management.³²

In September the governments of Myanmar and China signed an important agreement launching the China Myanmar Economic Corridor,³³ a set of initiatives falling, unsurprisingly, within China's Belt and Road Initiative, China President Xi Jinping's flagship initiative. Originally announced by China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi in January, the CMEC stretches over 1,700 km, connecting Kunming in Yunnan province to Mandalay and Yangon in Myanmar. The agreement, worth US\$ 2bn, encompasses in excess of 24 projects in infrastructure, telecommunications, agriculture, transport, finance, manufacturing and human resource development.³⁴

China continues to exert considerable leverage over Myanmar's foreign and domestic policy, as the following section also illustrates. The agreement has been met with doubt and scepticism inside Myanmar as the today infamous debt trap in which a growing number of smaller economies dependent on China's investment are becoming stuck as in the cases of Sri Lanka and Montenegro.

Fearing that its failure to lift living standards and deliver economic reform would cost it dearly in the 2020 elections, the government embarked on some changes to both personnel and policy.³⁵ In a move designed to boost the country's attractiveness to foreign investors and reshuffle macro-economic policy, the government created a new ministry for Investment and Foreign Economic Relations.³⁶ The move was subject to extensive criticism as – and in line with Myanmar policy-making (mal)practices – it was not subject to consultation or discussion in parliament, and the share of responsibilities between various ministries and organs remained blurred. On 19 November the government in fact announced the creation of a Ministry

31. 'Two steps backward to move forward: The energy sector moves in the right direction'.

32. Giuseppe Gabusi, 'Change and continuity: capacity, coordination and natural resources in Myanmar's periphery', in Justine Chambers, Gerard McCarthy, Nicholas Farrelly & Chit Win (eds.), *Myanmar transformed? People, places and politics*, 2018, Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, pp. 137-160.

33. Myat Myat Mon, 'Maximizing Benefit and Reducing Risk in the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor', *Tea Circle*, 10 October 2018.

34. 'Maximizing Benefit and Reducing Risk in the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor'.

35. 'Myanmar tries to jump-start policy with new economic team', *Asia Nikkei Review*, 19 November 2018; 'MIC Chair U Thaug Tun to lead new foreign economic relations ministry', *Frontier Myanmar*, 21 November 2018.

36. 'MIC Chair U Thaug Tun'.

for Investment and Foreign Economic Relations, to be chaired by Thang Tun.³⁷ Thang Tun's career in government has been rapid. A former diplomat, he was appointed National Security Advisor in January 2017, before becoming the Minister for the Office of the Union Government in November of the same year. Moreover, in June 2018 he was appointed Chair of the Myanmar Investment Commission, before taking up this new post later in 2018,³⁸ raising questions about what, if any, achievements one could possibly attain during such short tenures in office. In late December the government announced a number of economic reforms aimed at liberalising the insurance sector, easing restrictions on foreign banks and establishing a credit rating bureau in an attempt to kick-start the long-heralded but never-quite-delivered economic liberalisation.³⁹

4. Foreign policy

4.1. Myanmar, Bangladesh and the Rohingya crisis

This article deals with the Rohingya crisis in the foreign policy section not because it shares the Myanmar authorities' perspective that the Rohingya are 'somebody else's problem', but rather because with some 750,000 refugees now stationed in neighbouring Bangladesh, this has become a transnational issue. Insofar as the Rohingya issue is concerned, the year 2018 was marked by the planned (but failed) gradual and voluntary implementation of the November 2017 agreement between Dhaka and Nay Pyi Taw, which would have seen the repatriation of the Rohingya refugees back to Myanmar. According to the agreement, which constitutes a framework for repatriation rather than a detailed plan, the process would be completed 'preferably within two years', starting from 23 January 2018.⁴⁰ Bangladesh committed to a voluntary repatriation of the Rohingya, reiterating that it would not send any back against their will. The Myanmar authorities in turn stated that the physical infrastructure required for the refugees' repatriation was in place.⁴¹ As per the 2017 agreement, the authorities in Dhaka would send an initial list of 100,000 Rohingya to be verified by the Myanmar authorities. This list was supposed to be drawn from a database compiled by the Bangladeshi authorities, and did not include any household information, rendering it impossible to produce family-based lists, hence the proposal was dropped. On 15 January, Nay Pyi Taw provided Bangladesh with a list of 580 Hindu and 750 Muslim Rohingya,

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*

39. 'Myanmar steps up financial reforms', *Bangkok Post*, 24 December 2018.

40. International Crisis Group, *Bangladesh-Myanmar: The danger of forced Rohingya repatriation*, Asia briefing 153, 12 November 2018, p. 3.

41. *Ibid.*

but given the lack of information regarding whether these had been contacted or wished to return, Dhaka did not proceed with their repatriation.⁴² In February Bangladesh handed over a list of 1,673 Rohingya to Myanmar, but given that key information remained omitted (whether they had agreed to return), this course of action was also dropped, and so was the Myanmar request that 675 Rohingya from such a list would be sent back.⁴³ Whether the Rohingya should, under the current circumstances, return to Myanmar has been a source of considerable controversy.

In November the two countries embarked on what soon appeared to be a plan for forced repatriation of the refugees from Bangladesh to Myanmar.⁴⁴ On 15 November 2018, the Bangladeshi authorities began implementing the agreement. On 30 November, Myanmar and Bangladesh agreed on a repatriation deal and established a joint working group in Dhaka.⁴⁵ According to the agreement, 485 families (2,260 individuals) would return to Myanmar, 150 per day. At such a rate, this would take some 10 years to complete. However, the plan sparked controversy as it was immediately evident that no consultations with refugee agencies (or the refugees affected) had taken place and that no criteria for selecting families and individuals to be repatriated first or where they would be resettled had been determined, with the very prospect of the return of the Rohingya eliciting angry reactions inside Rakhine state.⁴⁶

On paper the Myanmar authorities claim to be ready to take the refugees back. The conditions in the camps remain appalling and the refugees' mobility is restricted. Inside Myanmar, however, burned villages have been bulldozed to make space for new buildings. Some new housings have been built in some of the areas affected, but certainly not in sufficient numbers to accommodate all of the refugees should they choose to return. In fact, large areas of Maungdaw township and other regions of northern Rakhine state are

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*

44. International Crisis Group, *Myanmar/Bangladesh: A humanitarian calamity and a two-country crisis*, Commentary, 31 January 2018; Nyan Lynn Aung, 'ASEAN, Myanmar to formalise cooperation on refugee repatriation', *Myanmar Times*, 19 December 2018; Syeda Naushin Parnini, 'The Rohingya crisis a test for Bangladesh-Myanmar relations', *East Asia Forum*, 24 March 2018; Pranab Kumar Panday, 'Rohingya repatriation destined to fail', *East Asia Forum*, 14 December 2018.

45. Bangladesh is neither part of the 1951 Convention on Refugees nor a signatory to the 1967 protocol. That said, it is bound by customary international law to ensure that the Rohingya's return, if and when it happens, is safe. See *Myanmar/Bangladesh: A humanitarian calamity and a two-country crisis*, p. 3.

46. 'Rohingya fears grow as refugees face forcible return to Myanmar', *The Guardian*, 11 November 2018; 'Rohingya refugees flee camps to avoid return to Myanmar', *The Guardian*, 13 November 2018; 'First Rohingya Are to Be Returned to Myanmar Killing Grounds', *New York Times*, 14 November 2018; 'Myanmar and Bangladesh to begin repatriating Rohingya Muslims', *Financial Times*, 14 November 2018.

depopulated.⁴⁷ Non-Muslim villages are expanding, land is being confiscated, and security infrastructure is being rolled out.⁴⁸ The plan is to make entire parts of Rakhine Muslim-free, as even local Kamans have been relocated to Yangon out of security and safety concerns.⁴⁹ There has been no consultation with the United Nations (UN) or other refugee agencies, whose access to the affected areas of Rakhine state remains restricted. The UN and other agencies remain opposed to the repatriation under current conditions.⁵⁰

Bangladesh has never recognised the Rohingya as refugees: not those of the 2017 wave, not the earlier ones in 1978, 1991-92 or 2015. It has not sought their local integration and has traditionally insisted that they must return to Myanmar.⁵¹ That being said, the Rohingya refugees have essentially been part of Bangladeshi life since the country's independence in 1971.

Dhaka held its national elections in late December 2018, and Sheikh Hasina's Awami League – which won another landslide victory – was keen to postpone the decision until after the elections in order to capitalise on some domestic sympathy for both the Rohingya and the government's objective difficulty in managing the crisis. However, the presence of such large numbers of refugees is starting to take a toll on the regions immediately bordering Myanmar. Those Rohingya not living in the camps are seen as undercutting wages by offering to be paid less than local Bangladeshi citizens, thus highlighting a predicament that is all too common in modern-day migration patterns.⁵²

Furthermore, the areas around Cox's bazar (the Ukhia and Teknaf districts) represent one of the main tourist attractions of the country and the presence of such vast refugee camps is considered detrimental. For this and other reasons, the possibility of relocating the Rohingya to remote Bhasan island in the Bay of Bengal has been aired, despite the place being deemed unsuitable to human dwellings given the risk of the island flooding during the monsoon season.⁵³ Amidst all of this, the Rohingya have not been consulted and those who feared being resettled in Myanmar have either gone into hiding or left the camps. What is increasingly apparent, and of growing concern to Bangladeshi authorities and citizens alike, is that the Rohingya

47. International Crisis Group, *The long haul ahead for Myanmar's Rohingya refugee crisis*, Asia report 296, 16 May 2018, p. 13.

48. *Ibid.*

49. *The Long Haul Ahead*, p. 5. Kamans are a legally recognised ethnic group in Myanmar and hold full citizenship.

50. Amnesty International, *Remaking Rakhine*, 2018. Mark Inkey, 'The nightmare awaiting Rohingya returnees', *The Diplomat*, 19 September 2018; 'UN will not help Myanmar with long-term camps for Rohingya: document', *The Irrawaddy*, 14 November 2018.

51. *The Long Haul Ahead*.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

53. 'Footage shows «prison-like units» built for Rohingya on Bangladeshi island', *The Guardian*, 28 November 2018.

may be on Bangladeshi territory for a long time.⁵⁴ Dealing with the refugee crisis and finding a future for the Rohingya has not even remotely begun.

Another 16,000 Rohingya left Myanmar in 2018, heading either to Bangladesh or elsewhere on dangerous boat trips towards supposedly safer havens like Malaysia.⁵⁵ Those who sought to return temporarily to check houses and property were confronted with threats, torture and arrest.⁵⁶

4.2. *The role of China*

As noted elsewhere,⁵⁷ Myanmar's efforts at diversifying its foreign policy ties in the early to mid-2010s were just that: an attempt to complement its strong – if not unproblematic – ties with China with a more diverse set of international engagements. Nay Pyi Taw was not keen on moving away from China. Of course there have been bumps in the China-Myanmar bilateral relationship, as evidenced by the Myitstone dam project coming to a halt under the Thein Sein presidency. At the same time, and on the whole, ties remain warm. Aung San Suu Kyi had few hesitations in turning to Beijing for protection when criticism of Myanmar's Rohingya minority stimulated international outcry. China remains Myanmar's main political and economic partner and depends on China's goodwill for progress in peace-building and reconciliation.⁵⁸ Proof of the immense leverage China retains on Myanmar and neighbouring Bangladesh – and the considerable economic interests it holds in both countries – is the effective pressure it exerted on both Nay Pyi Taw and Dhaka to settle the Rohingya issue bilaterally, without involving multilateral solutions. Beijing proposed a 'three-phase plan' to solve the Rohingya issue, first involving a ceasefire to prevent further refugee flows, followed by the establishment of a stable line of communication between the two governments (ties between which remain tense) to jointly tackle the crisis, and finally the development of a long-term solution to acknowledge poverty in Rakhine as a factor in the making of the crisis.⁵⁹

From Beijing's perspective of Myanmar, the country represents an important piece in its Silk Road Economic Belt component of the Belt and

54. Trevor Wilson, 'Rohingya refugees trapped in limbo', *East Asia Forum*, 18 October 2018; 'Bangladesh admits on Rohingya willing to take repatriation offer', *The Guardian*, 15 November 2018; *The Long Haul Ahead*.

55. 'Fears of boat exodus as smugglers prey on Rohingya desperation', *Frontier Myanmar*, 23 November 2018.

56. *The Long Haul Ahead*.

57. Matteo Fumagalli, 'South Korea's relations with Myanmar: a stepping stone towards global engagement', Washington, DC: Korea Economic Institute of America, 16 February, 2017.

58. Marc Lanteigne, 'Myanmar has changed, but China's dominance remains', *East Asia Forum*, 11 May 2018.

59. Niang Peng, 'China and Myanmar's budding relationship', *East Asia Forum*, 23 August 2018.

Road Initiative.⁶⁰ Maintaining an economic foothold enables Beijing to gain strategic outreach in the Bay of Bengal, as well as reminding geopolitical rival India of its presence.

4.3. *Ties with neighbours and the USA*

In the Trump era, the United States of America (USA) has not only pivoted away from Asia but has folded into isolationism. US-Myanmar ties have visibly deteriorated compared to the Obama era, when both the President and Secretary of State of the time, Hilary Clinton, repeatedly visited the country in local displays of support, whether staged or genuine. Different members of the Trump administration, such as Vice-President Mike Pence and former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, criticised not only the way the country handled the Rohingya crisis but rebuked Aung San Suu Kyi for not doing more.⁶¹ The Trump administration reimposed sanctions on Myanmar's military and brought up the Rohingya issue to the UN Security Council,⁶² a move resented by the government in Nay Pyi Taw.

Closer to home, Myanmar's authorities suffered severe criticism from nearby Malaysia, with Prime Minister Mahatir Mohamad explicitly criticising the Myanmar authorities.⁶³ Even the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) took a stance, issuing a statement at a summit in Singapore in mid-November noting that the Rohingya crisis was 'a matter of concern', a rare departure from the regional organisation's policy of non-interference,⁶⁴ and a sign of the growing discomfort of members like Malaysia and Indonesia.

4.4. *Relations with the UN*

Relations with refugee organisations and human rights groups have remained tense. While accusing Myanmar government (including Aung San Suu Kyi personally) of being complicit in the military-perpetrated ethnic cleansing, Nay Pyi Taw stubbornly refused to grant them access to areas of greater concern and insisted that all operations carried out in September were a legitimate response to terrorist attacks, being designed to restore peace and stability.⁶⁵ At the same time, and with considerable difficulty, Nay

60. Myat Myat Mon, 'Maximising benefit and reducing risk in the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor', *Tea Circle*, 10 October 2018.

61. 'Pence Decries Violence Against Rohingya in Open Remarks to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi', *The Irrawaddy*, 14 November 2018.

62. 'China and Myanmar's budding relationship'.

63. 'Defending the indefensible': Malaysia's Mahatir slams Suu Kyi over Rohingya crisis', *The Irrawaddy*, 14 November 2018. 'Myanmar's neighbours call for «accountability» in Rakhine crisis: draft statement', *The Irrawaddy*, 14 November 2018.

64. 'Pressure mounts on Myanmar as ASEAN raises refugee crisis', *Asia Nikkei Review*, 15 November 2018.

65. 'Democratic transition in Myanmar'.

Pyi Taw sought to mend ties with the international community. In attempts to reboot international engagement with Myanmar's authorities, the UN appointed Ambassador Christine Burgener as special envoy of the UN Secretary General in April, a move that was welcomed by Nay Pyi Taw. The Myanmar government established what it called an 'independent commission of enquiry' into the 2017 violence in Rakhine. In May plans were announced to establish an Independent Commission of Enquiry led by Ambassador Rosario Manalo, an ASEAN diplomat, and the Commission met for the first time in Nay Pyi Taw on 15 August.

Aung San Suu Kyi's rapid fall from global icon of peace to pariah complicit in mass violence 'at best' – and genocide at worst – was epitomised in the number of prizes withdrawn one after the other across the globe. Indeed, the Freedom of Dublin, Edinburgh or Glasgow Awards to the Gwangju Human Rights Award in South Korea and, perhaps more embarrassingly, Amnesty International's Freedom of Conscience Award, were all withdrawn.⁶⁶ Calls for her Nobel Peace Prize to be withdrawn were also constantly voiced during the year, with some calling for charges to be pressed against her for her complicity in the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya.

5. Conclusion

As noted in a recent report by the International Crisis Group, Myanmar's transition has, at best, 'stalled'.⁶⁷ Despite some belated yet welcome attempts at re-engaging the international community with the aim of restoring part of its irreparably tarnished international image and to deliver on promises of economic reform, the government has continued to under-deliver on what had always been unrealistically high promises and expectations of change. The election of a new president and the nomination of a new economic team have done little to tackle the well-known challenges of poor management and centralised leadership in Myanmar.

The country's potential to transform itself remains, with the people of Myanmar being capable and energetic, as Walton noted in a sober but fair assessment of the (lack of) progress thus far.⁶⁸ The country's government, however, continues to fail its people, citizens or otherwise.

66. 'Aung San Suu Kyi stripped of Amnesty's highest honour over «shameful betrayal», *The Guardian*, 12 November 2018; 'Amnesty International strips Myanmar's Suu Kyi of «conscience» award', *The Irrawaddy*, 13 November 2018; 'From peace icon to pariah: Aung San Suu Kyi's fall from grace', *The Guardian*, 23 November 2018.

67. International Crisis Group, *Myanmar's stalled transition*, Asia briefing 151, 28 August 2018.

68. Matthew Walton, 'Reflections on Myanmar under the NLD so far', in Justine Chambers, Gerard McCarthy, Nicholas Farrelly, Chit Win (eds.), *Myanmar transformed? People, places and politics*, Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, pp. 311-318.