

AUNG SAN SUU KYI AND MODERN BURMA

Local historian Bjorn Watson spoke to Faringdon Peace Group recently about Burma - a country he knows well - and its most famous daughter Aung San Suu Kyi. He finds it difficult to understand how an enchanted land, blessed with natural resources and steeped in the non-violent teachings of Buddha could have erupted into such violence and possibly even ethnic cleansing. Equally puzzling is how Aung San Suu Kyi, icon of human rights and Nobel Peace Prize winner, could stand silently by. He offered us some insight into these conundrums.

Bjorn began with a short history of the country. Burma was founded in the 11th century and its empire gradually came to dominate most of south-east Asia. The first of three Anglo-Burmese wars in 1824 led the way to British rule from 1885 to 1948 when it gained independence. It was occupied by the Japanese between 1942 and 1945. Bjorn's family was there throughout this colonial period. His grandfather arrived in the 1890s, his father was born there in 1909, married in Rangoon in 1925 and left in 1948. Aung San, father of Aung San Suu Kyi, founded and led various socialist nationalist movements during and after World War 2, including the Burma Independence Army, which fought with the Japanese against the British and the hill tribes, sowing the seeds of future conflict. Aung San became the leader of a nearly independent Burma and in 1947 secured the historic Panglong agreement which united 135 different ethnic groups which had been enemies during the war. He was probably the only leader who could have held the country together but was tragically assassinated a few months later when Aung San Suu Kyi was only 2 years old.

From 1948 -1962 independent Burma struggled economically and politically and in 1962 the government was ousted by a military coup led by Ne Win. Dissent was not tolerated, insurgencies were brutally suppressed, newspapers were banned, corruption and nepotism were rife and the country became very poor and isolated.

Bjorn told us more about Aung San Suu Kyi. She grew up in Rangoon under this repressive regime and went on to study at Oxford University where she met and married her husband, an English academic, and had 2 sons. In 1988, when mass protests by students, office workers and monks were being brutally suppressed, she returned to Burma to look after her sick mother. Inspired by Ghandi and Martin Luther King she made her first speech to the crowd saying 'I could not, as my father's daughter, ignore what was going on'. She founded and led the National League for Democracy (NLD) which called for democratic elections and reform. Ne Win was forced to resign but was replaced by another military junta. Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest where she remained more or less until 2010. During this time, in 1990, the NLD won the elections but the army refused to hand over power. In 1991 she won the Nobel Peace Prize and in 1999 her husband died, having only seen her 5 times since her arrest.

In 2007 the 'Saffron Revolution', led by monks, was suppressed by the military with many killed and imprisoned. In 2008 Burma was hit by cyclone Nargis which caused devastating floods, leaving over 130,000 dead. The government refused outside help but

did little to alleviate the effects. Rigged elections in 2010 were followed by an NLD victory in 2012 when Aung San Suu Kyi joined the government. She became State Counsellor (equivalent to PM) after further successful elections in 2016. While she was once an icon of non-violent struggle for democracy and freedom, since her appointment she has been accused of authoritarianism, micromanagement, and even disregard for human rights, particularly in regard to the persecution of the Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine state. One reason for this, Bjorn suggested, is that although she is the most important civilian in government, she does not control the army or security forces.

The Rohingya crisis in 2017 did not come from nowhere, as Bjorn explained. The centrality of Buddhism in the national psyche of Burma, with its absolute values of love and compassion, hides a deep seated fear of Islam among the Buddhist population. During the British colonial period farming was promoted and workers from what is now Bangladesh, mostly Wahabi Muslims, poured over the border into Rakhine state, outnumbering Burmese in the area. During World War 2, Britain recruited the guerilla 'V Force' from minority hill tribes and armed them to fight the Japanese. In Rakhine state these recruits were mostly Muslim and used their arms not only against the Japanese but also against local Buddhists, hoping to establish a caliphate in the north of the state. Although they have been known as Rohingyas since 1951, the government outlawed the term in 2011, regarding them not as an indigenous people but as illegal immigrants even though they have lived in the area for over 1000 years. They are denied citizenship and basic services and were excluded from standing for the NLD in the 2015 elections. Modern Jihadis in the Middle East and the rise of ISIS have fuelled the fear of Islam in Burma. Conflict erupted in 1978 and again in 2012 when the army killed 90 Rohingyas and 90,000 were displaced. Before the 2017 crisis, Aung San Suu Kyi asked Kofi Annan to research the problem but has so far failed to implement his recommendations to integrate such minority groups and give them citizenship. The present crisis was triggered by Rohingya militants who attacked police posts killing 12 policemen, but the army in its retaliation, killing, raping and burning whole villages, has been accused of ethnic cleansing and even genocide. As State Counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi stands similarly accused. Is she unable or unwilling to stop or even condemn these attacks?