

Why we misread Suu Kyi and her refusal to demonise the Burmese Army

BY ABHIJIT DUTTA

Of all the things that baffle people about politics in Myanmar, the most confounding seems to be Aung San Suu Kyi's refusal to demonise the country's armed forces, the Tatmadaw, which stand accused of genocidal intent, of using rape as a weapon of war, of torture and arson. It is somewhat understood that she is not fully in charge of the country's administration, given the outsized constitutional powers available to the military, but it seems almost inexplicable why she wouldn't stand atop a rostrum and use the very large microphone the world has handed her, to decry the generals. Instead of calling them murderers and rapists, she chooses to work with them, appoint some of them to important positions and generally behave as though she was among friends when she is with men in uniform. To the world, this is scandalous and morally reprehensible. "Once a moral leader, Aung San Suu Kyi's silence in Myanmar is damning," declares the Huffington Post. Her "deadening silence," argues The Guardian, makes her "morally complicit." The UN report that alleged genocidal intent on part of the Myanmar military concluded that while "the constitutional powers of the civilian authorities afford little scope for controlling the actions of the Tatmadaw," Suu Kyi did not use her "moral authority" to prevent or stem the unfolding events.

What is this "moral authority"? Suu Kyi's critics articulate it as "standing up" to the military, like the Fearless Girl on New York's Wall Street standing in the face of the Charging Bull. This David-Goliath face-off is how moral courage is defined and moral authority derived. In this universe, morality is a weapon, a stone to bash someone's head in.

But Suu Kyi has never subscribed to this philosophy. In her moral universe, courage is the freedom from fear, which she defines as the freedom from hostility, or the freedom from the need to hate. It is a courage that makes it possible to sit next to someone, instead of standing up to them. When she was under house arrest, people were happy to applaud this as courage and grace, even saintly.

John Pilger, who met Suu Kyi in 1995, soon after she was released from the first of her many detentions, asked her if she had been terrified being surrounded by a hostile force and cut off from her family, colleagues and comrades. "No," she tells him emphatically, "because I didn't feel hostile towards them. This is what people don't seem to understand. I think, fear comes out of hostility. I felt no hostility towards them, so I felt quite relaxed." Suu Kyi's moral courage is rooted in the conviction that hate and fear go hand in hand, that if you do not hate someone you cannot be frightened by them. When Suu Kyi walked into the parliament for the first time in 2012, she was asked by journalists how she felt about having to sit next to army men, who were responsible for her persecution. "I have tremendous goodwill towards the military," she responded, "so it doesn't in any way bother me to sit with them. I am pleased to be sitting together with them."

This is no empty statement. Suu Kyi's love for the army is located within her love for her father,

who is considered the founder of the Burmese Army and the country's greatest independence hero. Suu Kyi shocked the BBC's Kirsty Young, when she told her during an interview in 2012 that she is "very fond of the army" because she has always thought of it as her "father's army". In response, Young recounted the crimes that the same army stands accused of. "Of course!" replied Suu Kyi. "And it's terrible what they have done, and I don't like what they have done at all, but if you love somebody, I think you love her, or him, in spite of not because of and you always look forward to a time when they will be able to redeem themselves."

This idea, of not holding any one irredeemable, is central to the Buddhist conception of metta, the unbounded, unconditional loving-kindness for all fellow beings. Metta demands a breadth of compassion that is able to separate a person from their deeds. To see a murderer only as a murderer is to make forgiveness impossible. Without forgiveness, there can be no compassion, and the person remains outside the circle of metta. It is a profound conviction in the inherent goodness of people and a commitment to the power of love as an agent of social change.

The politics of metta may appear at first glance as too high-minded and divorced from the gruesome realities on the ground but, in fact, Suu Kyi's willingness to deal with the army without any baggage allows the space for practical, hard-nosed politics. Suu Kyi has sought to appoint former generals to positions that help her to navigate the trenchant obstructions built into parliamentary processes and use their talent and networks to take forward policy changes. This has not stopped her from transparently and unwaveringly talking about amending the Constitution, directly challenging the role the Tatmadaw sees for itself. Nor has it stopped her from criticising unlawful violence, condemn human rights violations and talk about justice within the frameworks of rule of law. But she will always criticise the deed, never the person. What the army has done is bad, but not the army itself. And she will always hope that the institution will one day redeem itself.

You can criticise her because it is now fashionable to do so, but the truth is that **Suu Kyi is a spiritual politician, a breed so rare we no longer know how to recognise it.**

(Abhijit Dutta is the author of the forthcoming book Myanmar in the World: Journeys through a Changing Burma)

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