

"Senseless, irrational, reactionary and extremist behaviour" in Myanmar

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30 May 2013

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"Whatever our prospects for a bright future may be, we are still at a sensitive stage in the reform process where there is little room for error; as such, senseless, irrational, reactionary and extremist behaviour and action by some of our citizens may lead to the failure of the reform process itself. I would like to seriously caution you that we, as citizens, must refrain from doing anything that will jeopardize our transition to a peaceful, democratic nation."

This quote from President Thein Sein's speech to the nation

was not the manifesto of someone worried about his party gaining votes or being re-elected as president. Made after the release of the Rakhine Commission report on 6 May, it was a bold statement of vision for his country as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation. It came at a time of crisis as essentially Buddhist-on-Muslim violence has been spreading. (...) The near-silence of the National League for Democracy's Aung San Suu Kyi on this issue in recent months has only underlined how far out in front of popular opinion he has been in his rhetoric. (...)

The recently reported decision of the local government in Rakhine State to restrict the number of children that Muslim Rohingya families can have is Exhibit A in the category of "*senseless, irrational, reactionary and extremist behaviour*"

that needs to be avoided if Myanmar's current transition is to bring stability to the nation and benefit all. The decision would revive of a military-era directive in Rakhine State that had stopped being applied some time ago. Abandoning her previous reticence on this issue, Aung San Suu Kyi has rightly condemned it as illegal

and a violation of human rights. President Thein Sein now needs also to condemn the revival of this policy and ensure its implementation does not come to pass.

Whatever their genesis in local or national law-making, such discriminatory policies are forbidden by international human rights law, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, that Myanmar has ratified. (...)

The Rohingya, concentrated in northern Rakhine State, are the most repressed population in Myanmar. (...) Since independence in 1948, they have long faced restrictions and discrimination from the state as well as prejudice, even hatred, from the local Rakhine Buddhist population, which controls much of the provincial civil service. A restrictive 1982 citizenship law

has not helped (...). For decades, even that flawed law has not been fairly applied and (...)has been a tool to marginalise the Rohingya. This discrimination has manifested itself in a range of ways, including through restrictions on travel outside the village-tract. This has meant limited work opportunities for the Rohingya and great difficulty accessing state services such as education and health. In addition, they are often denied essential documents for marriage and birth registration. (...) Even before the violence against the Rohingya in 2012 killed almost 200 people and displaced more than 100,000, they faced forced labour, arbitrary taxation, and land confiscation.

Among the restrictions is a ban on polygamy and registering more than two children, which applies in the Muslim-majority northern parts of Rakhine. This has apparently been in place at the local level since at least 2005, but by some accounts more than a decade before that. Rather than announcing a “new” policy, the local Rakhine State government has reactivated this old directive — which has always been contrary to international human rights law — which was no longer being actively applied. While such discrimination was accepted practice under previous authoritarian regimes, it should not be tolerated by an aspiring

“
peaceful, democratic nation

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It is exactly the kind of “
senseless, irrational, reactionary and extremist behaviour and action by some of our citizens
” that the president cautioned against in his speech. It is also inconsistent with his pledge that “
the Government will take all necessary action to ensure the basic human rights of Muslims in the Rakhine State

“.

While the president’s vision is long-term, the need for action is increasingly urgent. (...)

The president’s words must become his government’s deeds. The Union or national government needs immediately to overturn the blatantly discriminatory restriction on the size of Rohingya families, just as it needs to do more to better protect them from violence and other forms of victimisation. (...)

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