

Breaking a silence

Myanmar State Counsellor [Aung San Suu Kyi](#)'s speech on Tuesday was meant to fend off global criticism over her long silence on the Rohingya issue. The words she spoke certainly broke the silence, but they provided little hope that Myanmar can end the problem soon. Speaking in English, Suu Kyi made what was essentially a plea to the world for more patience and understanding of Myanmar's difficult transition to democracy, and the multiple challenges facing the government that has been in power less than 18 months.

As for the Rohingya, the Nobel Peace Laureate said Myanmar was prepared to take back the "refugees" after a "verification process". That is not as easy as it sounds. The process is to be based on a 1993 agreement reached with Bangladesh, under which repatriation was given to "those carrying Myanmar identity cards", "those able to present other documents issued by relevant Myanmar authorities" and "all those able to furnish evidence of their residence in Myanmar".

It is doubtful that many among the 4,00,000 who fled carried their documentation with them, or had any to begin with. Only in 2015, the Myanmar government cancelled Temporary Residence Cards given to the Rohingya from 1995. At the centre of the present crisis is Myanmar's refusal to accept the Rohingya people as citizens of the country, and unless this is resolved, the problem is certain to continue. The Rohingya are not in the list of 135 Myanmar ethnic groups, and the 1982 Citizenship Act makes it next to impossible for them to acquire citizenship.

It is telling that Suu Kyi did not once mention the Rohingya by name, except in a mention of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, whose attacks on August 25, and the security crackdown that followed, triggered the exodus.

The Kofi Annan Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, appointed at Suu Kyi's behest, submitted its report on August 25, which said Myanmar should establish a clear strategy and timeline for the citizenship verification process. It has recommended a review of the existing Citizenship Act. Suu Kyi referenced this in her speech to say the doable recommendations would be implemented in the "shortest" time. Doubtless, that will not include the Citizenship Act overhaul.

The Centre's affidavit in the Supreme Court that the presence of 40,000 Rohingya in the country is a threat to national security borders on racial profiling. There is no evidence yet to link any of the Rohingya in the country to ARSA, or its affiliates. The Centre's submission to the court that the "illegal immigrants" figure "in the designs of the IS and ISI", and that they obtain PAN and [Aadhaar](#) cards by "fraudulent" means, are at best general statements and at worst admissions that Indian security agencies are helpless in the face of such machinations by enemies of the country, and that India's bureaucracy is so gullible as to hand out documents to anyone who asks for them.

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