

## Dancing with Suu Kyi

New Delhi's relationship with the de facto leader of Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi, seems to have snowballed into a diplomatic debacle following her recent address to the Myanmar Parliament. Ms. Suu Kyi pointedly avoided the term Rohingya in her speech, calling the ethnic minority "Bengali Muslims" instead. Timed to avoid censure at the ongoing United Nations General Assembly session, which she chose not to attend, Ms. Suu Kyi's speech was clearly aimed at an international audience.

Ms. Suu Kyi said her government does not fear "international scrutiny" of its handling of the Rohingya crisis and yet Myanmar has been denying for several months visas to a three-member fact-finding mission named by the UN Human Rights Council to investigate the violence. Journalists are allowed into Rakhine state only on government-controlled trips.

Not only has Ms. Suu Kyi done nothing to stem the recent spate of violence but she has also failed to condemn the atrocities in Rakhine state, which the UN Human Rights Commissioner recently termed as a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing". According to the UN Refugee Agency, as of September 18, over 412,000 Rohingya refugees have fled to Bangladesh since August 25.

In 2012, Ms. Suu Kyi had named Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru as the two Indian leaders she felt "closest" to. Less than five years later, she has spectacularly failed to emulate her heroes who publicly supported Muslims during the communal violence that followed India's Partition.

So why is Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government courting Ms. Suu Kyi? Could the rising Buddhist nationalist radicalism in Myanmar and the concomitant anti-Muslim sentiment have found resonance with it? It's only telling that Mr. Modi is also keeping away from the ongoing UN General Assembly session. During his visit to Myanmar early this month, he also refrained from using the term 'Rohingya', and decried the loss of lives of security forces and innocent people "due to the extremist violence in Rakhine state."

A prominent theory in favour of the Modi government's slant towards Ms. Suu Kyi is that alienating Myanmar would risk the country embracing China, which maintains that the Rohingya crisis is an "internal affair" for Myanmar to deal with. This argument may sound pragmatic, but the reality is that China's involvement in Myanmar is far deeper than India can possibly match any time soon. Less than two weeks ago, China opened its first liaison office in Naypyidaw, the generally empty capital city shunned by most other diplomatic missions, as a prelude to moving its embassy there from Yangon. From weapons to foodgrains and textiles, the list of Myanmar's imports from China is long. China's investments in Myanmar include a cross-border oil and gas pipeline, an alternative route for energy imports from West Asia that avoids the busy Malacca Strait. The construction of a port at the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone in Rakhine will enhance Beijing's naval presence in Myanmar. No wonder India seems to consider countering the growing Chinese influence in Myanmar more important — and more appealing to the nationalist domestic audience — than upholding long-cherished democratic values.

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The new U.S. Fed Chairman is unlikely to opt for policies that might upset the President's plan

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