

*Short Presentation for
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No Change Without National Revolution: The Two Myanmar and the Two International Systems

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Countries have two existences, the temporary existence experienced by the people and places under the mundane control of the state and the permanent imaginary or imaginaries rather of what the country is, the transcendent land and people. When they coalesce we have social harmony and when they are not we have oppression, resistance, and ultimately, whether quiet or loud, revolution. Myanmar has had very few periods of coalescence since independence in 1948. It is the reason there are still ethnic armies, why the Rohingya have seen three to four major periods of expulsion into Bangladesh, it is why the NLD leaders are under arrest and undergoing trial right now, and why there is an alternative government, the NUG right now.

At a broader level, the international system has two existences. The temporary status quo all countries live within, the real balance of power that emerges from the state of anarchy and the permanent imaginaries of states nominally existing within that international system. Again, when they are coterminous we have harmony and when they are not we have imperialism, resistance, and ultimately, a new international system. It is the reason why the International Liberal Order is being undone right now, why the PRC faces off against the Quad, one to subvert the international rules-based order and the other to reinforce it. It is the indirect reason why no external power other than the PRC will intervene in Myanmar, why ASEAN will not do anything meaningful regarding Myanmar, and why Min Aung Hlaing has nothing to fear from anyone, anywhere, outside of Myanmar.

These two levels of existences, at the country level and international system level see change at different speeds, at the country level change can come quick and the international level, movement is more glacial and their interrelationship is asymmetric. Country change does not usually bring changes to the international system but changes to the international system can bring a wave of change to countries, for example what occurred with the end of the Cold War and the formerly supposed end of history with the victory of liberal democracies.

In other words, the current state of multiple existences, of the mundane and the imaginaries, mean that the Rohingya are not going anywhere, other than deeper into the refugee camps in Bangladesh. This is not a replay of earlier periods of expulsion, this is their new mundane reality, four years on now since August 2017, the anniversary we are remembering now. Min Aung Hlaing's state suits well the current condition of the international system and that system is so weakened that it cannot extend liberal democracy to Afghanistan or save the Uyghurs, much less unseat the Tatmadaw or force it into real political change.

So, my short talk here today is to reverse my historian's lens from the past to the present to speculate on what I believe I know of what has happened so many times before in many different systems and countries to promise only a dismal picture of the future. Those that seek a solution to the Rohingya condition in international solutions will not find it until there is a change in the current international system and as I have said this change is likely to be glacial even if it moves in the right direction at all.

The solution can only happen with country-level revolution, and I mean here regime change not necessarily violence, which I am not free to advocate. And this will have to occur facing not only the opposition of the Tatmadaw, but also with a clear understanding that outside help, support from other states in the international system, will be weak or non-existent. The Rohingya cannot achieve this on their own just as the NUG cannot achieve this on their own. Moreover, the international system is positioned for more external support to be given to the Min Aung Hlaing regime, regardless of sanctions, as we have a weak, porous, and divided international system. A revolution in the international system might of course make change more immediately realisable, someday, to Myanmar, or it might make things even worse. But the only short-term path to bringing the mundane existence of Myanmar into line with the best imaginaries of Myanmar is nothing short of state change within the country.