

OpEd

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“The power of identity”

Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and the new Myanmar Government have cautioned the international community against using “emotive terms” that could make the tensions in Rakhine state more difficult to address. They are speaking about the use of the term “Rohingya” to refer to the minority Muslim population who have been living for generations in Rakhine State of majority Buddhist Myanmar. However, terminology in this case matters, because it symbolizes the recognition of a community that has long been oppressed. Denying anyone’s identity is a serious form of discrimination and neither the international community nor the government of Myanmar should compromise when it comes to recognising peoples’ fundamental rights.

Our identity is what defines each of us - as an individual, or as a group. Identity tends to be associated with race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, culture, gender, sexual orientation, and many other aspect of ourselves that speak to the essence of our standing, individually and in society. Basically, identity is the glue that brings people together or, I should say, that *should* bring us together.

Nelson Mandela, another Nobel Peace Prize laureate, understood the healing power of group identity very well. He used national identity to help unite a society that was profoundly divided as a result of the system of racial segregation imposed during the Apartheid regime in South Africa. In one of the most famous examples of how he did this, in 1995 he used the Rugby World Cup to bridge the gap between two populations that had learned to fear and despise each other. Despite criticism from his “own” people, Mandela stood firm in his resolve that his Presidency be one of reconciliation and healing, rather than of hatred and a return to civil war.

However, history has shown that identity can also be used for the opposite purpose. Theories and propaganda on racial purity and superiority were used to spread hatred in the 1930’s and 40’s in Germany and persecute the Jews, Sinti and Roma, black people, homosexuals and others seen as “undesirable” or “inferior”. These “undesirables” were first excluded from society and later exterminated. In many places and conflicts around the world, identity has been manipulated to feed ideologies, to attain or consolidate power or to respond to real or perceived threats and in this way, justify violent attacks that may amount to genocide, crimes against humanity or war crimes.

The Holocaust did not start with the gas chambers. Instead, it started with the first signs of discrimination against people based on their identity, who were blamed for problems that were in fact the result of a deep economic and financial crisis. In South Africa, if Mandela had not taken action to address both the fears of the white minority as well as the grievances of the black majority, uniting all under their national identity as South Africans, the country could have quickly descended into a full-scale racial and bloody civil war, which all predicted would happen. He may well have averted a genocide.

The Rohingya in Myanmar have been denied a national identity. They have been stripped of their citizenship - they are stateless. For many years they have been subject to severe practices and policies of discrimination and restrictions to some of their most fundamental rights, including the right to freedom of movement and the right to marry and found a family. Thousands displaced by the 2012 violence have been living, segregated, in IDP camps and thousands more have been compelled to flee by land or sea. Many have been caught by networks of human traffickers or have died while trying to reach other countries in the region. In Myanmar, a campaign of dangerous anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya “hate speech” by extremists has the potential to lead to further violence.

Even the use of the term “Rohingya” to describe this religious and ethnic group has become sensitive and highly politicised. In fact, the Rohingya are not allowed to exercise their right to self-identification, a right that is recognised by international human rights law and in the jurisprudence of human rights treaty committees. Instead, derogatory terms have been used to label them as outsiders, “foreigners” and, well, as “undesirable”.

The new President and Government of Myanmar are in a difficult position. They have to manage the expectations both of those who want to pursue and most probably strengthen exclusionary policies against the Rohingya, as well as those who expect them to reverse this trend. Most notably, they have to find a way to unite the diverse populations of Myanmar so that they live alongside each other in peace and without prejudice. In order to succeed, they will have to address the root causes of the tensions between different communities and longstanding grievances, and that will be challenging. But when we deny - or ask someone else to deny – an important aspect of an individual or community’s identity, this is tantamount to rejecting who those people are as human beings. This is not acceptable.

I sincerely hope the new President and Government of Myanmar will look to Mandela as a role model.