

Comments on a Speech by Dr Radhika Coomaraswamy at the Laksi-Kadrigamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies in Colombo on 3 May 2018.

The text of the speech is at <https://tinyurl.com/yczvrl4g>

In this speech, Dr Radhika Coomaraswamy made numerous bizarre and inaccurate statements about the Rohingya community in Rakhine State and about the 2008 Constitution

Most inexplicable is her assertion on Page 5 that General Aung San “called the Panglong Conference and negotiated with the ethnic minorities, including the Rohingyas, and created the Union of Burma.” The Rohingyas, then known as Arakan Muslims, were not invited to Panglong, which was a meeting of peoples of the Frontier Areas only. This is confirmed by the Council of Muslim Scholars North Arakan themselves **whose leaders asked the British Parliamentary Secretary** for the Dominions, Arthur Bottomley, then in Burma to attend the Conference as an observer, whether their Muslim community too could be granted the benefits of the autonomous status of a “Frontier Area” which had been agreed at the Panglong Conference. “The Conference is coming to its close, but unfortunately we find that we have been totally ignored” they wrote on 24 February 1947.

The Final Communiqué dated 12 February 1947 was **signed only by the Shan, Chin and Kachin**, with some Karens in attendance. Aung San would not have been acquainted with the designation “Rohingya” at all which only emerged some 15 years after his death, which makes nonsense of the statement on Page 10 of Dr Radhika Coomaraswamy’s speech that Aung San “initially recognised them as an indigenous nationality”.

Equally mistaken is her statement on Page 3 that Myanmar officially recognises 135 ethnic races which “are then amalgamated into eight what are called ‘major national ethnic races’”. This suggests that the national races were selected first, and “then” amalgamated into eight groups. This is of course not correct. Since independence Burma/Myanmar has listed the main ethnic groups, taken over from the British administration, as the four former nation states of the Bamar, Shan, Rakhine and Mon and four other main groups which are the Kayin (Karen), Kayah (Karenni), Chin and Kachin. In both the **1948 Union of Burma Citizenship Act** and the **1982 Union of Burma Citizenship Law** these eight groups are mentioned by name, but **the list of 135 “national races”** was first published only in 1990.

Although she visited Myanmar in 2007 and 2011, having talks on the second occasion with President Thein Sein, she repeatedly writes his name incorrectly as “Thien Sien” and mispronounces it likewise in the videoed version of her speech. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s name is also mispronounced as “Aung San Suu KEE”.

I think it probable that Dr Radhika Coomaraswamy secured her information about the Rohingyas from less than reliable refugee and activist sources she met at Cox’s Bazaar in her capacity as a Member of the UN Fact-Finding Mission. A sample of six further inaccuracies (out of a large number) includes her convictions:

- (a) Page 3, that the Karen are a Christian minority, when the Karen are in fact mainly **Buddhist and animist**;

(b) Page 3, that certain groups are “not recognized by the Constitution”, when **Article 346 of the Constitution** only provides that matters of citizenship “shall be as prescribed by law” and “recognises” no groups at all;

(c) Page 6, that **the Religious Conversion Law 2015** “requires a special process for conversion from Buddhism”, when the Law does not in fact mention any religion by name;

(d) Page 7, that Suu Kyi’s late husband Michael Aris was a “Burma scholar”, when he was in fact an expert in Tibetan and Himalayan culture;

(e) Page 9, that Arakan became Rakhine State in 1990, when it in fact took this name in 1982: see use of “Rakhine” in the 1982 Citizenship Law and in **the 1983 Census**.

(f) Page 10, that the 1982 Citizenship Law “only gave citizenship to those ethnic groups that were in Myanmar before the British came”, when the Law provides for associate and naturalised citizenship regardless of ethnicity, and also that no one can lose their citizenship held previously.

She has clearly made no effort to check her facts e.g. by consulting original sources such as the text of the Panglong Agreement, the articles of the 2008 Constitution, or the Religious Conversion Law 2015, all readily available online.

The numerous errors in her speech lead to me to conclude that she is regrettably an easily gullible person, which is why, although I might be inclined towards seeing events in Rakhine State in recent years as threatening the “genocide” of the Rohingyas, I would first seek confirmation from more reliable sources than the Mission, whose report contains many appalling allegations, but few if any confirmed facts. Her speech with its multitude of errors bordering on disinformation convinces me that it is simply not safe to believe her contribution to the Mission report, whatever that might have been.

Derek Tonkin – 21 December 2018