Comment: Suu Kyi chooses to be a national hero, not international darling

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ON Dec 11, Myanmar’s State Counselor-cum-Foreign Minister Aung San Suu Kyi (pix) stood at the podium of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at the Hague and defended her country against the accusation of violating the 1948 Genocide Convention over the military’s clearance operations in northern Rakhine state which caused more than 700,000 Rohingyas to flee the Southeast Asian country for Bangladesh.

On behalf of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) countries, Gambia filed a case at the ICJ to order for “provisional measures” to “protect and preserve the rights” of the Rohingya minority.

The ICJ’s ruling can possibly have two outcomes. If the ruling goes in favor of Gambia, there may be a new wave of violence targeting not only the Rohingyas but the larger Muslim population in Myanmar. And if the court dismisses the case, it may provoke anger among the Rohingyas and their supporters across the globe, including the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army.

The legal process has triggered global attention and understandably it also divides the international community largely into two groups - those who support Aung San Suu Kyi and others who criticise or condemn her.

Among others, those who criticise Aung San Suu Kyi have argued that she has transformed herself from an international democratic icon and a champion of human rights to a denier of genocidal acts.
Some have also questioned the rationale or motive behind Aung San Suu Kyi’s decision to lead a delegation for a cause which many viewed as indefensible case, primarily because of the prima-facie evidence of human rights abuses.

At the least, there are five reasons as to why Aung San Suu Kyi decided to lead the case herself.

First, she wanted to take the opportunity to tell the world’s highest court and the international community that genocide did not take place. In her defense at the Hague, Aung San Suu Kyi said that there may have been human rights violations during the military campaigns against the Rohingya militants but the atrocities did not constitute genocide under international conventions.

She also said that if crimes were committed during the security operations, they should be tried by local military courts and “only if domestic accountability fails, may international justice come into play.”

She urged the ICJ not to intervene and instead let the Myanmar legal system perform its duties and bring justice.

However, the irony is that Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) government have no full control over the military and the country’s security system or even the judiciary. One example was that the seven soldiers who were convicted and jailed for the death of 10 Rohingya men and boys during the 2017 military operations were released less than a year into their 10-year each prison sentence. But the two journalists who reported the killing spent more than 16 months behind bars on charges of obtaining state secrets.

Second, Aung San Suu Kyi wanted to tell the world that Myanmar has taken several initiatives to address the Rohingya issue. In fact, the authorities in Myanmar, including the NLD government, have instituted several investigative committees or commissions in their attempt to address the situation. The Kofi Annan commission was one among them.

The problem, however, is that such initiatives have not yielded any concrete results to address the concerns and demands of the international community and that of the Rohingyas, including issues of security guarantee, recognition of identity, and citizenship.

Third, Aung San Suu Kyi wanted the Myanmar military leadership to understand that she was willing to face the wrath of the international community for crimes primarily committed by the security forces.

This is significant for the fact that the top military generals have not only been found guilty of war crimes by the UN fact-finding team but are also sanctioned by the United States, Canada, and the European Union.

It is also important for the fact that Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD government need the support and cooperation of military representatives in Myanmar’s national parliament to amend the 2008 constitution.

Fourth, Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD party have their goal set on the upcoming elections in late 2020. Especially with the country’s economy not performing well as expected or anticipated and also
the fact that the peace process with the country’s ethnic armed groups have not gone well, Aung San Suu Kyi sees the need to stand up for the concerns of the country’s majority electorates.

The overwhelming majority voters in Myanmar, which anyway exclude the Rohingya, support Aung San Suu Kyi and her government’s policy on Rohingya. This was evident from the fact that there were several rallies across the country in support of Aung San Suu Kyi before and during the ICJ hearings. Interestingly and to the likings of many in Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi did not use the term ‘Rohingya’ during her ICJ defense.

An overwhelming support from Myanmar voters over the ICJ case was also visible when thousands of supporters lined up along the streets of Nay Pyi Taw to welcome Aung San Suu Kyi upon her return from the Hague.

Fifth, Aung San Suu Kyi belongs to the Bama or Burman majority ethnic group. This is particularly important because many in Myanmar, especially the Bama or Burman group, are unwilling to accept Rohingya as one of the country’s ethnic groups.

While she has been widely criticised, accused or even condemned in the international media and by several rights groups and organizations, Aung San Suu Kyi chooses to be a national hero than international darling. This is unlikely to change by international pressure.

Aung San Suu Kyi rather chooses to be the darling of her country, at least to the majority-Buddhist group. This primarily stems from the fact that she is now a true politician who wants to govern and remain in power. She has indeed transformed from an international democratic icon to being a pragmatic politician for herself, the NLD party and Myanmar.

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