

Eyes Without the Prize: Stripping Aung San Suu Kyi's Awards

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It is impossible to see peace prize or freedom awards as anything other than fragments of an industry. In time, ideals become marketable and matters of commodity. Those who go against this market rationale face the fires of moral outrage. The business of promoting peace in the wrapping of human rights protections is its own market, with false advertising. It is merely, in many instances, the flipside of conflict.

A point often forgotten in this indulgence is that most recipients tend to be not merely the advocates of peace but previous advocates of conflict. Bloodied swords preceded ploughshares; the terrorist became, in time, a peace maker. Realising this tense, and central reality, should put any committee responsible for peace prizes or humanitarian awards out of business.

The speed at which a previously celebrated Aung San Suu Kyi has been stripped of such awards shows the frustration and rage of peace bureaucrats and the cocktail set who suddenly deigned their choice a counterfeit. Like an original hanging in a gallery, the award had to be removed, its bestowing reconsidered.

So many removals and revocations have taken place that Suu Kyi's record now reads like a veritable Who's Who of award deprivation. Each has been accompanied with necessary doses of hurt and cant in the face of a sanctified figure who has rusted. Stripping Suu Kyi of the Freedom of City awards figures prominently in these grand moral gestures: Edinburgh, Oxford, Glasgow and Newcastle, to name but a few examples. A good deal of this suggests an inflated brand gone wrong: the saint sinned in taking the steroids of pragmatism, and to that end, city councillors are left in search of other appropriate products and recipients.

When she was in fashion, Suu Kyi could rely on such remarks as those of the Lord Provost of Edinburgh, who described her in 2005 as "a symbol of peaceful resistance in the face of oppression." Comparisons were made to another figure rendered pure by a lengthy prison stint: Nelson Mandela. Last November, the Lord Provost started getting nervous. Use your "immeasurable courage and influence," [urged](#) Frank Ross, to ensure the safe return of the Rohingya Muslims to Rakhine.

With total radio silence following, Ross tabled a council motion calling for her freedom of city to be stripped. Suu Kyi found herself in curious company: the last, and previously only time Edinburgh had revoked a freedom of city award was in 1890, when the giddily nationalistic Charles Parnell was accused of conducting an adulterous affair with Katharine O'Shea. Then, as now, the moralists were in charge of both tradition and award.



Much is also being made about her silence on matters that are, less the bread and butter of human rights than its publicity. To air them is to incite a miracle. The atrocities against the Rohingya by the Burmese military is marked out as a significant inkblot on previously unblemished paper. In October, Canadian lawmakers, in an unprecedented move revoking Suu Kyi's honorary Canadian citizenship granted in 2007, cited her inaction on calling out "genocide" against the Rohingyas as a determining factor. Senator Ratna Omidvar was almost [aggrieved](#) at a symbol fallen from imposed grace.

"The world pinned its hope on her as the shining light and hope for a democratic and peaceful Myanmar."

Suu Kyi's ambitions were evidently more modest and less global.

Amnesty International followed in November.

"Our expectation," came an [enraged](#) letter from its Secretary General Kumi Naidoo this month, "was that you would continue to use your moral authority to speak out against injustice whenever you saw it, not least within Myanmar itself."

The organisation thereby announced its revocation of the Ambassador of Conscience award.

The Norwegian Nobel Committee has also been pressed to reconsider their award. Olav Njølstad, secretary of the committee, [tiptoed](#) around the matter with a ballerina's ease, finding relief in the certainty that the prize was not a presently relevant issue.

"It's important to remember that a Nobel Prize, whether in physics, literature or peace, is awarded for some prize-worthy effort or achievement in the past."

Using the past as apologia, escape and salvation for his organisation's decision, Njølstad could argue that Suu Kyi's award was based on "her fight for democracy and freedom up until 1991, the year she was awarded the prize."

Committees often exhibit such pedantic, book-keeping tendencies. Berit Reiss-Andersen, head of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, [eschewed](#) any prospective policing role by her organisation's members in 2017.

"It's not our task to oversee or censor what a laureate does after the prize has been won."

Once awarded, never to be revoked.

For Myanmar gazers, peace is a complex commodity, bought through complicity, acquiescence and the dictates of stability. The National Coalition of Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), a composite of exiled pro-democracy figures elected to the national parliament in 1990, left a specific [tripartite rationale](#) in place: unchallenged, near-divine respect for Suu Kyi; a reluctance to directly criticise the military (notable here is Suu Kyi's own bloodline, tied to a father considered one of the founders of the Tatmadaw, or Myanmar military); and a chronic inability to confront ethnic problems within the country.

In the [words](#) of J.J. Rose,

“The military controls all significant political action in Myanmar, despite its political wing winning less than 7 percent of the popular vote in the country's major parliamentary house in 2015.”

Under conditions of house arrest, the activist becomes a symbol externally venerated rather than a practitioner able to exert meaningful action. In time, Suu Kyi became a cipher for democratic impulses and sentiments, but hardly a genuine, substantive figure of effective leadership.

The sentiments of veneration and subsequent despair seem cute to bricks and mortar pragmatists who see the obsession with her refusal to use microphone and rostrum as complicit in culpability. Abhijit Dutta, [writing](#) in the *Hindustan Times*, gives the leader far more time and consideration.

“Today, she has a job to do: remake a country that has systematically hollowed out its institutions over the past 50 years and ensure that it stays the course on its democratic transition.”

The vocal stance, or in this case its absence, has been elevated to the level of mystical influence. To not speak is tantamount to the gravest of sins in the epoch of emoting, where the decibel range of outrage is taken as a measure of an activist's worth. Even a [concession](#) by a UN independent international fact-finding mission that “the constitutional powers of the civilian authorities afford little scope for controlling the actions of the Tatmadaw” does not sway proponents of necessary, and public condemnation. The present condemns the past.

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