

Aung San Suu Kyi's unholy alliance with Viktor Orban, a new low

Would the Nobel Peace Prize ever be awarded to the woman she has revealed herself to be? Of course not

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If the decision to award the Nobel Peace Prize to Barack Obama in 2009 was somewhat embarrassing – given that he'd only been US president for a few months and had done little to earn what is considered one of the ultimate accolades – its bestowal on Aung San Suu Kyi in 1991 now looks disastrous.

Many thought that Myanmar's de facto leader – technically she is just “state counsellor”, but the president defers to her – could not sink any lower after a litany of horrors saw her status as a “secular saint” thoroughly demolished. Last week, however, she managed it.

After meeting prime minister Viktor Orban in Budapest, a statement was issued by the Hungarian government: “The two leaders highlighted that one of the greatest challenges at present for both countries and their respective regions – south-east Asia and Europe – is migration. They noted that both regions have seen the emergence of the issue of coexistence with continuously growing Muslim populations.”

Mr Orban may be duly and legally elected but it says something about Ms Suu Kyi's current standing that a woman who was once a human rights icon now seeks an alliance with a far-right populist accused of subverting his country's democratic institutions, whipping up hatred against non-whites and non-Christians and cracking down on free speech.

Mr Orban has his own (bad) reasons for trading in the language of migrant and Muslim-bashing. Certainly, it is true that Europe is deeply divided over how to deal with the hundreds of thousands of people



Aung San Suu Kyi with Viktor Orban.

fleeing war and poverty who want to start new lives on the continent.

For Ms Suu Kyi to echo him, however, is truly despicable. The migration “challenge” that is facing Myanmar, after all, is that more than 900,000 mostly Muslim Rohingya were forced out of the country of their birth, in a state-run campaign of harassment and persecution that went on for years, before escalating from October 2016 onwards into what a top UN official has denounced as genocide,

crimes against humanity and war crimes.

The Myanmar military that Ms Suu Kyi has always had a soft spot for, not least because her father, general Aung San, used to head it, has tried to solve the “issue of coexistence” with their Muslim compatriots by killing, raping and completely marginalising a community that makes up a mere 4 per cent of the 54 million strong population. Far from “continuously growing”, the percentage of Muslims in the country has gone down. And

Myanmar coexisted perfectly well with its Muslim-majority fellow members of the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (Asean), Malaysia and Indonesia, until its ill-treatment of its own Muslims became impossible to ignore.

It is this issue above all that has ruined Ms Suu Kyi's once illustrious reputation, leading even old friends like South Africa's Desmond Tutu – a fellow Nobel Prize winner – to condemn a woman he considered “a dearly beloved younger sister”

Can this be a new era of pragmatism

RASHMEE ROSHAN

How will Narendra Modi's India deal with the world now? Differently from his first term as prime minister, as far as confidence and competence are concerned. Mr Modi is newly empowered, having won an emphatic re-election last month. Bestriding India and his governing Bharatiya Janata Party, Mr Modi faced no political pushback in the swift and radical appointment of a veteran apolitical diplomat, S Jaishankar, as his foreign minister.

All the signs point to a new seriousness about foreign policy. It will be informed by Mr Modi's worldview, but subtly shaped and implemented by Mr Jaishankar, who retired as India's top career diplomat in January 2018 and was formerly ambassador to both the US and China.

To get a sense of what might be in store, consider Mr Jaishankar's policy prescription just five weeks before his surprise elevation to one of the four great offices of the Indian state. It's all about positioning today's India on the world stage, he said, which means “cultivating America, steadying Russia, managing

China, enthusing Japan and attending to Europe”. In the same breath, he added that “prioritisation of the neighbourhood is also important”.

Clues to what that foreign policy might look like were there in Mr Modi's second swearing-in ceremony. In 2014, South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (Saarc) leaders were invited. This time, it was the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Co-operation (Bimstec) countries, as well as the president of Kyrgyzstan and the prime minister of Mauritius. All the invitations had a clear purpose.

India and China are competing in Mauritius, often referred to as Asia's gateway to Africa, and New Delhi is playing the diaspora card – about 70 per cent of the island nation's population is descended from indentured Indian labourers taken there by the British.

Kyrgyzstan is chair of the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO), and Mr Modi will attend its two-day summit in Bishkek from June 13. The SCO is a China-led eight-member economic and security bloc, which includes both India and Paki-



Prime Minister Narendra Modi is taking a different approach to the world after his re-election.

stan. Mr Modi will be working the summit hard. He will meet China's President Xi Jinping and discuss issues related to counter-terrorism, connectivity and transportation with Central Asian leaders, as a US exit from Afghanistan becomes more likely by the day. Finally, Bishkek will be used to send a strong message to Pakistan. Indian officials have indicated there will be lit-

tle chance of a one-on-one with Prime Minister Imran Khan.

Isolating Pakistan is part of the reason for the change in Mr Modi's guest list in his two inaugurations. The shift from Saarc to Bimstec was about more than acronyms. Bimstec comprises India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand. So, it is Saarc minus Pakistan and Afghanistan, plus

Thailand and Myanmar. Bimstec's new prominence is significant, 22 years after it came into being as a means of integrating the littoral economies of the Bay of Bengal. Mr Modi's India is signalling a quite different aspiration to those of years past. Instead of engaging Pakistan, it seeks to marginalise it altogether, and build new bridges to east and south-east Asia.

The prime minister's India is today signalling a quite different aspiration to those of years past