

Myanmar: The Roots of Ethnic Conflict and Civil Unrest in Rakhine State

Abstract: Under the backdrop of the first internationally recognized parliamentary elections held in the country of Myanmar since 1962, ethnic violence continues to plague Muslims and Buddhists living in Rakhine State on the border with Bangladesh. The current government and the previous military junta have practiced a campaign of ethnic discrimination towards the minority Rohingya people. Since the passage of a citizenship law in 1982 which officially disregarded the Rohingya as citizens or even legal inhabitants, widespread discrimination has occurred with occasional flare-ups of violence. Rohingya people are denied government jobs and many have been forced into camps for Internally Displaced People within Rakhine State. Over 200,000 of the nearly 1 million Rohingya have crossed into Bangladesh where they have been met additional human rights abuses and discrimination by the Bangladesh government. This article seeks to explore the origins of these ethnic tensions within the historical context of systematic governmental discrimination and the migration of Rohingya people from the Indian Subcontinent during the 19th century rule by the British empire.

The Rohingya are a Muslim ethnic group who have lived in what is now referred to as Rakhine Province in Myanmar since at least the 15th century during a period where the ruling Arakan Kingdom had begun trade relations with Muslims arriving with goods via boat on the Bay of Bengal. Historical documents show that the King of Arakan (now Rakhine State) had good relations with Bengali Muslims and the Rohingya, who resided in Arakan, had their own language and were ethnically similar to Bengalis (Grundy-War/Wong, 1997).

The expansion of the British Empire in the late 19th century and control of Rakhine province led to a significant migration of Muslims from the Indian subcontinent into Myanmar. By 1942, the country was split between British and Japanese control resulting into many ethnic Burmans fleeing the Japanese into British controlled territory. What resulted was escalating ethnic tensions between Burmans and migrants from South Asia who were brought over by the British to work and fill government posts as the British trusted South Asians more than the local Burmese (Grundy-War/Wong, 1997).

Britain's policy of 'divide and conquer' between the various ethnic groups in Western Myanmar led to resentment towards Bengali Muslims who had continued to exert control and influence over Western Myanmar's economy, leading to the Marginalization of Buddhists living in Rakhine State (Grundy-War/Wong, 1997). The Rohingya, like the ethnic Burmans and Arakanese were marginalized as well. Many migrated to the Chittagong region of what would later become Bangladesh while increasing numbers Muslim Bengalis arrived in Myanmar for work (Kirby, 1965).

The growing resentment between Muslims and Buddhists failed to distinguish between Rohingyas and ethnic Bengalis. And today the government position is that the Rohingyas were never an ethnic group but rather illegal migrants from Bengal in India. When India received independence from Britain in 1947, the Muslim dominated areas on the east and west ends of the colony were annexed to become East and West Pakistan. East Pakistan would become independent from West Pakistan in 1971 and rename itself Bangladesh. The artificial lines drawn placed a significant minority of Buddhists in Bangladesh and a significant minority of

Muslims in Myanmar, creating a culture of discrimination on both sides as a result of British policies.

Myanmar has been awash in ethnic conflict since its independence from Britain in 1948. In 1962, a military junta led by General Ne Win toppled the democratically elected government and introduced "The Burmese Way to Socialism," an isolationist policy intended to be free of both capitalist and communist influence (Telltire, 2007). For the next 45 years the government would be led by various generals being installed following protests against the government about once a decade. General Ne Win was ousted in a military coup following the most widespread protests the country had ever seen (he died in 2002).

A slightly more relaxed government allowed tourist visas to foreigners by the 1990's. During Ne Win's rule of the country visas to foreigners were difficult to get and even if one could make it into the country, their restriction was tightly controlled by security forces and minders and the visa would expire in a week.

At the center of a country shrouded in secrecy lay ongoing conflicts with indigenous groups on the border areas. Myanmar is home to 135 ethnic groups, the majority of who are ethnic Burmans living in the central plains (Lewa, 2009). Other significant ethnicities are the Kachin living in the far north near the Chinese border, the Karen who reside by Thailand and make up the bulk of refugees living on the Myanmar/Thai border, the Shan near the border with Laos, the Chin, Arakanese and Rohingya who live near the border with Bangladesh.

Several of these groups have entered into some level of armed conflict with the ruling Burmese junta. The Karen National Union, the Shan State Army, and the Kachin Independence

Army all controlled land in their respective provinces. Both the Shan and the Karen armies have signed peace deals with the central government. The Thai government, which sponsors the estimated 120,000 mostly Karen refugees on the border with Myanmar, has indicated that most of the refugees will be resettled back home by the summer of 2013 (Democratic Voice of Burma, 2012). In 2012, current President Thein Sein officially welcomed back all refugees and political activists who were born in Myanmar (Human Rights Watch, 2012). Yet despite the current regime's open arms to most ethnic groups, the ethnic Rohingya continue to be persecuted and the number of refugees who have crossed the Naf River into Bangladesh have swelled from 20,000 to an estimated 200,000 within the past few years (Refugees International, 2012).

Since General Ne Win took power in 1962, violent clashes between the Rohingya Muslims and Buddhist Rakhine have escalated, with the central government backing the Rakhine while threatening and attacking Muslim homes and businesses. In 2002 I had the opportunity to visit the Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh and spoke with several refugees. One refugee, Malek, left with his family to avoid what he referred to as "torture, persecution and harassment" by the local authorities (Greenwood, Khan, 2002). At the time, many of these refugees were given permission to return to Myanmar, but many were reluctant and feared similar persecution if they returned.

During my visit to Bangladesh in 2002, Myanmar was still controlled by a military dictatorship and a call to Myanmar's ambassador to Bangladesh was met with denial that the Rohingya were facing any problems in Myanmar. Yet on paper, the military government has

denied that the Rohingya are citizens at all, referring to them as Bengali illegal immigrants. In a report written by Chris Lewa, coordinator for the Arakan Project, an NGO devoted to uncovering official persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar, the military government imposed a citizenship law in 1982, which excluded people of Indian descent living in Myanmar as illegal immigrants without the right to citizenship. By 1989, the government issued identification cards defining residents in Myanmar into three groups; full citizens, associate citizens and naturalized citizens. The Rohingya were the only ethnic group not issued any cards and have been excluded and marginalized from obtaining work and pressured to leave the country (Lewa, 2012).

In addition to a substantial number of the Rohingya population fleeing to refugee camps in Bangladesh, the government of Myanmar has set up camps for Internally Displaced Persons within its border. While both Buddhists and Muslims in Rakhine State have been displaced, the camps have been set up to include only Rohingya Muslims, cutting the supply to sources of income, access to markets and medical care for an estimated 110,000 Rohingyas currently residing in these camps (Brinham, 2012). Myanmar continues to limit access to these camps for international aid workers and much of what is known about life in these camps comes down to journalists sneaking footage out of the country or through first-hand accounts of refugees who have been placed in these camps. In July of 2012, Myanmar's president suggested that the Rohingya either remain in camps within the country under the supervision of the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) or be deported to third countries (Brinham, 2012).

In April 2012, Myanmar held elections for the first time since 1990. Although in 1990, the results went largely to the opposition National League for Democracy led by Nobel Prize Laureate Aung San Su Kyi, the military ignored the landslide victory and continued on the path of dictatorship. This time however, the military generals made good on their promise and the National League for Democracy won 43 seats in parliament, including one seat won by Aung San Su Kyi (Irrawaddy, 2012).

The positive democratic changes included hundreds of political prisoners released from prison and a welcoming back of refugees who had fled persecution under the previous government. But many of these new changes were eclipsed when deadly riots broke out in Rakhine State following the rape and murder of a Buddhist woman. Three young Rohingya men were subsequently arrested by the police. Up to this point, many of the Rohingya lived in the Rakhine State capital of Sittwe. Following the arrest, Rohingya shops were looted and their homes were burned, leading to a tit-for-tat round of attacks and killings by both the Rohingya and the Rakhine. One of the more shocking images taken in a grainy photo shows Buddhist monks taking part in the violence (Al Jazeera, 2012).

After the Rohingya were forced out of Sittwe, the violence continued into other coastal towns with a sizable Rohingya population. President Thein Sein issued a state of emergency and appealed for calm. He also suggested that all Rohingya be deported. Aung San Su Kyi, whose past statement encouraged tolerance of Myanmar's various ethnic groups, has not taken a stand one way or the other regarding the Rohingya question. By the end of June 2012, 200 people were killed and 100,000 Rohingya were displaced following the riots (Eng, 2013).

Myanmar's first wave of refugees into Bangladesh began after a military campaign designed to intimidate the Rohingyas in Rakhine State starting in 1978 (Eng, 2013). The exodus peaked in the early 1990's when over 200,000 refugees fled Myanmar for Bangladesh escaping rape, torture and murder (UNHCR, 2001).

While many of those refugees were repatriated, the new arrival of refugees has put a strain on the already overpopulated and impoverished country of Bangladesh. Anti-Rohingya sentiment has grown on the other side of the border as well, where an already existing tension exists between the country's Muslim majority and the estimated 840,000 Theravada Buddhists living in the country's southeast corner near the hub of Cox's Bazaar (Mandal).

In September of 2012, riots broke out in the Cox's Bazaar district between Muslims and Buddhists (in this case with the Buddhists suffering the brunt of the violence) following a Facebook post showing a photo of a burned Quran. According to government officials, roughly 25,000 people set fire to 15 villages, homes and temples in and around Cox's Bazaar after claims that a Buddhist boy in the area had uploaded the photo (Agence France-Presse, 2012). In October, Bangladeshi government officials blamed several Rohingya leaders including the Rohingya Solidarity Organization for inciting the violence that destroyed about 100 homes in the area. According to interrogations with leaders of the banned militant Islamic group Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), the Rohingya Solidarity Organization trained JMB militants in explosives in the remote Chittagong Hill Tracts near the border with Myanmar (Manik, 2012).

The fear of Islamic extremism has been growing in Bangladesh, with the recent war crime trials of leaders of the Jamaat-e-Islami and subsequent riots that have killed over 70 people in 2013 following the death sentence handed out to a Jamaat-e-Islami leader accused of war-crimes during the country's

civil war with West Pakistan in 1971 (Al-Jazeera, 2012). The region near the Myanmar border has always been volatile, and the two countries have very limited diplomatic cooperation. While the Rohingya National Army fought for greater autonomy in Myanmar, the Buddhist Minority Hill Tribes living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region fought an insurgency until 1997 over land access and the ever encroaching migration of ethnic Bengalis into tribal lands.

As ethnic tensions grow in Myanmar between the Rakhine and the Rohingya, more and more refugees are crossing into Bangladesh. But the government has said they can't take any more in, citing instability on the border, poverty and overpopulation that have already placed a strain on the country's weak economy. Many who try to enter the country are sent back by the Bangladeshi military, whose stance has been similar to Myanmar's in that neither country will grant citizenship or recognize the basic human rights of the Rohingyas. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina officially stated in 2012 that the Rohingyas were not Bangladesh's responsibility. Bangladesh's foreign minister later said that for Bangladesh had not signed on to the United Nations 1967 protocol, which requires countries to take in refugees, and therefore the government of Myanmar was responsible for the Rohingya and not Bangladesh. Human Rights watch has spoken with aid-workers on the ground working with the refugees who contend that the Bangladesh authorities have been blocking access to international aid groups and have stated that providing healthcare, food, water and shelter is only encouraging more refugees to arrive.

The governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh have both refused to accept the Rohingya, and as a result, many of the refugees fleeing Myanmar and now Bangladesh are now looking for help from countries further away such as Thailand, India and Malaysia.

By 2006, Malaysia began registering Rohingya refugees who had travelled by boat from Myanmar and Bangladesh with residence and work-permits. Although the law was later suspended, the

Rohingya have increasingly paid smugglers to take them by boat along the Myanmar coast in the Bay of Bengal, alongside the coast of Thailand and finally to Malaysia. The crossing by sea lasts about a week and many die from drowning or dehydration, including one case in 2007 when 150 people being smuggled by boat drowned when the boat sank. The majority of these travelers by boat are young men and the entire journey costs up to \$1,000 (Lewa, 2009).

The international community's response to the ongoing violence has been a combination of trepidation, ignorance, or in the case of much of the Muslim world: open criticism towards the government of Myanmar and statements made calling the conflict "ethnic cleansing" and "genocide."

Economic Sanctions have been in place by the West for decades but following the elections in 2012, freeing of political prisoners and a genuine change in press freedom caused world leaders to reconsider these trade embargos. On April 22, 2013, the European Union lifted the last of its trade sanctions with Myanmar while at the same time foreign ministers of the European Union issued a statement expressing concern for the mistreatment of Muslims in Rakhine State, following a report by Human Rights Watch that four mass graves had been uncovered there (BBC, 2012).

The United States has also lifted sanctions with Myanmar, and both Hillary Clinton and President Obama have visited the country in the last year. In a speech at the University of Yangon last November, Obama brought up the violence plagued by Rakhine State and appealed for the respect of all human rights, including those of the Rohingya (White House Transcript, 2012).

During a fragile period where Myanmar experiments with democracy for the first time in 50 years, civil and ethnic unrest could prove to be the downfall of the country where warlords and the illegal drug trade have been a common occurrence over the past century. In March of 2013, ethnic sectarian violence between Muslims and Buddhists spread to central Myanmar, including the country's largest city of Yangon. US State Department Officials warned US citizens to avoid going outside after 40

people had been killed (CNN, 2012). The Generals have often stated in the past that without a military dictatorship, the country would split into ethnic factions much the way events unfolded in Yugoslavia following the collapse of the Communist government there. Myanmar is at a crossroads, and if this conflict continues to spread across the country, it may give the military an excuse to return to martial law and dictatorship.

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