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Addressing the Rohingya Problem

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Abstract
The simmering tension between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in Western Myanmar escalated into a violent conflict in 2012, first in June and again in October. The violence led to the loss of over a hundred lives, destruction of thousands of homes, and the displacement of tens of thousands of people. The Myanmar government intervened to end the bloodshed but tension continues to linger. This article argues that, instead of alienating the Rohingyas politically, consociational democracy should be pursued to address the problem. The support and cooperation of both Buddhists and Muslims, and perhaps assistance from a neutral organization like the United Nations, would help achieve a political solution.

Keywords
Burma, consociational democracy, Myanmar, Rakhine Buddhists, Rohingya Muslims, violence

Introduction

Since the country's independence, Myanmar has been plagued by ethno-religious tensions and armed conflicts. While the majority of conflicts have been between the central government and ethnic minorities on the question of autonomy, inter and intra tensions also exist within ethnic minorities. One among them is the simmering tension between the Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine state in the western part of the country. In recent years, the international community has shown great interest in the Rohingya problem, especially in the aftermath of the violence in June and October 2012. While scores of writers in international media have focused on the subjectivity of the conflict, there are others pondering what could be done to achieve long-term solutions to the inherent problem. Myanmar[1] has myriad problems, but what makes the Rohingya issue unique and why has it caught the attention of the wider international community? Is it because the Rohingya Muslims are a less fortunate community than the other groups or is it because they are distinctive?

It is puzzling to see some particular groups within a society express themselves more radically than others. It is equally intriguing to see how a government responds differently to such a phenomenon. A society may be divided along the lines of culture, religion, political affiliations, or other forms of divisions. One dominant theoretical model that social scientists employ to study political stability in a segmented society is 'consociational democracy' (Andeweg, 2000; Barry, 1975; Bogaards, 1998; Boynton and Kwon, 1978; Lijphart, 1969; Pappalardo, 1981; Toit, 1987).

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Arend Lijphart defines consociational democracy as a 'government by elite cartel designed to turn a democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy' (Lijphart, 1969: 216). Under this form of government, the elites attempt to form a stable government by accommodating or integrating diverse views and interests of people belonging to different cultural groups. A successful consociational democracy requires that the elites have the 'ability to accommodate the divergent interests and demands of the subcultures' and also have the 'ability to transcend cleavages and to join in a common effort with the elites of rival subcultures'. The possibility of such cooperation between rival elites would depend on their 'commitment to the maintenance of the system and to the improvement of its cohesion and stability' provided that the elites understand the 'perils of political fragmentation' (Lijphart, 1969: 216).

Consociational democracy emphasizes the role of 'elite behavior' in diverse societies (Toit, 1987: 419). Cooperation between elites within the same group and also with elites of other groups or cultures is essential. In successful consociational democracy, the elites find ways to accommodate different sections of the society by sharing power as well as reaching decisions by means of 'consensus' or 'unanimity' (Toit, 1987: 419). In an attempt to find a common ground in establishing a grand coalition government, the elites try to achieve two objectives. First, the goal of the elites is to settle 'conflicts of interest' that may exist among the participating members. Second, by settling conflicts of interest, the elites also want to achieve a settlement or result that is 'most favorable' to their own support groups. The extent to which the elites can reach a consensus agreement depends on how much each participating elite can make 'concessions'. The elites know that they cannot solve conflicts of interest unilaterally, and therefore need to carry out strategic 'bargaining'. One elite's interest may not necessarily be the same as that of the other elite and vice versa. This would give each elite a chance to bargain for the best possible outcome that involves 'competition as well as cooperation' (Toit, 1987: 419–420).

Objectives of the Study

This article attempts to understand the nature of the conflict between Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine[2] Buddhists in the western part of Myanmar in 2012. The violent conflict first started in June, and seemingly subsided for three months, but later erupted again in October. While the two sides blamed each other for inciting the violence, they could not find a mutually acceptable peaceful solution among themselves. The Rohingyas accused the Rakhine state government and the central government of deliberately attempting to eliminate their population and termed the violence as a state-sponsored ethnic cleansing. The Myanmar government denied such allegations, but failed to produce a concrete plan for long-term solutions. I attempt to explain the underlying factors causing such mayhem and argue that consociational democracy should be pursued to achieve long-term solutions to the problem.

In order to understand the nature of violence in 2012, I will briefly discuss the historical context of the problem. I will then analyze the policies of the Myanmar government toward the issue, and discuss the general perception of the Myanmar people toward the conflict. I will also study the reactions of the international community vis-à-vis the Rohingya conundrum. After presenting the different perspectives, I will discuss why I believe consociational democracy is the ideal approach to solve the problem.

The Historical Context of the Rohingya Problem

Rohingya is a controversial terminology in Myanmar. The problem lies in the nomenclature itself. Though they call themselves Rohingya, the term which is also widely used by the international

community including the United Nations, the Myanmar government officially identifies them as illegal Bengali migrants from neighboring Bangladesh, which also happens to be the general perception of the Myanmar people (Kipgen, 2012a). The fact is that Rohingya is not included among the 135 ethnic races of Myanmar recognized by the government. The origin of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar has been a sensitive and controversial subject. Some claim that the Rohingyas have lived in Myanmar for centuries and they are the descendants of Muslim Arabs, Moors, Persians, Turks, Mughals and Bengalis who came mostly as traders, warriors and saints through overland and sea routes (Chowdhury, 2006). Since the focus of this article is the violent conflict in 2012, I will not delve further into the historical debates about the origin of the people in question. I must be clear here that not all the Muslims in Myanmar are Rohingya.

The tension between Rohingya and Rakhine in 2012 started off with a rape and murder of a Rakhine woman on 28 May. The May incident was followed by a retaliatory killing of 10 Muslims by a mob of Rakhine on 3 June. Though it culminated in 2012, the simmering tension between the two groups has existed for the past several decades (Kipgen, 2012b); for example, the exodus of Rohingya Muslims that occurred during the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) military government in 1978. Describing the incident in his 1978 article 'Refugees from Burma', Anand writes:

> OVER 200,000 refugees from Burma have crossed over to Bangladesh during the past two months. Most of them have been housed in about 300 tented camps along the border. The Burmese authorities have been accused of persecution, torture, harassment and excesses against Muslim residents of the Arakan state. Refugees allege that they have been fleeing from "atrocities" committed by the Burmese Army and immigrant officials and that the Muslim minority in Arakan is being driven out deliberately. The Bangladesh government has lodged a strong protest against the "repressive measures resulting in the forcible expulsion of their nationals belonging to ethnic and religious minorities", and President Ziaur Rahman too has spoken about the "inhuman eviction of Burmese Muslim nationals" (Anand, 1978: 1100).

In contrast to the allegations of both Rohingya and the Bangladeshi government, the Burmese government then said the Muslims, even refusing to use the term Rohingya, are not its nationals. The Burmese government's position according to Anand's article was that:

> … the 'refugees' are in fact illegal immigrants or fugitives from law. The so-called refugees, it is contended, are Bangladesh nationals, who had illegally settled along the border inside Burma. According to the official Burma News Agency (NAB) the 'Bengalis' had fled because they lacked proper entry registration papers and also because of instigation by 'unscrupulous persons'. They wanted to escape the scrutinisation drive, code-named 'Nagamani', launched in the region commencing on March 17 to classify the status of residents – bonafide citizens and foreigners; and they preferred to flee rather face detection and prosecution. (Anand, 1978: 1100)

The above two passages demonstrate the fundamental problem of the Rohingya people. They not only show how two neighboring countries have been dragged into the problem but also how differently they have reacted to the issue. While Bangladesh condemned the Burmese government for using excessive force to drive away the Muslims into the Bangladeshi territory, the Burmese government said they were illegal settlers intruding into its territory. The 2012 violence in Rakhine state was an offshoot of the unsettled question on the origin and identity of the Rohingya Muslims.

In 1977 the Muslim population was concentrated in two townships in Arakan (the former name of Rakhine)[3] state close to the Bangladesh border, 90% in Maungdaw and 80% in Buthidaung where the local Arakan population was reduced to a minority. As of 31 May 1977, there were 212,104 Muslims and 22,963 professing other religious faiths in Maungdaw and 140,641 Muslims

and 24,562 others in Buthidaung. The towns of Maungdaw, Buthidaung, Rathedaung and Kyauktaw were the main entry points of 'illegal immigrants' from across the Bangladesh border (Anand, 1978: 1100). As there has not been any official census in Myanmar since 1983, the precise distribution of population in Rakhine state cannot be ascertained.[4] However, it is estimated that there are approximately 800,000 Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and another 300,000 in Bangladesh. Another exodus of the Rohingya population into Bangladesh occurred in 1991–1992 during the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) military government (Ragland, 1994). Despite their dire situation in Bangladesh, the Rohingya refugees were unwilling to return to Myanmar voluntarily (McGowan, 1993: 47).

The June Violence and the Government Response

The violence in June between Rohingya and Rakhine in Rakhine state initially started with a rape, robbery and murder of a young Rakhine woman by three Muslim youths in Yanbe township on 28 May and the subsequent killing of 10 Muslim males in a passenger bus in Taun gup township on 3 June. Following the two incidents, riots broke out between the two communities in three different townships in Sittway, Maungdaw and Buthidaung. Angry rioters on both sides torched and destroyed homes, shops, guest houses, and engaged in a killing spree. According to the Myanmar government's report released in July, 77 people from both communities were killed and 109 people were injured. A total of 4,822 homes, 17 mosques, 15 monasteries, and three schools were burnt down (Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2012a). The government in its revised report released on 21 August said that 88 people were killed: 31 Rakhines and 57 Rohingyas (Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2012b). Some claimed that the death toll was in the hundreds.[5]

Table 1 shows the official record of deaths and injuries in both communities as of 30 July 2012. Both in terms of casualties and injuries, the data show that the Rohingya Muslims were the more affected community. It also shows that it was not a pogrom carried out on one particular community.

Amidst criticisms from various rights groups and members of the international community for not taking the necessary measures to prevent the violence, the Myanmar government formed a 16-member committee on 6 June to investigate the incident. The committee was chaired by the Deputy Minister of Home Affairs. On 11 June President Thein Sein promised his government's commitment to rule of law and appealed to the people to cooperate with the committee to bring peace to the volatile situation. The next day on 12 June, the president declared a state of emergency in Rakhine state to prevent further violence and to restore law and order.

Table 2 above shows the two different groups of people affected by the violence: people who took refuge in the relief camps during the actual violence and thereafter. Similar to Table 1, Table 2 also shows that both Rohingya and Rakhine communities were affected by the violence, with Rohingya Muslims evidently the more affected community.

The government's investigation committee concluded that the violence was due to mutual mistrust and religious differences between the two groups that triggered hatred and vengeance between Muslims and Buddhists. After the government's report, both union and state government officials and representatives from various civil society groups visited the affected areas and engaged in different resettlement and rehabilitation activities. In the process, the government set up 89 relief camps in three affected townships to accommodate 30,740 Rohingyas and 14,328 Rakhines. The government received cash and kinds worth more than 3 billion Myanmar kyats (approximately over US$3.3 million) from people inside the country and abroad.

Table 1. Summary list of casualties and injuries in townships concerning incidents that occurred in Rakhine state (as of 30 July 2012).

Township	Casualty			Injury		
	Rakhine	Bengali	Total	Rakhine	Bengali	Total
Sittway	11	23	34	35	22	57
Ponnagyun	—	—	—	—	—	—
Myauk U	—	—	—	—	—	—
Kyauktaw	—	4	4	—	3	3
Pauktaw	—	3	3	6	10	16
Rathedaung	10	4	14	3	26	29
Buthidaung	—	1	1	—	—	—
Maungdaw	10	10	20	6	—	6
Yanbye	—	1	1	—	—	—
Minpyar	—	—	—	—	1	—
Total	31	46	77	50	62	112

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2012).

Table 2. Comparison of affected persons at the relief camps in the period of violence and at present (as of 30 July 2012).

Township	Number of affected persons in the period of riots			Number of affected persons at present		
	Rakhine	Bengali	Total	Rakhine	Bengali	Total
Sittway	8525	28,012	36,537	5702	53,390	59,092
Maungdaw	3827	—	3827	2329		2329
Buthidaung	1110	—	1110	—	—	—
Rathedaung	4020	—	4020	—	—	—
Ponnagyun	3295	—	3295	—	—	—
Pauktaw	3438	—	3438			
Total	24,215	28,012	52,227	8,031	53,390	61,421

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2012).

The Myanmar government rejected the accusations that the authority abused its power and used excessive force in dealing with the violence. The government downplayed the intensity of the violence by stating that it happened only in some isolated areas of the state. The government also rejected the attempts by some organizations and groups to politicize and internationalize the conflict as a religious issue. The authority said the violence was neither religious oppression nor discrimination against a particular group of people. The government claimed that Myanmar is a multi-religious country where Buddhists, Christians, Muslims and Hindus have lived together in peace and harmony for centuries (Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2012a).

Data in Table 3 below show the number of homes and other buildings destroyed during the June violence. Similar to Tables 1 and 2, overall more homes and buildings belonging to the Rohingya Muslims were destroyed.

Table 3. Summary list of destruction and burning of buildings during the violence in Rakhine state (as of 26 July 2012).

Township	Destruction and Burning					
	Rakhine	Bengali	Total	Mosque	Monasteries	School
Sittway	669	2967	3636	11	6	—
Ponnagyun	—	—	—	—	—	—
Myauk U	—	15	15	—	—	—
Kyauktaw	—	171	171	2	—	—
Pauktaw	21	103	124	—	—	—
Rathedaung	—	367	367	1	—	—
Buthidaung	—	—	—	—	—	—
Maungdaw	460	14	474	—	8	3
Yanbye	—	35	35	3	—	—
Minpyar	—	—	—	—	—	—
Total	1150	3672	4822	17	14	3

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2012).

In an attempt to understand the real cause(s) of the violence and for the government to be able to provide a transparent policy, President Thein Sein formed a 27-member investigation commission on 17 August. The commission's representation was more inclusive than the previous 16-member committee. The new body comprised of leaders from religious organizations including Muslims, intellectuals, politicians and retired government officials. The United Nations (UN) Secretary General Ban Ki-moon issued a statement in support of the new commission. In an effort to enhance the transparency of the conflict situation, the authority welcomed representatives from international organizations and foreign governments which included the special representative of the UN Secretary General Vijay Nambiar, the special rapporteur on human rights Tomás Ojea Quintana, the Turkish delegation led by Minister for Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoglu, the President of Indonesian Red Cross Yusuf Kalla, and representative and Assistant Secretary General of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Atta Al-manam Bakhit (Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2012b).

The Violence in October and the Government Response

Despite the government's claim that it had taken the necessary measures to prevent the recurring violence, violent conflict broke out again on 21 October. As a consequence of a series of violent attacks, 84 people lost their lives, 129 people were injured, 2950 homes were destroyed, 14 religious buildings and eight rice mills were incinerated. Some claimed that the number of deaths was much higher than the government's official record.[6] In an attempt to end the violence, the government deployed police and army personnel in the affected areas. Community leaders and state authorities also engaged in attempts to mitigate the conflict. The authority initiated legal actions against 1058 people involved in the fresh violence.

The government carried out relief and rehabilitation works for those affected areas. With a view to better coordinating the relief efforts, the Ministry of Border Affairs held a meeting with government departmental heads and representatives from the UN agencies and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) on 28 October. On the same day, the government arranged

for the Turkish ambassador to Myanmar to visit the Thekkelbyin relief camp to distribute relief materials. Representatives from the World Food Program (WFP), the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), accompanied by the Rakhine state chief minister, also visited the affected areas to assess the situation. In response to allegations and accusations that the government deliberately targeted the Muslim population, the government reiterated that the violence was a consequence of sectarian conflict between two communities and that the government 'never practiced policy of violence against Muslim or any other faiths' (Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2012c).

Without specifying names, the government hinted that the violence was instigated and exacerbated by some local and international organizations. It accused those organizations of supporting a certain organization with local made arms to commit mob threats, terrorist acts and arson attacks. The government announced that it was taking action against individuals and organizations instigating violence behind the scenes (Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2012d).

Reactions from the International Community

Though the Myanmar government claimed to have taken impartial actions in dealing with the violence, concerns and criticisms came in from different quarters, including the office of the United Nations Secretary General and other agencies of the United Nations. During the 67th UN General Assembly session, which commenced on 18 September, Muslim leaders from OIC countries called for more action to end the violent conflict which the UN Secretary General discussed with Myanmar President Thein Sein and Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, Secretary General of the 57-nation OIC. Subsequently, in late October Ban Ki-moon's office warned that the achievements of recent democratic reforms could be 'undone' if the violence was not stopped. The violence had caused damage to the social fabric of the people. The UN Secretary General's office cautioned that the local vigilante attacks, targeted threats and radical rhetoric should be stopped (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC], 2012).

On 31 October the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights on Myanmar Tomás Ojea Quintana, while expressing his concern over the conflict, said that there was a long-standing problem of discrimination toward the Rohingyas by many in Myanmar, including people in the government. His assessment was that, if the government was serious about the country's democratic transition, the problem of human rights needed to be addressed. Similarly, the United Nations independent expert on minority issues, Rita Izsák, said the Rohingyas have been historically marginalized and vulnerable to human rights abuses. She urged the government to allow the safe return of Rohingya Muslims to their homes and to review relevant laws and procedures to allow equal access to citizenship and to encourage reconciliation programs between Rohingya and Rakhine communities. The special Rapporteur on human rights of internally displaced persons, Chaloka Beyani, urged the Myanmar government to take necessary steps to prevent further displacement and destruction of homes (United Nations Human Rights, 2012).

The third committee of the 193-member UN General Assembly, which focuses on rights issues, expressed its serious concern over human rights abuses of the Rohingya people. The committee's non-binding resolution adopted on 26 November urged the Myanmar government to improve the living conditions of the Rohingyas by protecting their human rights, including the right to citizenship. The Myanmar mission to the UN General Assembly accepted the resolution in principle but denied the existence of Rohingya as an ethnic minority group. However, the Myanmar mission said, despite the non-existence of Rohingya as an ethnic group, the Myanmar government would

consider citizenship for any member or community in accordance with the law of the land (Nichols, 2012).

Surin Pitsuwan, the Secretary General of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), of which Myanmar is also a member, warned on 30 October that the sectarian violence in Rakhine state could radicalize the Rohingya Muslims which could potentially threaten peace and stability in the region, and could also jeopardize the economic security of south and East Asia. The ASEAN chief admitted that the role of the regional body was limited to providing humanitarian assistance. He urged the international community, particularly the United Nations, to intervene in finding a political solution to the problem (Voice of America, 2012).

In its 27 October report, the Human Rights Watch accounted extensive destruction of homes and damage of other properties in the predominantly Muslim populated coastal area of Rakhine state. The rights group urged the Myanmar government to take the necessary measures to end the violence against the Muslim population and provide adequate security. Earlier in its June report, the rights body documented targeted killings, rape and mass arrest of the Rohingyas by the Myanmar security forces. The report condemned the authority for imposing restrictions on humanitarian access to the Rohingya community that displaced as many as 104,000 people who were in dire need of food, shelter and medical care (Human Rights Watch, 2012).

One major allegation of alleged deliberate attacks on the Muslim population was produced in a documentary by Al-Jazeera. The 50-minute documentary titled 'The Hidden Genocide' was aired from 8–12 December in Arabic and from 9–13 December in English. Two days before its official release, the Myanmar Ministry of Foreign Affairs strongly criticized the documentary and said the incidents were fabricated and exaggerated. The government reiterated its earlier stand that the security forces and the local authorities were not involved in communal violence or racial and religious discrimination activities. As a testament to its transparent policy on the issue, the foreign ministry said the government had given permission to UN agencies, INGOs, diplomatic corps, and Muslim Aid to visit the affected areas to observe the 'situation for themselves'. Moreover, foreign ministers and high-level delegations from Muslim nations, including Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia, as well as from the OIC, were allowed to visit Rakhine state (Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2012e).

On 8 December the Minister for Border Affairs Lieutenant General Thein Htay said, 'In Rakhine, there were only 250,000 Rohingya in 1980 and now there are one million. Think for yourselves. Is this genocide?' and added that 'we have nothing to hide, and we are asking for your help in resolving this issue'. The government strongly rejected the use of the word 'genocide' in Al-Jazeera's documentary and said the violence in Rakhine state was a communal conflict between Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists as a result of underdevelopment in the region and lack of international assistance. The Minister for Immigration Khin Yi said the government was open to accepting citizenship applications from anyone, including Rohingyas, under the 1982 citizenship law,[7] provided that they met all the criteria, including evidence that their families have lived in Myanmar for three generations (Lwin, 2012).

The General Perception of the Violence by Myanmar People

There were concerns and criticisms from the international community over how the violence was handled by the Myanmar government. How did the general public, particularly the majority Burmans, view the conflict? Initially, neither Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the opposition in the national parliament and the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize recipient, nor the country's human rights groups and the pro-democracy activists outright condemn the violence. On 30 October several

thousand people, mostly Rakhines, marched to a Rohingya village in Rakhine state and asked the villagers to relocate. One person was killed when police fired upon the demonstrators.

The international community's expectation from Aung San Suu Kyi was high since she has been admired by many as an icon of democracy movement and human rights. However, Suu Kyi, who is also chairperson of the National League for Democracy, the largest opposition political party, and rule of law committee in the parliament that was created to oversee the importance of rule of law in the country, said both sides of the conflicting parties are culpable and that rule of law must prevail. During her tour to the United States of America in September, Suu Kyi was asked at Harvard University why she did not condemn the violence targeted toward the Rohingya Muslims. Her response was that 'You must not forget that there have been human rights violations on both sides of the communal divide. It's not a matter of condemning one community or the other. I condemn all human rights violations' (Ingber, 2012).

The people of Myanmar in general and the Rakhines in particular, who are overwhelmingly Buddhists, apparently do not use the term Rohingya. They rather use Bengali, and sometimes a derogatory term *kalar*.[8] During the violence, pamphlets were disseminated in Rakhine state which stirred up fear and anger among the local Buddhists. The pamphlets suggested that the global Islamic plan has made inroads into non-Muslim countries in different forms, such as the practice of polygamy, building and expansion of mosques, and seeking an ethnic minority status for the Rohingya Muslims. Though it was not substantiated, some alleged that the pamphlets could have been the strategy of the government in its attempt to win voters' support ahead of the upcoming general elections in 2015 (McDonald, 2012).

The monks (wearing saffron-color clothes) are highly revered by the general public as well as the military in a predominantly-Buddhist country. In a two-day public demonstration that began in Mandalay on 2 September, thousands of people, including hundreds of Buddhist monks, took part in support of President Thein Sein's proposal to resettle the Rohingyas to a third country. The monks urged the people to save their motherland by supporting the president's proposal. President Thein Sein suggested earlier in July that the Rohingya Muslims be settled in any country that would accept them. The civilian protesters wore t-shirts with a photo of President Thein Sein printed on the front as a sign of support, and at the back a crossed out picture of the UN human rights envoy Tomás Ojea Quintana. The demonstrators complained that the international community, particularly the UN, unnecessarily intervened in the sectarian violence in favor of the Rohingyas (Irrawaddy and Associated Press, 2012).

On 15 October thousands of Buddhist monks marched in Yangon and Mandalay, the two biggest cities in the country, in protest against the plan to open OIC's liaison office in northwest Rakhine state. The monks were joined by ordinary citizens in both cities. The protesters carried placards with words such as 'get out OIC' and 'no OIC' and were destined to continue demonstrations until the government agreed to their demands; that is, not to allow the OIC to open its office. The monks accused the OIC of working only for the interest of the Rohingyas. Hours after the monks dispersed, President Thein Sein's office released a statement that the OIC would not be allowed to open an office in the country since the people were against to it. It was unclear whether the statement was prepared in response to the protest or in advance (Reuters, 2012).

How the Government Plans to Address the Problem

With the help of the international community, including the UN agencies and non-governmental organizations, the government initiated several programs that were intended to address the immediate needs of the affected people. Apart from humanitarian assistance, authorities also took

initiatives that were intended to address the problem in the long-term. Some of the objectives were: to improve law enforcement, to enhance stability, to improve public administration, to build emerging and developing civil society groups, to conduct training and awareness campaigns on conflict prevention, to take actions necessary to develop both Rohingya and Rakhine communities, to promote road connectivity, and to provide orientations on native culture and traditions. The government also plans to conduct activities that would enhance exchanges between the two communities, to promote jobs in the agricultural sector, to improve market conditions, and to provide the necessary infrastructure in health and education.

In addition, the government's plan was to explore new opportunities in ship building, electricity generation, fishery processing, and to establish labor-intensive industries, promote tourism industries and forest plantation. These programs were conceptualized in anticipation of cooperation and collaboration from civil society groups, international governments and organizations, either through bilateral or multilateral partnership (Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2012f). It is evident from the intended programs that a long-term political solution is missing or neglected.

Concluding Remarks

Consociational democracy suggests that the problems of a divided and fragmented society can be addressed by accommodating or integrating the different groups in the government. It also emphasizes cooperation between elites of different cultures. Empirical evidence shows that the Rohingya Muslims have not only been marginalized economically and socially but excluded politically both in the formation of Rakhine state government and the central government. The brutality of military dictatorship from 1962 to 2010 prevented any explosion of the simmering tension between Rohingyas and Rakhines. As the country began to open up to the outside world, and people have been gradually allowed to express their opinions more freely since 2011, the lingering tension between the two communities manifested in the form of a violent conflict. The complexity of the Rohingya problem fundamentally lies in the fact that they are not considered citizens of Myanmar. This makes the case unique from the rest of the conflicts in the country. While other ethnic minorities demand autonomy under a federal set up, the Rohingya Muslims struggle to be recognized as one of the ethnic groups of the country.

While the Myanmar government suggested a resettlement program as the possible solution to the Rohingya problem, none in the international community, including the UN, has come forward to support such a proposal. Instead, the UN has advised the Myanmar government to initiate reconciliation between the two communities and to pursue an integration program. The policies of the Myanmar government have failed to emphasize a political environment where the Rohingya Muslims can fully participate in a multi-ethnic coalition government. The main argument in this article is that, despite the government's plan to implement several programs to address the ramifications of the 2012 violence and its attempt to prevent the violence from happening again, they are unlikely to be sustained without any political solution. A political solution does not necessarily mean guaranteeing the Rohingya Muslims a special status or privilege in the government. Before a consociational model can be adopted, the status of the Rohingyas needs to be studied and addressed constitutionally. And eligible individuals should be entitled to full citizenship rights like any other Myanmar citizens.

People to people relations between Rohingyas and Rakhines, and with the people of Myanmar in general, need to be improved. Given the historical and unique nature of the Rohingya Muslims, reconciliation and political integration can be a great challenge. A reconciliation program will have

a chance to succeed when Rohingyas and Rakhines are willing to compromise on their differences by respecting each other's identity and culture. More importantly, the Myanmar government and the general public must be ready to embrace the Rohingyas if any genuine reconciliation is to be realized. Attempts to achieve long-term solutions by ignoring the crux of the problem – that is, political integration – is unlikely to bring genuine peace and stability in Rakhine state. In other words, without addressing the Rohingya problem politically, the violent conflict in 2012 could be a precedent for future violence.

Postscript

After the 2012 violence between Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists, the government laid out several short-term and long-term plans to address the problem. My main argument in the article is that the government's programs are unlikely to succeed in addressing the Rohingya conundrum without a political solution. Instead of alienating them, the Rohingyas should be politically integrated. Since the article was written, there have been considerable positive developments in the country. For the first time since 1964, private daily newspapers were issued licenses to print. For the first time since 1962, leaders from the government and the opposition participated in a live debate on a wide range of issues, including a sensitive topic on the question of 'Myanmar' versus 'Burma'. The government successfully hosted a three-day World Economic Forum for East Asia, the largest international conference of such magnitude in Myanmar's history. Political prisoners were released in batches. The United States and the European Union lifted economic sanctions and strengthened diplomatic relations. The Myanmar President was hosted by Western leaders, including the US President Barack Obama and the British Prime Minister David Cameron. Economy and education systems have shown improvement.

Despite the country's positive developments on several fronts, the Rohingya problem still remains largely unaddressed. Some fundamental concerns still persist. In May 2013 officials in Rakhine state mandated a two-child policy for Rohingyas in two townships: Buthidaung and Maungdaw. The authority said overpopulation of Rohingyas in the state is one cause of tension between Rohingya Muslims and Rakine Buddhists. The measure, part of a policy which will also ban polygamy, was enacted on the recommendation of a government-appointed commission which released its final report on 8 July 2013. Among others, the commission also recommended doubling of security forces in Rakhine state and resolving Rohingya citizenship status.[9] While the two-child policy was condemned among others by the United Nations and Myanmar's opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi as discriminatory and a violation of human rights, Myanmar's Immigration Minister said the measure will 'benefit the Bengali women' (Szep and Marshall, 2013). Tension between the two groups is pervasive. In March, violence in Meiktila, the central part of Myanmar, killed more than 40 people, mostly Muslims. In another incident, three Rohingya women were killed on 5 June when police fired on protesters in Rakhine state (BBC, 2013). On 24 August 2013 about a thousand anti-Muslim rioters destroyed at least 20 homes and over a dozen shops and a rice mill in Kanbalu village in the central region of Sagaing (*Myanmar Times*, 2013).

While it is encouraging to see Myanmar democratic reforms progress domestically and in international relations, the simmering religious and communal tensions between Muslims and Buddhists remains alarming. The Myanmar government, with assistance from local and international humanitarian agencies, has implemented short-term measures such as providing temporary shelter and foods to the affected people, and increasing the presence of security forces. However, these steps would not solve the inherent problem that has existed for decades. While attending to the

immediate needs, both the central and state governments should consider focusing on long-term measures, such as resolving the identity of Rohingya Muslims.

The government-appointed commission made some important recommendations, including the necessity to address the question of Rohingya citizenship status. The support and cooperation of both Buddhists and Muslims, and perhaps assistance from a neutral organization like the UN, would help achieve a political solution. It remains to be seen how the Myanmar government will address the Rohingya problem.

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Notes

1. Myanmar was formerly known as Burma. It was renamed by the then State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) military government in 1989. Many in the Myanmar opposition groups, the Burmese expatriates, and some Western countries continue to use the name Burma. Some people argue that Burma should still be used since it was an undemocratic military government which changed the name without the consent of the people. The United Nations uses the new name. This article uses Myanmar except for direct quotations and the period prior to 1989.
2. Rakhine is one of the eight major ethnic groups of Myanmar recognized by the government and constitutes the majority of Rakhine state population.
3. In 1989 the SLORC military government changed the state name from Arakan to Rakhine. This article uses Rakhine except for direct quotations and the period prior to 1989.
4. The Myanmar government, with assistance from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), plans to conduct a nationwide population and housing census starting in March 2014.
5. The Equal Rights Trust (ERT), an independent international organization, which purpose is to combat discrimination and promote equality as a fundamental human rights and a basic principle of social justice, in its June 2012 report, quoting Tun Khin of Burmese Rohingya Organisation in the United Kingdom (BROUK)'s briefing in the British Parliament, claimed that at least 650 Rohingyas were killed by Rakhine and government forces, and at least 1,200 people were missing.
6. The National Democratic Party for Human Rights (NDPHR), a Rohingya group in exile, said the death toll of Rohingyas was over 10,000. The NDPHR's report entitled 'Report of ongoing ethnic-cleansing pogrom against defenceless unarmed Rohingya' collected between 8 June and 20 October 2012 is available in its website at http://www.ndphr.net/p/ongoing-genocidal-attacks-in-arakan.html (accessed 10 May 2013).
7. According to the 1982 citizenship law, there are three categories of citizenship: citizen, associate citizen and naturalized citizen. Citizens are descendants of residents who lived in Burma prior to 1823 or were born to parents both of whom were citizens. Associate citizens are those who acquired citizenship through the 1948 Union Citizenship Act. Naturalized citizens are people who lived in Burma before 4 January 1948 and applied for citizenship after 1982.
8. The word *kalar* is a highly derogatory term often applied to Muslims and people with dark South Asian complexions.
9. For details, see the commission's report titled 'Final Report of Inquiry Commission on Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State'. The commission was established by President Thein Sein's Executive Order on 17 August 2012.

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