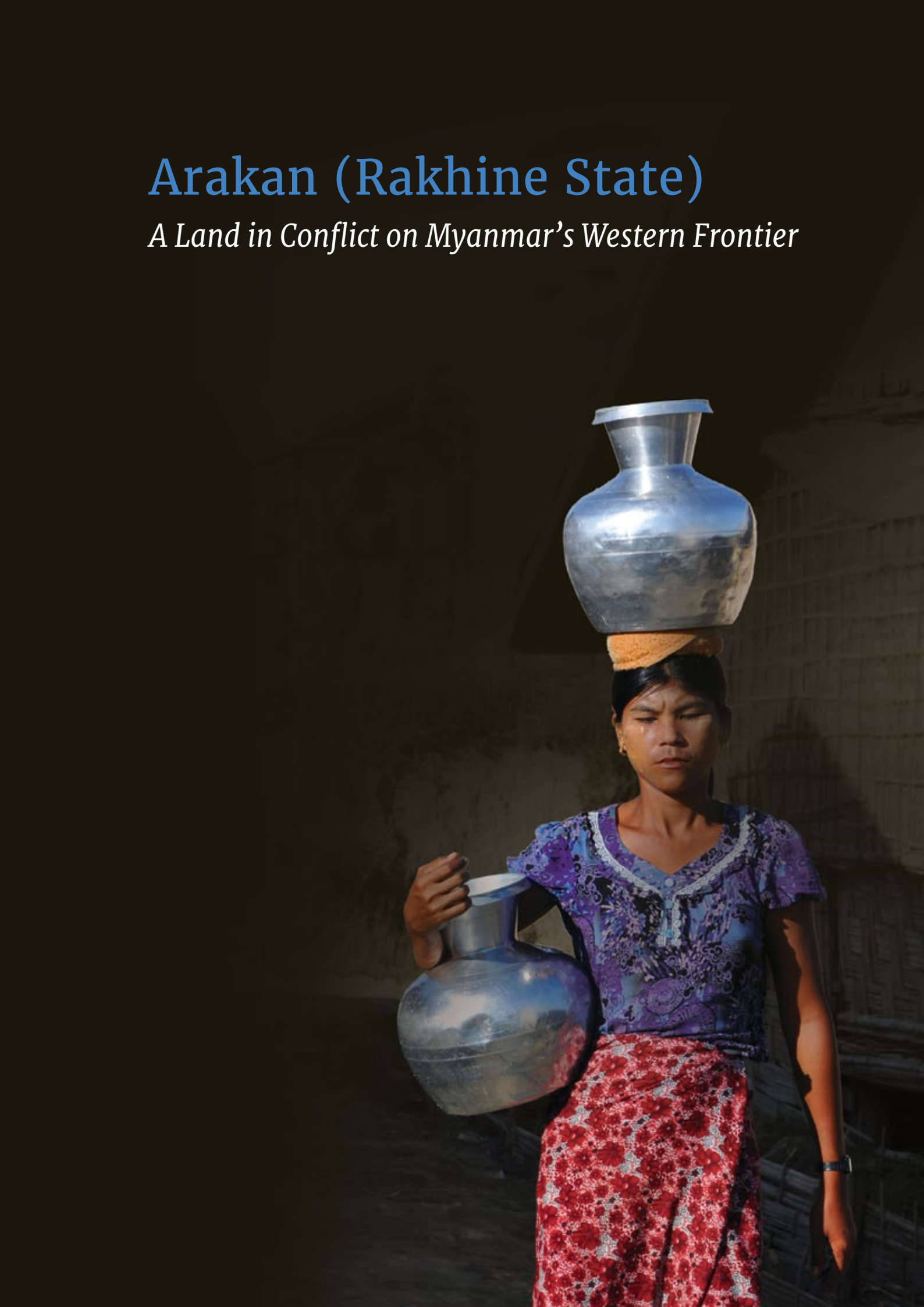
Arakan (Rakhine State)

A Land in Conflict on Myanmar's Western Frontier



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COVER PHOTO:
Displaced Rakhine woman fetching water in IDP camp near Sittwe (TK)

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Arakan Political Timeline

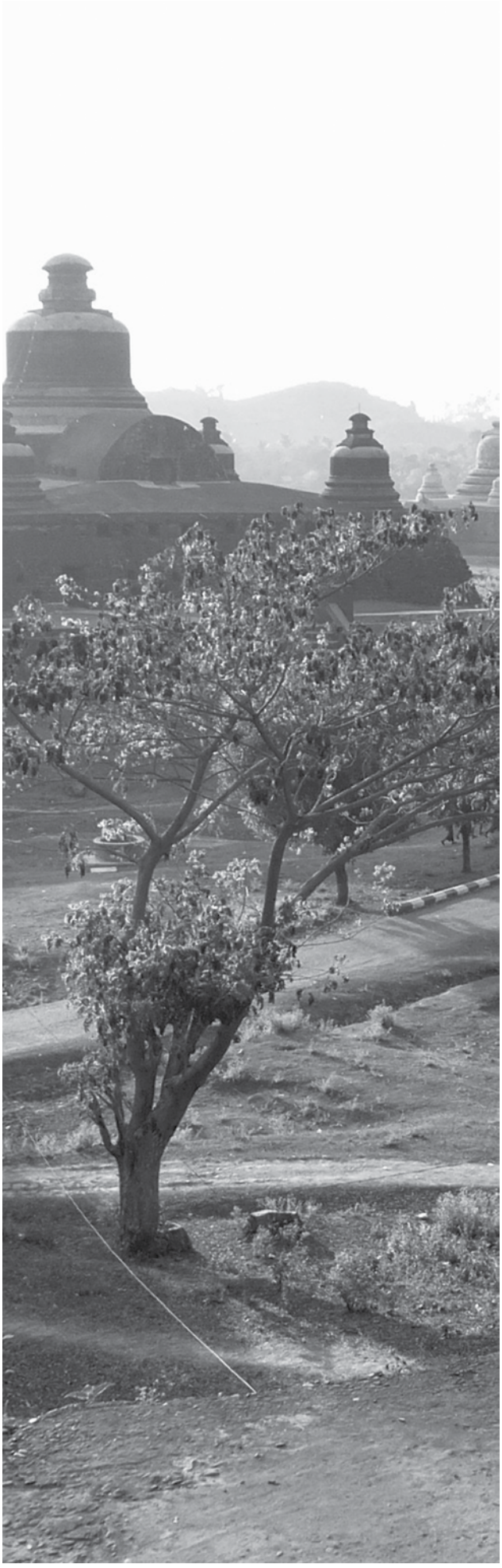
1784	Mrauk-U Kingdom invaded under the Konbaung Dynasty
1824-1826	Arakan annexed during first Anglo-Burmese War
1885-1886	Arakan incorporated into British Burma in third Anglo-Burmese War; Arakan administered as Division in Ministerial Burma
1918-1919	Nationalist parties revive with Arakan Association
1936	Jamiatul-Uluma North Arakan established
1937	British Burma separated from Indian Empire; Arakan National Congress established
1941-45	World War Two and Japanese occupation
1942	Outbreak of inter-communal violence
1945	Arakan People's Liberation Party established
1946	White Flag-Red Flag CPB split
1947	Panglong Agreement on principles of equality and union
1948	Independence of Union of Burma; Arakan incorporated as Division; Hill Tracts separated into Chin Special Division; armed struggle begins by Rakhine, Mujahid, CPB and other groups
1951	IAPG wins Arakan Division majority in general election
1956	ANUO allies with National United Front; NUF second to U Nu's AFPFL in general election
1958	U Nu's "Arms for Democracy" peace movement
1958-1960	Ne Win "Military Caretaker" administration
1960-1962	"Federal Proposal" by Shan, Rakhine and other ethnic leaders; agreement on formation of Arakan State; Mayu Frontier Administration established
1962	Ne Win military coup; "Burmese Way to Socialism" imposed
1963	CPA attends nationwide "Peace Parley"; armed struggle revives by Rakhine, Mujahid, Rohingya and CPB groups
1967	"Rice Killing Day" in Sittwe
1973	National census and referendum
1974	BSPP constitution introduced; Rakhine State established
1978	Operation Nagamin and 1st Rohingya refugee exodus

1982	Citizenship Law introduced
1988	Democracy protests; BSPP collapse; SLORC takes office; democracy exiles take refuge in armed opposition territory
1989	CPB collapse; ethnic ceasefires begin
1990	NLD wins general election; ALD gains most Rakhine State seats; NDPHR also wins four seats
1992	ALD, NDPHR and other ethnic parties banned; Tatmadaw offensive; 2nd Rohingya refugee exodus
1993	National Convention starts to draft new constitution; formation of USDA
1997	SLORC government renamed SPDC
1998	ALD joins Committee Representing People's Parliament with NLD
2002	ALD joins United Nationalities Alliance
2008	Cyclone Nargis; referendum and announcement of new constitution
2009	Ceasefire groups ordered to transform into BGFs
2010	NLD and ALD boycott general election; USDP wins polls; RNDP gains most Rakhine State seats
2011	SPDC steps down; President Thein Sein begins new peace process
2012	NLD enters parliament in by-elections; ALP ceasefire; inter-communal violence breaks out
2015	Partial Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement; NLD wins general election; ANP wins most Rakhine State seats; most Muslim candidates barred; Rohingya population disenfranchised
2016	21st Century Panglong Conference; ULA-AA begins operations in Rakhine State; ARSA emerges; new conflict and refugee flight
2017	2nd Panglong-21; China launches BRI; report of Kofi Annan Advisory Commission; ARSA attacks resume; Tatmadaw crackdown; 3rd Rohingya refugee flight
2018	protestors killed in Mrauk-U; ex-ANP leader Aye Maung arrested; 3rd Panglong-21; UN Fact-Finding Mission alleges "war crimes"; Western Command excluded from peace process
2019	China steps up efforts to broker peace; ULA conflict intensifies; over a million refugees in Bangladesh; up to 200,000 internally displaced; ICC and ICJ launch investigations into crimes against humanity and persecution
2020	Scheduled date of third general election under 2008 constitution

Abbreviations

AA[1]	Arakan Army
AA[2]	Arakan Army (armed wing of NUPA, subsequently ANC)
AA[3]	Arakan Army (armed wing of ULA)
AASYC	All Arakan Students and Youth Congress
ABSDF	All Burma Students Democratic Front
AFPFL	Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League
AIA	Arakan Independence Alliance
AIO	Arakan Independence Organisation
ALD	Arakan League for Democracy
ALD (E)	Arakan League for Democracy (exile)
ALO	Arakan Liberation Organisation
ALP	Arakan Liberation Party
ANC	Arakan National Congress
ANC	Arakan National Council (2004-present)
ANLP	Arakan National Liberation Party
ANP	Arakan National Party
ANUO	Arakan National United Organisation
ARIF	Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front
ARSA	Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army
BCIM	Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar Economic Corridor
BGF	Border Guard Force
BIA	Burma Independence Army
BMC	Burma Muslim Congress
BNA	Burma National Army
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
CMEC	China-Myanmar Economic Corridor
CNF	Chin National Front
CNVP	Chin National Vanguard Party
CPA	Communist Party of Arakan
CPB	Communist Party of Burma
CRPP	Committee Representing the People's Parliament
DAB	Democratic Alliance of Burma
DHRP	Democracy and Human Rights Party
DKBA	Democratic Karen (Buddhist) Benevolent Army
DPA	Democratic Party of Arakan
EAO	ethnic armed organisation
FPNCC	Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee
IAPG	Independent Arakanese Parliamentary Group
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICJ	International Court of Justice
IDP	internally-displaced person
KIO	Kachin Independence Organisation
KMT	Kuomintang
KNLD	Kamans National League for Democracy
KNPP	Kaman National Progressive Party
KNPP	Karenni National Progressive Party
KNU	Karen National Union
KPC	Karen (KNU/KNLA) Peace Council
LDU	Lahu Democratic Union
LID	Light Infantry Division
MFA	Mayu Frontier Administration
MLOB	Muslim Liberation Organisation of Burma
MNDAA	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (Kokang)
MNF	Mizo National Front
MP	member of parliament
MPC	Myanmar Peace Center
NBF	Nationalities Brotherhood Federation
NCA	Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement

NCCT	Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team
NCGUB	National Coalition Government Union of Burma
NCUB	National Council Union of Burma
NDAA	National Democratic Alliance Army (Mongla)
NDF	National Democratic Front
NDFA	National Democratic Force of Arakan
NDPD	National Democratic Party for Development
NDPHR	National Democratic Party for Human Rights
NDPP	National Development and Peace Party
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NLD	National League for Democracy
NMSP	New Mon State Party
NRPC	National Reconciliation and Peace Centre
NSCN-K	National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang
NUF	National United Front
NUFA	National United Front of Arakan
NULF	National United Liberation Front
NUP	National Unity Party
NUPA	National United Party of Arakan
PDP	Parliamentary Democracy Party
PNLO	Pa-O National Liberation Organisation
RNDP	Rakhine Nationalities Development Party
RPF	Rohingya Patriotic Front
RSO	Rohingya Solidarity Organisation
RSU	Rakhine Sangha Union
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SNLD	Shan Nationalities League for Democracy
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
SSA/RCSS	Shan State Army/Restoration Council of Shan State
SSA/SSPP	Shan State Army/Shan State Progress Party
TNLA	Ta-ang National Liberation Army
TNP	Tribal Nationalities Party
ULA	United League of Arakan
UN	United Nations
UNA	United Nationalities Alliance
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFC	United Nationalities Federal Council
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNLD	United Nationalities League for Democracy
UNOCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UPDJC	Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee
USDA	Union Solidarity and Development Association
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party
UWSA	United Wa State Army
WNO	Wa National Organisation



Htukanthein temple, Mrauk-U (MS)

1. Introduction

Arakan, the present-day Rakhine State,[1] represents the post-colonial failures of Myanmar in microcosm: ethnic conflict,[2] political impasse, militarisation, economic neglect and the marginalisation of local peoples. During the past decade, many of these challenges have gathered a new intensity, accentuating a Buddhist-Muslim divide and resulting in one of the greatest refugee crises in the modern world. A land of undoubted human and natural resource potential, Arakan has become one of the poorest territories in the country today.

The current crisis was in no way preordained. Arakan's vibrant history reflects its position on a strategic crossroads in Asia. Far from being a remote or forgotten land, Arakan and its peoples have long been at a centre of regional interchange, not at the periphery. Inter-community relationships, however, were badly disrupted by the intervention of colonial rule. This is a debilitating legacy that has had lasting resonance in national politics until the present day. At different turning points in history, Arakan has undergone grievous times of conflict and instability. All were moments of outside intervention and governmental change during which the rights of local peoples were marginalised and ignored. Such an era exists again today.

The current emergency is often misleadingly characterised as a "Buddhist Rakhine" versus "Muslim Rohingya" struggle for political rights and ethnic identity. But the challenges of achieving the rights of democracy and self-determination for the peoples of Arakan have always been more complex and nuanced than this. Since colonisation began in the 18th century, central governments have never been independent or neutral actors. During the past two centuries, a number of very different jurisdictions have come and gone: the Konbaung dynasty, the "Pax Britannica", the Japanese interregnum during the Second World War, and a series of military-dominated governments since Myanmar's independence in 1948. In the 21st century, Arakan is a land that is yet to find ethnic peace and political inclusion for all its peoples.

Since 2011, hopes for reconciliation and national change have been invested in parliamentary reform

and peace talks under a new system of quasi-civilian democracy. These expectations accelerated with the election of the National League for Democracy (NLD) to government office in 2015. For the moment, however, the processes of reform have not been inclusive, and meaningful dialogue is yet to begin. A practice of "top-down" government still exists; communal divisions have deepened; and a culture of impunity remains unaddressed in the military field. The greater liberalism in the country during the past few years is not in doubt. But the contemporary Rakhine State has witnessed its greatest period of violence and displacement in many decades.

Critically, such experiences are not unique in the country.[3] Conflict regression has also occurred in the Kachin and Shan States during the past few years. Such realities in these three states – Kachin, Rakhine and Shan – cannot be regarded as exceptions or secondary issues in post-colonial Myanmar. Rather, they go to the heart of the failures of the modern-day state.

For the moment, the ethno-political landscape is bleak. During the past three years, a series of investigations have been underway, both in Myanmar and abroad, to try and address the causes of such deep crisis in Arakan. Some very different perspectives have emerged. To date, there is no consensus on how to engage with the challenges of Arakan nor how to take policy recommendations forward.

The 2017 Kofi Annan "Advisory Commission on Rakhine State" put forward a host of recommendations for policy reform.[4] The 2018 UN "Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar" advocated that the leaders of the national armed forces, known as the Tatmadaw, be prosecuted for war crimes.[5] A new "Independent Commission of Enquiry on Northern Rakhine", appointed by the Myanmar government, is currently re-examining the emergency in the Bangladesh borderlands under the auspices of international advisors.[6] And in November 2019 the International Criminal Court announced that it would open an investigation into crimes against humanity and persecution on the grounds of ethnicity or religion. Meanwhile the International Court of Justice accepted a case on the alleged breach of the 1948 UN Convention against Genocide.

Complicating matters further, the international community is pursuing some very different policies in the field. Western governments believe that punitive action needs to be taken against those responsible for human rights abuses. China is seeking to place Rakhine State at the centre of President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative to develop economic roads westwards to Eurasia.[7] India is prioritising a "Kaladan Gateway" project to promote integration with Mizoram, Assam and other northeast states under Narendra Modi's "Act East" policy. And Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries in the world, is left with the burden of over one million Rohingya refugees and the prospect of instability along its borders for many years to come.

These are all crucial issues, and how different actions play out during the next few years will have defining consequences on the political future of Myanmar. At a critical moment in national transition, Arakan is once again on the front-line in both domestic emergency and international geo-politics. After a long history of close inter-relations with the politics and cultures of India, Arakan is on the brink of one of the greatest political shifts in two centuries as Myanmar increasingly gravitates into the orbit of China. Long neglected by the outside world, Rakhine State today is one of the most scrutinised territories in international politics and diplomacy.

There is, however, one great omission in these discussions as different visions are prepared for Rakhine State's future: the voices of the peoples of Arakan themselves. It is a mistake of historic proportions. Communities from all ethnic backgrounds are presently facing among the most challenging times in their history. But, as during previous times of national change, they are being scarcely consulted – if at all. Instead historic errors of marginalisation and exclusion are being repeated, compounding a new generation of grievance. During the past decade, ethnic conflicts and armed struggles that originally broke out at Myanmar's independence in 1948 have sprung back into new life.

The evidence is stark. Northern Rakhine State and the tri-border region with Bangladesh and India is presently one of the most conflict-divided territories in the modern world; hostility is deep between different government and nationality

organisations; over a million people – or a third of the population – are refugees in Bangladesh or displaced internally from their homes; electoral politics are highly contested in the country's emergent democracy; and the contemporary humanitarian crisis bears comparison with the worst upheavals in Arakan's troubled past.

It is important that hope is not lost. Despite the present scale of crisis, there are political and community leaders in Rakhine State and other parts of the country who believe that just and equitable solutions can be achieved. After decades under military rule, opinion is widespread in political circles that there should be better potential for reconciliation and reform during the present time of governmental change. But this very much depends on the achievement of peace and democratic inclusion for all peoples.

This is far from the case at present. As in other ethnic borderlands, an unbroken cycle of political failure and armed conflict continues, dating back to the first days of Myanmar's independence. For lasting peace and stability to be achieved, these realities must be faced and addressed. Reconciliation and reform cannot be imposed: they can only be built by the peoples on the ground.

Myanmar is at a delicate stage. During the past three years, the government's processes for national peace and reform – a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement and the 21st Century Panglong Conference – have been badly stumbling. In the case of Rakhine State, they have completely lost their way. For breakthroughs to happen, it is essential that the causes and struggles of the peoples of Arakan are listened to and understood. Today, the different communities in the conflict-zones – whether Buddhist or Muslim, Christian or Hindu – are among the most suffering and marginalised peoples in the country.

This report seeks to analyse the challenges facing Rakhine State at a critical moment in the transition from military rule. As always in Myanmar, a balanced understanding of local perspectives and realities is vital in a territory that reflects different ethnic, religious and political viewpoints. As in other ethnic nationality states, the difficulties have been exacerbated by the territory's isolation from outside engagement during the long years of civil war. This lack of access has resulted in a dearth of research and reporting on the political and ethnic conflicts that have had a devastating impact on the ground. During a time of humanitarian suffering and emergency, the causes of conflict have been little documented or understood.

The report will take a narrative approach, examining the history of conflict that began under the Konbaung dynasty in the 18th century and has continued, without real interruption, since the Japanese invasion during the Second World War.[8] The peoples of modern-day Arakan have not known a time of true peace. Especial attention will be given to the evolution of ethnic and political movements, both electoral and armed. Focus will also be given to the failures of successive post-colonial governments that have caused the failures of Rakhine State to become so entrenched. Many of the contemporary challenges – from political instability to citizenship denial – have their origins in the unaddressed conflicts of earlier political eras.

Finally, the report will turn to the contemporary landscape. Arakan stands on one of the most ethnically diverse crossroads in Asia. Key issues of concern include the escalation in armed struggle between ethnic opposition forces and the Tatmadaw, the Rohingya Muslim refugee exodus, peace initiatives, human rights investigations, and the growing economic entry by outside neighbours into the territory. The report will also pay attention to the continuing crises in the former Arakan Hill Tracts, today demarcated in Chin State. The instabilities in the tri-border conjunction with Bangladesh and India cannot be separated from the challenges of peace and stability in the region more broadly.

The situation is now urgent. During another time of governmental change, the peoples of Arakan are determined that their struggle for political and ethnic rights is not forgotten. For the moment, divisions and human suffering are only continuing to spread across the territory. It is therefore vital that Rakhine State should not be considered an exceptional or peripheral case of political and ethnic breakdown in the country today. The ambition must be that in the coming decade the territory becomes a model for informed and progressive change. History has long since warned that peace for Arakan's peoples is integral to peace and stability in Myanmar at large.

Arakan Map


Chittagong
India
Mizoram
Parva
Bangladesh
Chittagong Division
Chin State
Arakan Hill Tracts
Cox's Bazar
Kaladan River
Paletwa
Samee
Lemro River
Kyaukhtu
Mt. Victoria
Saw
Maungdaw District
Naf River
Buthidaung
Kyauktaw
Maungdaw
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Rathedaung
Sidoktaya
Ponnagyun
Minbya
Sittwe District
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Site of the ancient Great Buddha image, Vesali (MS)

2. The Forgotten Kingdom of Arakan

A Legacy of Conflict and Colonisation

> The use of force alone is but temporary. It may subdue for a moment; but it does not remove the necessity of subduing again: and a nation is not governed, which is perpetually to be conquered.
> *Edmund Burke, 1775.*[1]

The cautionary words of Edmund Burke, an Anglo-Irish statesman and philosopher, were spoken in the 18th century as the age of colonialism and empire-building began to take root. But for nationalists in Arakan, who see special resonance in the historical experiences of Ireland, they have always been important. Within a decade, the ancient capital of Mrauk-U was captured by the Konbaung dynasty. Arakan's age of independence was at an end.

Somewhat remarkably, then, a main reason given by both government and Tatmadaw interlocutors for rejecting peace talks with ethnic nationalist forces in Rakhine State today is that the territory is considered a "White Area": i.e. a region where armed opposition groups have either been defeated or do not exist.[2] This explanation may provide insight into the thinking of military strategists. But, as a political justification, it does not stand up. Dating back to the colonial era, there is a long tradition of unrest and resistance in Arakan that has continued until the present day. For the casual visitor to Ngapali and the tourist beaches in the south of the territory, this may not be immediately apparent. But at periodic intervals during the past two centuries, the borderlands of Arakan have witnessed some of the most violent upheavals in Asia.

Today the ethno-political conflicts in the Rakhine State and the tri-border region with India and Bangladesh are among the most contentious in the country. Disagreements continue over interpretations of history. The struggles for Rakhine State's present are also struggles for Arakan's past. Dating back to the early centuries CE, nearly 2,000 years of civilisation and city-states have been documented within the territory. This is one of the most extensive records of continuous habitation in the sub-Asian region. As various dynasties rose and fell, "Greater Arakan"

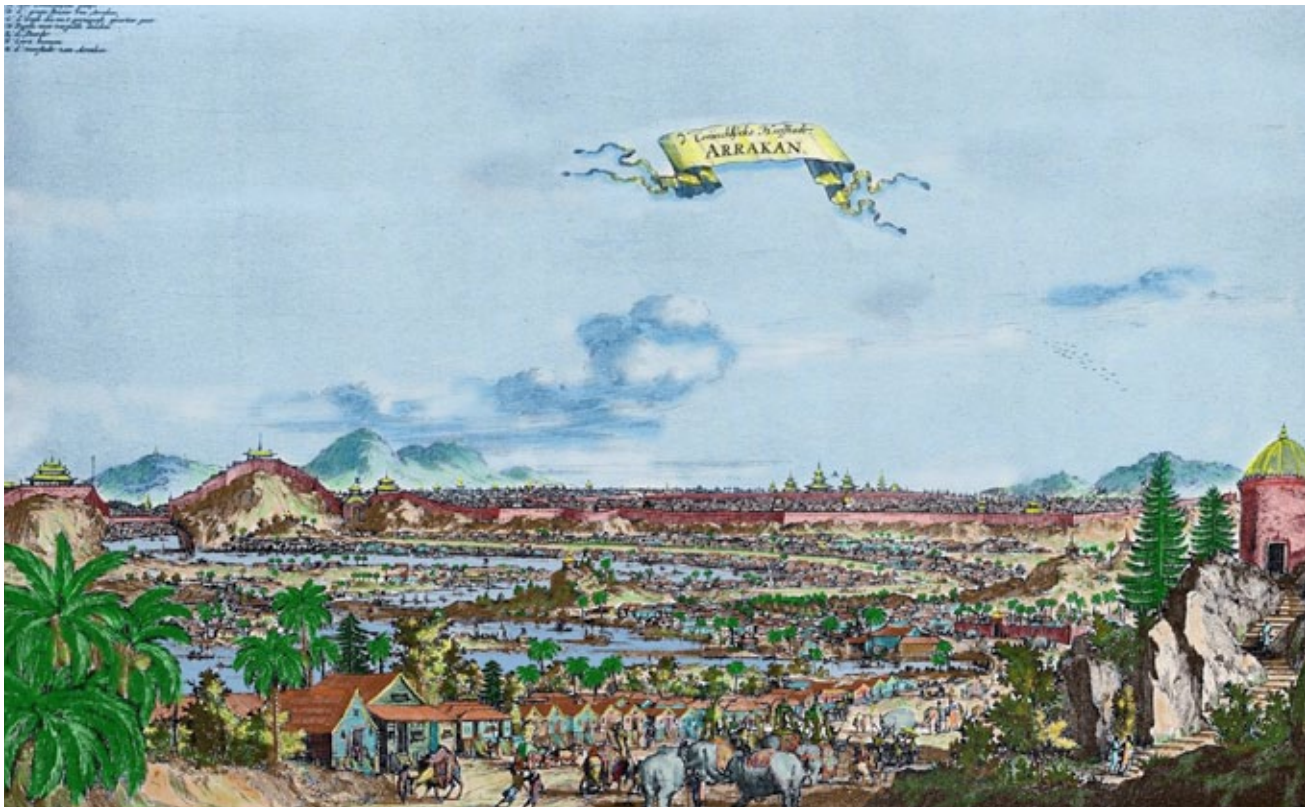
was once over 50 per cent larger in area than it is today. Territories claimed to be under the authority of the Arakan kings included the Arakan Hill Tracts in present-day Chin State, the Chittagong Division in Bangladesh, the Tripura Hill Tracts in India, and lands stretching further westwards into Bengal and southwards into lower Myanmar.[3]

For the last millennium, the majority inhabitants are ethnic Rakhines, who are mostly Buddhists and speak a language related to Burmese. But there have always been other peoples living in this changing frontier world. Arakanese, Rakhine, Rohingya, Chin, Daingnet, Kaman, Khami and Mro – these are only contemporary manifestations of identity in a land that is rich in history and cultural diversity (see box: "Rakhine State: A Contemporary Snapshot").

A particular zenith was the rise of the capital at Mrauk-U during the 15th to 17th centuries CE. Although the kings were Buddhists, they also used Islamic titles, issued coins in Persian script, and had close inter-connection with the politics of Bengal. As the historian Thant Myint-U wrote: "This was the start of a new golden age for this country – a period of power and prosperity – and the creation of a remarkably hybrid Buddhist-Islamic court, fusing traditions from Persia and India as well as the Buddhist worlds to the east."[4] It is a legacy about which many inhabitants of the modern-day state feel proud. As Rakhine educators point out, Arakan was historically the "path for the diffusion of cultures".[5]

Storm clouds, however, were gathering. Pre-colonial Arakan was rarely a land at peace. Over the centuries, Arakanese rulers became involved in wars with various Bamar (Burman), Mon, Siamese and Bengali rivals. Peoples and territories frequently re-aligned. Arakanese adventurers, too, became notorious for maritime raiding from which the Bengali term of "Magh" ("pirate" or "bandit") for the Rakhine people is thought to derive. And, ultimately, it was military competition along the India frontier that witnessed Arakan's golden age come to an end as Mughal emperors and European powers encroached further eastwards into the sub-Asian region. In particular, it was the loss of Chittagong to the Mughals in 1666 that presaged instabilities on Arakan's northern frontier, leading to the kingdom's political decline.[6] Thus began a pattern of militarizations and demilitarizations that have continued along Arakan's borders until the present day.

Two invasions now followed that were to have lasting resonance in Arakan politics. In Rakhine histories, they are recorded as the first two of five "colonisations", a subordinate status that many political activists argue still continues. These five



17th Century view of Mrauk-U, capital city of Arakan

Fishermen bringing their catch to shore, Thandwe Township (TK)

eras are summarised as: 1784-1824 under the Konbaung Dynasty, 1824-1941 under the British, 1942-45 under the Japanese, 1945-48 under the British again, and 1948 to the present day under post-independence governments. The British and Japanese rulers are today long gone. But the longevity of these experiences means that, in political circles, Arakan is still referred to as a "hidden colony" today (see Chapter 4).

In modern-day Myanmar, discussion of Rakhine State politics quickly reverts to the events of two centuries ago. First in 1784, the Konbaung ruler Bodawpaya captured Mrauk-U, deposing the last Arakan king, Thamada. Bodawpaya's troops then carried away the sacred Mahamuni Buddha image to Mandalay where, to the disquiet of Rakhine nationalists, it still remains today. During the following years, tens of thousands of civilians were killed or conscripted.[7] Up to 100,000 refugees – or a third of the population – fled into British-controlled Bengal.[8] For several years, a local resistance leader Chin Byan (King Bering) fought an unsuccessful war to try and regain the territory. "Multitudes" of refugees were still arriving by land and sea, the Chittagong Magistrate warned in 1798.[9] The majority of those arriving were Buddhist Rakhines who were described by the British as "in a terror" of the "Burmese".[10] But there is also mention in the British records of Muslim refugees crossing into Bengal as well as Muslims in the new Arakan administration. "We consider the province of Chittagong and Arracan as one," the "Great Rajah" of the Kingdom of Arakan wrote.[11] It is an important reminder of how inter-mixed populations were on both sides of the Naf River border at the time.[12]

Any victory for the Konbaung dynasty proved very short. The 1784 invasion was only the prelude to an even more seismic event in Arakan politics: the British annexation. As rivalries continued along the India frontier, a battle for hegemony developed between the British and the royal Court of Ava. The outcome was the first "Anglo-Burmese War" during 1824-26. For over a year, fighting swept across the Arakan battleground from Chittagong in the north to Ramree and Munaung (Cheduba) Islands in the south before the British emerged victorious after opening a second front to advance upon Yangon.[13] The power of the Konbaung dynasty was broken.

Rakhine State: A Contemporary Snapshot

An estuarine territory of over 36,000 square kilometres, modern-day Rakhine State stands on a strategic crossroads in Asia. Its borders mark three geo-political meeting-points: between Myanmar, Bangladesh and India; South and Southeast Asia; and the Buddhist and Muslim worlds. As such, it has often been referred to as Myanmar's "Western Gate". But due to its singular geography, its peoples and politics were historically isolated from the kingdoms of the Bamar and Mon peoples who lived in the plains of the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) and Sittoung river valleys to the south and east. Rather, protected by the forests and mountains of the Arakan Yoma, most human habitation developed along a coastal strip of muddy creeks and winding rivers that run down to the Bay of Bengal.

Population statistics are contentious. On the eve of the 2016 violence that erupted in the north of the territory, it was generally considered that ethnic Rakhines constituted about 60 per cent of the population and Muslim communities, including Rohingya and Kaman (Kamein), around 30 per cent.[14] The remaining 10 per cent were estimated to consist of Chin and smaller nationality groups, including Mro, Khami, Daingnet and Maramagyi. There are also Hindus and other peoples of Indian heritage living in Rakhine State, while Christianity has spread among Chin communities during the past 100 years. But, as in many other parts of contemporary Myanmar, there is no data upon which reliable assumptions about ethnicity and demography can be made.

This confusion over ethnic statistics was highlighted by the 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census,[15] which calculated the Rakhine State population at 3,188,807.[16] But in one of many anomalies, the 2014 figure included an estimate of 1,090,000 people – or a third of the population – that had not been counted.[17] Most were Rohingya Muslims who were either internally displaced in Rakhine State or not recognised by the government as full citizens. Since this time, a majority of the Rohingya population has left from the country, with over one million refugees or exiles in Bangladesh. Many of the Muslim Kaman population have also left their homes after inter-community violence broke out in 2012.

As these upheavals continue, population displacement has become a major crisis in Arakan politics and society. Around 128,000 people (mostly Muslims) remain in displacement camps in central Rakhine State from the 2012 violence.[18] More recently, over 90,000 civilians of Rakhine, Chin and Mro ethnicity were displaced in fighting during 2019 between the security services and United League of Arakan (ULA) in the northern part of the state.[19] Meanwhile an exodus is continuing of young people from all ethnic backgrounds to other parts of Myanmar and abroad. In recent years, the exile diaspora has become an important element in nationalist activism, both Rakhine and Rohingya.

The sense is widespread that Arakan's best times were in the past. Historically, Arakan was important in agriculture, fishing, shipping and trade, all of which accelerated under British rule. Arakan was also known for education and learning, and many Arakanese gained positions in

the colonial civil service. Much of the economy was based around Sittwe (Akyab), which became an important hub in the British India empire. Meanwhile immigration increased from British India, which later became a source of inter-community tension. Until the present day, the main centres of politics and trade have remained around Sittwe, Mrauk-U and Maungdaw Districts in the more populous north of the state. Central and southern areas, by comparison, have closer connections with Magway, Bago and Bamar-majority regions to the east.

Since independence in 1948, the economy has notably declined. Rakhine State is today the second poorest of the 14 states and regions in the country. It also has some of the worst indicators for disease, poverty, illiteracy and child mortality. Only three major roads – from Ann, Toungup and Gwa – connect the state with other parts of the country. Such governmental neglect has become a major source of ethno-political discontent. During the past decade, oil and gas pipelines have been built from the Shwe Gas fields in the Bay of Bengal to Yunnan Province in China. But, to date, there has been little evidence of benefit to local communities. Most of the population remains rural-based.

Looking to the future, Kyaukpyu seaport in the central part of the state is targeted by China as a major hub in President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative to develop trade and infrastructure links across Asia. To back this up, an agreement on a China-Myanmar Economic Corridor was signed between the two governments last year. A Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project is also underway with India, and a Kanyin Chaung Economic Zone and Ponnagyun Industrial Zone are being developed with Bangladesh. As these projects go ahead, Rakhine State is likely to witness its greatest social and economic changes since the British departure. Due to conflict, however, progress on international investments has been slow. Tourism has also been adversely affected at the two main sites: the ancient capital of Mrauk-U in the north and beaches at Ngapali near Thandwe in the south.

Rakhine State also remains closely inter-linked with the politics and economy of the former Arakan Hill Tracts. This is a thinly-populated highland region of 9,176 square kilometres in the tri-border area with Bangladesh and India. At independence in 1948, these territories were conjoined with the neighbouring Chin Hills because of their Chin-majority peoples. Social and political inter-relations, however, have continued on both sides of the borders. The Kaladan valley that connects Sittwe in Rakhine State, Paletwa Township in Chin State and Mizoram in northeast India is the focus of much economic and geo-political interest today. There is also controversy over plans to build two hydropower dams on the Lemro (Laymyo) River that flows into Rakhine State. Thousands of villagers face possible relocation in the two states.[20]

Following the outbreak of insurrections in 1948, various armed opposition groups from Rakhine State have been active in the territory. During the past year, several thousand villagers have been displaced and hundreds of schools have been closed due to the fighting.[21] Some Rakhine nationalists dream of returning the hill tracts to Arakan, but their political status is likely to remain unchanged (see box: "A Regional Conflict Complex").

A critical turning-point in regional geo-politics had been reached. Under the Treaty of Yandabo, the Court of Ava ceded Arakan and Tenasserim (Tanintharyi) to the British along with Assam and Manipur that are today states in northeast India. For the peoples of Arakan, the consequences were both immediate and profound. The interregnum of the Konbaung rulers may have lasted just forty years. But with the British annexation, Arakan's "Golden Age" of Mrauk-U was consigned to a historical memory.

British Rule and the Development of Nationalist Movements

Following the Treaty of Yandabo, it was to take another six decades, until 1886, for the full annexation of British Burma to take place. Armed resistance initially continued in Arakan under such nationalist leaders as Aung Kyaw Zan and Prince Shwe Ban. There was also unrest among Chin peoples in the borderlands to the north. But, following their suppression, there was little interest among colonial officials in supporting self-development in a territory that, by virtue of its resources and location, was regarded one of the more prosperous in British Burma. Security and profit were the main colonial motives and, once these had been achieved, Arakan never became a central concern in the British administration of its India Empire.

To control its new territories, a diarchic system of government was introduced by the British authorities. Most of the ethnic borderlands were placed under the "Frontier Areas Administration" (FAA), where indirect rule was established through traditional leaders. Arakan, in contrast, was designated as one of seven "divisions" under what became known as "Ministerial Burma" (Burma Proper), which came under direct administration. Here a degree of parliamentary home rule was introduced from the turn of the 20th century.

The focus of British administration was centred on Sittwe (Akyab), with four main districts in the division: Akyab, Arakan Hill Tracts, Kyaukpyu and Thandwe (Sandoway). Communications remained difficult. But supported by improved infrastructure and navigation, trade and agriculture expanded, and the once sleepy fishing-village of Sittwe

Bronze Buddha image, Mrauk-U (MS)

became a major hub for rice export in the "Akyab-Chittagong-Calcutta" triangle. The territory was also notable for its standards of education, and many Arakanese gained important positions in such areas as banking and the civil service in Britain's new colony. Most notably, the lawyer Sir Paw Tun rose to become prime minister.

The desire for independence, however, never completely died. As British rule continued, Rakhine nationalists believed that Arakan's identity and sovereignty were being eroded by two pillars in the British administration. First, with British Burma conjoined to India until 1937, Arakan became one of the key gateways for trade and traffic in the British Empire. And second, by placing Arakan as a division within Ministerial Burma, Arakan's traditions of autonomy were effectively brought to an end. In making this decision, the British appeared to regard the Rakhine people as close cousins of the majority Bamars and therefore not sufficiently distinct for separate representation. But, as with many colonial designations, the implications for local politics and

society were never thought through. In essence, the identity of Arakan and its peoples became submerged within British Burma.

Against this backdrop, a resurgence in Arakan nationalism began to take shape during the first decades of the 20th century. As is the case today, a fundamental question remained unanswered. Are the interests of Arakan movements better represented by working in collaboration with Bamar-majority parties at the political centre or by seeking to work independently on their own? From the outset, the different trends and dilemmas were clear. While leaders such as the Buddhist monk U Ottama and lawyer Sir Paw Tun worked with political parties in Ministerial Burma, new cultural and political organisations started to spread among the Rakhine population. These included the Association for Awakening, Arakan Association and Rakkhapura Association. In parliament, meanwhile, Rakhine politicians were loosely grouped together as the "Arakan Party".[22] In 1935 a Bengal Arakanese Buddhist Association was also formed on the Chittagong side of the border.[23]

Initially, the main focus of the new movements was the future of what the Arakan Association called "neglected Arakan".[24] But, following the 1937 separation of British Burma from India, Buddhist monks encouraged the different Rakhine associations to join together as the Arakan National Congress (ANC) to promote political aspirations more effectively. Such united fronts have since become a feature of Rakhine politics, and a new Arakan National Council lives on in contemporary affairs. Subsequently, the ANC held its first congress in May 1940 in Pauktaw. The same year the radical monk U Seinda established the quasi-Buddhist Central Auwadasariya Organisation at a meeting in Kyaukpyu Township. It was from this latter formation that the armed nationalist movement later grew.

Although less noticed, nationalist stirrings were also beginning among Muslim populations in the territory. As today, this proved a difficult issue. There were different opinions as to how Muslim inhabitants should politically organise – whether within Arakan Division or Ministerial Burma. As early as 1922, a Jamiatul-Uluma (Council of Religious Teachers) for Burma Province was formed.[25] But given their diversity, Muslim communities were not considered as a people with nationality rights connected to a particular territory under the structures of British administration. The situation was further complicated by the accelerating scale of migration from India into British Burma following the 1886 annexation. By the time of the 1931 census, the population calculated as "Indian" – including "Bengalis", "Chittagonians", "Hindustanis" and "Tamils" – had passed one million out of a total population of 14,650,000.[26]

As the decades passed by, such rapid social change had a divisive impact on inter-community relations in several parts of the country. Many of the present-day controversies over identity and citizenship date back to the unrest of these years. In particular, it was the activities of a caste of "chettyar" moneylenders of Indian origin who caused the most unrest. This fuelled the rising tide of nationalist agitation in Ministerial Burma. There were anti-Indian riots in 1930-31 and again in 1938 during which several hundred Indians were killed.[27]

In Arakan itself, there was little evidence of inter-communal violence under British rule. Many communities were long-standing and well known to their neighbours. The British tended to refer to all inhabitants, whether Buddhist or Muslim, as Arakanese. The first significant outbreak was reported in 1938 when protests in Maungdaw Township echoed anti-Indian riots then taking place in other parts of the country.[28] But, as anti-colonial agitations deepened, Muslim leaders were well aware of the political challenges that they were facing. With the 1937 separation from India, should Muslims support faith, ideological or nationality-based movements in their political organisation?

Recognising these inconsistencies, a change of strategy was introduced in 1936 when a Jamiatul-Uluma organisation was formed by Muslims in Maungdaw for what they termed "North Arakan". Centred in the Muslim-majority region between the Mayu and Naf Rivers, this was the first movement to seek a distinctive representation for Muslims in Arakan. It proved a landmark decision that has had defining consequences in the struggle over politics and identity. As the scholar Moshe Yegar wrote: "the Muslims of Arakan had, again, a separate history."[29]

Almost imperceptibly, many of the elements were coming together – Buddhist and Muslim,

nationalist and ideological – that have since characterised the Arakan struggle. At the time, the main momentum for independence from Great Britain was coming from Aung San and the young Thakins of the Dobama movement. In 1941 Aung San and the "Thirty Comrades" slipped away to Japan to begin military training. As the war clouds spread over Asia, Arakan was swiftly drawn in. There was little warning, however, of the scale of disaster that would now unfold.

Japanese Invasion and Inter-communal Violence

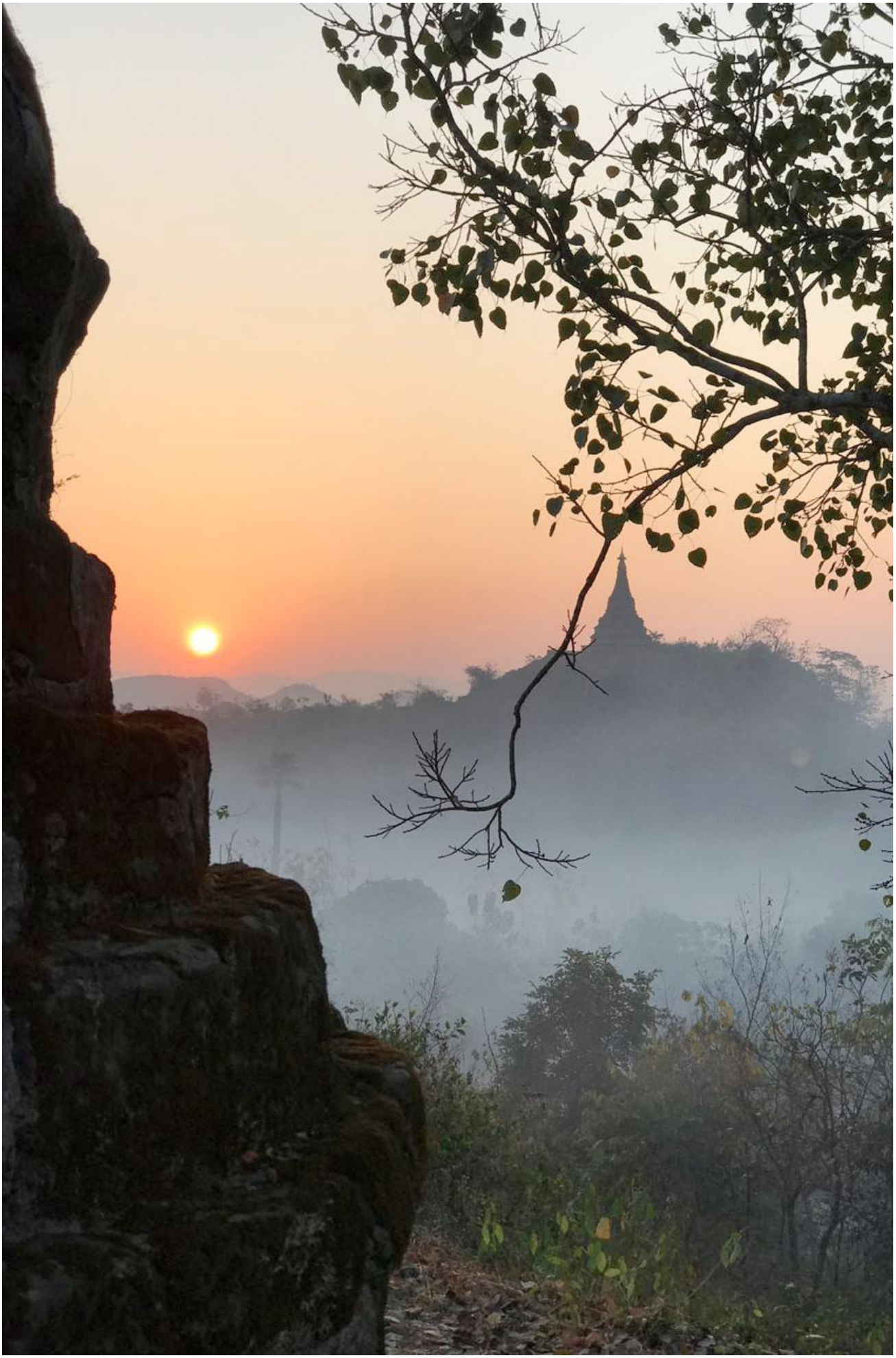
It is impossible to underestimate the divisive consequences of the Second World War in precipitating conflict and inter-community breakdown. For while Aung San and the newly-formed Burma Independence Army (BIA) initially joined on the side of Japan, the Kachins, Karens and other minority peoples largely stayed loyal to the British. From these divisive events, a new generation of leaders gained the experiences that caused many to subsequently choose armed struggle as a primary means for achieving their goals. Socialists, communists, democrats and nationalists: these militant legacies have never entirely dissipated in a country where the armed forces of the Tatmadaw have held control of central government for over 50 years.[30]

The experiences of conflict were especially acute in Arakan. In nationalist politics, the destruction and loss of life during the Second World War are compared to the deep traumas caused by the annexations of 1784 and 1824. Once again, Arakan became a major battleground in a war triggered by external actors as the territory was "colonised" for a third time: this time by Imperial Japan. Until the present day, it can be argued that the damage – socially, politically and economically – has never been repaired. The schisms of these years remain a fault-line that continues to divide Arakan politics and society.

All parts of the country came to be affected. An estimated 500,000 inhabitants of Indian ancestry fled with the retreating British forces into India. Inter-communal violence then spread into Arakan during 1942 as the first Japanese and BIA units entered the territory. Since then, a blame game has continued as to who instigated the community-based violence that broke out. Large numbers of lives were lost in attacks on Muslim villages in Minbya, Myebon, Pauktaw and other territories in central Arakan.[31] A few weeks later, similar violence occurred against Rakhine villagers in Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships. At the time, local voices – both Buddhist and Muslim – accused the BIA and successor Burma National Army (BNA) of inflaming the situation by urging the expulsion of "Kalas" (a derogatory term for Indians) and "collaborators" with the British. Similar allegations of the targeting of minority communities by the BIA-BNA were made in other parts of the country (see box: "Rakhine, Rohingya and the 'Politics of Labelling'").[32]

Eventually, Peace Committees set up by local Muslim groups stabilized the security situation around Buthidaung in north Arakan. An Arakan Defence Army (ADA) was also established among the Rakhine population as the local branch of the BNA. But such interventions did not mark the end of inter-community conflict. While the Muslim population generally supported the British and its underground V-Force, many Rakhines joined the ADA that was fighting on the Japanese side. Nor were these the only armed movements operating in the territory. Little noticed at the time, the newly-formed Communist Party of Burma (CPB) also started armed resistance in Arakan during the Second World War. The party was to remain a militant force in anti-government politics in the territory for the next four decades.

In the 21st century, the fall-out from these events remains profound. As Jacques Leider has written, the inter-communal violence of the Second World War has become a key element in "political identity formation", linking perceptions of the "past to the present".[33] Certainly, it is likely that casualties ran into the tens of thousands in terms of displacement and loss of life. No reliable figures exist.[34] Equally critical, the violence enforced a demographic transformation in north Arakan as Muslims fled across the Kaladan River towards the north and Buddhists to the south. But few independent studies have been conducted nor reconciliation efforts made to redress the community breakdown. Rather, memories of the violence continue to be invoked by protagonists to justify inter-community separation on the different sides.[35]



Sunset over Mrauk-U (private source)

Most notoriously, at the height of the Rohingya exodus during 2017, the present-day Commander-in-Chief Snr-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing described Tatmadaw operations in northern Rakhine State as "unfinished business" from the Second World War.[36] These words have since come back to haunt him (see Chapters 7 and 8). But the tragedy remains that any discussion of Buddhist-Muslim violence today begins with the wartime violence. In 1945, it was in the dense forests of the Mayu Range that the "battle for Burma" turned in an epic struggle as two colonial powers – Great Britain and Japan – wrested for control over the gateway to India.[37] More than 70 years later, conflicts are still continuing in the same territory. The scale of displacement and unrest in the contemporary Rakhine State is as high as at any point in Arakan history.

The Marginalisation of Arakan and Rush to Independence

In the countdown to Myanmar's independence in January 1948, the crisis in Arakan was fatefully ignored. This has always been the territory's misfortune during times of national change. British officials admitted that they were more pre-occupied with the transition to independence in neighbouring India and Pakistan.[38] But the same neglect was shown by Aung San and leaders of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) who would soon take over the reins of government. Such disregard proved to be a historic error. Although overlooked in official discourse, patterns were emerging that indicated how ethnic and political movements would develop in Arakan after independence. In many respects, the same distinctions exist in Rakhine State politics today.

As in other times of transition, it is difficult to ascribe a single narrative to the complex events that followed. Rakhine nationalists were quick off the mark. On 1 January 1945 the ADA began a revolt that helped clear the territory of Japanese forces even before the main AFPFL uprising that followed in March. As a result, there was later great resentment at the action of British forces in disarming Arakan resistance fighters. Among those arrested were the ADA chief Bo Kra Hla Aung and nationalist monk U Seinda. In Rakhine histories, the British return is marked as the fourth "colonisation" of their land.

From this point, the Arakan movement developed along three lines among Rakhine-majority parties. On the nationalist right, there was a parliamentary grouping, led by the former Prime Minister Sir Paw Tun. In the centre, there was the pre-war Arakan National Congress, headed by Aung Zan Wai, who became an AFPFL Executive Council member. And on the left, there was a militant force, led by U Seinda, who broke away from the ANC in November 1945 to establish the Arakan People's Liberation Party (APLP). With an estimated 3,000 supporters under arms, APLP guerrillas immediately started attacking government targets. Armed struggle had, in effect, begun. "In the countryside law and order exists exactly as far as a shot from a police station can reach," the British Commissioner in Sittwe warned the anthropologist Edmund Leach in March 1946.[39]

AFPFL leaders, however, chose not to engage with the three movements together. Instead, they focused on only one, the ANC, convincing its members to disband and join them in a joint struggle for independence. It proved a major mistake, deepening the divisions in Arakan politics and excluding dissenting voices. The AFPFL was itself hardly united, and the crisis worsened in late 1946 when the CPB was expelled from the AFPFL. Some Rakhine nationalists stayed with the AFPFL, some went over to the CPB, some joined U Seinda's APLP, and some took up with the People's Volunteer Organisation (PVO), a paramilitary force for wartime veterans established by Aung San.

Complicating matters further, the CPB movement now split into two factions: a larger group known as the "White Flags", headed by Thakin Than Tun; and a smaller organisation, the "Red Flags", led by Thakin Soe. Both remained influential in Arakan, and overnight Ramree Island, Thandwe and Gwa became communist strongholds. Far from the end of the Second World War bringing peace, militancy was now spreading.

Writing two decades later, the ANC leader Aung Zan Wai was bitterly critical of the experiences of these years. The merger with the AFPFL, he argued, did not promote national unity; rather, it opened the door to the "interference" in Arakan by the political interests of Ministerial Burma.[40] With the ANC's demise, socialist and communist organisers began sending competing teams into Arakan to try and recruit young leaders. As Aung Zan Wai warned:

> The consequence of their activities was such that the success achieved by the ANC in uniting the whole of Arakan in the struggle for independence was torn asunder, and there ensued factions carrying flags of sundry colours – red, white, yellow, etc. At a time when we had just started to build a new state, a new nation, a new people, sections of progressive young people of a national minority, of Arakan, suddenly confronted each other as mortal enemies.[41]

There was a similar lack of political attention paid by British and AFPFL officials to Muslim politics. In the war's aftermath, the communal situation remained highly tense. There was concern among Muslim leaders about the imminent independence of what would become three countries on their doorstep: Burma, India and Pakistan (subsequently Bangladesh).[42] It was a time of high political consciousness. As Jacques Leider has written, the events of the Second World War marked the "political coming of age of the Muslims".[43]

Initially, many Muslim leaders in the different communities in Arakan made the same political decision as the ANC. In organisational terms, this meant cooperation with the AFPFL and Bamar-majority parties at the political centre in Yangon.

Muslim man at market in Buthidaung town (TK)

Following the inter-communal breakdown in 1942, communities of both Muslim and Indian heritage wanted to show their support for the national independence struggle. Myanmar was their home, and they wanted to play a full part in its future. On this basis, Muslim organisations came together from around the country to unite in a new Burma Muslim Congress (BMC) that affiliated with the AFPFL in December 1945. For the next decade, the BMC was to remain an important voice for Muslim communities in national politics.

The pressures, however, were felt very differently in north Arakan. Here the historic bonds between the peoples of Arakan and Chittagong were about to be broken by the separation of what would subsequently become known as East Pakistan. As Rajashree Mazumder has written: "People suddenly found themselves on a side of a border that made them minorities in a Muslim-, Hindu-, or Buddhist-majority population."[44] In the aftermath of war, the situation was chaotic. Many communities remained displaced from their homes; government administration had broken down; and it was during the population movements and upheavals of these times that accusations later began of what would be called "illegal" immigration into Arakan from "Bengal".

In fact, many Rakhine-related peoples remained on the East Pakistan side of the border following the British departure. The Naf River border had never marked a Berlin Wall between Buddhist and Muslim peoples or cultures. In the post-war period, there were also discussions as to whether "Arakanese Buddhists" should resettle on the Arakan side of the frontier.[45] As with the Muslim population in Arakan, there were differences of opinion between recent refugees and established communities who had lived in the Chittagong region for generations. Unlike Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, however, the ethno-political status of the Buddhist population in Chittagong was never seriously questioned (see box: "Rakhine, Rohingya and the 'Politics of Labelling'"). With a population of over 200,000 citizens, the Marma people – who are Rakhine-related – are the third largest nationality in present-day Bangladesh. Kyaw Minn Htin calls them a "de-Arakanized" community.[46]

In contrast, the situation was deteriorating fast on the other side of the Naf River frontier in the countdown to the British departure. To try and

protect their interests, a number of ideas were mooted by Muslim leaders. Conservative voices generally supported the BMC strategy of working with the AFPFL. But more radical positions began to be taken in the volatile politics of north Arakan. Three, in particular, stood out: a demand for the independence of the Mayu frontier region; an autonomous region that would be part of either Arakan or the new Union; or the conjunction of Muslim-majority territories in north Arakan to the new state of (East) Pakistan.

None of these ideas ever succeeded, and the last was quickly rejected by the founder leader of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah.[47] Nevertheless the demand for local autonomy gained strength during the post-war period. In the country's ethnicized politics, Muslim leaders quickly realised that they needed a "nationality" identity of "statehood" if their political voices were to be heard. Ethnic politics were reshaping across the country; anti-Indian sentiment was widespread; and many Muslims in Arakan felt themselves to be an unrecognised people. As the British departure loomed, discussions were already beginning about the representation of Muslims in north Arakan by the name that they use for themselves: Rohingya.

It was not only Muslim or Rohingya leaders who believed that their peoples were being neglected. The same sense of exclusion was felt among the Rakhine population. The former ANC leader Aung Zan Wai did attend the Panglong Conference in February 1947. It was here that the principles for equality and autonomy in the new "Union of Burma" were agreed by Aung San together with Chin, Kachin and Shan representatives from the Frontier Areas. But Aung Zan Wai was present as a member of the AFPFL team – and not as a delegate from Arakan. This omission of Arakan remained a grievance in nationalist politics for many decades afterwards.[48]

The Jamiatul-Ulama North Arakan was quick off the mark in raising concerns. In a statement submitted by its president Sultan Ahmed to Arthur Bottomley, the British representative at Panglong, the party criticised its omission from the meeting.[49] Reminding the authorities that Muslims and their Arakanese Buddhist "brethren" had lived peacefully together before the British arrival, the statement warned of the serious damage to inter-communal relations caused by the Second World War. It also noted the sacrifices by "Muslims of this Frontier" in the Allied victory, proving "our ability to manage our own internal affairs".[50] The solution proposed by the Jamiatul-Ulama was for the creation of a Muslim "autonomous state" in Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung townships west of the Mayu River.[51] The British did not respond, and the question of Arakan's future was not taken up by the Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry that began in March 1947. Only the Arakan Hill Tracts were discussed.

In the aftermath of Panglong, the security situation rapidly worsened. In April, an Arakan Leftist Unity Front was established at an "All Arakan Conference" in Myebon, called by U Seinda and the local Red Flag CPB leader Bonbauk Tha Kyaw. Here the call was for revolution and independence, and Aung San and the Socialist Party leader U Ba Swe were greeted with protests from the crowds.[52] The same month, the demand for an Islamic "frontier state" was declared at a mass meeting of the Jamiatul-Ulama in Maungdaw.[53] In June, as temperatures rose, the Burma Office warned British ministers in London: "The trouble in Arakan is essentially a rebellion for the separation of Arakan, but communist agitators and dacoit bands have infiltrated into the movement."[54] Once again, no actions were taken by either the British or AFPFL authorities to address the looming crisis.

Tragically, events were now overshadowed by the assassination of Aung San and five fellow ministers in July 1947 by the gang of a political rival, the pre-war Prime Minister U Saw. It is impossible to speculate what might have happened if they had survived. Among the dead was the Minister of Education and BMC leader U Razak. The killings were a devastating blow from which, it can be argued, the new Union never recovered. In the following decades, Aung San's vision of "unity in diversity" never took root. It was to be another seven decades before the goal of a new "Panglong" was tried – this time by his daughter, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

As chaos reigned, Arakan became sidelined even further in the discussions about the new Union's future. This neglect continues to challenge the country today. When the 1947 constitution was announced, there was to be no "Arakan State". Instead, Arakan was designated as one of seven

"Divisions" that had previously been included with Bamar-majority populations as part of Ministerial Burma. Only four ethnic "States" were created: Kachin, Karenni (from 1951 Kayah), Shan and Karen (from 1952).

Compounding nationalist frustrations, the Arakan Hill Tracts were separated from their historic conjunction with Arakan and, instead, joined to the Chin Hills.[55] Rakhine leaders did not necessarily disagree; the territory has a Chin-majority population. But the manner by which the upper Kaladan valley was truncated without integrated planning or thought for Arakan's future has had considerable political and economic implications that are yet to be resolved. Paletwa Township in the tri-border region remains a key centre for Rakhine armed opposition groups today (see Chapters 7 and 8). Meanwhile the rights or identities of the Muslim population in Arakan were also overlooked.

Once the results were known, the outcome of the deliberations over Myanmar's future was a constitution at independence in 1948 that ended up pleasing nobody. Both Rakhine and Muslim demands were ignored, and no attention had been paid to Arakan's history of autonomy and self-governance. Equally anomalous, there was no Chin State in the new constitution – only a reduced "Chin Special Division". This had the effect of leaving Chin-related ("Zo") peoples separated between three different territories at the British departure: the post-colonial Union of Burma, northeast India and East Pakistan. There is no turning the clock back. But, until the present day, the tri-border area with Bangladesh and India has remained one of the most volatile in the sub-Asian region. Into the 21st century, the divisions under colonial rule are still having an impact in ethno-political discourse and conflict (see box: "A Regional Conflict Complex").

Arguments have since continued over the failures of the 1947 constitution to bring peace and justice to the new Union. These are questions that have never been fully answered. Part of the reason was haste. But as Josef Silverstein pointed out, there was also a fundamental flaw: while federal in theory, the new constitution was unitary in practice.[56] This lack of equality in ethnic rights and representation was soon contested after independence as a host of nationality groups took up arms, including Karen, Karenni, Mon and Pa-O.

What, though, was notable in Arakan's case is the degree to which the desire for self-determination was persistently downplayed by government officials. Subsequently, the constitutional lawyer and future Union President, U Maung Maung, acknowledged "Arakanese" demands for statehood on the basis of culture and history. But he then went on to argue that the Arakanese people "are not so different from the Burmese" to require this.[57] "What they need is good roads and better communications so that their isolation may be broken down," he said.[58]

To the frustration of modern-day nationalists, these are exactly the kind of claims that government officials make today. The Union Minister for Border Affairs Lt-Gen. Ye Aung stated in 2016: "Rakhine State, with an abundant supply of natural resources and favorable topography, will be able to see development through the better use of those resources under the vanguard of the Union government."[59] At no point do the aspirations, demands and capabilities of the local peoples appear to have been factored in. Sadly, enormous suffering and loss of life have taken place during the intervening years. Rakhine State is presently at its most divided in history.

As the clock ticked down to independence in January 1948, the political crisis in Arakan was deepening. All sides had kept weapon stockpiles from the Second World War, and both APLP and CPB Red Flag guerrillas had initiated military operations. A 700-strong force was reported to be operating in Sittwe District alone. Meanwhile hundreds of supporters of the popular singer Jafar Kawal (Jafar Hussain) gathered near Buthidaung to form a "Mujahid Party". In the Dabbori Chaung Declaration of August 1947, Muslim leaders announced the goal of forming an "Autonomous Muslim State". This was to be known as "North Arakan", located between the Kaladan and Naf Rivers.[60] Their defence force was named the "North Arakan Muslim Regiment".

In effect, government control was collapsing across Arakan even before the British departure. A new era of volatility was about to begin. Few would have predicted then that, seven decades later, conflicts would be still continuing in the same territories and over the same issues. The modern-day Rakhine State is a land that is yet to find peace.

Rakhine, Rohingya and the "Politics of Labelling"[61]

That there have historically been Muslim and other minority communities or peoples of longstanding settlement in Arakan has never been in doubt. Arab travellers are believed to date from the 9th century, while Persian and other Muslim influences or inter-actions increased with the rise of the Bengal Sultanate in the 14th century. The Kaman people, for example, are considered to be descendants from followers of the Mughal ruler, Shah Shuja, who took sanctuary in Arakan during the 17th century.[62] In particular, the Mrauk-U kingdom (1429-1784) was renowned for its cultural diversity.

Much of the contemporary crisis, however, is not based upon these histories but on notions of ethnicity, identity and citizenship as they stand in present-day Myanmar. It is here that a huge gulf has developed during the past 70 years between advocates of Rakhine identity, which has Buddhist traditions, and Rohingya identity, which is essentially Muslim. As the Kofi Annan Advisory Commission on Rakhine State noted, "inter-communal conflict" in Arakan is a "clash of narratives".[63]

At root, a dispute has developed as to whether Muslims in Rakhine State should trace their heritage to a diversity of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, including Bengali, Chittagonian and Kaman, in which case they should be considered as "Arakanese Muslims". Alternatively, there is an ethnic-based view, which is predominant in Muslim areas in the north of the state. This holds that Muslim communities constitute a distinct identity, Rohingya, who should have the same rights as Rakhine, Bamar, Chin and other nationality peoples. For the moment, neither identity – whether Arakanese Muslim or Rohingya – is accepted as a nationality for Myanmar citizenship. In the meantime, tensions over identity continue to be expressed at the community level. Muslims are frequently disparaged as "kalas" (a pejorative name for Indian foreigner), while Rakhines are referred to as "maghs" (a Bengali term for "bandit").

These ethno-political divisions have not always been so acute – nor expressed in such terminologies. Despite the inter-communal violence in the Second World War, Rohingya identity appeared to be accepted during the parliamentary era after independence. This came to an end with Gen. Ne Win's military coup in 1962. From then on, citizenship restrictions were increasingly enforced on the Muslim population and those of perceived Indian ancestry. For Rohingya communities, the situation further deteriorated after the creation of "Rakhine State" under the 1974 constitution. "We and our people, in Arakan, are yet unknown to the outside world," proclaimed the armed Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF) in 1976.[64] Two years later, Tatmadaw military operations instigated the first large-scale exodus of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh.

The marginalisation of Muslims – as well as other peoples of perceived Indian or Chinese heritage – then became systematised by the introduction of the 1982 Citizenship Law. It remains one of the most controversial and "ethnicized" examples of legislation in post-colonial history. In the future, full citizenship would only be allowed to nationalities deemed "indigenous", such as ethnic Bamars, Rakhines and Chins. In Bamar language, this means peoples considered "taingyinthar" or "native", who are deemed to collectively represent Myanmar's modern-day identity. In contrast, peoples regarded as "non-indigenous" would be granted only "associate" or "naturalized" status unless they could prove ancestry in the country before the first British annexation in 1824 (in effect, 1823 or earlier). For many families, this is a near impossible task. The consequence of the 1982 law was that potentially millions of people were categorised as second-class citizens overnight. Of Rohingya identity, there was no recognition at all.

Since this time, the departure of Muslims from Rakhine State has continued. A second mass exodus occurred in 1991-92 during Tatmadaw operations in the aftermath of the 1988 democracy uprising. The plight of the Rohingya population then worsened again following the transition to a quasi-civilian system of government in 2011. Buddhist-Muslim conflict and violence against Muslims broke out in 2012; increasing restrictions were imposed by the government on the movement and voting rights of Muslims; and armed conflict erupted again during 2016-17 with the advent of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). This led to an unprecedented Tatmadaw clampdown and the mass exodus by a majority of the Rohingya population into Bangladesh. As the New York Times headlined: "'No Such Thing as Rohingya': Myanmar Erases a History."[65]

To try and address such breakdown, social and historical research has accelerated in recent years. Much attention is paid to when Rohingya identity could be first said to develop. But to date little consensus has been reached.[66] Controversy usually begins with the first known reference to "Rohingya" in Western literature in a 1799 study of the "Burma Empire". In a much-quoted passage, Francis Buchanan refers to "Mohammedens, who have been long settled in Arakan and who call themselves Rooinga, or natives of Arakan".[67] After annexation, the British do not appear to have used this name officially again. Muslims in Arakan were instead referred to by such terms as Arakanese Mohammedan, Bengali Muslim, Chittagonian, Kaman and Zerbadi.

Critics of the Rohingya movement therefore argue that their name is either a fiction or a cover that has been used as a nationality claim to conceal the scale of immigration by Bengali Muslims into Arakan during the past 100 years. Certainly, there was a significant movement of peoples under the British India Empire. In Arakan, many men came to work as seasonal labourers on the farms. But large numbers of people of Indian origin also left the country during the upheavals of the Second World War. Opponents of the Rohingya cause nevertheless argue that "Bengali" immigration subsequently increased again after the British departure, encouraged by Mujahid groups that were seeking to gain control over north Arakan.

This is where the identity debate remains deadlocked today. Since the military coup of Gen. Ne Win in 1962, this view of "illegal" migration by those claiming Rohingya identity has predominated in government as well as many anti-government circles. With few exceptions, "Bengali" not "Rohingya" is the term used in public references to the Muslim population. Among Muslim-majority communities in Myanmar, only the Kaman people in Rakhine State are recognised as an indigenous nationality under the 1982 Citizenship Law.[68]

The difficulty with the different arguments over Rohingya or Arakanese Muslim identity are many. They can quickly become a sideshow from essential issues that have always had more simple answers. Of fundamental importance, citizenship is a basic human right for all peoples that cannot be tied to notions of ethnicity or culture. Nor should it be arbitrarily deprived.[69] This is the same for any country in the world. The need in post-colonial Myanmar has always been for inter-community understandings that bring peoples together. Tragically, such opportunities have proven very rare during the past half-century of conflict. The government has by no means been a neutral actor; co-existence among peoples and faiths appears increasingly rejected; and the multi-cultural days of the Mrauk-U kingdom seem long ago. In the 21st century, the right of Muslims from any ethnic background to live in Rakhine State appear to be under constant scrutiny by government officials and the security forces.

Related to this, the practice by many researchers and historians of relying on colonial records is not an adequate way to resolve contemporary challenges in politics and society. The first draft of history is written by the victorious – not those marginalised in the field. Most notably, Francis Buchanan also gave the names of "Rossawn, Rohhawn, Roang, Reng or Rung" as terms used by

the "Bengalese" for "Arakan" during his travels.[70] It would be difficult to imagine a situation in modern-day Europe where discussions of citizenship or identity become based around the writings of an Asian traveller two centuries ago.

The problems of establishing political rights and identity faced by the Muslims of Arakan should not be considered unique. As conflict continues, there are many parallels to the Rakhine State crisis in other parts of modern-day Myanmar. Like the Rohingya, other peoples in the country have often been known by names given to them by outsiders that they do not call themselves: e.g. Kayan (Padaung), Pa-O (Taungthu) and Ta'ang (Palaung). Many have also taken up arms in pursuit of their causes since the British departure. Equally pertinent, much of the post-colonial instability has been in frontier regions where different nationality peoples and cultures exist on both sides of modern international borders. Restive frontier lands have included the contemporary Kachin, Karen and Shan States.[71]

In terms of conflict, this has especially been the case along the former borders of British India. Both Bangladesh and northeast India have experienced considerable instability since the British departure. Here struggles have continued in the tri-border region among such peoples as the Chakma, Mizo and Naga (see box: "A Regional Conflict Complex"). In this respect, the Chin, Rakhine and Rohingya conflicts in Myanmar share many similarities. It is not only Rakhine and Rohingya communities who fear their identities are coming under threat.[72] But it is important to note that, unlike the Rohingya in Myanmar, no similar restrictions over citizenship rights or identity have been faced by Rakhine-related peoples who stayed on the East Pakistan side of the border at independence. Around 1.2 million Buddhists are estimated to live in modern-day Bangladesh. Described as a "de-Arakanized" community, the largest "Rakhine" group are known as Marma, a name that was promoted from the late 1940s with the British departure.[73]

In recent years, a more urgent parallel in Myanmar is with the deepening crisis in Assam. In August 2019 the Indian government declared 1.9 million inhabitants as "stateless" if they could not prove a history of residency in India.[74] Unlike Myanmar's 1823-24 timeline for citizenship rights, the New Delhi government chose a more recent date: that of Bangladesh's declaration of independence from Pakistan in 1971. This creates a new series of definitions and crises. Most of those declared stateless are Hindus and Muslims of Bengali culture or heritage. But like the Rohingyas from Rakhine State, Bangladesh does not recognise them as citizens.

Finally, there remain questions over the origins of the Rohingya name. Recent research has cast the net wider. It has been suggested that Rohingya derives from the Arabic word "Rahm" for "mercy" after which Ramree Island might be named.[75] Some also argue that Rohingya – and the related "Rohang" (or "Rohan") term for Arakan – originally comes from the ancient city of Mrauk-U (Mrohaung).[76] But, whatever the etymology, the founders of the Rohingya movement always had a more simple explanation: that "Rohingya" and "Rohang" have similar roots to the same terms in the Rakhine language for "Arakan", "Rakkhapura" and "Rakhine". In essence, Rohingya is a Bengali-related language that is similar to the dialect in Chittagong. According to this argument, the territory was called "Rohang" among Muslim communities in the Chittagong dialect and hence they became known as the "Rohingya" or "people of Rohang" over time.[77]

In the 21st century, the situation is ambiguously poised. On the one hand, the rejection of Rohingya identity in Myanmar is at its most extreme since independence. On the other hand, the extent of conflict, suffering and denial of rights has provided the Rohingya cause with its highest profile and recognition around the world. It is long since time that just and inclusive solutions were looked for and found. Arguments about such egregious human rights violations should never have become so focused on a name.

The old clock tower, Sittwe (TK)

3. The Parliamentary Era (1948-62)

A Country Goes Underground

Myanmar's independence was born out of conflict. During 1948-49, it was Tatmadaw mutinies and the outbreak of armed struggle by the Communist Party of Burma, Karen National Union and other nationality forces that gained the main media headlines. But the social and political breakdown was equally serious in Arakan. Within a year of independence, many towns had fallen under the control of the Arakan People's Liberation Party, the White Flag and Red Flag CPB, and the armed militia forces of the People's Volunteer Organisation. Locally known as the People's Comrade Party, the PVOs were to remain an influential movement in several parts of the country over the next decade. Meanwhile fighters from Jafar Kawal's Mujahid Party seized control of much of the former Mayu frontier region in Arakan's far north.

At this critical moment of breakdown, the effectiveness of armed opposition groups in Arakan was helped by "united front" strategies that were promoted by both factions of the CPB. From 1949, a "People's Democratic Front" began running joint administrations across the territory. Many leaders were well known to each other from the Second World War. Prominent figures included U Seinda (APLP), Kyaw Mya (White Flag CPB) Bonbauk Tha Kyaw (Red Flag CPB), and Bo San Tha Kyaw and Bo Kra Hla Aung (both PVO).[1] Encouraged by this success, in 1952 the White Flag CPB tried to boost united front tactics across the Union under a Tripartite Alliance Pact with the Red Flags and PVOs. But it was only in the "Western" command of Arakan and the adjoining Chin Hills that such cooperation really took root.[2]

In future years, this cross-party collaboration left an important legacy in Arakan politics. It supported a particular radicalisation of the nationalist movement involving both Marxist and Buddhist traditions after the British departure. At the national levels, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, CPB and Tatmadaw all had Bamar-majority leaderships. But at the grass-roots levels in Arakan and other minority regions, communist leaders took care to support the struggles of "nationality peoples" for "self-determination" against "feudal autocracy".[3] As wars of national liberation swept

Asia, such class-based language was very much in tune with the times. Many Rakhine nationalists believed that the establishment of "people's democracy" would be the quickest way to gain freedom. Until the present day, the goal of a self-determined "Republic of Arakan" has remained popular in nationalist circles (see box: "Timeline: Armed Movements Arakan").

Buddhism was also important in the development of Arakan nationalism. Starting with the APLP and U Seinda, there has always been a close nexus between intellectuals and Buddhists in political circles. Pride in Arakan's Buddhist heritage is a key element in Rakhine nationalism. Over the years, a number of Rakhine – as well as communist – leaders have been former monks, and political movements have always displayed strong ideological underpinnings.[4] Until the present day, Buddhist monasteries often serve as safe-houses that activists can pass through.

Eventually, the tide began to turn the government's way. The first Tatmadaw target was the Mujahid Party in Arakan's far north. Following Jafar Kawal's assassination in 1951, the movement had split into two commands in the present-day Maungdaw District. Here a major Tatmadaw offensive in 1954 known as "Operation Monsoon" succeeded in capturing the Mujahids' last strongholds along the Naf River frontier. Their best-known leader, Cassim, was forced to take sanctuary across the border. Subsequent progress, however, was slow, and Mujahid guerrillas continued to operate in and around the Mayu Range.[5] Meanwhile the key towns of Ann and Gwa in central and southern Arakan remained under the control of various CPB, PVO and APLP forces until as late as 1956 and 1958 respectively. In 1957, three small forces among Chin and other hill peoples also came together to form a Tribal Nationalities Organisation in north Arakan.[6]

Coming so soon after the violence of Second World War, the conflicts that swept the country during the parliamentary era were a devastating blow. There are no records of how many people lost their lives in the battles of these years. The government's major focus was always on Yangon, Mandalay and the main conurbations of central Myanmar. The invasion by Kuomintang (KMT) remnants into Shan State after Mao Zedong's communist victory in China was a further challenge to the government's authority.

Any victories for the government, however, must be considered pyrrhic. It was the failure to achieve peace during these pivotal years after independence that sowed the seeds for much of the grievance and instability that followed. A dangerous precedent had been set. In the new Union of Burma, armed struggle was becoming a way of life.

Electoral Movements Revive

Despite the failure to halt fighting, some important re-figurations in parliamentary politics began to take place after the British departure. As with the APLP and armed opposition movements, they left a distinctive imprint on Arakan history. Among Rakhine parties, a movement of conservative nationalists did notably well during the post-independence era, winning 17 seats in Arakan Division compared to just three for the AFPFL in the 1951 general election. Known as the Independent Arakanese Parliamentary Group (IAPG: later Arakan National United Organisation [ANUO]), they campaigned for an Arakan State within the Union. Their success at the polls was not a complete surprise. "AFPFL carpet-baggers were more blatantly overbearing in Arakan than anywhere else," wrote the historian Hugh Tinker.[7]

The government was painfully slow to react. Officials were partly distracted by the scale of conflict within the country. But there was also a deeper reason. Prime Minister U Nu always made it clear that he was one hundred per cent "in disagreement" with the formation of new states for the "Arakanese", Mons and Karens.[8] Against this backdrop, only limited progress was made on addressing ethnic nationality demands. Starting with the 1948 Regional Autonomy Enquiry Commission, various proposals were examined that looked at Arakan, Karen and Mon claims for statehood.[9] But the only outcome was the delineation of a Karen State that came into being during 1952. Containing less than a quarter of the Karen population in the new Union, it was far from meeting KNU demands. Six decades later, the KNU struggle still continues.

Similar impasse continued in Muslim politics. Muslim politicians also performed well in elections during the parliamentary era. In the 1947, 1951 and 1956 elections, Muslim candidates won the

seats for Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships, running with the support of the Jamiatul-Ulama North Arakan (and, in one case, Burma Muslim Congress).[10] Conservative Muslims generally rejected the Mujahid recourse to armed struggle. The leading Muslim MPs, Sultan Ahmed and Abdul Gaffar, both joined efforts to convince the Mujahids to lay down their arms if they wanted their political demands to be considered.[11] Muslim politicians, however, did not form a single party. They also rejected joining with IAPG-ANUO leaders in forming an "All Arakan" alliance to press the case for Arakan statehood.[12] Their strategy, instead, was to advocate for the rights of the Muslim population by negotiating with different parliamentary leaders, both in government and political opposition.

In electoral terms, this platform proved popular, but major problems were looming. First, Rakhine politicians were not happy with a perceived lack of Muslim collaboration with other groups promoting the Arakan cause. And second, tensions were developing with the central government, which wanted the Burma Muslim Congress to merge into the AFPFL. In essence, Muslim leaders were faced with the same dilemma as ethnic Rakhine parties: would they do better to advance their cause inside or outside the orbit of Bamar-majority parties and the central government?

This question brought to the surface a crisis over the rights and identity of the Muslim population that had been unaddressed since the British departure. For this reason, it is to the events of the late 1940s and early 1950s that the beginning of the Rohingya controversy is usually dated (see box: "Rakhine, Rohingya and the 'Politics of Labelling'"). Opinions about identities – whether Rohingya or Arakanese Muslim – often overlapped. But there were also different political views as to how Muslim communities should represent themselves.

In particular, many Muslims in Sittwe and among the smaller populations in the centre and south of the territory continued to define themselves as "Arakanese Muslims", notably the Arakanese Muslim Association. In general, such leaders preferred to concentrate on political relationships with the AFPFL, BMC and Muslim communities in other parts of the country.[13] The 1956 amalgamation, however, of the BMC into the AFPFL brought any separate role for this organisation to an end. The BMC was effectively subsumed.

All these developments had resonance in north Arakan. Here the political situation was much more critical on the ground. Inter-communal relations remained tense from the Second World War, and confusion reigned as conflict swept through the borderlands after the British departure. Muslim representatives had many reasons for concern. As fighting continued, various accusations began to circulate. These included the allegation that

Muslims passing a Buddhist pagoda on the Buthidaung River (TK)

"Pakistanis" were flowing into the territory; that the Mujahids supported the creation of a "communist" enclave with links to "Bengal"; and, according to the IAPG, that the Mujahids posed a bigger "danger" to the Union than the KMT invaders from China.[14]

Alarmed by the worsening situation, Muslim leaders began to fear for the very future of their peoples. In 1951 this led an Arakanese Muslim Conference to publish an appeal to the AFPFL government entitled: "Stop Genocide of the Muslims who alone stand between Communism and Democracy in Arakan".[15] In an ominous warning, they attributed their worries not to "insurgents" but to the "Arakanese" population, "especially those enlisted in the Burmese Government's forces".[16] It was the first time that the word "genocide" had been used.

Recognising that a change in tactics was vital, Muslim leaders in north Arakan stepped up their efforts to protect the rights of local communities. Up until 1956, the Jamiatul-Uluma North Arakan was generally described as an organisation of "Arakanese Muslims". But now a policy shift was made. The new strategy was to focus attention on the plight of the Muslim population in the Mayu frontier region. Acceptance as equal citizens in the new Union was the basic essential.

There were two elements to this promotion: identity and territory. First, Muslim leaders stepped up public recognition of their Rohingya identity to distinguish themselves from "Indian Muslims".[17] In essence, in Myanmar's ethnicized politics, Rohingya leaders wanted their cause to be recognised as a "nationality" rather than "faith" movement. This was signified by Abdul Gaffar MP and other Muslim politicians in north Arakan who highlighted their Rohingya name in speeches and statements after independence. In ethnic terms, Rohingya was declared as one of the two "major" nationalities in Arakan.[18] In some transliterations, this appeared as "Rwangya" but during the 1950s "Rohingya" was increasingly used.

Initially, the new movement was little known. But over the following years, advocacy spread from north Arakan to other parts of the country through such networks as the United Rohingya Organisation and Rohingya Youth Organisation, established in 1956 and 1959 respectively.[19]

As advocacy continued, Rohingya leaders then pressed ahead with their second policy goal: the establishment of an autonomous territory. This quickly ran into objections. The aspiration for a "Muslim State" in the Mayu frontier region did not sit well with the Rakhine public;[20] the Mujahid insurgency still continued; and ideas that were initially floated, such as the promotion of "Urdu" as a regional language for "North Arakan",[21] only deepened concerns among non-Muslim communities. A worrying division was beginning. Misunderstandings quickly developed and, until the present day, there has never been any real inter-community dialogue on the essential issues of Rohingya rights and identity in Rakhine State.

In reality, Muslim communities in Arakan were tightly boxed in whichever paths they pursued – whether as "Rohingyas" or "Arakanese Muslims". On the promotion of Rohingya identity, at least, Muslim leaders believed that they met with some success during the parliamentary era. The name Rohingya increasingly began to be used in the media and political discourse. But any advances have to be viewed with great caution. The aspirations of Arakan's peoples were not prime targets of government concern during the political uncertainties of the 1950s – whether Rohingya or Rakhine. The new Union remained in a state of civil war and Arakan came to be seen as a conflict-divided backwater.

At this moment, an unexpected chink of light broke through with the 1958 announcement of an "Arms for Democracy" amnesty by Prime Minister U Nu. For the first time since independence, optimism began to grow that political solutions might finally be achieved. Expectations, though, did not last long. The peace interregnum of 1958 marked only a brief moment of calm before a much darker storm.

"Arms for Democracy": Peace Breakthroughs and Political Failures

By the mid-1950s, war-weariness was widespread throughout the country. Instability and conflict had never really ended since the Second World War. Face-to-face peace talks with the government were rare. The most important negotiations had taken place with the KNU as long ago as 1949 during the Insein siege. Against this unpromising backdrop,

U Aung Zan Wai, ANC leader and AFPFL minister

peace momentum began to develop in the mid-1950s. The starting-point was a White Flag CPB initiative. Known as the "peace and unity" line, the new policy was agreed at a party meeting in Sidoktaya Township on the east of the Arakan Yoma range in May 1955.[22] The CPB's promotion of peace led to the formation of a left-wing coalition, the National United Front (NUF), that gave the AFPFL a close run in the 1956 general election.[23] In a timely moment of inter-party cooperation, both the Arakan National United Organisation and Burma Muslim Congress backed the NUF's "pro-peace" call.

From this point, political cooperation began to gather pace. In behind-the-scenes talks, the AFPFL government made a number of promises of reform, including the creation of Arakan and Mon States, before announcing the 1958 amnesty.[24] U Seinda's APLP was the first to come in from the forests, with over 1,000 supporters taking part in a peace ceremony at Minbya at the beginning of the year. Various Pa-O, Shan, Mon and PVO forces then followed in other parts of the country, including Kra Hla Aung's PVO group in Arakan.

Several hundred White Flag CPB supporters also quit the party in Sittwe District, dealing the communist movement a serious blow in a key base area. Importantly, though, other White Flag and Red Flag CPB loyalists stayed behind in their rural strongholds. In the following years, their continued opposition to the government acted as an important bridge in maintaining militant resistance. Until the present day, the lineage of armed struggle in Arakan remains unbroken.

Any hopes of a peace breakthrough proved very short-lived. Following a split in the AFPFL leadership, the Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief Gen. Ne Win moved quickly to become emergency Prime Minister in October the same year. Setting up a "Military Caretaker" administration, he accused a coalition of anti-government opponents – including the APLP, communists and other armed opposition groups – of seeking to take power through parliamentary means. Using this as a pretext, Tatmadaw operations were resumed. For the next 18 months, fighting continued with the White Flag and Red Flag CPB, KNU and other armed movements in different areas around the country.

Subsequently, the "Military Caretaker" administration was regarded as a trial run for Ne Win's military coup. But little noticed at the time, a key battleground was also being charted out by Tatmadaw strategists in north Arakan. Here the caretaker government set up a "Frontier Areas Administration" to police the frontier with East Pakistan and combat Mujahid groups still active in the area.[25] Today, the designation by the Tatmadaw of "special administrative zones" is well known in different parts of the country. It is a tactic to extend central outreach into contested areas where armed opposition groups are strong and government authority is weak (see Chapters 5 and 6). But during 1958-60 it was the first evidence that the Tatmadaw leadership viewed the Mayu frontier region differently to other parts of Arakan. Encompassing Muslim-majority townships in the present-day Maungdaw District, it has since remained one of the most contentious territories within the country.

For the moment, Gen. Ne Win kept his political ambitions quiet. With the security clampdown complete,[26] parliamentary government was restored to Prime Minister U Nu after the 1960 general election. Keeping to his "Arms for

Democracy" call, U Nu pledged the creation of new Arakan and Mon States during his election campaign. Many Rakhine leaders were sceptical. But the promise of a return to democracy was popular with voters, and U Nu's "Clean" AFPFL faction dominated the polls.

There now followed one of the most critical periods in national politics after independence. Much of the impetus for reform came from ethnic nationality parties – not from the U Nu government. Political campaigning began during 1960 by Shan and other nationality leaders in the former Frontier Areas Administration under the British. To begin with, their focus was on Chin, Kachin and Shan territories that had been covered under the 1947 Panglong Agreement. But the movement soon came to include Arakan, Karen, Karenni and Mon peoples who had not taken part in the original Panglong meeting (see Chapter 2).[27] Together they developed what became known as the "Federal Proposal" movement.[28]

A high point was reached in June 1961 when Bonbauk Tha Kyaw, Maung Oo Kyaw and other Rakhine representatives joined an "All States Conference" of the federal movement in Taunggyi.[29] Delegates urged the government to immediately form new states for the "Chin, Mon and Rakhine nationalities".[30] Their demand was for federal reforms to guarantee the promises of equality and union that had been made under the Panglong Agreement.[31] Since this time, other political models have been put forward by Rakhine organisations – from complete independence to Soviet-style republics. But the All States Conference was the first occasion when Arakan representatives joined together with other organisations in the country to publicly support federal reform.

As these events took place, the U Nu government was following up on his election promise of allowing the creation of new ethnic states. Upon assuming office, an Arakan Enquiry Commission was set up, leading to the announcement that Arakan and Mon States would be established by September 1962. During the enquiry, not all inhabitants supported the creation of a new Arakan State. Nationalist sentiment was higher in Sittwe and the north of the territory in comparison with Thandwe and the south where there are closer ties to ethnic Bamar communities. Rohingya advocates also used the opportunity to promote the creation of a Muslim-majority territory in north Arakan (see below). But by agreeing to Arakan and Mon States, government leaders finally appeared to recognise the need to fulfil promises made to the Arakanese and Mon peoples as early as the first Regional Autonomy Enquiry Commission back in 1948. After a decade of human loss and suffering, peace and reform momentum appeared to be gaining pace.

There were, however, ominous warning signs on the horizon. Not for the first or last time, political developments in Arakan were now destabilized by developments elsewhere in the country. These events occurred half a century ago but, in their fall-out, there are many reflections of the conflict landscape today. Despite the return to democracy, distrust of both Tatmadaw and government leaders remained high.

In the early 1960s, unrest was manifest in many ethnic nationality regions. In Shan State, armed opposition movements were developing among a younger generation of activists, including Shan, Ta'ang and Wa ethnic groups. Meanwhile in 1961 the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) was formed in the China borderlands in response to U Nu's intention to make Buddhism the country's state religion. Most Kachins are Christians. At the same time, there was little respite in the armed struggles by the CPB, KNU and other anti-government forces that had broken out at independence.[32]

Many of these uncertainties were felt in Arakan. Here, the Second World War veteran Maung Sein Nyunt returned underground in June 1960 with 30 former APLP officers to establish the pro-Marxist Arakan National Liberation Party (ANLP). Meanwhile Red Flag CPB members, led by Kyaw Zan Rhee, plotted the formation of an independent Communist Party of Arakan (CPA). Fatefully, the new CPA was timed to a come into being in March 1962 – a date that would soon become resonant in Myanmar history (see box: "Timeline: Armed Movements Arakan").

For their part, Rakhine politicians tried to warn the government of the looming crisis. In his submission to the Arakan Enquiry Commission, the former AFPFL minister Aung Zan Wai issued a stark ultimatum. Fourteen years after independence, he said, Arakan was neglected and falling behind;

"Arakanese-Burman" tensions were rising; and conflict would result if the people did not gain justice.[33] These were powerful words coming from a colleague of the late Aung San and founder of the pre-war Arakan National Congress.

In response, government leaders appeared to believe that the creation of an Arakan State would be sufficient to meet nationality demands. In reality, it was a case of too little, too late. History was soon to show that Gen. Ne Win and the Tatmadaw leadership had their own plans for Myanmar's future. For the moment, the formation of an Arakan State would be put on hold.

The Mayu Frontier Administration and Ne Win's Seizure of Power

Shortly before Gen. Ne Win's military coup, there was a further development that has had lasting consequences in Arakan history: the creation of a Mayu Frontier Administration (MFA). The government's exact motives have never been explained, and there was little press attention at the time. But the MFA's creation appeared to reflect a convergence of the interests of three very different groupings: the Tatmadaw leadership, government politicians and Muslim advocates in north Arakan. Their perspectives were not in line, and they were not working together. But in the designation of the MFA they all had reasons to see potential – though controversial – solutions.

The background was complex. In their submissions to the Arakan Enquiry Commission, differences of opinion were reflected between Rohingya advocates in north Arakan and those who identified as Arakanese Muslims more broadly. The Arakanese Muslim Association supported the creation of an Arakan State, but with alternating Buddhist and Muslim heads of state and guarantees for the religious, cultural and political rights of all peoples.[34] The association was headed by Sultan Mahmud, the MP for Buthidaung and former Minister of Health, who was close to the U Nu government. In contrast, the Rohingya Jamiatul-Uluma and other Muslim leaders in north Arakan wanted the creation of a Muslim-majority "special district" that would come under the authority of the central government.[35] Rohingya leaders did not object to the creation of an Arakan State per se. But the language they used was cautionary. If the formation of a single Arakan State was forced on all peoples, the result could be the "renewed spilling of blood".[36]

A further controversy was about to break out. Just at the moment when an "Arakan State" had been promised, the U Nu government caused shock in May 1961 by announcing the formation of a "Mayu Frontier Administration", comprising Maungdaw, Buthidaung and western Rathedaung townships.[37] The MFA initiative was enhanced by the surrender of around 500 Mujahid fighters, headed by Rauschid Bullah and Mustafiz, signalling an apparent end to the Muslim insurgency.[38] As yet, an Arakan State had not been created. But when a draft law mandating the new state was prepared in early 1962, "Mayu District" was excluded from its territory.

Subsequent events soon showed that the designation of the MFA was a long way from ending conflict in north Arakan. Instead, it remains one of most sensitive issues in post-colonial history. Ultimately, neither the political actors in Arakan nor in the central government were satisfied. When details were circulated, the new MFA was not created as a self-governed territory. It would be administered under the Tatmadaw. As such, as Jacques Leider has written, the MFA was a "refashioning" of the "Frontier Areas Administration" that had been set up under Ne Win's Military Caretaker government on the East Pakistan border.[39] This is a convincing explanation. Transected by a steep range of hills, the Mayu frontier region has always been an isolated area that it is difficult for government forces to access and control.

The view on the ground in Arakan was very different. Rakhine nationalists felt completely wrong-footed. From their perspective, the MFA announcement could only be designed as a "divide and rule" measure by ethnic Bamar leaders to undermine the strength and viability of an autonomous Arakan State. Once again the sense was growing that, during another period of transition, outside actors were making decisions about their political and economic future without them. Arakan, they feared, was continuing to contract. At independence in 1948, the Hill Tracts had been separated from Arakan. Now the Mayu frontier region also appeared to be lost.

Farmers harvesting rice, Sittwe District (TK)

For the Rohingya movement, in contrast, the MFA announcement and Mujahid ceasefire could be seen to mark a breakthrough in post-independence politics. However there were few illusions among Rohingya leaders. As they recognised, the MFA was under Tatmadaw control and did not grant real autonomy. But, for the first time, acceptance of Rohingya identity was gathering pace in the country, and the behaviour of the security forces generally improved towards Muslim communities. There were Rohingya language radio programmes; Rohingya cultural and youth organisations continued to spread;[40] and the MFA marked a time of improved freedoms and job opportunities for Muslims in the north of the territory.

Importantly, too, government leaders began to refer to Rohingya communities by their name. Most famously, the Tatmadaw Vice Chief-of-Staff, Brig-Gen. Aung Gyi, declared that the "Rohingya" are one of the minorities of the Union at a Mujahid ceasefire ceremony in Maungdaw in July 1961. His only caveat was that, like other nationalities who live on "both sides" of Myanmar's frontiers, they must be loyal to the Union.[41] In a much-quoted parallel, Aung Gyi compared the situation of the Rohingyas to such peoples as the Karen, Naga, Shan and those of Chinese origin in the Kokang region whose populations are also separated by international borders.

This, however, was as far as political change developed in Arakan under the U Nu government. The year of 1962 marks one of the great "what if?" moments in Myanmar history. None of the three constitutional innovations on the drawing boards was allowed a chance to work: the Federal Proposal, the new Arakan State and the Mayu Frontier Administration. On 2 March, just as U Nu was preparing to meet with the federal movement leaders, Gen. Ne Win seized power in a military coup.[42] "Federalism is impossible: it will destroy the Union," he said.[43] Over the following days, U Nu and most of his cabinet were arrested along with leaders from different political and ethnic nationality backgrounds. Those detained included the former Union President and co-organiser of the Panglong Conference, Sao Shwe Thaike, who died in custody shortly afterwards.

Myanmar's brief era of parliamentary democracy was at an end. It was to be another half century before multi-party politics returned to the country. Far from Arakan sovereignty or any federal reform, military rule was just beginning.

Sittwe University entrance (TK)

4. The "Burmese Way to Socialism" (1962-88)

Military Rule, "Four Cuts" and a New Generation of Conflicts

Gen. Ne Win's "Burmese Way to Socialism" quickly proved a disaster for politics and society in Myanmar. An idiosyncratic mixture of Buddhist, Marxist and nationalist principles, Ne Win's philosophy was never deeply developed. For a quarter of a century, the country became one of the most isolated and militarised states in the world as the Tatmadaw sought to impose a centralised system of one-party rule. Until the present day, many legacies of the Ne Win era remain apparent across the country. This was especially the case in Arakan which became a key battleground in the attempt to enforce Tatmadaw control.

Ne Win's main political vehicle was the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). Before rolling the BSPP out, Ne Win appeared to believe that he might be able to win over the Communist Party of Burma and other parties on the political left to his new philosophy. This led to the 1963-64 Peace Parley in Yangon to which delegates from over a dozen opposition forces came in from their "liberated zones" around the country.[1] Representatives included the Red Flag CPB leader Thakin Soe who arrived from the party's base areas in Arakan. The only party representing Arakan itself during the talks was the recently-formed Communist Party of Arakan. The CPA demanded a "Republic of Arakan" with the right of secession from the Union.[2] Once it became clear, however, that Ne Win was unwilling to negotiate, the talks quickly broke down. Ultimately, only one opposition movement made a peace agreement – a breakaway faction from the Karen National Union.

Following the peace talk collapse, Gen. Ne Win set out a two-track strategy to impose the "Burmese Way to Socialism" on the country: political and military. The BSPP and Tatmadaw systems ran in parallel. From the outset, the style of the BSPP government was xenophobic and austere. The constitution was suspended, key sectors of the economy nationalised, independent media closed down, and teaching in ethnic minority languages halted from fourth grade in schools. An estimated 300,000 inhabitants of perceived "Indian" ancestry

and 100,000 Chinese were also forced to leave the country during the 1963-67 period. Many of those leaving were entrepreneurs whose assets were transferred into state ownership. Although never announced as such, it was the beginning of a new policy of "Burmanisation" that gathered pace over the following years.[3]

Simultaneous with the BSPP rollout, the Tatmadaw generals moved on to the second element in Ne Win's strategy: a new counter-insurgency policy. Following the Peace Parley breakdown, military offensives were stepped up to try and to impose a centralised structure of government on the country. At the core of Tatmadaw operations was a new military stratagem known as the "Four Cuts" (Pya Lay Pya).[4] Loosely modelled on the "Strategic Hamlet" tactics of U.S. forces in Vietnam, the aim was to end civilian support to armed opposition groups.

To carry these operations out, special Light Infantry Divisions (LIDs) were created, such as the 99th LID set up in 1968. Today these tactics are known more generally in the country as regional "clearance operations".[5] They have long been synonymous with human rights violations. But it took until the mass destruction of Rohingya villages in the 21st century for the international community to truly wake up.[6] During 2017-18, the 99th LID was one of several "shock troop" forces whose activities in northern Rakhine State were the cause for allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity perpetrated on the local population (see Chapter 7).[7]

Back in the 1960s, it was quickly clear that Ne Win was never going to introduce political change by military means. Over the next decade, the Tatmadaw did have some success in pushing CPB and KNU forces from the Ayeyarwady Delta and Bago Yoma in central Myanmar. But such tactics were never likely to succeed in the ethnic borderlands where displaced people and anti-government groups could retreat into the hills or across international frontiers. Far from quelling rebellion, opposition was fuelled as a new generation of nationality movements took up arms. Very soon an inter-connected pattern of "liberated zones" encircled the country's borders. Here a diversity of armed opposition groups continued to keep alive very different political visions to Ne Win's one-party rule.

In sustaining resistance on such scale, anti-government forces were boosted by three developments in the late 1960s that had increasing impact as the BSPP era wore on. First, following anti-Chinese riots in Yangon, from 1968 communist China began a decade of full-scale backing to the CPB. With this aid, the CPB's People's Army was able to seize control of much of the Yunnan Province border.

Second, following their release from detention, the deposed Prime Minister U Nu escaped with several colleagues to the Thailand border. Here they set up a National United Liberation Front (NULF) with the KNU and other former ethnic opponents in 1970 in a bid to overthrow the BSPP government by force.[8] The NULF proved short-lived. But, faced by countrywide opposition, Tatmadaw control remained very limited outside central Myanmar and the main conurbations.

And third, as the "Burmese Way to Socialism" began to break down, it was armed opposition groups in their "liberated zones" who came to control much of the country's illicit border trade. With arms easily available from China or as "Vietnam surplus" on the regional blackmarket, several opposition forces – notably the CPB, KNU and Kachin Independence Organisation – were able to engage with the Tatmadaw in both conventional and guerrilla warfare.

There are no reliable records of the loss of life and suffering during these years. But such entrenched warfare in both government and opposition goes to the heart of the political and economic failures in the post-colonial state. Across the country, communities were disrupted and forcibly relocated as fighting ebbed and flowed in many parts of the rural countryside. Half a century later, Myanmar's political landscape remains highly militarised.

The Revival of Armed Struggle in Arakan

During the BSPP era, the armed conflicts in Arakan were generally less reported in the world outside. On the surface, the central government was in control. But the unrest was just as potent as the other ethnic and political crises enveloping the country. With opposition activity banned,

repression fed support for armed resistance groups. Following the Ne Win coup, parliamentary parties were compelled to close down; the implementation of an Arakan State was forgotten; and the Mayu Frontier Administration (1961-64) was discontinued. These arbitrary actions set the tone for a quarter century of political impasse and conflict between the military government and a diversity of armed opposition movements.

As the 1960s began, the strongest opposition force in Arakan remained the White Flag CPB. It had two main base areas: the party's "Arakan Province" headquarters, headed by Kyaw Mya, which was located in Sittwe District in the north; and its "Northwest Division", under Thet Tun, which linked between the townships on the east side of the Arakan Yoma with Kyaukpyu and Toungup districts to the west. In Sittwe District, Rakhine cadres were in the majority, but in both areas the CPB also had Chin and other ethnic nationality supporters.[9] A mini-"cultural revolution", echoing Maoist ideology in China, dealt the party's reputation a severe setback in the late 1960s. But the policy was not strictly enforced in Arakan, and the CPB's leaders were able to continue their struggle in the rural terrain. With the CPB building up a 15,000-strong "People's Army" on the Yunnan border, communist supporters held high hopes that the political pendulum would swing the party's way.

The Red Flag CPB, in contrast, rapidly declined in influence following the Ne Win coup. Much of this was precipitated by the formation of two new parties – the CPA and Arakan National Liberation Party – in the early 1960s. Arakan had been one of the last Red Flag strongholds, and the CPA's 1962 split was a serious challenge to the party's authority. Both the ANLP and CPA were Marxists and Arakan nationalists. The Red Flag's downfall then accelerated after the party's veteran leader Thakin Soe handed himself in to the government. This happened in unusual circumstances on a "prophet of peace" mission by Thakin Soe during Tatmadaw operations in the Arakan Yoma in 1970. From this point, the Red Flag CPB became a largely dormant force in the country.[10]

Late historian Kyaw Hlaing, AIO and NUFA leader (MS)

At this critical moment, revolutionary ardour in Arakan was boosted by the emergence of a number of new ethnic nationality fronts (see box: "Timeline: Armed Movements Arakan"). The first new movement was a short-lived Arakan National United Organisation (no relation to the earlier ANUO). This was set up in 1963 by Bo Kra Hla Aung, a respected former PVO leader who had exchanged "arms for democracy" with the U Nu government in 1958. A Mujahid Party also revived under Sani Jafar, a militant leader in the northern borderlands.[11] Of more enduring importance was the Rohingya Independence Front (from 1973 Rohingya Patriotic Front: RPF). Established in 1964 by a Yangon University student, Muhammad Jafar Habib, the new movement took a number of years to evolve. But it is from Jafar Habib and the RPF that many Rohingya militants claim lineage today.

A further catalyst then came on 13 August 1967, a date that has become notorious in Arakan history. Until the present day, these events have never been independently investigated. But eyewitnesses claimed that up to 400 civilians were killed, injured or disappeared when the security forces opened fire on crowds protesting against rice shortages in the state capital, Sittwe.[12] In a territory once renowned for its rice production, a fuse in

nationalism had been re-lit. Since this time, the 1967 "Rice Killing Day" is mourned as a centrepiece in Arakan patriotism alongside the annexations and bloodshed in 1784, 1824 and 1942.

In the fall-out from these events, two new movements were formed: the Arakan Independence Organisation (AIO) and the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP). A particular source of inspiration was the historian U Oo Tha Tun. Popular among young people, he later died in prison after co-founding the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD) that stood in the 1990 general election. In 1968 one of his students, the first AIO leader Sara San Kyaw Tun, coined the expression "Hidden Colony" to describe the Arakan plight.[13] The struggle of the Irish republican movement in Great Britain was often invoked for comparison. The new generation of militant movements also rejected the Marxist strictures of the CPB and BSPP. In Myanmar's case, the young AIO ideologues believed that minority peoples were facing two very specific challenges: Marxism and the BSPP's "Burmanisation" policies. Said Kyaw Hlaing, a history student who later became the AIO chair: "At independence many Burmans thought Marxism was an ideology which would restore their lost empire."[14]

In subsequent decades, neither the AIO nor ALP achieved success in establishing "liberated areas". Today both parties are better known for their political advocacy. But, in their networking and organisation, there are parallels to paths subsequently pursued by other armed groups in the territory. For this reason, their models have become important. The AIO was founded in 1970 by a small group of students at Mandalay University. They then travelled to base areas controlled by the KIO on the China border to begin military training. Two years later an advance AIO force penetrated back along the India border into Arakan, where they established a foothold in Kyauktaw and Mrauk-U townships. AIO leaders now made public their call for Arakan independence and the right of self-determination.

Efforts to form the second armed movement, the ALP, moved more slowly. The first attempt failed in 1967-68 when underground supporters were arrested in Sittwe and Rathedaung townships. Those detained included the future party leaders Khaing Moe Linn, Khaing Ye Khaing and Khaing Soe Naing.[15] Only during 1972-74 was the ALP formally established on the Thailand border with the help of the KNU. In subsequent decades, the ALP became well known in united front circles. The ALP was a founder member of the ethnic-based National Democratic Front (NDF), which demanded the formation of a federal union. Set up in KNU territory in 1976, the NDF sought to build up networks with other ethnic nationality forces around the country. When, however, the ALP tried to establish itself as a military movement in Arakan, it was to find its path blocked by the security forces (see "Regional Clearances, Nagamin and Refugee Flight" below).

Meanwhile armed opposition was also reviving among Muslim communities. Following the patterns of Mujahid groups in the parliamentary era, there was no central organisation among commanders in the 1960s. The largest force was a new Mujahid Party, also known as the Muslim (or Rohingya) National Liberation Party. Led by Sani Jafar, the movement allied with the CPA and ANLP in the Naf River borderlands. But during the early 1970s armed opposition among Muslim communities in north Arakan was largely superseded by the activities of Muhammad Jafar Habib and a younger generation of RPF militants who had gone underground from the towns.[16]

After a decade of BSPP government, support for militancy was deepening in Muslim communities. Regardless of their backgrounds, many Muslims felt insecure under the BSPP government. Although no official announcements had been made, reports began to circulate that existing identity documents were being confiscated and no new National Registration Cards would be issued to Muslims perceived to be of foreign heritage.[17]

At this pivotal moment, the opposition cause in Arakan was boosted by two dramatic events that enhanced their potential. First, following the 1971 Liberation War against Pakistan, the Bangladesh borderlands were awash with weapons. There was widespread sympathy for revolutionary causes, and anti-government groups could move around very easily. Second, armed resistance also flared along the borders with northeast India. To begin with, the strongest force was the Mizo National Front (MNF: established 1961), which enjoyed the support of China.[18] Initially, the MNF hoped to develop a common cause among its ethnic Chin cousins in Myanmar in support of a "greater Mizoram". But,

as MNF troops took sanctuary in the tri-border region, Mizo commanders also allied with the White Flag CPB in north Arakan. Into the early 1970s, the CPB and MNF carried out several joint operations, including a raid on Rathedaung town.[19]

The consequences were profound. While the CPB, CPA and ANLP continued to wage armed struggle in northern and central Arakan, an array of new opposition movements were developing in the borders with Bangladesh and India (see box: "A Regional Conflict Complex"). Government control of the towns was never seriously threatened. But the opening of new fronts in the tri-border region became an important element in the maintenance of anti-government resistance during the next two decades. The CPB was still the BSPP's strongest opponent in the country. But, as in other parts of Myanmar, new opposition forces were becoming increasingly active in Arakan. Tatmadaw strategists recognised that it was time to reconsider their plans.

The 1974 Constitution, Rakhine State and Population Census

Veteran ethnic nationalists today regard the mid-1970s as the high point in armed opposition activities during the half century under military rule (1962-2011). Most of the Arakan borderlands and much of the interior remained under the control of anti-government forces. But, in many respects, this period of militant strength was an illusion. By 1973 a train of events on the national stage had begun to turn the BSPP's way. The CPB's advance from the China border had been halted amidst heavy fighting, while the NULF alliance on the Thailand border was running out of steam. The weaknesses in these two movements allowed the Tatmadaw time to regroup. Once again, Ne Win returned to his twin strategies of attempting to deliver political and military actions together. A new combination of activities was being prepared.

On the political front, the government launched a series of initiatives in quick succession: a national census, a referendum and a new constitution. Arakan was a central area of concern in all these plans. Under the new constitution, Myanmar would become a one-party state, but an ethnic symmetry was demarcated for the first time on the political map. After three decades of lobbying, Arakan was finally designated – along with Chin and Mon – as a "state" to go along with the existing Kachin, Karen, Kayah and Shan states. In future, there would be seven "ethnic" states, which are home to minority peoples, and seven "divisions" (renamed "regions" under the 2008 constitution) that are mostly inhabited by the Bamar majority. There was no nationalist fanfare, however. In what BSPP opponents saw as a "divide and rule" measure, the official name for the new state would be "Rakhine" – not "Arakan" – after the majority ethnic group.

To back these reforms up, security pressures were intensified in different parts of the country. Student protests were suppressed during the U Thant funeral in Yangon; regional clearance operations were intensified in the Bago Yoma highlands; and a major objective was achieved during 1974-75 when the Tatmadaw succeeded in driving remaining CPB and Karen forces from central Myanmar. Supply lines were effectively cut between armed opposition forces in the east and the west of the country. The government's tactics had been heavy-handed, but the 1973 referendum and 1974 constitution were successfully pushed through.

Vegetable seller at morning market in northern Rakhine State (TK)

With central Myanmar cleared of insurgent forces, military attention now turned towards other conflict-zones in the country. Most opposition groups expected the China or Thailand borderlands to be the next target. Instead, the new Rakhine State was singled out. It was to remain a main focus of security activity for the remainder of the BSPP era.

Tatmadaw commanders have never explained why such a focus was placed on Arakan at this time. Despite the diversity of actors, the conflicts were low-intensity by comparison with the battles then underway in the Chinese and Thai borderlands. Certainly, the emergence of new opposition forces was causing concern to government leaders in Yangon. The White Flag CPB, CPA and ANLP were still active in various parts of the state, while the AIO, ALP and RPF were seeking to set up base areas of their own.[20] Perhaps the only factor helping sustain BSPP authority was the lack of unity among opposition groups. In some cases, clashes would occur if different organisations came across each other in the field, and in 1972 the White Flag CPB disbanded the indigenous Tribal Nationalities Organisation that was active in the north of the state (see box: "Timeline: Armed Movements Arakan").[21]

Events were now to show that Gen. Ne Win had other reasons for placing such a high priority on Arakan in the 1970s. All were connected to security and the inter-linked issues of ethnicity and identity. There is a long history to the juxtaposition of these three concepts in the post-colonial Union. Ne Win was not the only leader to show xenophobic and nationalistic tendencies. Myanmar did not join the Commonwealth of Nations at its 1949 foundation; politics became successively more "ethnicized" after independence; and, even today, the State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi has been barred under the 2008 constitution from becoming President on the grounds of having foreign relatives by her marriage to a non-Myanmar citizen (her late husband was British).

During the BSPP era, these concerns appeared to come together to fuel Ne Win's increasingly xenophobic views. It was the height of the Cold War. Two factors focused attention on the country's troubled borders. First, in a region divided by civil wars, Ne Win was acutely aware of the risks of being pulled into superpower conflicts of the kind that had led to divisions in Korea and Vietnam. With China supporting the CPB and the USA backing the deposed Prime Minister U Nu, the dangers appeared very real. So seriously did Ne Win take these threats to sovereignty that in 1979 he even withdrew Myanmar from the "Non-Aligned Movement".

Second, it was not only China and the USA that Ne Win feared, but also instability on Arakan's borders on the Bay of Bengal. Hostility to colonial rule, when Myanmar was administered as a province of India, was integral to the Tatmadaw's worldview. For this reason, as conflict spread in the tri-border region, Arakan very much moved to the forefront of Ne Win's thinking. The BSPP government was seeking to shut the country off. But, in the aftermath of the Bangladesh Liberation War, Arakan was an insecure gateway to the outside world.

Over the following years, it is difficult to extricate from official sources the exact evolution of the government's policies towards Arakan. Secrecy was the hallmark of the military government. But two objectives appeared to lie at their core: repression of anti-government movements and the introduction of controls on populations of Indian heritage or Muslim identity. In Ne Win's view, the two issues were interlinked. For this reason, the start of the clampdown in Arakan is usually dated to the 1973 census, the first since the British era. The results of the census were partial and contested, but its methodologies revealed its ethnicized underpinnings. Three categories were selected for "race and ethnic composition", separating peoples between those considered "pure" or "alien" by the government.[22]

On this basis, it is often assumed that the results of the census contributed to Ne Win's views about population change. In fact, far from suggesting a rise in migration, the figures appeared to confirm the reverse: i.e., that the proportion of inhabitants of Indian and Chinese ancestry had decreased due to their mass exodus since the Second World War.[23] Despite this evidence, Ne Win's concerns about demography increased as the 1970s progressed. Distinctions between "indigenous" and "non-indigenous races" became mainstream in government discourse; enforcement of the 1947 "Burma Immigration (Emergency Provisions) Act" was stepped up;[24] and National Registration Cards were frequently checked or withdrawn from

CPA leaders, Shwe Tha and Thein Phay, 1986 (centre L & R) (MS)

Muslim inhabitants. Ostensibly, the purpose was to reduce illegal immigration. But subsequent events demonstrated that rejection of inhabitants of perceived Indian origin was very much in the government's sights.

Rakhine State now became a front-line in Ne Win's attempt to entrench BSPP rule. Although habitation areas were not given, the 1973 census marked the "Arakanese" (Rakhine) as the fourth largest ethnic group in the country, with "Indians and Pakistanis" as the sixth.[25] With the advent of the 1974 constitution, three changes were made to the general structures of ethnic discourse during the parliamentary era that have had defining consequences in Arakan politics and society. The new Arakan state was recognised by a "Rakhine" political and cultural heritage; the notion of a Muslim-majority Mayu frontier area was abandoned; and there was no longer any acknowledgement of a "Rohingya" people or identity. Although many Muslims held National Registration Cards, a majority of those living in Rakhine State now appeared to be categorised as "non-indigenous or foreign races", either as Indians or Pakistanis. Within a few years, the blanket term of "Bengali" would be used.

Much of the complexity in Rakhine State politics today lies in the fall-out from these events. Although the BSPP was dressed in socialist guise, the political language was chauvinistic and often highly racist. Ne Win himself gave little away in public. But in 1979 his prejudices slipped out in a rare news report on the radio when he explained his position on "racial purity". In Ne Win's view, the loyalty of all non-Bamar peoples was suspect:

> "...we must carefully watch people of mixed blood. Some people are of pure blood, pure Burmese heritage and descendants of genuine citizens. Karen, Kachin and so forth, are of genuine pure blood. But we must consider whether these people are completely for our race – our Burmese people; and our country – our Burma."[26]

In one of the most ethnically-diverse countries in Asia, the notion of a racial homogeneity was being enforced.

Regional Clearances, Nagamin and Refugee Flight

The government's creation of Rakhine State set the stage for the most systematic military operations in the territory since the Second World War. All opposition forces came under attack. To start the campaign, two Tactical Divisions were established. These were designated as No.1, which came under the Tatmadaw's Western Command in Rakhine State, and No.2 under the 66th LID in the Arakan

Yoma borders with the Magway Division. It was the CPB's Northwest Division that was first targeted during 1977 when large areas were cleared of human settlement during a series of Tatmadaw "Four Cuts" operations.[27] Faced with the loss of territory, CPB remnants began a slow exodus towards the north.

The same year, the AIO and ALP also ran into Tatmadaw counter-insurgency operations. Both suffered blows from which they never truly recovered during what became known as the "year of long marches". In 1972, an AIO force had already reached the tri-border region from Kachin State. But when a second column attempted the same journey in 1977, it was virtually wiped out in Tatmadaw ambushes – and skirmishes with the India Army – along the Chin State frontier. Among those killed was the AIO's founding leader San Kyaw Tun.

The same year, the ALP suffered a similar fate when a 120-strong force attempted an even longer journey from KNU territories on the Thailand border. Accompanying the ALP was a small Chin force led by William, an ethnic Saline Chin who hoped to establish a Chin nationality movement in the tri-border region. As they struggled through the mountains, over 50 ALP personnel were killed in a series of Tatmadaw attacks and India Army clashes, including the party leader Khaing Moe Linn, a former Burma Navy commander.[28] After this loss, the ALP leadership was taken over by its present-day chair, Khaing Ye Khaing, who has since mostly stayed with a small team close to the India-Bangladesh borders. The ALP's main force, meanwhile, of around 50-100 troops remained with the KNU at its Kawmoorah base on the Thailand border.

With both Rakhine and CPB forces in retreat, security attention turned in the late 1970s to the Muslim population in the north of the state. Codenamed "Nagamin" ("King Dragon"), the government began a local census operation in February 1978 that rapidly ran out of control amidst widespread reports of human rights abuses including killings.[29] Over the following months, over 200,000 Muslim villagers fled across the Naf River into Bangladesh. Among those who crossed the border was Sultan Ahmed, the former MP and Jamiatul-Ulama leader who had represented the cause of Arakanese Muslims at independence. He died three years later in exile.[30]

At the time, the Tatmadaw clampdown was presented as a temporary operation to deal with illegal immigration. But international aid workers in Bangladesh were in no doubt that the government's intention was to suppress political opposition. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the refugee exodus was triggered by a "combined operation of the Burmese army and administration to crush" movements among both Buddhist and Muslim communities for the "autonomy or independence" of Arakan.[31]

The language used by government officials was also highly inflammatory in accentuating inter-community division. Articles in the state media openly blamed the crisis on "armed bands of Bengalis", "rampaging Bengali mobs" and "Muslim extremists" attacking Buddhist villages.[32] Any violence, it was claimed, was not the fault of the Tatmadaw. Since this time, "Bengali" has become the default expression used by government officials when describing the Muslim population.

Back in the 1970s, the international community was very uncertain about how to deal with the crisis. Under the "Burmese Way to Socialism", Myanmar had become one of the most isolated countries in the world. But four decades later, United Nations investigators and international human rights groups are very clear in describing the Nagamin operation as the first attempt by the security forces to drive the Muslim population from northern Rakhine State.[33]

It is important to note, then, that there were political movements among the Rakhine population who expressed concerns about the Tatmadaw's treatment of Muslim communities at the time. According to the AIO, the "BSPP regime" was seeking to cause "racial and religious conflict between the two intimate brothers – Arakanese Buddhist and Muslim communities – to crush their national unity and revolution".[34] The solution, the AIO argued, was for the "Arakanese people" to have control of their own affairs.[35]

Since this crackdown, an opportunity for political reconciliation and inter-community dialogue has never arisen. Nagamin was not the only security operation underway. The same year another counter-insurgency offensive, Ye The Ha, was launched by the Tatmadaw's Western Command in

Sittwe District. The intention was to try and trap any remaining CPB, CPA, AIO, ANLP and RPF forces operating in the hills. For two years, the pressures were relentless. Under constant attack, opposition leaders and their families were squeezed ever further northwards into the tri-border region with Bangladesh and India. Eventually, these tactics paid off. Under a 1980 amnesty, three leading opposition figures surrendered to the government: the CPB's Northwest Division commander Thet Tun, the CPA's founding leader Kyaw Zan Rhee and the AIO co-founder Tun Shwe Maung.

BSPP officials were exultant. For a brief moment, it appeared that the government's combination of security clampdowns and political outreach were making strategic breakthroughs. The same year, the former Prime Minister U Nu also returned to Yangon from the Thailand border under government amnesty. Meanwhile Gen. Ne Win initiated peace talks with the CPB and, separately, with the KIO. In the coming years, however, this was as far as peace progress went. Both the Chinese and Thai frontiers remained hotbeds of anti-government activism. But the Tatmadaw had succeeded in one key objective: during a time of volatility around the country's borders, the government had maintained its control of the central Myanmar heartlands.

Into the 1980s desultory fighting continued in northern Rakhine State. Most of the refugees who had fled into Bangladesh during the 1978 clampdown were eventually allowed to return under UN auspices. But any hopes of a just resolution to their cause were quickly ended in 1982 when a new series of pressures were ratcheted up on the Muslim population under the BSPP's new Citizenship Law (see box: "Rakhine, Rohingya and the 'Politics of Labelling'"). In the future, full citizenship would only be granted to nationalities deemed "indigenous". In contrast, "non-indigenous" peoples – notably those of presumed Indian or Chinese heritage – would be allowed only "associate" or "naturalized" status unless they could prove family lineage in the country before the British annexation of Arakan in 1824. Of the Rohingya, there was no mention at all.

CPB White Flag troops 1987 (MS)

A Regional Conflict Complex

In recent years, international focus on Arakan has often been defined by the Rakhine-Rohingya debate and relations with the central government. But these are not the only peoples or challenges in the modern-day state. Since the British departure, the tri-border region between Myanmar, India and Bangladesh has witnessed frequent conflict and instability. In these remote territories, a diversity of ethnic nationality movements have continued to engage in struggles on different sides of the post-colonial frontiers.[36] It is not only "Buddhist" and "Muslim" faiths or "Indian" and "Myanmar" populations that meet on this multi-cultural crossroads. Running from the Bay of Bengal through India to the Tibetan Plateau, the interior is home to a mosaic of peoples with distinctive histories: from Mizoram to Arunachal in northeast India; the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh; and from Rakhine State to Kachin State in Myanmar.[37]

Arakan is very much part of this borderland world. As such, the tri-border region with Bangladesh and India reflects many aspects of what academics term a "regional conflict complex".[38] The cross-border spread of such peoples as Rakhine-Marma and Rohingya-Chittagonian has very much created a political and cultural space in which opposition groups can operate. Seen from the perspective of central governments, political and economic actors in these borderworlds are often regarded as "rebels", "bandits", "blackmarketeers" and "illegal" people resisting the central state. In this respect, the authorities are following in the footsteps of the colonial administrators who created the modern-day boundaries.[39] In terms of state instability, it is also important to note that Bangladesh has seen a national liberation war from Pakistan since independence, while conflict has seen the number of ethnic minority states in northeast India increase from three to the present-day seven.[40]

In cross-border politics, nationality movements have only operated among the Naga people in the Sagaing frontiers in tandem with India, notably the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN). But, less remarked, nationalist movements have also continued among Chin-related peoples in all three countries. Speaking Tibeto-Burmese languages, they have historically been referred to by the collective name of "Zo". At independence, there was suggestion of a "pan-Chin" state that would combine the populations in the three countries. However, momentum for such a movement never evolved.[41] In ethno-political terms, Zo peoples – a majority of whom are Christians – are today best known as Chin in Myanmar and Mizo in India. Locally – depending on context – they are also known as Kuki and Zomi, the latter a term often preferred in Myanmar.[42] The related Mro-Khami and Khumi peoples also inhabit both the Rakhine and Chin States as well as Bangladesh.

Through these relationships, the Chin and Arakan struggles in Myanmar and those of the Mizo in India have inter-connected at critical times since independence. From the late 1960s, supporters of the Mizo National Front began moving across the frontiers of the tri-border region into the Chittagong and Arakan Hill Tracts for sanctuary (see "The Revival of Armed Struggle in Arakan" above). In 1986, MNF units returned to Mizoram following a peace accord with the Indian government. On the Myanmar side of the border, the Chin National Front (CNF) also signed a 2012 ceasefire with the Nay Pyi Taw government. But these agreements have not brought peace to the borderlands, and it is in the rugged terrain of the Arakan Hill Tracts, today demarcated in Chin State, that Chin and Rakhine opposition forces continue to operate today.[43]

Within Arakan itself, there have been smaller armed movements among the Chin and other hill peoples since independence. The best-known in the parliamentary era was the Tribal Nationalities Organisation, established in 1957.[44] Following the 1962 coup, a number of new groups arose, including the Chin National Liberation Organisation headed by U Ba Maung.[45] Generally, however, political actors in Chin and other minority communities mostly joined with the BSPP or CPB during the Ne Win era. In 1972, the CPB closed the Tribal Nationalities Organisation down at the height of the party's Maoist phase. This, however, did not deter activism among hill peoples. In 1985

Chin and Mro activists broke away from the CPB to form a new Tribal Nationalities Party (TNP) in northern Rakhine State.

The ethno-political landscape changed again in the tri-border region following the 1988 collapse of Ne Win's BSPP. With electoral parties permitted, a diversity of Chin-related movements, including Mro-Khami, have since continued. Under the 2008 constitution, there is also a Chin Ethnic Affairs Minister for Rakhine State, the only nationality recognised by this designation within the territory (see box: "Rakhine State: A Contemporary Snapshot"). Volatility, however, has not ended in the former hill tracts. The United League of Arakan is presently active in the area as well as the smaller ALP and CNF, both of which have ceasefires with the government.

The struggles of minority peoples in Bangladesh have also had impact on conflicts on the Myanmar side of the border. This is especially the case among the Chakma in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, a predominantly Buddhist people who are related to the Daingnet in Rakhine State.[46] In 1972, the armed struggle of the Shanti Bahini broke out, with consequences that reverberated across the tri-border region. With Bangladeshi forces in retreat, armed opposition groups from Rakhine State became the de facto authorities along much of the Chittagong frontier. Following a 1997 ceasefire with the Dhaka government, over 50,000 Chakma refugees returned from India and armed conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts largely came to an end.[47] Nevertheless, the remote highlands remained lightly-policed frontier areas where opposition groups were able to continue their struggles. For decades, it has been central government forces from the three countries that have appeared as the outsiders – not ethnic nationality forces on the ground.

In 2019, the social and political challenges in the tri-border region are becoming ever more urgent. Geo-political pressures are mounting in one of the fastest-changing regions in Asia. India is promoting a "Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project" through the Kaladan valley; Bangladesh is supporting the Kanyin Chaung Economic Zone in the Maungdaw borderlands; China is seeking to place Kyaukpyu at the heart of its Belt and Road Initiative; and the French government has been supporting initiatives to build two hydropower dams on the upper Lemro (Laymyo: "Four Cities") River.[48] For local peoples, the Lemro is a symbolic waterway linking four ancient towns along its route. Today it connects Mrauk-U, Minbya, Myebon, Pauktaw and Sittwe townships.

Northern Rakhine State and the tri-border region, however, are far from peace. Over one million Rohingya Muslim refugees are estimated to remain in Bangladesh; over 200,000 civilians – both Buddhist and Muslim – are internally displaced in Rakhine State and the adjoining Chin State;[49] the India government has declared 1.9 million people of Bengali heritage stateless in Assam next door;[50] and a diversity of armed conflicts continue in the tri-border region. In addition to the ULA, ALP, CNF, NSCN and Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army on the Myanmar side, over a dozen nationality forces remain active across the border with India.[51] Of the number of Chin, Rakhine, Rohingya and other refugees and migrants now living in such countries as India, Thailand and Malaysia, there are no reliable figures at all.

During the past eighteen months, fighting has increased in several border regions as both the Myanmar and Indian governments – as well as armed opposition groups – have stepped up activities (see Chapters 7 and 8). Instabilities that have continued since the Second World War have not been resolved. Rather, the recent increase in outside interventions is only exacerbating tensions and ethno-political divisions.

The message has long since been clear. The problems in the tri-border region have always been political, concerning justice, equality and the rights and representation of local peoples. In many respects, the shape of contemporary challenges was created by the nature of post-colonial divisions in three different countries. Until and unless there is peace and political inclusion, the "regional conflict complex" will continue.

From this point, the outflow of Muslim migrants and refugees from Rakhine State resumed again. But this time many did not stop in Bangladesh. The objective for many émigrés was to reach Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and other countries abroad. Under constant threat or harassment, many Muslims no longer felt secure in their homes. A local saying developed: "If the Burmese army sees you in the village you are an alien; if you are fishing on the river you are a smuggler; and if you are working in the forest you are an insurgent."[52] A human tragedy of catastrophic proportions was developing. As the exodus increased, the Rohingya people quickly became known as the "new Palestinians" in Asia. Today, the Rohingya diaspora is known in countries around the world.

Opposition Retrenchment, Ethno-Political Divisions and the BSPP Collapse

Following the Tatmadaw operations of the late 1970s, armed opposition movements were never again a significant force in the central and southern Rakhine State. But militant resistance was not at an end. The security situation remained very different in the borderlands with Bangladesh and India. Here opposition forces were helped by a combination of three factors. Repression meant that there was no lack of support for opposition causes. The failures of the "Burmese Way to Socialism" sustained a blackmarket trade that opposition groups could tax or control. And all sides of the tri-border region were essentially a "no-man's land" outside the control of security forces in any of the three countries. It was into these remote backwaters that the six main opposition forces in Rakhine State – the ANLP, CPA, AIO, ALP, RPF and White Flag CPB – retreated and sought to reorganise (see box: "Timeline: Armed Movements Arakan").

A further factor was now to support their survival: political laissez-faire. With the main exception of China's support to the CPB, international advantage to opposition groups in the borderlands has often been more by the lassitude of neighbouring governments than official policy. But at the turn of the 1980s, the tri-border region with India and Bangladesh was in deep crisis. Any military presence by government forces in the three countries was slight, and the security services vied with each other as conflicts deepened in the tri-border region (see box: "A Regional Conflict Complex").

Two struggles especially had an impact on the armed struggles in Rakhine State: those of the Mizo National Front in Mizoram and the Shanti Bahini in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Since its 1972 foundation, the Shanti Bahini's influence had rapidly spread among the Chakma, who are related to the Daingnet and other Buddhist peoples in the tri-border region. With the rise of the Shanti Bahini movement, it suited security strategists in Dhaka to have anti-government groups from India and Myanmar acting as buffers along their south-eastern frontier. Following the 1971 separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan, the new country's leaders were feeling their way.

On this security basis, the MNF was allowed to maintain camps in Bangladesh and operate across the Chittagong-Arakan borders. Indian politicians had supported the Bangladesh cause in the Liberation War. Following the war's end, however, political understandings had stalled, and Dhaka's tolerance of the MNF caused a further deterioration in relations with New Delhi. In response, the Indian government allowed Shanti Bahini members and Chakma refugees to cross into Mizoram and Tripura.[53] A conflict paradigm quickly appeared. The MNF and Shanti Bahini were effectively being used as proxies in a border struggle between neighbouring governments.

Fears in Bangladesh then deepened in the late 1970s when a third crisis broke out on its frontiers: Nagamin and the Tatmadaw's security clampdown in Rakhine State. Over 200,000 Muslim refugees fled across the Naf River frontier, while various Rakhine and Rohingya forces arrived on the Chittagong doorstep. As chaos descended, it was quickly recognised by the security forces in Bangladesh that it was armed opposition groups that had better relations with the local peoples than the Tatmadaw authorities in Myanmar. By 1980, most of the refugees had been allowed to return. But anger with the BSPP government was reignited with the passage of the 1982 Citizenship Law. The effect of this law was to prompt a new wave of Rohingya migrants and refugees to cross into the Chittagong Division. The tri-border region had in effect become ungovernable, with a diversity of Chakma, Mizo, Rakhine and Rohingya forces all under arms.

Secure in their borderland sanctuaries, armed opposition groups in Rakhine State struggled on through the 1980s in resistance to the BSPP government. Streams of travellers – villagers, blackmarketeers, refugees and activists – daily crossed backwards and forwards through territories contested by different authorities. Chittagong, Teknaf and Cox's Bazar became the main hubs for cross-border networking. A significant change in the security balance only occurred in 1986 when the MNF leader Pu Laldenga agreed a peace accord with the Indian government. After a quarter century in armed struggle, the MNF gained political recognition for the Mizo cause and won elections to become the first Mizoram State government. Until the present day, the struggle for Mizoram is regarded as a model among nationality peoples seeking the rights of autonomy and self-determination in the region.[54]

The MNF left another important legacy behind. The withdrawal of MNF troops had the consequence of strengthening the foothold of other anti-government groups in the tri-border region. As the MNF returned to Mizoram, forces from Rakhine State were able to take over their positions. With around 200 troops under arms, the White Flag CPB remained the strongest force. But the ANLP, CPA, AIO and RPF also maintained armed wings that continued underground operations. The ALP meanwhile placed most emphasis on its membership of the National Democratic Front on the Thailand border. During the 1980s, the KNU-NDF headquarters at Manerplaw became the main resistance centre for ethnic nationality forces in the country.

The result was that, though weakened in military terms, Rakhine activists remained prominent in armed opposition politics.[55] This was highlighted in famous circumstances in 1985 when delegations of the two key forces in anti-government resistance – the CPB and NDF – finally met for a landmark meeting on the China border. The leaders of both teams were ethnic Rakhines: Kyaw Mya, politburo member of the CPB, and U Soe Aung for the KNU/NDF.

Factionalism and disunity, however, continued to be a perennial problem. It was early warning of serious difficulties to come. During the 1970s, the CPA had itself split into two factions at the height of its popularity. The leading party was headed by Maung Han, which was overtly nationalist. The smaller grouping, led by Kyaw Zhan Rhee, remained closer to the Red Flag CPB.[56] Then in 1985, the White Flag CPB suffered a major blow when a Chin-related group broke away to set up what, in 1987, became the Tribal Nationalities Party, headed by Padi Phru. To try and build unity, the AIO, ALP and CPA initiated a new alliance in 1985, the National United Front of Arakan (NUFA), which developed in subsequent years into a new nationalist movement. But any political progress was very slow.

There was also a lack of cooperation with Muslim-based parties throughout this critical time. The challenge of fighting a common enemy did not bring inter-party unity. The main Muslim-based movement in the aftermath of the Nagamin operation was the Rohingya Patriotic Front. But the RPF was also badly weakened by political in-fighting and factionalism during the 1980s. This was triggered in 1982 when the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) broke away from the RPF under the leadership of Mohammed Yunus, a former doctor.

With links in international Islamic circles, the RSO quickly became regarded as the more radical of the two movements. The RSO maintained a base near Ukhia on the Bangladesh border where the Saudi Arabian charity Rabitat-al-Aalam-al-Islami funded a hospital and other aid projects for Muslim refugees.[57] In later years, the RSO was also reported to have developed connections with fundamentalist organisations abroad. These included the Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh and Pakistan, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami in Afghanistan and the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen in India.[58]

Any military activity, however, by the new RSO was limited. Many Rohingya leaders in Rakhine State disagreed with the party's radical turn. During 1986-87 this led to the formation of the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF) in an alliance between the RPF, headed by Shabbir Hussein, and an RSO faction led by Nurul Islam, a former lawyer.[59] Like its Rohingya predecessors, the ARIF demanded an autonomous territory in Muslim-majority areas of north Arakan. To achieve this, it sought to work with pro-democracy parties and other nationality forces.[60] The aim of the ARIF, said Nurul Islam, was a "multi-national" union and a "prosperous welfare state on the basis of federalism, where peace will prevail forever".[61]

RPF troops in border camp, mid-1980s (MS archive)

Today these divisions and rivalries in the Bangladesh borderlands might seem obscure. But it was against this backdrop that the controversial issues of identity and ideology began to take on a deeper resonance. In the light of later events, modern-day advocates should not try and make an equivalence – or false equivalence – about actions taken by the different sides. Care is always needed in linking particular events to longer-term consequences. Human rights are universal and must be guaranteed for all people. That has always remained the fundamental need in Arakan. But during the 1980s the narratives of "Rakhine" and "Rohingya" identities began to develop in divergent ways that have had a lasting, and historically regressive, impact on ethno-political discourse in Arakan politics (see box: "Rakhine, Rohingya and the 'Politics of Labelling'").

For this reason, it is important to note that, in a country riven by ethnic conflict, the issue of "Rohingya" rights and identity was not generally the contentious subject in the mid-1980s that it subsequently proved to be. Part of this was due to a lack of familiarity about politics in the modern-day Maungdaw District outside of communities in northern Rakhine State. But the Nagamin clampdown and 1982 Citizenship Law had also set in motion a train of events that led to the radicalisation in response – and counter-response – on all sides that underpins the scale of societal division that exists today.

It is difficult to date an exact starting point. But many community leaders believe that the 1978 Nagamin operation was the moment from which "extremism" first came out into the open. Many of the worst fears from the inter-communal violence of 1942 were revived. At its most divisive, this could be described as a complete denial of a "Rohingya" identity by the Myanmar government and by many Rakhine and Buddhist nationalists. In their descriptions, they insist that a majority of Muslims in Rakhine State are "Bengali" – and hence are illegal migrants from "India" or, more recently, East Pakistan-Bangladesh. In contrast, there are Rohingya nationalists and Islamic fundamentalists from this era who have sought to expand Rohingya identity to create a "pan-Arakan" history. In their view Muslims, rather than Buddhists or Rakhines, have been the dominant cultural and ethnic group in the territory.

Both positions have obvious flaws. Arakan has always been a multi-cultural land. But during the past four decades, the opposing narratives have

been increasingly articulated, resulting in the eventual collapse in inter-community relations. It should be stressed that many people reject such competing views. Moderating opinions, however, were generally lost sight of amidst the worsening crisis. Under the BSPP government, both Buddhists and Muslim leaders expressed concerns about what they saw as the attempted "Burmanisation" of their lands. But during the 1980s some Rakhine nationalists also began to project the Rohingya movement as an equal political threat.

A similar hardening of views was underway in Rohingya activist circles. In northern Rakhine state, the Nagamin operation had left very deep fears in many Muslim communities about their future in the country. In 1978 this prompted the RPF to revive claims from the 1950s of "genocide".[62] Four years later, the 1982 Citizenship Law accelerated the promotion of a more assertive description of Rohingya history and identity. The RPF began to circulate maps of a "Rohingya Homeland" covering the whole of the Rakhine State and Arakan Hill Tracts.[63] Then in November 1984 the RPF presented an appeal to the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers for international support. Claiming that Arakan is a Muslim-majority state, the RPF President Muhammad Jafar Habib stated that the party was waging "jihad" for the creation of a "Rohingya Autonomous State within the Burmese Federation".[64] There is a "perennial cycle of anti-Muslim rage in Arakan," claimed the RSO.[65]

Although targeted for an international audience, such appeals did not escape the notice of Rakhine nationalists and government leaders at home. Among Rakhine parties, the historic existence of Muslim communities was not denied. But peace had never truly returned to the Naf River borderlands after the Second World War. Here, the notion of Muslim or Rohingya "autonomy" was rejected. The government's flirtation with a Mayu Frontier Administration was also not forgotten. In addition, there were continued allegations about illegal migration across the Naf River under the auspices of Mujahid struggle.

It needs to be stressed that there is no evidence to support that migration on any significant scale happened. In fact, the greatest movement occurred in the other direction. But this accusation remains an integral part of the anti-Rohingya narrative in Rakhine State today. Located next door to one of the most populous countries in the world,[66] the sense of Rakhine vulnerability on a Muslim front-line remains strong.

From this point, the language of both Rakhine and Rohingya movements became more polarised. Said an AIO official: "We recognize the rights of the Muslim people in Arakan and invite them to join us but they must realize that talk of holy wars severely alienates our people."[67] Also criticised, the elevation of Rohingya from northern Rakhine State to a pan-Arakan identity raised much broader concerns about the territory's political future. Opposition leaders believed that Muslim radicals were reshaping "Arakan history in a manner that could best be said as Islamized and Rohingyanized."[68]

There were also disagreements among Muslim groups. As in the 1950s, the rise of a militant movement among the Rohingya population raised questions among the Kamans and other Muslim communities about how to best represent their cause. Not all Muslims in Arakan have historically regarded themselves as Rohingyas. Many still preferred to see themselves as "Arakanese Muslims", an identity that they want to retain as part of the broader social landscape in Rakhine State (see Chapter 3).

In 1982 this led to the formation of the Arakan Liberation Organisation (ALO). Its founder was U Kyaw Hla, an intellectual and self-described "Arakanese Muslim" who had an ethnic Kaman wife. Kyaw Hla was well known in opposition political circles for a foiled plot against Gen. Ne Win, after which he escaped to the Thailand border. In previous years, the ALP had blocked the RPF from gaining membership to the NDF. But by forming the ALO as a "non-Rohingya" force, Kyaw Hla hoped that KNU and NDF leaders in Manerplaw would agree to Muslim representation from Arakan. The ALO's aim was to organise among the Muslim population in the Sittwe and Mrauk-U areas. The ALP, though, continued its objections.[69]

A small force of ALO troops subsequently trained further north in territory controlled by the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP). But this was the virtual limit of its activities. When the ALO tried to set up a base area on the Bangladesh border in 1986, its members were disarmed by Rohingya forces, effectively ending the ALO movement.[70] Two years later, the ALO was transformed by Kyaw Hla

into the Muslim Liberation Organisation of Burma (MLOB) amidst pro-democracy protests that swept the country. During the following decade, the MLOB became the leading Muslim voice in united front politics against the government.

The rejection of the ALO – by both Rakhine and Rohingya groups – also had negative fall-out in the broader context of Arakan politics. Until the ALO disagreement, most organisations had regarded the Rohingya groups as one element among Muslim-based parties. But the lack of unity between Rohingya and fellow Muslim organisations troubled Rakhine opposition groups.[71] The ALO was also criticised by hardliners in the Rakhine nationality movement, who did not want to see the formation of a rival "Arakan" force among the Muslim population. As the National United Party of Arakan later concluded of the ALO: "This group was moderate and progressive but attacked by Rakhaing extremists and Muslim fundamentalists."[72]

The ALO failure in itself might have appeared to be a minor episode. But it warned of deeper divisions that were about to come. Until the present day, Muslim or Rohingya organisations in Rakhine State – whether electoral or armed – have rarely been accepted into discussions and alliances with other political groupings. The result was that, at another critical moment in history, the different political and nationality claims among the peoples of Arakan were not discussed and resolved. A dangerous divide was deepening. Nagamin, the Citizenship Law and a diversity of armed struggles: no effort was made to achieve reconciliation between the government and different nationalities in Rakhine State.[73] Instead, the shape of national change was being dictated by Ne Win's Tatmadaw.

As this impasse deepened, Rakhine State remained a land in deep crisis. It was the Tatmadaw's continuing fighting with the KNU and NDF forces in the Thai borderlands and with the CPB and KIO on the Yunnan frontier that received the rare media headlines. But it was also becoming difficult for the government to keep the lid on unrest in Rakhine State as well. During 1985-86 Amnesty International launched its first appeals over the arrest of "Arakan Muslims" in Buthidaung who were accused of links to armed Muslim groups.[74] Then in May 1986 a CPA guerrilla force seized control of Minbya town during a spectacular raid in an attempt to put the Arakan cause back on the political map.[75] The Tatmadaw responded with a security crackdown during which dozens of local people were arrested, prompting another appeal by Amnesty International.[76] Among those detained was the BSPP township chairman.

Since this time, a stream of documented reports about arbitrary arrests and other human rights violations has continued until the present day. Northern Rakhine State has one of the most serious – and continuous – records of conflict and human rights abuses of any territory in the country.[77] It is a divisive legacy that remains to be addressed. The Tatmadaw's counter-insurgency offensives of the late 1970s had not succeeded. As the Minbya attack revealed, Rakhine State in the 1980s represented a classic example of all the failures of the "Burmese Way to Socialism" in microcosm: political repression, an economy in decline, and a diversity of armed opposition groups in the hills (see box: "Timeline: Armed Movements Arakan").

The days of the BSPP government were nearing an end. In December 1987, Myanmar was designated with Least Developed Country status at the United Nations as one of the ten poorest countries in the world. It was a humbling decline, proving the spark for student-led protests that spread across the country. In July 1988 Ne Win resigned, signalling the end to BSPP rule. As people took to the streets in celebration, it appeared for a brief moment that ethnic peace and political reform could finally be coming.

Not for the first time, optimism proved short-lived. Within two months, the Tatmadaw had cracked down again, and the Ne Win government was replaced by a new incarnation of military rule that lasted nearly as long as its BSPP predecessor.

Mother and daughter at Rural Health Centre, Maungdaw District (TK)

5. Military Government: The SLORC-SPDC (1988-2011)

Electoral Promises and Political Repression

Arakan politics entered a new era of instability and upheaval following the assumption of power by the military State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in September 1988 (from 1997, State Peace and Development Council [SPDC]). Political reaction was triggered by a series of epoch-defining events that reshaped the ethno-political landscape of the country during the next two years. The Burma Socialist Programme Party collapsed. Up to 10,000 students and democracy activists fled into borderlands controlled by the National Democratic Front and other nationality forces. The Communist Party of Burma fell apart due to ethnic munities. The SLORC government announced a new policy of ceasefires with armed nationality forces. And the newly-established National League for Democracy won a landslide victory in the 1990 general election, the country's first in three decades.

Once the dust had settled, this was the virtual limit of government change. Systematic repression quickly resumed, and over the next two decades a new "tri-partite" configuration developed in national politics between the Tatmadaw, the NLD and ethnic nationality parties. Since this time, "tri-partite dialogue" has been promoted by the United Nations and other international bodies as the essential step needed to achieve national peace and reform. Thirty years later, the same challenges remain. Many of the divisions in national politics today have their origins in the fractured landscape of the SLORC-SPDC era.

Nowhere have these challenges been more deeply felt than in Rakhine State. During another time of national change, the instabilities of central government had a detrimental impact on local communities. The failures of state triggered a new cycle of marginalisation and loss, reaffirming the fundamental question as to how the peoples of Arakan should represent themselves. Should this be through cooperation with the Tatmadaw and parties at the national centre or through the development of political movements in their own land? In the 21st century, this question remains to be answered.

Optimism was initially high following the BSPP downfall. Pro-democracy demonstrations took place in Sittwe, Mrauk-U, Rathedaung and other towns in Rakhine State during the 1988 protests. Around 700 students and anti-government activists subsequently took refugee in the tri-border region following the SLORC clampdown.[1] Despite continuing repression, two main nationalist parties were set up to contest the 1990 polls. The stronger was the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD), headed by Dr Saw Mra Aung and the historian U Oo Tha Tun. The smaller was the left-wing Arakan People's United Organisation, which included Kyaw Zan Rhee, Kra Hla Aung, Bonbauk Tha Kyaw and other former revolutionary leaders. Among the Muslim population, the main party was the National Democratic Party for Human Rights (NDPHR), led by U Tin Maung (Nur Ahmed), Fazul Ahmed, U Kyaw Min (Zul Nurain) and U Ebrahim (U Chit Lwin). Initially, supporters wanted to include the name Rohingya in their title. But this was rejected by the authorities. After decades of conflict, it was a rare moment of opportunity for the peoples of Rakhine State to try to express their views.

On election day, the voting was unexpectedly free and fair. It was little surprise then that Arakan-based parties did best at the polls. U Oo Tha Tun was arrested before the election. But the ALD succeeded in becoming the largest party in the state. Running on a manifesto of ethnic peace and federal democracy, the party won eleven of the 26 available seats to the NLD's nine. The ALD's victory also had national significance, with the party becoming the third most successful party after the NLD and Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) in the country. After an interruption of 28 years, Arakan nationalism was officially back on the political map.[2]

Other nationality parties also did well in the election. The success of Muslim candidates during the parliamentary era after independence was repeated in the north of the state (see Chapter 3). Here the NDPHR won the four seats for Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships. Relations were generally good between the ALD and NDPHR, with both parties promoting human rights reform. The ALD was also allied in the United Nationalities League for Democracy (UNLD) with two other nationality parties that won seats in the state: the Mro or Khami National Solidarity Organisation and (Muslim-majority) Kamans National League for Democracy (KNLD). With a combined total of 65 seats, ALD and UNLD leaders were confident that they could play a leading role in drawing up a new constitution in collaboration with the NLD.

This, though, was the limit of reform. As with the Federal Movement in 1962, Tatmadaw leaders stepped in to stop political parties from meeting. The victorious MPs were never allowed to call a parliament. The security services instead initiated a long-running clampdown on the NLD, SNLD, ALD and other pro-democracy parties. In Rakhine State, the pressures were relentless. Oo Tha Tun died in prison in 1991; the ALD, KNLD and NDPHR were banned in 1992; and the ALD MP-elect for Rathedaung, U Tha Noe, and NLD MP-elect for Thandwe, U Tun Yi, both went into political exile. The crackdown on the Muslim-backed NDPHR was similarly intense. The party's candidate for Sittwe, U Kyaw Hla Aung, was sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment, and the MP-elect for Buthidaung (1), Kyaw Min, was detained for three months. For both men, it was the beginning of a long period of political harassment and arrest.[3]

It was to be another two decades before political parties were allowed to revive. This, however, did not quell nationalist opposition. With electoral parties suppressed, nationalist momentum once again swung back to the armed opposition side. Militant resistance was by no means at an end.

Conflict Resumes, Militant Reorganisation and the 1991-92 Rohingya Exodus

While the political crackdown continued, the Tatmadaw leadership turned their attention to armed opposition groups. After the SLORC takeover, the country's borderlands were in turmoil. With the CPB collapse, the SLORC government initially won itself breathing space by agreeing ceasefires during 1989 with four nationality forces that broke away from the CPB's People's Army on the China border. Two organisations stood out: the (Kokang) Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and United Wa State Army (UWSA).[4] Together with the Kachin Independence Organisation, these three ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) in the northeast of the

country were to later play a vital role in the revival of armed opposition in Rakhine State (see Chapters 6, 7 and 8). But for the SLORC an initial aim had been achieved. With the Shan-Yunnan frontier largely subdued, the ruling generals were able to turn their main concentration to the country's other restive borders. In several ethnic states, anti-government opposition was still building.

The Tatmadaw leadership had many reasons for concern. In the early 1990s, a plethora of new alliances and organisations were just getting underway to bring different movements in the country together. The main opposition hub was the territory of the Karen National Union and its NDF allies on the Thailand borders. Here the main force of the Arakan Liberation Party was also based. New movements included the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF: 1988), Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB: 1988) and National Coalition Government Union of Burma (NCGUB: 1990) of exile MPs. Subsequently, the National Council Union of Burma (NCUB: 1992) was also set up, bringing together over 20 different anti-government organisations from around the country. The Muslim Liberation Organisation of Burma, headed by the Arakanese Muslim Kyaw Hla, also became a DAB and NCUB founding member.

As all sides recognised, the new united fronts marked a highly potent moment in national politics. The NCGUB and NCUB were movements linking different parties and actors across the country that the security forces were determined to forestall. The "Prime Minister" of the new NCGUB in the KNU-NDF headquarters at Manerplaw was Dr Sein Win. He is a cousin of the NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi who was under house arrest in Yangon.

Initially, the activities of armed movements in Rakhine State received little international attention after the SLORC takeover. The Tatmadaw's first offensives were in NDF-controlled territories in the Kachin, Karen, Kayah, Mon and Shan States. But Rakhine State was to become an important barometer of conflict and change during the SLORC-SPDC era. As conflict spread, Rakhine State was quickly drawn in. With political parties banned, support for armed opposition movements was continuing to grow. In the following years, a diversity of Rakhine and Rohingya EAOs became centrally involved in anti-government activism.

In 1988, Rakhine forces in the tri-border region had initially been quick off the mark. Sensing the winds of change, in September that year the existing National Unity Front of Arakan of the ALP, Arakan Independence Organisation and Communist Party of Arakan was expanded. Three new members joined: the veteran Arakan National Liberation Party, Tribal Nationalities Party and a short-lived National Democratic Force of Arakan (NDFA) that was formed among younger activists. The NUFA's objective was threefold: transition to "democracy", salvaging "Arakan from colonial bondage" and founding a "sovereign state of Arakan".[5] On the same day, the AIO and ALP briefly merged. Although no Muslim parties were included, such a move to bring opposition forces together had long been advocated by nationalist supporters. The armed wing of the new alliance was known as the New Arakan Construction Army (see box: "Timeline: Armed Movements Arakan").

Political momentum was then taken over by the new arrivals from the towns. In November 1988, an All Arakan Students Union was established. Subsequently, a "901 Regiment" was formed by ABSDF members in the Bangladesh, India and Thailand borderlands as one of 18 ABSDF battalions based around the country's frontiers.[6] An ALD-in-exile (ALD [E]) movement was also formed in the tri-border region following the government crackdown down on the ALD and other electoral parties. The MP-elect Tha Noe became its patron. Meanwhile the ALP, an NDF member, joined as a founding member of the new 22-party DAB on the Thai border along with the ABSDF and NUFA. At the same time, a newly-formed Chin National Front, also an NDF and DAB member, began organising in Paletwa Township in the former Arakan Hill Tracts.[7] By 1990, it was clear that a significant reorientation in anti-government movements was underway in every border region.

As a reminder of earlier times, the remnant "CPB Arakan" force, headed by Saw Tun Oo, attempted to struggle on following the collapse of its mother party on the China border. It was the last outpost of a once powerful movement to remain active in the country. In a final rallying call, the CPB's Rakhine politburo member Kyaw Mya claimed: "The oppressed people of all nationalities are now in angry mood and they are waiting their time."[8] But it was now a younger generation of activists who were driving events on the ground. Reflecting

Ethnic Mro women in Ponnagyun Township (IR)

the end of the Cold War, communist ideologies were dropped. The new focus was on federalism, human rights and democracy. The CPB's remaining "Arakan Province" members eventually resettled at a "peace village" near Maungdaw after a 1997 ceasefire with the military government. After four decades of armed struggle, CPB advocacy in Rakhine State was at an end.

Muslim politics, meanwhile, were also passing through critical changes. Like their Rakhine counterparts, Muslim leaders initially placed their hopes on a breakthrough by the new democracy parties. If any single event could change their political fortunes, it was hoped that the 1990 election would do this. Following the 1978 refugee exodus and 1982 Citizenship Law, the plight of Rohingya communities in northern Rakhine State was desperate (see Chapter 4). Both the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front and Rohingya Solidarity Organisation remained active, but neither posed any significant threat to government control. Democratic change was the popular aspiration, and most attention in militant circles focused on the MLOB that was active with other anti-government forces in the DAB on the Thailand border.

The SLORC government viewed the security situation very differently. For a regime battling for survival, it was the link-up between democracy supporters in the towns and ethnic nationality forces in the borderlands that was its greatest fear. It was through this prism that all its analyses were made. Three opposition actions during 1990-91 now caused the Tatmadaw leadership to shift their security attention from the China and Thailand borders in the east to the Bangladesh and India borders in the west. For a two-year period, Rakhine State and Ayeyarwady Division became the focus of an intensive security crackdown.[9] As in the late 1970s, the consequences were devastating for local communities.

In organisational terms, the three initiatives by armed opposition forces were not inter-linked. But they all aroused the same degree of suspicion among Tatmadaw commanders. First, a newly-formed "Arakan Army" (AA[1]: initially "Rakhaing Tatmadaw") began moving its base by sea from the KNU's Dawei-Myeik district on the Andaman Sea to the India-Bangladesh borders. Led by an ex-ALP commander Bo Khaing Raza, the aim of the new movement was to link up with the NUFA and other anti-government organisations. Second, reports began to emerge that the RSO and ARIF were stepping up the training of troops in the Bangladesh borderlands after acquiring new sources of arms and funding.[10] And third, the KNU attempted to resume operations in the Ayeyarwady Delta.

These were all threats that the SLORC government took very seriously. Cross-country movement between armed opposition groups had largely been stopped by the Tatmadaw's "Four Cuts" campaigns against the CPB and KNU during the 1970s (see Chapter 4). But if the KNU could regain a foothold in the Ayeyarwady Delta region, the NDF, DAB and other armed opposition forces would be able to resume a land and sea bridge between the Thailand border and Rakhine State. To counter this challenge, the Tatmadaw moved quickly to step up military operations during 1991-92.

The first counter-insurgency target was Khaing Raza's AA[1]. An advance force landed in Pauktaw Township in April 1991. Breaking into two parties, one team reached the tri-border region and NUFA-controlled territory after crossing the Kaladan River. But the second team was interdicted by the Tatmadaw near Mrauk-U. The news of the AA[1]'s presence was quickly out. In response, the security forces launched a systematic clearance operation over the following weeks in the upper streams of Mrauk-U, Kyauktaw, Buthidaung, Rathedaung and Ponnagyun townships. The SLORC government was determined to prevent the AA[1] and NUFA members from joining together to develop new base areas in the surrounding hills (see box: "Timeline: Armed Movements Arakan").

Most of the villagers targeted in these first counter-insurgency operations were ethnic Rakhines. Dozens of villages were reportedly relocated.[11] But it was Muslim communities who bore the main brunt during the Tatmadaw's second campaign. Under "Operation Pyi Tharyar", government troops moved further north to target the RSO.[12] For the second time in 14 years, a major refugee crisis occurred when over 260,000 Muslim refugees fled across the Bangladesh frontier to escape Tatmadaw operations. Any hopes of peace and democratic change after the 1990 general election were now ended. For the fifth time in Arakan history, a major conflict crisis unfolded along the Naf River frontier during a time of governmental change. The mass displacements and sufferings of 1991-92 were now added to those of 1784, 1824, 1942 and 1978.

While these operations continued, the government embarked on the third stage in its security clampdown. In late 1991, the Tatmadaw's South West Command struck with extraordinary force after a small KNU unit entered the Bogale area in the Ayeyarwady Delta. Army units and helicopters constantly swept local villages as far as Ngapudaw on the Bay of Bengal. At the end of this campaign, the government claimed to have killed 317 "terrorist insurgents".[13] Eyewitnesses, in contrast, said that nearly all those who died were civilians.[14] The message was clear. The Tatmadaw was prepared to use draconian force to disrupt any attempt by armed opposition groups to link up on Myanmar's western flank.

With the military operations over, Rakhine State was to remain cut off from central Myanmar for the rest of the SLORC-SPDC era. But this time, amidst the usual patterns of village relocations, a new policy of social engineering was introduced. According to Amnesty International and other human rights organisations, the purpose was to drive the Muslim population from their homes in the north of the state.[15] To deliver this policy, a new inter-agency force was set up. Known as the Nasaka or "Border Immigration Headquarters", the network included police, intelligence, customs and Tatmadaw officials.[16] At the same time, model communities – known as "Natala" villages – were built by the new Ministry for the Development of Border Areas and National Races.[17] This began resettling Rakhine villagers and ethnic Bamar inhabitants in the northern townships to try and create a Buddhist "buffer zone" along the frontier. Such measures were to take time. But, by these policies, a system of division was set in place. In the following decades, this would lead to the apartheid – and later complete removal – of many Muslim communities from the populous north of the state.

There were Rakhine organisations that tried to raise concerns about the government clampdown at the time. Pro-democracy groups believed that the security forces were trying to stoke inter-community tensions. In a public statement, the ABSDF (Arakan) appealed for peace, arguing that the "removal of the illegitimate military regime is the prerequisite and the cooperation between Arakanese and Benglee [sic] Rohingya Muslims are essential".[18] But in expressing Muslim sympathies, there was also concern about the intentions of the RSO and other Rohingya forces. As the ABSDF (Arakan) warned, the refugee crisis needed to be "peacefully resolved by democratic means as part

of a struggle for human rights ...not as an Islamic jihad".[19] Such sentiments still remain widespread today.

Rakhine nationalists also had another fear. As refugees fled across the border, there were worries that inter-communal violence between Buddhists and Muslims could spread into Chittagong District after inflammatory reports appeared in the Bangladesh media. So intense were the Tatmadaw operations that a frontier war seemed possible at one stage after a policeman was killed in an attack on a Bangladesh border post. Marma, Rakhine and other Buddhist communities feared a religious backlash. To try and calm tensions, a committee of nine "revolutionary forces of Arakan" issued a public appeal to "Bangladesh and her people". This assured them of the fraternity between the peoples of the two countries, who are "culturo-historically as well as geo-politically" always neighbours.[20] To begin with, these activities worked. But the patience of the Bangladesh authorities towards the perennial instabilities on the border was beginning to wear thin (see "Government Transition and Opposition Re-alignments" below).

From this low point, government-to-government relations between Yangon and Dhaka slowly started to improve. The official beginning was a bilateral treaty on refugee repatriation agreed with the Bangladesh government after Snr-Gen. Than Shwe replaced Snr-Gen. Saw Maung as the SLORC chairman in April 1992. Then a little-known general, Than Shwe was to emerge as the main architect of SLORC-SPDC transition in the following years. By 1996, 190,000 refugees had officially returned to Rakhine State under UNHCR auspices.

On the surface, these appeared to be steps in the right direction. But, as with many Than Shwe policies, outcomes were not always what they at first seemed. In many cases, the returning refugees were not allowed to go back to their homes. Rather, they came back to conditions of strict security restrictions and monitoring as the government's new border controls kicked in.

The rights of many Muslims were also eroded by a further tightening up on citizenship restrictions. In 1989, the government had introduced "Citizenship Scrutiny Cards" to replace "National Registration Cards" for all inhabitants of the country. But, when this system was rolled out during the 1990s, many Muslims in Rakhine State were rejected. Officials instead issued them with temporary "White Cards" that provided few guarantees for their livelihoods and security. Faced with this realisation, 50,000 refugees never returned to Rakhine State, and the exodus of Muslims continued. By 2000, it was estimated that there were over 100,000 unregistered people identified as Rohingyas in Bangladesh alone.[21] Others travelled further afield in the Muslim world, while the diaspora began to increase for the first time in Western countries.

Many governments and humanitarian organisations were appalled by the SLORC's actions. The Rohingya crisis was only one among many raising human rights concerns at the time. The democracy movement was suppressed, and refugee numbers were increasing among Karen, Karenni and Mon peoples along the Thailand border as well. In this context, the attempts by military officials to explain the Rohingya exodus were deemed completely unacceptable. When questioned, SLORC officials always returned to the same allegations of scaremongering by "Mujahid extremists" that had been made to justify Nagamin and the 1978 crackdown (see Chapter 4). "The Rohingya problem is no more than the problem of unregistered illegal immigrants," claimed the state-controlled Working People's Daily.[22] In response to the deepening emergency, the position of UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights to Myanmar was mandated in 1992 to produce regular reports on social and political developments in the country. A quarter of a century later, such reports are still continuing.[23]

In the following years, there was no amelioration in the military government's behaviour. As economic sanctions by the European Union, USA and other Western countries intensified, the SLORC-SPDC regime became one of the most condemned in the world. A catalogue of grave human rights violations was building. Aung San Suu Kyi and other democracy leaders suffered constant harassment and arrest. The first allegations of the "ethnic cleansing" of Rohingya Muslims were made.[24] Fighting still continued in several borderlands. And by the turn of the century, hundreds of political prisoners still remained in jail.[25] But from the viewpoint of Tatmadaw strategists, such ruthless security tactics paid off. The military government had survived a period of political turbulence as potentially serious as any of those during the 1940s and 1960s.

Arakan had once again been in the front-line of these events. But neither electoral nor armed nationality groups had been able to reshape the political landscape. It was the ruling generals who retained governmental control. With opposition movements contained, the Tatmadaw now embarked on a very different set of timetables and structures for reform.

Government Transition and Opposition Re-alignments

After Snr-Gen. Than Shwe took office, the military government began a long period of entrenchment towards what officers termed a new system of "disciplined democracy". Four elements were cornerstones in the Tatmadaw's transitional reform. All had significant consequences in Rakhine State. First, in 1993 the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) was established as a mass movement to support the Tatmadaw in the aftermath of the BSPP's collapse. Second, a hand-picked National Convention was formed the same year to draw up the principles for a new constitution. Third, the government's ethnic peace process was stepped up by the offer of ceasefires to more nationality forces. And fourth, a realignment in regional geo-politics was begun.

The international effect of these measures was to end the isolationism of the BSPP era and resume the post-colonial pivot away from India towards east and southeast Asia. With Beijing ending its support to the CPB, China quickly became the country's most important trading partner. In 1997, meanwhile, Myanmar became a member of the Association of South East Asian Nations.

Inside Myanmar, however, the pace of reform was glacially slow. In 1997, the SLORC was renamed the State Peace and Development Council, but this did not herald any change in government style. Rather, a reform path of labyrinthine complexity was instituted that is still evident today. Once again, this created many dilemmas over policy direction for opposition parties within the country. As in previous governmental eras, it was difficult for ethnic and political movements to find common ground while national politics were so deeply divided. This time, the main schism was between the military government and the NLD that had won the 1990 general election. Political parties –

National United Front of Arakan camp (MS)

whether electoral or armed – had to make a choice: should they try to work with the SLORC-SPDC that actually had power or should they support the NLD that was marginalised and weak?

A major division in national politics now developed over these issues. On the one hand, there was a loose objective of "federal democracy" among the NLD, pro-democracy parties and ethnic armed organisations in such alliances as the NDF and NCUB. On the other hand, the USDA and ethnic ceasefire groups were cooperating with the Tatmadaw in the National Convention to draw up a new constitution. The irreconcilable nature of these oppositional challenges was starkly exposed in the mid-1990s when an increasing number of EAOs began to make ceasefires with the government. The ceasefires of such forces as the Kachin Independence Organisation and New Mon State Party (NMSP) dealt a serious blow to the unity of the NDF and NCUB alliances. But the question as to whom to cooperate with for representation and reform – whether the Tatmadaw or NLD – was never completely answered. A quarter of a century later, a power play continues between the Tatmadaw and NLD at the heart of government, and the ethnic peace process is still ongoing.

The ramifications of these pressures were especially acute in Rakhine State. Although the SLORC-SPDC was commonly rejected, there were two further dynamics for local parties to contend with. First, there were tensions between Rakhine and Rohingya groups. And second, most ethnic nationality organisations preferred to keep their distance from the NLD and other Bamar-majority parties. This was highlighted by the results of the 1990 election where the ALD, NDPHR and other non-Bamar parties had won a majority of seats in the state. Following the SLORC crackdown, however, their ability to organise had largely been curtailed.

In this vacuum, much of the anti-government campaigning during the 1990s came from armed opposition groups. But no movement of effective strength was to truly emerge. Sometimes weakness was due to security pressures. But very often, it was due to factionalism among opposition parties themselves.

There were early warnings. Four months after the expansion of the NUFA alliance in September 1988, one faction of the ALP – under its President Khaing Ye Khaing – withdrew from its merger with the AIO and moved further north into the tri-border region with India.[26] Keen to retain the movement's identity, the main focus of the breakaway leaders was on the Thailand border. Here the party was a member of the NDF, DAB and NCUB alliances. Always a small force, in the following years the ALP's split was to prove highly divisive to Arakan unity. Three decades later, the ALP was still the only EAO in Rakhine State officially recognised by the government (see chart: "Ethnic Armed Organisations, November 2019").

To begin with, the ALP rift was little noticed. The various NUFA members generally took heart from the increase in volunteers following the SLORC's assumption of power. Hopes were further boosted during 1991 by the arrival from the Thai border of arms supplies and the first members of Khaing Raza's AA[1] to join with the NUFA. The Tatmadaw's counter-insurgency operations during 1991-92 generally limited the ability of opposition groups to organise. But NUFA organisers were not disheartened. In 1993, they followed the ALP in shifting their headquarters northwards to the Mizoram border where they established a new base at the "Parva Camp" on the Indian frontier.

In making this decision, NUFA leaders had been forced to take note of a strategy change by the government in neighbouring Bangladesh. After 1992, Bangladeshi security officials began to discourage armed opposition groups from settling too permanently in the no-man's land on the Chittagong frontier. This was partly in response to the destabilising fall-out from the 1992 refugee crisis. But it was also due to a changing strategy in Dhaka towards its handling of the Chakma conflict. In 1997, a softer governmental approach eventually led to a ceasefire with the Shanti Bahini movement. Any "buffer" role for Arakan forces was at an end (see box: "A Regional Conflict Complex").

At first, the relocation of the NUFA headquarters did not appear too serious a problem. During the 1990s, the borderlands of northeast India were still an epicentre of anti-government activism. In the remote mountains and forests, there was a complexity of armed nationality forces to rival those across the Myanmar frontier. At the Parva camp, the reorganisation of NUFA parties appeared to be going well. On 4 January 1994, the four

main members – the ANLP, CPA, TNP and AIO-ALP merger group – made the historic decision to transform into a single party, the National United Party of Arakan (NUPA). Its founding leadership was headed by the veteran revolutionaries Maung Sein Nyunt (ANLP), Shwe Tha (CPA) and Khin Maung (AIO). The AA[1], meanwhile, changed its name in the Rakhine language from "Rakhaing Tatmadaw" to "Rakhaing-Pray Tatmadaw". This was to signify its representation of all nationalities in Arakan "land". From this time, the new AA[2] was variously referred to in English as the Arakan Army and Arakan State Army (see box: "Timeline: Armed Movements Arakan").

With sympathisers throughout the state, the NUPA-AA[2] marked – on paper – the most important new armed opposition force in Arakan politics since the 1960s. But the new movement got off to a troubled start. A year later, 70 members of a CPA faction, headed by the political ideologue Thein Phay, seized weapons from the NUPA and broke away to form a new organisation: the Democratic Party of Arakan (DPA).[27] Other former CPA members, led by Shwe Tha, stayed with the NUPA movement. But the DPA defection was another distraction at a time when Arakan nationalists were seeking to build political unity. The same year, the NUPA also resigned from the DAB that was headquartered on the Thai border to return to what it described as the "Arakan independence line".[28]

Watching these events were a younger generation of Rakhine nationalists. They increasingly began to despair of the ideological differences among their elders. As they recognised, the humanitarian plight in many communities was desperate. It was not only Muslims who were suffering. In post-BSPP Myanmar, many Rakhines were also leaving from their homes in large numbers. Some were political exiles and refugees. Others were young people looking for work in the jade mines in Kachin State or in the migrant economy in India, Thailand, Malaysia and further countries beyond. Their departure was initially little noted amidst the population movements within the country. During the same period, refugees and migrants from all ethnic backgrounds poured across Myanmar's borders, including Chins, Karens, Mons, Shans and Bamars. But, over time, the new Rakhine diaspora became a significant population who played a key role in the sustenance – and present-day revival – of the Arakan nationalist movement.

The first steps in youth regeneration began in the mid-1990s at the same time as the NUPA formation. Youth activists were already prominent in the ALD (E), and in 1994 an Arakan Students Congress was set up in India. The next year, this informal grouping was superseded at a meeting in Bangkok by the present-day All Arakan Students and Youth Congress (AASYC). This included the ABSDF (Arakan) as well as young monk and youth representatives from Rakhine State, Bangladesh, India and Thailand. In its foundation statement, the AASYC prioritised achieving democracy, human rights, national unity and regaining the "lost sovereignty of Arakan".[29] But the young activists also recognised that there were challenges over strategies in the country's contested landscape. As a military movement, the Arakan branch of the ABSDF never evolved, and it was absorbed into the AASYC in 1995. Thus, rather than endorsing any one political movement or cause, the AASYC pledged cooperation with "all revolutionary organisations". The AASYC founders hoped that they could bring the different Arakan parties together – notably the ALP and NUPA. In the meantime, the AASYC argued that power should be handed over to the NLD that had been democratically elected.[30]

It was not long before this independent position came under challenge. Support for militancy was strengthening among young people. There was anger at government repression and the slow pace of change, and AASYC members frequently inter-acted with ALP, NUPA and other nationality forces in the field. This led to an early split over direction. An armed movement known as the Arakan New Generation Army was formed, and in March 1997 an AASYC grouping led by Khaing Mrat Kyaw joined with the NUPA-AA[2].[31] The AASYC still continued as a youth-based movement. But in the following years, other AASYC members went on to join a number of different parties and organisations. Both Twan Mrat Naing (Tun Myat Naing) and Kyaw Han, present-day commander and general-secretary of the United League of Arakan-Arakan Army, were formerly AASYC leaders (Kyaw Han was a president).

Through these inter-actions, the Arakan nationalist movement continued the opposition diversity that has been a feature in every governmental era since independence. Supporters of the ALD tried to keep the democracy movement alive in the towns. At

Naval supply boat in Buthidaung (TK)

the same time, a new line-up of organisations was supporting anti-government resistance in the hills: the AASYC, ALD (E), ALP, DPA and NUPA. On the surface, such fragmentation was a reflection of the government's upper hand. But Tatmadaw officers have always privately said that such a diversity of opposition movements are very difficult for the security forces to track down and control.

There was, however, one section of the population missing from this Arakan activism. Even at this stage, there was no meaningful engagement between Rakhine and Rohingya organisations. In the aftermath of the 1991-92 clampdown, the RSO build-up in the Bangladesh border had largely been quashed. But Rohingya militants had not gone away. Both the ARIF and RSO maintained small forces, and during 1994 the RSO launched a number of guerrilla operations in the Maungdaw area.[32] These were repelled by the security forces, with the RSO losing an estimated 30 troops killed in attacks. From this point, both the ARIF and RSO scaled back their military ambitions and returned to their focus on political lobbying.

With opposition pinned back in the hills, Tatmadaw leaders began to hope that they had weathered the worst of the storms. In reality, the era of Than Shwe government had not reached even a halfway stage. As the SLORC made its 1997 transformation into the SPDC, the government still faced a host of grave challenges around the country. Although the Tatmadaw remained in control, the task of replacing the BSPP with the USDA and a new political system had not seriously begun. Conflict impasse and military rule remained the dominant features of political life in SPDC Myanmar.

Operation Leech and Shwe Gas: New Fronts and New Crises

The late 1990s marked a difficult time for anti-government parties. As in the BSPP era, all opposition groups were facing challenges in their survival. But although military government was enforced, opposition movements were far from passive actors. Initiatives were constantly being launched to try and keep democratic opposition alive. None of these strategies succeeded in changing the pace or direction of government reform. However, many aspects of the contemporary landscape can be seen in the fall-out from events during the SPDC era. In particular, with the arrival of Indian, South Korean and Chinese business interests, a new chapter in Rakhine State politics was just beginning.

During the 2000s, six initiatives stood out as different actors sought to revitalize the Arakan

cause. All marked stepping-stones to the escalation in conflict that followed the SPDC era. They can be summarised as follows:

- an attempt by the NUPA to escalate armed struggle.
- an ALD initiative to revive party politics
- a failed alliance by the NUPA with armed Rohingya forces
- the formation of the present-day Arakan National Council to bring armed and non-armed organisations together
- a growth in civil society activism
- the emergence of a new military movement, the United League of Arakan-Arakan Army.

The most extraordinary of these endeavours remains the first: the attempt by the NUPA to establish a naval route along the Rakhine State coast. What was remarkable was the apparent cooperation in the initial stages by elements in the security forces in India. This was then followed by a sting operation against the NUPA known as "Operation Leech". Many aspects of these events remain shrouded in mystery. But the basic facts are not disputed. In February 1998, a combined NUPA-KNU team journeyed with two boatloads of arms from the Thai border to Landfall Island in the Andamans. In these operations, they were helped by a Myanmar-born Indian intelligence operative.[33] On arrival, the NUPA commander Khaing Raza and five other leaders were taken away and executed by believed members of the Indian security forces.

Controversy then followed for the Indian government. The remaining 34 NUPA and KNU members spent eight years in detention on the Andaman Islands. After that, they were transferred to Kolkata for trial and eventual release under UNHCR auspices in May 2011.[34] In setting such a trap, it was presumed that the Indian authorities feared connections between the NUPA and other armed groups, notably the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, in the adjoining borderlands (see box: "A Regional Conflict Complex"). On the other hand, NUPA officials believed that they had good relations with the Indian authorities. They argued that it would have been impossible for the organisation to set up its headquarters at Parva on the Mizoram border without the tacit approval of the Indian government. NUPA leaders were shocked by perceived duplicity, and there were rumours for several years afterwards of Tatmadaw involvement in Operation Leech or intrigue by political rivals against the NUPA.[35]

Later another explanation emerged: the Shwe Gas fields. In the light of India's economic interest, suspicions grew that the real motive behind Operation Leech was to remove the NUPA as a security threat from the Bay of Bengal. With the 2000 inauguration of the Shwe Gas project, the SPDC government was about to open the door to Asian investors in the territory. The economic prize of Arakan was very much on the radar of Indian, Chinese and South Korean companies at the time. But whatever the real intentions, Operation Leech had a very damaging impact on perceptions about international engagement in Rakhine political circles. Distrust has since lingered about the motives of outside interests and actors until the present day. From the outset, there was a perceived lack of consultation with local peoples.[36] The NUPA and AASYC subsequently led a 10-year campaign for the release of their colleagues. But the NUPA movement never truly regained momentum again.[37]

Nationalist attention meanwhile turned for a time to a second key area of activity in the SPDC era: the ALD's attempt to revive party politics. After the party was banned in 1992, the ALD (E) stepped up political advocacy in the borderlands. But the main ALD strategy was to try and work with the NLD and other pro-democracy groups in the towns. Initially, there was some success. In September 1998, this saw the ALD join the NLD, SNLD, Mon National Democratic Front and Zomi National Congress, who had all contested the 1990 general election, in forming a ten-person Committee Representing the Peoples Parliament (CRPP). In outreach to the Muslim community, Kyaw Min from the Muslim-backed NDPHR was also invited to join. However the response from the security forces was immediate. The ALD President Dr Saw Mra Aung was detained for over two years, while the ALD and CRPP Secretary, U Aye Thar Aung, received a 21-year jail term.[38]

Four years later, ALD leaders made another attempt to revive party politics when the party helped initiate the 2002 United Nationalities Alliance (UNA). This is a joint front, still active today, of nine ethnic-based parties that seek the establishment of a federal union.[39] The UNA's activities, though, proved little more successful

than those of the CRPP. Freedom of expression continued to be severely curtailed, and in 2005 the SNLD and UNA leader Khun Htun Oo received a 93-year jail term for alleged "high treason". The same year the NDPHR's Kyaw Min received a 47-year sentence, reportedly for living in Yangon without official permission.[40] It was a stark warning to opposition groups. Both men had previously attended sessions of the government's National Convention.[41] Political activism outside the government's parameters was clearly a high-risk undertaking.

With political parties hemmed in, it was ethnic armed organisations – the third area of nationalist initiative – who were often the main voices for the Arakan cause during the SPDC era. While the ALP engaged in NCUB politics on the Thailand border, the NUPA took the lead in the India-Bangladesh frontiers. From its Parva headquarters, NUPA leaders embarked during these years on a very different strategy towards the Rohingya question. Until the present day, the idea of a link-up between Rakhine and Rohingya parties remains controversial in both communities. Today the NUPA initiative to try and build bridges with the Muslim community looks prescient in its timing. However, subsequent events were soon to show the depth of the deepening chasm between Buddhist and Muslim populations.

Two decades ago, there still seemed a greater variety of ways to try and bring communities together and seek inclusive solutions. Most Rakhine nationalists were reluctant to work with organisations that identified by a Rohingya name. A Muslim autonomous region was rejected, and fears of jihadism or the imposition of Sharia law were frequently expressed. But there was also recognition of the historic existence of Muslim communities in Arakan and sympathy for those who had been displaced by Tatmadaw operations. Both the ALD and NLD accepted working with the NDPHR as a pro-democracy party, but not as a nationality movement.

On the Rohingya question, the situation was seen slightly differently among political activists in northern Rakhine State. Here there was greater understanding of the nationality issues involved. Leaders on the different sides were often known to one another, and their paths regularly crossed in the borderland world. A sense that the government was using ethnic and cultural divisions to chip away at Arakan's historic identity was of concern to leaders in both Rakhine and Rohingya movements. While Buddhist and Muslim populations were in armed struggle against the government in the northern districts, it was believed that the authorities were trying to divide them from communities in other parts of the state.

In particular, there is a stronger influence from ethnic Bamars and the politics of central Myanmar in Ann and Thandwe townships in the centre and south. In essence, it was considered by a number of leaders in both Rakhine and Rohingya networks that the division between Buddhist and Muslim communities in northern Rakhine State was an integral weakness in advancing the Arakan cause.

Against this backdrop, a change in Rohingya politics during the mid-1990s paved the way for a re-alignment in EAO positions. Behind this decision were a number of factors. These included the military weaknesses of armed opposition groups, the growing influence of exile movements, and recognition of the need to improve inter-community relations with the Buddhist population. The first step came with the 1995 formation of a new front, the Rohingya National Alliance. This finally brought the two main Rohingya EAOs of the ARIF and RSO together. Three years later, a more concrete strategy was unveiled with the establishment of two further alliances: a broader Rohingya National Council;[42] and a new military front known as the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO). The objective was to combine three opposition forces: the ARIF, headed by Nurul Islam, and two RSO factions, led by Dr. Mohammed Yunus and Prof. Mohammed Zakaria respectively. Supported by international outreach, the two new fronts represented the most significant new initiative in Rohingya advocacy since Gen. Ne Win's coup back in 1962 (see box: "Timeline: Armed Movements Arakan").

However hopes of Rohingya unity did not last long in the field. As in the 1980s, elements in the RSO leadership were never prepared to commit themselves fully to united front politics. Subsequently, a number of leaders – headed by Moulavi Deen Mohammed – broke away to remain a low-key Islamist force in the Naf River borderlands.[43] In contrast, Nurul Islam and the ARNO leaders followed a very different strategy.

Their goal was to develop cooperation with other ethnic nationalities and pro-democracy groups. This was made explicit in the ARNO's founding manifesto, which promoted democracy, human rights, the right of self-determination and an end to "Burmanisation" policies by the central government.[44] On this basis, the new Rohingya initiative had some success during the following years. Today ARNO is well known in political campaign circles around the world.

A key breakthrough occurred in 2000 when an Arakan Independence Alliance (AIA) was formed between ARNO and NUPA leaders. It was the first time such a Rakhine-Rohingya front had been agreed since independence in 1948. The two parties subsequently carried out occasional military operations together. But their main focus was on the promotion of inter-community understanding. Attracting particular attention, the two parties issued joint warnings about the increase in community tensions in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in New York.[45] The AIA stated:

> "AIA is committed to preserve the composite nature of the Arakan society and uphold the principle of 'peaceful co-existence' among all or different national groups of Arakan. It believes that the joint struggle of the Buddhist and Muslim communities…is absolutely imperative to liberate their homeland."[46]

During the following years, ARNO representatives also attended meetings of the National Reconciliation Programme with NCUB organisations on the Thailand border. Here they again pledged their support for federalism, peaceful coexistence and an "Indivisible Arakan".[47] For a brief moment, inter-community understandings appeared to be increasing. Other Rakhine organisations sought to convey the same message. In 2008 on the 224th anniversary of the downfall of the Arakan kingdom, the AASYC stated: "Instilling parochial racial and religious prejudices, successive Burman regimes from 1947 up to now have been driving a wedge between Arakanese and its sub-ethnic groups, northern and southern Arakan, and diverse ethnic and religious groups."[48]

Not all Rakhine organisations, however, approved of the AIA creation. This became apparent in the early 2000s when the ALP and DPA blocked attempts by NUPA-ARNO leaders to set up new training bases in the Thailand borders. The timing of this rejection came at a particularly difficult moment for the AIA partners. Not only was the Tatmadaw increasing military operations in the tri-border region, but Bangladesh had also ended its traditional policies of laissez-faire towards exiles and refugees along the Chittagong frontier. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, there was increased focus on the activities of armed groups with perceived jihadist connections in the Myanmar borderlands.[49]

Such international concerns were highlighted in 2003 when the ARNO offices in Bangladesh were raided and their files taken away.[50] The same year, ARNO leaders made the decision to retire from armed struggle and concentrate on political advocacy. But behind Dhaka's fears there was also concern over the increasing number of Rohingya "boat people" attempting to leave through Bangladesh to make the hazardous journey to Thailand.[51] Restrictions on the Rohingya population had been further tightened after violence between Buddhists and Muslims in Sittwe in February 2001 during which a number of people were killed. The new system of "White Card" registration made many Rohingyas in Rakhine State feel that they were becoming essentially stateless, recognised neither as citizens nor as foreigners in their own homeland.[52]

The NUPA leader Khin Maung was quick to sense the dangers. He warned at a 2006 peace conference in Bangkok that, since the AIA's 2000 formation, communal division had not only worsened in Rakhine State but was also being used by the government to undermine Arakan's sovereignty.[53] Already, he believed, the hope of political moderates that a future democratic state would resolve the Rohingya question was "unwise":

> "Unfortunately, since this alliance was formed, the debate about the Rohingya issue has become even more destructive, with extremists from both sides now putting forward Rakhaing chauvinist or Islamic expansionist concepts as possible solutions.[54]

At the time, advocacy by Rakhine and Rohingya leaders for inter-community understanding received little attention. A decade later, Khin Maung's warnings about the dangers of radicalisation proved to be true.

As the 2000s progressed, the dispute over Rakhine-Rohingya relations came to overshadow the fourth key initiative during the SPDC era: the attempt to establish a united front that included both armed and non-armed organisations. There were a growing number of voices seeking to be heard.

As a first step, a new movement known as the Arakan National Council (ANC) was established in March 2004 in New Delhi. Echoing the Arakan National Congress of the 1930s (see Chapter 2), the new ANC began with a broad representation of Rakhine nationalists – both armed and non-armed. Organisations involved in its formation included the NUPA, ALP, DPA, ALD (E), AASYC, Buddhist Rakhine Sangha Union, Arakan Women Welfare Association and Rakhine Women's Union. While various goals had been promoted by various members in the past, the new council agreed to seek the establishment of a federal union. There was, however, no Muslim or Rohingya representation, an absence that was criticised by Muslim commentators at the time (see box: "Timeline: Armed Movements Arakan").[55]

From this starting point, the question of the relationship with Rohingya parties now began to fuel differences of opinion among council members. Matters came to a head at an ANC convention in New Delhi in 2006 when other members demanded that the NUPA end its AIA alliance with the ARNO.[56] The NUPA leadership refused and, within two years, a series of splits had undermined both the NUPA and ANC movements.[57]

Policy decisions among ethnic armed organisations at this time were partly driven by the survival priorities of the various factions and parties. Sustaining a revolutionary movement in the borderworld has never been an easy task. Pressures were especially acute for armed movements in the tri-border region. Operation Leech had badly damaged relations with India, and during the 2000s the Bangladesh authorities continued to step up pressures on the different EAOs. In June 2005 the NUPA commander Tha Kyaw Tun was himself arrested in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Common hardships, however, did not bridge political differences. The outcome was a new series of divisions that today demarcate the peace and conflict landscape where three Rakhine forces are represented in armed opposition politics: the ALP, ANC and ULA.

For its part, the ALP never effectively joined the ANC. The party's main activities were in the anti-government strongholds of the KNU and other EAOs on the Thailand border. Here Khaing Soe Naing Aung became vice-chair of the NDF, DAB and NCUB during the 2000s. Resistance forces may have been weak on Myanmar's western frontier, but the NCUB remained a significant opposition alliance in the country. "The main aim of NCUB is to launch political defiance against the Government through military means as well as sabotage, political, diplomatic and public defiance," warned the state-controlled media.[58]

The NUPA and ANC, in contrast, split during 2007 along what became known as "Delhi group" and "Chittagong group" lines. Both factions proposed the notion that the Arakan movement should stand on its own feet.[59] Once the tensions had calmed, it was the ANC "Chittagong group", headed by Khin Maung, that took up the main political running. Eventually, a renewed sense of unity was achieved when a reorganised ANC held its 2nd Congress in 2009 in Mae Sot on the Thailand border. In attendance were representatives of the NUPA "Chittagong group", the ALD (E), AASYC and Rakhine Sangha Union (RSU) as well as the KNU and ABSDF. Here it was agreed that the ANC would become the leading body for political representation in the future, while the existing "Arakan Army" of the NUPA would become its military wing. Today these developments might appear obscure, but they explain how two ostensibly similar EAOs have remained in Arakan politics until the present day: the ALP and ANC, both of which claim legacies dating back to the 1960s (see box: "Timeline: Armed Movements Arakan").

In the following years, both the ALP and ANC members continued to struggle on in remote locations around the country's frontiers. The ALP was largely based on the Thai border with liaison in the tri-border region. The ANC had two groups using the "AA[2]" name: the NUPA in the Bangladesh-India borders and the AASYC on the Thai border.[60] Meanwhile, as pressures continued from the Bangladesh authorities, the AIA alliance between the ARNO and NUPA began to wind down. RSO diehards continued low-level activities in the Naf River borderlands from where they were reported to maintain links with the Taliban in Afghanistan and other fundamentalist networks.[61] The ARNO leadership, in contrast, concentrated on

domestic and international publicity following their 2003 retirement from armed struggle.[62]

On the surface, then, armed opposition movements in Rakhine State appeared to be running out of steam. What perhaps nobody expected was that, from this fractured landscape, two new armed forces were about to arise in Arakan politics, leading to the greatest upsurge of violence in many years: the United League of Arakan and the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army. Although the new movements differed widely in outlook and goals, they shared a common characteristic: alienation from the politics of the central government and disquiet among young people at the neglect of Arakan affairs. After another era of military government, they were also deeply sceptical of the intentions of all Bamar-led parties, whether the Tatmadaw, USDA or NLD. All Bamar-majority parties were viewed through an ethnic lens.

To understand how these new movements rose, it is important to look at the fifth key area in the development of Arakan nationalism during the SPDC era: the growth in civil society activism. After the SLORC assumed power, the pace of social change was initially slow in the transition from the sleepy days of the "Burmese Way to Socialism". However, there has always been a strong tradition of community activism in Buddhist circles dating back to British colonial days (see Chapter 2). Students and monks were again active during the 1988 protests, with the subsequent ABSDF (Arakan), AASYC and Rakhine Sangha Union extending their outreach into border areas. As poverty and repression continued, growing numbers of young people left their homes to seek refugee or opportunity elsewhere. From the late 1990s, community activism then began to blend with the activities of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in urban areas after the SLORC-SPDC allowed them to begin forming again in the country after an absence of three decades.[63] A tipping-point in community activism was approaching.

Civil society initiatives first started with the Metta Development Foundation and Shalom Foundation in Kachin State. At first, the government believed that it could control community actions by confining NGOs to the health and humanitarian sectors. In particular, faith-based organisations were of especial concern to the security forces. The 2007 "Saffron Revolution" reminded the authorities of the influence that Buddhist monks continued to have in the country. In response, the Yangon protests were heavily repressed. But as social and political conditions worsened, civil society action was the one sphere where community concerns could be expressed. This was a trend that accelerated in 2008 following the devastating Cyclone Nargis in which an estimated 140,000 people died in the Ayeyarwady Delta region.

On this occasion, Rakhine State was largely spared. But here community activism was galvanised from the turn of the century by the entrance of outside business interests into the territory. Social discontent was widespread. Rakhine State was one of the poorest territories in Myanmar; peace and political reforms had not been achieved; and many communities were barely living at subsistence level. At this unhappy moment, the arrival of international investors was not what local peoples wanted nor expected to see. With the SPDC leaders relocating from Yangon to their new capital at Nay Pyi Taw, the sense was deep of a military government very much out of tune with Myanmar's peoples.

As frustrations increased, an important role in raising awareness was played by exile groups. The crisis in Rakhine State was increasingly well documented in media networks abroad.[64] Because of the constant human exodus, numbers are difficult to estimate. But by the 2000s, the number of refugees and migrants from Rakhine State were well over the half million mark. Rakhine migrants and exiles were mostly in Thailand, Malaysia and Kachin State, while Rohingya Muslim populations were expanding in Bangladesh, Malaysia and other countries around the world. At first, much of the reporting was print-based. But, as access to the Internet spread, news and opinions were quickly disseminated between groups inside and outside of the country. Such dynamics marked a significant change from Myanmar's heavily-censored past (see box: "Facebook and the Role of Social Media").

At this moment, a key catalyst in bringing activists together was the Shwe Gas Movement. This was an NGO alliance that included networks in Rakhine State, Bangladesh, India and Thailand.[65] The Shwe Gas project was initiated in 2000 by the SPDC government with a consortium of South Korean and Indian companies.[66] It was only in 2009,

however, that the final destination for the natural gas was decided: the People's Republic of China. At the time, the project was promoted as a perfect collaboration between two friendly neighbours. The Myanmar government would gain revenue, while the China government would address its "Malacca Straits dilemma" by avoiding the security and economic costs of trans-shipment around the coast of Singapore.[67]

Today this decision is regarded by Rakhine nationalists as a turning-point in Arakan history. The signatory of the Memorandum of Understanding on the Chinese side was Vice-President Xi Jinping. A decade later, he looms large over relations with Myanmar and other Asian neighbours. As the modern-day President of China, he is the mastermind behind the Belt and Road Initiative and Beijing's visionary plans for economic expansion by land and sea towards Eurasia and beyond (see Chapters 7 and 8). The impact of the gas pipeline on Arakan was profound. With Kyaukpyu designated the port for on-shore delivery, Rakhine State has since become the gateway for transmission of the Shwe gas from the Bay of Bengal to Kunming in Yunnan Province. Subsequently, a pipeline was added to transport oil shipped from the Middle East.

Political and community leaders in Rakhine State were taken aback by the scale of the new project. The economic neglect of Arakan has always been a prime factor in driving nationalist sentiment. Opinion was widespread that successive governments had kept the territory poor as a matter of strategy since independence in 1948. Fears of increased marginalisation were now revived. As government troops moved in to seize land and enforce security, it was not clear how local communities would benefit. During the 2000s, the build-up in the Tatmadaw's Western Command continued to accelerate. By 2006 three Strategic Commands and 43 battalions were reportedly in place.[68]

The evidence was troubling. Rakhine State – after Kachin State – was estimated to be the second largest recipient of Foreign Direct Investment during the SLORC-SPDC era.[69] And yet, in neither territory was there evidence of benefit to the local people. Under the SPDC, such international organisations as Ärzte ohne Grenzen and the Three Diseases Fund were allowed to begin humanitarian projects in Rakhine State. But the territory still had some of the poorest social and health indicators in the country, including the highest rate of malaria.[70] Cautioned U Tun Win, the ALD MP-elect for Minbya (2):

> There is not enough medicine, not enough doctors and not enough hospitals. There are not enough schools, not enough teachers, and not enough support for students. Instead they are using the gas money to build their new capital city (Naypyidaw) and to buy weapons… If the companies continue this project, they will directly support the military regime. There will be no positive impact for the people.[71]

China's oil and gas pipelines were not the only international projects now raising concerns. A new "Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project" was agreed with India during the last years of the SPDC government. Initiated in 2008, the plan is to develop Sittwe as a commercial port to expand trade links in two directions: to Kolkata by sea and to northeast India through the Kaladan valley by land. For New Delhi, the benefits are obvious. Travel time between Kolkata and Mizoram will be cut by several days. But with the tri-border region a continuing zone of conflict, opposition leaders wondered how such mega-projects could be considered until peace and reform have truly been achieved (see box: "A Regional Conflict Complex").

In comparison with the pipelines, progress on the Kaladan Gateway project has subsequently been slower. But its announcement fed into the growing disaffection among local communities. Long-term decisions were being taken about the future of Rakhine State by the governments of Myanmar, China and India. And yet, there had been no participatory consultation with the local populations. Rather, the perception was growing that Rakhine State would become a "land bridge" for the advantage of the central government and business interests in neighbouring countries.[72] According to the Shwe Gas Movement, the new projects would not only increase human rights abuses but the ability of the armed forces "to hold the country hostage".[73]

As anger grew, the sixth – and potentially the most significant – initiative in the reshaping of Arakan nationalism took place during the final years of SPDC rule: the emergence of a new armed movement. In April 2009, a new "Arakan Army"

(AA[3]: "Rakkhaing Tatmadaw", subsequently "Rakkhaing Tatdaw") was declared by a group of 26 young people in northeast Myanmar.[74] Its political wing is known as the United League of Arakan. Led by Twan Mrat Naing, the new movement quickly found support among young people. From the outset, the ULA was different from its predecessors, rejecting the ideologically-bound politics of earlier movements in favour of a simpler nationalism. Among its leaders were former students, exiles and activists who had experience in other anti-government movements in the borderlands.[75]

Military training first began in the territory of the KIO ceasefire group in Kachin State where increasing numbers of jobless Rakhines had travelled in search of work during the previous two decades. The Hpakant jade mines, especially, had become a major source of employment in a lucrative trade tied up between the government, crony elites and Chinese business interests.[76] In taking these steps, the ULA appeared to be following in the path of previous Rakhine parties – notably the AIO, ALP and ABSDF (Arakan) – that had sought to begin their own movements in the territory of other nationality forces in the past. Over the next decade, however, the ULA was to make notably faster progress.

By a timing of history, two additional factors now supported the ULA's advance. First, in the new digital age, the ULA leaders were adept in social media and modern communications. In the following years, the party's youthfulness and modernity were to prove important in a country where young people were desperate for change after half a century under military rule. Unlike its predecessors, ULA supporters circulated their political messages very quickly.[77] And second, although the new movement began during a time of ceasefires in Kachin State, the northeast of the country was about to be convulsed by violence that saw the ULA's young trainees caught in its wake. Very quickly, the ULA's Arakan Army became a combat-ready force.

At first, the new movement attracted little media attention. At the time, the ULA's emergence was overshadowed by the SPDC's plans for governmental transition. In the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, "regime change" was the buzzword in international diplomacy. The KIO was also cautious about the ULA developing as a political movement in Kachin territory.[78] But in Rakhine State, social dynamics were moving in a very different direction. Political activism was reviving again after another two decades under military government. With a guiding philosophy known as "The Way of Rakhita", the ULA warned of the deteriorating situation:

> "Under the Burman colonial rule and racist regime, Arakan has now become the poorest state of Myanmar where people of Arakan are falling into the vicious cycle of inequality, poverty and famine. These great sufferings and tragedies have given the Arakanese new generations no choice but to launch national revolution."[79]

Such revolutionary words have been spoken by armed movements in Rakhine State many times before. However, while initially mocked by government officials, the new ULA movement was about to regalvanize Rakhine nationalism during a time when older parties were struggling to survive. Meanwhile, almost forgotten, the Rohingya crisis continued in the Bangladesh borderlands. Many young Muslims were still leaving their homes. Very soon, Rakhine State would erupt into conflict on a scale that had not been witnessed for many decades.

It was the last period of calm before the storm. For the moment, the ULA's name was hardly known outside activist circles. Before the Arakan Army commenced fighting, a major change in national politics would first take place. Snr-Gen. Than Shwe and the SPDC generals were making plans to step down in 2011 to implement a new system of quasi-civilian government. To do this, they would first need to introduce Myanmar's third constitution since independence in 1948. After 20 years of suppression, electoral politics were about to revive.

The 2008 Constitution and 2010 General Election

Following the devastation of Cyclone Nargis, the tempo of political change picked up fast. As the SPDC moved ahead with the introduction of a new political system, expectations in Rakhine State were initially low. In 2008 the National Convention

Timeline: Armed Movements Arakan[80]

Arakan Defence Army	1942 – 1945
Arakan People's Liberation Party	1945 – 1958
Communist Party of Burma (Red Flag)	1945 ~ 1992
Communist Party of Burma (White Flag/Arakan)	1945 – 1997
People's Volunteer Organisation/People's Comrade Party	1945 – 1958
Mujahid Party	1947 – 1961
Tribal Nationalities Organisation (Akyab District)	1957 – 1972
Arakan National Liberation Party	1960 – 1994
Communist Party of Arakan	1962 – 1994
Mujahid Party – Muslim (Rohingya) National Liberation Party	1962 ~ 1973
Rohingya Patriotic Front (Rohingya Independence Front)	1973 (63) ~ 1986
Mizo National Front	1966 (61) ~1986[81]
Arakan Independence Organisation	1970 – 1988 (94)
Arakan Liberation Party	1973 (68) – present day
Arakan Liberation Organisation	1982 – 1988
Rohingya Solidarity Organisation	1982 ~ present day
National United Front of Arakan	1985 – 1994[82]
Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front	1986 – 1998[83]
Tribal Nationalities Party (Arakan)	1987 – 1994
Chin National Front	1988 – present day[84]
All Burma Students Democratic Front (Arakan)	1988 – 1995
Arakan Army[1]	1991 – 1994
National United Party of Arakan/Arakan Army[2]	1994 – 2014[85]
Democratic Party of Arakan	1994 – 2014
All Arakan Students and Youths Congress	1995 – present day[86]
Arakan Rohingya National Organisation	1998 – present day[87]
Arakan National Council/Arakan (State) Army[2]	2004 – present day[88]
United League of Arakan/Arakan Army[3]	2009 – present day
Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army	2016 – present day

finished drawing up a new constitution after a 15-year process. Considerable powers, however, remained with the Tatmadaw. The national armed forces were designated the "leading role" in national politics; three ministries would stay under Tatmadaw control (Home, Defence and Border Affairs); and 25 per cent of seats in the three new levels of legislature (Lower and Upper Houses of Parliament, and State/Region Assemblies) would be reserved for Tatmadaw appointees.

On the surface, there were some potentially significant changes in the political landscape. The Bamar-majority "Divisions" were renamed as "Regions", and the seven ethnic "States" would remain the same. But new "self-administered" territories were designated for the Naga in the Sagaing Region, and Danu, Kokang, Palaung (Ta'ang), Pa-O and Wa nationalities in Shan State. In another innovation, 29 electoral seats were reserved for "national races" in states or regions where they formed a minority of more than 51,400 people.[89] These positions later became "Ethnic Affairs Ministers".[90] But there were many anomalies. Rakhine seats, for example, were reserved for the Ayeyarwady and Yangon Regions but not for Kachin State. Equally striking, although there was a reserved seat for the Chin nationality in Rakhine State, no such representation was allowed for the Kaman, Rohingya or any other Muslim-based identity. The concept of a Mayu Frontier Administration was also not revived.

For political movements in Rakhine State, the new constitution presented many dilemmas. At root, the future system would be a "unitary" rather than a "union" or "federal" structure that opposition nationality parties wanted. The constitutional process had also been stage-managed. In an echo of the "divide-and-rule" practices of the past, two small "ceasefire" groups were invited to take part in the National Convention when it resumed in 2006: the remnant CPB Arakan and a small breakaway faction of the NUPA.[91]

This only angered opposition groups more. With hundreds of political prisoners still in detention, dissenting voices were essentially banned.[92] Engendering further criticisms, the constitution was also rushed through by a tightly-controlled referendum immediately after Cyclone Nargis. But with the transformation of the USDA into a pro-military "Union Solidarity and Development Party" (USDP), it was certain that the USDP-Tatmadaw nexus would dominate any new government after the polls.

There were also deepening worries on the security front. In April 2009 the SPDC ordered all ceasefire groups to transform into Border Guard Forces (BGFs) under Tatmadaw control. The KIO and stronger ceasefire forces immediately refused. But four months later, the Tatmadaw attacked the MNDAA in the Kokang region of northern Shan State. Over 200 deaths were reported and 37,000 refugees fled into China. The full implications of the Tatmadaw's return to military operations in northeast Myanmar took a little while to become clear. At the time, the main political focus was on the 2010 general election and transition to a new system of government. But all these events were highly formative experiences for the young generation of ULA leaders who were positioned in Kachin State nearby. Government operations were led by the future Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief Snr-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing. The MNDAA, in contrast, became a close ULA ally.

As the 2010 election deadline loomed, this fragmented landscape gave rise to the same question that had caused divisions during previous political eras: should Arakan parties oppose or cooperate with an unfavourable legislative system that had been drawn up and imposed by the central government? In 2010, at least, the answer appeared straightforward. With such democracy leaders as Aung San Suu Kyi and the SNLD's Khun Htun Oo in detention, the ALD decided to join fellow UNA members and the NLD in boycotting the polls. For similar reasons, the Muslim-backed NDPHR also decided not to stand.

There was surprise, then, when a new organisation – the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP) – came forward to contest the polls. Under the leadership of Dr Aye Maung, a former veterinarian, the RNDP was considered more "pro-Rakhine" than earlier "Arakan" parties. A number of other Rakhine, Mro and Kaman parties also decided to run in the polls. A National Democratic Party for Development (NDPD), led by U Maung Maung Ni, was similarly established in Muslim and Rohingya communities. This included supporters of the banned NDPHR that had won seats in the 1990 election. Meanwhile a rival National Development and Peace Party (NDPP) was set up as an apparent

proxy by USDP activists, headed by the property tycoon U Aung Zaw Win. Unlike the NDPD, however, it never found serious traction in local politics.[93]

At this point, the sensitive issue of Buddhist-Muslim relations came to the fore. In the light of subsequent events, care is needed in attributing intentions to different actions and outcomes. But in an unexpected move, the Muslim population in the north of the state, many of whom were still displaced or without full citizenship, were allowed the right to vote in what was widely interpreted as a government attempt to increase the proportion of USDP votes.[94] To encourage their support, Temporary Registration Certificates (White Cards) were reportedly issued to those without documentation in exchange for USDP votes, and a number of prominent Muslims stood as candidates for the party.[95]

This was only the beginning of government efforts to shore up the USDP vote. The SPDC was determined that nothing should disrupt its transitional plans. In the run-up to the polls, members of the NDPD were subject to frequent harassment by the security forces and its USDP rivals.[96] Meanwhile the SPDC ignored a request by the RNDP for balloting to be delayed after Cyclone Giri hit the Rakhine State coast on the election eve. According to UN estimates, around 70,000 people were left homeless and over 100 died.[97] And even after the polls closed, there were widespread suspicions that the results were being manipulated by the counting of "advance votes" in the USDP's favour.[98]

Such efforts were to no avail. When the results came in, they demonstrated – as in 1990 – the continuing strength of nationality sentiment. In the absence of the ALD, the RNDP swept the popular vote, winning a total of 35 seats to the three levels of legislature. This was the fourth highest number of seats by any party in the country.[99] Equally striking, the RNDP would also form the largest bloc of seats in the Rakhine State Assembly, the only state legislature in the country where a nationality party achieved such a victory.[100] The RNDP also won the Rakhine Ethnic Affairs seat in the Yangon Region.

Among other results, the NDPD won two seats to the State Assembly, while five other Muslim candidates were elected to the three levels of the legislature for the USDP.[101] The USDP MPs included U Shwe Maung, a Muslim leader who identified as ethnic Rohingya and the businessman Aung Zaw Win. In addition, the USDP won the seat for the Chin Ethnic Affairs Minister in Rakhine State and the Rakhine seat in the Ayeyarwady Region. On the surface, the results could look complicated. But, as in 1990, they represented the political aspirations and cultural diversity of Arakan's peoples.

In the election aftermath, a great deal of reflection took place. It was accepted that, with the SPDC's retirement, the main political force on the national stage would be the USDP-Tatmadaw. The new President, ex-Gen. Thein Sein, was himself Prime Minister of the outgoing SPDC. Many leaders in Rakhine State nevertheless took heart from the election result. After half a century under military rule, they were a growing number of actors emerging on the political stage. Civil society activism was burgeoning, and the RNDP and ULA were both bringing fresh impetus – in their different ways – to the Arakan cause.

There were also warning clouds on the horizon. Rakhine State was standing on the edge of a conflict precipice that, within a few years, would see the exodus or displacement of most of the Muslim population from the territory. The 2010 election marked the last time that Muslim candidates or parties would be allowed to stand in any numbers in the polls. Meanwhile China and India were pushing ahead with plans to place Rakhine State at the centre of their policies for geo-political influence and economic advance. Sittwe, Kyaukpyu, Mrauk-U and Ngapali: the once sleepy towns of Arakan would soon become familiar names on the international stage.

Half a century of hermetic isolation was coming to an end. Once again a military government had failed to resolve the deep-rooted challenges of conflict and ethnic politics in Myanmar. Rakhine State was returning to international prominence. But another era of contested governance was just about to begin.

The Kaladan Project, working on expansion of Sittwe port (TK)

6. Quasi-Civilian Government: The Era of President Thein Sein (2011-16)

After the State Peace and Development Council stepped down in March 2011, a narrative of generally positive change developed in international circles about the government of President Thein Sein. This perception was helped by a series of initiatives that opened up the country to greater modernity and freedoms. Political prisoners began to be released; a new ethnic ceasefire initiative was launched; Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy entered parliament following by-elections in April 2012; restrictions on independent media and civil society organisations were relaxed; and Western sanctions were lifted as government transition gathered pace. Certainly, the liberalising change in atmosphere in Yangon and the main conurbations was significant, and there were borderlands with Thailand that witnessed their first halt to armed conflict in half a century.

Less considered at the time, there were also parts of the country where social and political trends were very different. After decades of military rule, it was generally accepted that achieving peace and reform would take time. But, as the new government settled in, this laissez-faire tolerance of the new political system ignored the fact that many peoples did not feel any benefits from the changes taking place. In September 2011, President Thein Sein postponed the China-backed Myitsone Dam in Kachin State.[1] But history quickly showed that this was very much an exception in indicating geo-political change. Rather, the suspension was the first skirmish in a new cycle of domestic and international competition over Myanmar's future. As community-based groups complained, Tatmadaw-dominated government continued; natural resource exploitation increased; and land-grabbing accelerated as outside investors rushed in.[2] A new "Great Game" was just beginning.[3]

Equally critical, despite Thein Sein's promises of peace, there were a number of nationality areas where ceasefire agreements broke down or new conflicts began. Once again, a change in the government system was followed by crisis and volatility in the ethnic borderlands. Initially, most of the fighting centred on the Kachin and northern Shan States where the Tatmadaw resumed military

operations against the Kachin Independence Organisation in June 2011.[4] But during the following years, conflict rapidly spread, with the (Kokang) Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) also resuming armed struggle.[5] All three were close allies of the United League of Arakan-Arakan Army. Aung San Suu Kyi had been released. But there was no "Nelson Mandela" or "fall of the Berlin Wall" moment that signified national change.

As these events unfolded, the socio-political landscape became increasingly unstable in Rakhine State. The local actors may have been different, but the underlying causes were very much the same: inequality, discrimination, poverty, neglect and the debilitating consequences of conflict. And yet hopes of political change had initially been very different when the SPDC first stood down. The victories of the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party and National Democratic Party for Development in the 2010 general election and Thein Sein's announcement of a new ethnic ceasefire policy encouraged optimism that new ways might be found to encourage national reform. Very quickly, however, the 2008 constitution and government peace process were perceived as unfit for purpose.

From this starting point, a blame game still continues as to what happened next. Rakhine State was about to witness one of the most turbulent periods in its history. But, once again, there can be no singular description or narrative. Too many crises arose that are continuing to drive events on the ground. In the subsequent decade, the greatest emergencies were experienced in the north and centre of the state. But the entire territory was destabilised by the ensuing fall-out. All communities have been deeply affected. The greatest displacement of Arakan's peoples in recorded history was about to begin.

The 2012 Outbreak of Anti-Muslim Violence

When President Thein Sein first assumed office, the issue of Muslim or Rohingya rights and identity was generally quiet. The existing militant groups, the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation and Rohingya Solidarity Organisation, were largely dormant except for international advocacy. At the same time, the success of the NDPD in the 2010 election and outreach by the Union Solidarity and Development Party to Muslim voters had fostered hopes in Rohingya communities that the questions of citizenship rights and identity would finally be resolved. Optimism over the potential for national reform was furthered by two events in early 2012: a ceasefire agreement in January by the Arakan Liberation Party as part of the government's peace process; and the April entry of the NLD into parliament. With the ALP's long-time supporter, the Karen National Union, also agreeing a ceasefire, the ALP's leaders did not want to be left out in the political cold (see "Ceasefires and Militarisation during a Time of Change" below).

When violence broke out in May 2012, it therefore came as a shock. The spark was the reported rape and murder of a Buddhist woman by three Muslim men in Ramree Township in the central state. Over the following weeks, inter-communal violence rapidly spread to Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Sittwe townships in the north.[6] To begin with, the clashes were regarded as reflecting "Rakhine-Rohingya" tensions. But in October attacks spread to Mrauk-U, Minbya, Thandwe and other parts of the state where ethnic Kamans and other Muslims were similarly targeted.[7] By the end of the year, over 190 people (mostly Muslims) were reported to have been killed and over 100,000 displaced (again mostly Muslims).[8]

To explain the violence, human rights organisations noted that much of the initial protest appeared to be coming from pro-Buddhist groups and supporters of the parliamentary RNDP.[9] The armed ALP was also accused of stirring up anti-Muslim antipathy following its ceasefire with the government.[10] Among reasons for resentment against Muslims, it was thought that the USDP's canvassing of Muslim votes during the general election had revived worries about Rohingya claims for autonomy as well as allegations of illegal immigration. There were also memories of the Muslim-majority Mayu Frontier Administration in the early 1960s and fears of a recurrence of the inter-communal violence that had taken place during the Second World War (see Chapters 2 and 3).[11] However, as protests spread to Mandalay and Yangon, it was soon clear that the outbreak of anti-Muslim protest was part of a much wider expression of Buddhist nationalism in the country. During 2013, anti-Muslim violence also occurred

Rohingya IDP camp, Sittwe Township (TK)

in other states and regions, including in Meiktila in central Myanmar where over 40 Muslims were killed.[12]

In the spread of anti-Muslim agitation, a central role was played by the "969" movement and subsequent "Ma Ba Tha" or "Organisation for the Protection of Race and Religion", led by U Wirathu and other nationalist monks.[13] Under previous military governments, faith-based activism had largely been curtailed in a country where Buddhist monks have long traditions of political activism. In contrast, the traditions of Islam in Myanmar have generally been regarded as conservative. Now, as political liberalisms were allowed, it seemed that Buddhist nationalists were framing perspectives about Muslim communities in the 21st century language of "cultural wars" and "jihad threat". U Wirathu claimed: "the extremists are pulling the strings, providing them with financial, military and technical power."[14]

Myanmar's leaders were fatefully slow to react. No local or national figure spoke up who might have had influence to act as an arbiter to stop the violence. Government and opposition leaders were both negligent. Rather, most parties employed a language of preserving "law and order" or "equivalence" between wrongs committed on the different sides.[15] At the time, many people looked to Aung San Suu Kyi. But her reply was to argue that there was a problem of "fear on both sides of the border" due to its "porous" nature.[16]

The rule of law was undoubtedly a key issue, and it is understandable why there was caution amongst community leaders against inflaming an already volatile situation. But, as violence spread, the effect of such equivocal explanations was to steer discussion away from the need to protect fundamental human rights. During the following years, this lack of human rights recognition paved the way for an ever-deteriorating crisis on the ground. The consequences were both immediate and far-reaching. From 2012 onwards, many displaced persons – both Rohingya and Rakhine – were unable to return to their homes; Rohingya "boat people" again started making dangerous voyages by sea; and apartheid-like conditions became normalised.[17] Within a year, the capital Sittwe had lost most of its Muslim population, with many Muslims confined to interment camps outside the town, and the refugee population in Bangladesh passed the 230,000 mark.[18]

Under international pressure, the Thein Sein government appointed an "Investigation Commission" into "Sectarian Violence in Rakhine

State" in August 2012.[19] But Thein Sein had already established the government's tone in a meeting the previous month with the then UNHCR head António Guterres, saying that his government did not recognise the Rohingya as an ethnic group in Myanmar. Instead, in an extraordinary offer, he said that his government would hand them over for "resettlement" to any third countries "that are willing to take them".[20] The Investigation Commission then incorporated the government's rejection of Rohingya identity in its report, settling on the foreign nationality term of "Bengali" that it repeated 622 times. As a justification, the commission warned that, although the name "Rohingya" is not officially accepted, "the Bengali community is pushing this term to the point where it is becoming the object of an intensive campaign".[21]

Four years later a second enquiry – the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, headed by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan – came to a very different set of conclusions. The events of 2012, the commission warned, marked a "watershed" in the "comprehensive disentanglement of the two communities".[22] Muslims from all nationality backgrounds had been pushed from the towns, over 120,000 internally displaced people moved into camps, and restrictions imposed on freedom of movement.[23] Rakhine and other nationality peoples, the commission noted, had also suffered displacement and loss. But rather than healing divisions, the authorities used the security clampdown to further partition between the two groups. A state of emergency, declared in June 2012, was lifted only in March 2016. According to the commission, the government's culpability was explicit: "The Government has actively supported this drive towards segregation, arguing that stability and security can only be achieved through the separation of the communities."[24]

Another year later, the UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar went even further in its condemnation. The Thein Sein government's explanation of the 2012 events was dismissed as "inaccurate".[25] Rejecting the notion that the violence was "intercommunal", the Fact-Finding Mission alleged that a "campaign of hate and dehumanization of the Rohingya had been under way for months" beforehand during which officials from the RNDP and various Rakhine, Buddhist and government organisations had all been involved.[26] The security forces were "at least complicit" in the violence that followed.[27] Equally damning, the Fact-Finding Mission echoed the Advisory Commission in highlighting how the plight of Muslim communities became very much worse in the aftermath of the 2012 violence. Under the Thein Sein presidency, discrimination against Muslims and Rohingyas was not simply an expression of populist sentiment but was promoted by the government. Using the 1982 Citizenship Law as a basis, the policy of social engineering that had begun under the SLORC-SPDC government in the 1990s was visibly ramped up (see Chapter 5).

To reinforce restrictions on the Muslim population, four key measures were employed by the authorities: the denial of Rohingya identity; the withdrawal of Temporary Registration Certificates which effectively removed the right to vote for holders; "Race and Religion" protection laws; and the intensification of security measures in the Bangladesh borderlands (see box: "Discriminatory

Kofi Annan and Aung San Suu Kyi at Advisory Commission meeting (IR)

Discriminatory Measures in the Aftermath of the 2012 Violence

Following the 2012 violence in Rakhine State, the Thein Sein government introduced four measures that furthered discrimination against the Muslim population. Both the UN Fact-Finding Mission and international human rights organisations identified these policies as paving the way for the exclusion of people claiming a Rohingya identity from Myanmar. Most of these policies were also supported by Buddhist nationalist groups and came during a time of continuing anti-Muslim protest in Rakhine State and other parts of the country.

First, in the 2014 Population and Housing Census, the identity of Rohingya was omitted altogether in the list of "135 national races".[28] Most Muslims in Rakhine State could only be counted as "Bengalis". Of Muslim communities, only the Kamans were categorised as "indigenous". The upshot was that an estimated 1,090,000 people – around a third of the population in Rakhine State – were not officially counted.[29] Most of those excluded were Muslims claiming a Rohingya identity (see box: "Rakhine, Rohingya and the 'Politics of Labelling'").

Second, the following year the government revoked the Temporary Registration Certificates or "White" identity cards that many Muslims held. The consequence was to deprive large numbers of people of perceived Indian or Chinese heritage of the right to vote.[30] Of the estimated million people who lost electoral representation, around half identified as Rohingya.[31]

Third, shortly before leaving office, the Thein Sein government rushed through parliament four "Race and Religion" protection laws that placed restrictions on non-Buddhists in social and community affairs.[32] The consequence of these laws was to place governmental controls on the marriage and, potentially, the number of children for Muslims and other minority faiths.

Fourth, military deployments were increased and the Nasaka Border Security Force was reorganised in the borderlands with Bangladesh. At the time, the Tatmadaw rearrangements were explained as part of a general tightening of security in the aftermath of the 2012 violence. Within four years, this militarised build-up became an integral element on the path towards inter-community division and ethno-political breakdown.

Measures in the Aftermath of the 2012 Violence"). As the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon warned: "I am deeply disappointed by this effective disenfranchisement of the Rohingya and other minority communities."[33] Whether the government understood this or not, the conditions were being created for a perfect storm of ethnic exclusion and conflict implosion.

Today international opprobrium is universal as to how government policies contributed to the social and conflict catastrophe that was approaching. But, at the time, it is a matter of historical record that insufficient attention was paid by democracy supporters – whether international or domestic – to the consequences of government actions. As with the Tatmadaw's operations in Kachin and Shan States, security clampdowns were too often portrayed as "exceptions" rather than evidence of grave failings that needed to be addressed. During a rare time of governmental change in Myanmar, the main international focus was on the Tatmadaw's promises of political reform. Repeated warnings of violence and human rights violations were disregarded or downplayed.[34] The outcome was to empower an unequal status quo and unrepresentative political system. Instead of the Thein Sein government promoting a new era of national peace and reconciliation, the reverse was evidently happening in several parts of the country.

This was especially the case in Rakhine State. It was not, however, only the Muslim population who felt themselves disadvantaged. Crucially

overlooked during governmental change, grievance was also growing among the Rakhine population. After half a century under military rule, all peoples were uncertain about the political direction of the country, and this was to prove the catalyst for the greatest instability in many years. Under the Thein Sein government, the ethno-political divisions in Rakhine State continued to deepen and intensify in ever more dangerous ways.

The Upsurge in Rakhine Nationalism

In analyses of the post-2011 breakdown in Rakhine State, blame is often attributed to a mixture of two factors: communal populism and governmental failure to deal with the issues of "law and order". But this is a simplification that greatly underestimates the nature of socio-political division between the central government and Arakan peoples. As the SPDC stepped down, Rakhine nationalists also felt marginalised by discrimination and repression under military rule. Fuelling this disaffection is a belief that outside actors have historically sought to control the territory in order to pursue political and economic interests of their own. Unrest was already growing before President Thein Sein assumed office (see Chapter 5). With the change of government, Rakhine nationalism quickly sprang back to the fore. In political circles, the desire to regain Arakan's lost sovereignty had never truly gone away.

In 2011, nationalist leaders had a long list of complaints. Four especially stood out: armed conflict still continued; political reforms were limited; increasing numbers of young people were leaving their homes; and Rakhine State was now the second poorest in the country.[35] Subsequently, as international aid and investment increased, there was progress in such areas as energy supplies and disease alleviation. But many Rakhine nationalists did not see why ethnic Bamar leaders should receive credit for allowing attention to turn to social and economic crises that, they believe, had been caused by governmental neglect in the first place.

Aggrieved by this sense of discrimination, expressions of ethnic nationalism quickly revived among the Rakhine population after President Thein Sein took office. On the surface, Rakhine politics looked fractured after decades of conflict. But, in many cases, these divisions were a means of survival. In political terms, the Rakhine cause was represented by three main groupings: the political parties of the RNDP and Arakan League for Democracy; the armed movements of the ALP, ULA, National United Party of Arakan and allied Arakan National Council;[36] and the burgeoning Buddhist and civil society networks. Importantly, too, the ability of activists to communicate rapidly was also increasing in the new social media age. In post-SPDC Myanmar, no part of the country was immune to the winds of change (see box: "Facebook and the Role of Social Media").

From this point, Rakhine nationalism took a more unpredictable path. As political liberalisations continued, it was not surprising that nationalism would bloom into new life. Arakan has witnessed many times of governmental upheaval before, and there were a diversity of Rakhine leaders who wanted to be in the forefront of social and political change. What was unexpected was the complexity of events. Reflecting the divisions of earlier political eras, peace and reconciliation proved elusive. During the next few years, relations between the government and Rakhine opposition movements moved along different – and often very divergent – paths.

As Rakhine State slipped towards breakdown, it is difficult to attribute the crisis to one single cause. But, as in the colonial past, there was an obvious failing: the lack of an inclusive or representative system of government by which the local peoples can address their social and political challenges together. In the following years, this political dysfunction became very much worse. A growing sense of alienation among Arakan's peoples was hastened by the government's mishandling of three major issues: the fall-out from the 2012 violence; the entry by outside actors into the state; and the failure to include all parties in Thein Sein's peace process. Whether Buddhist or Muslim, all the peoples of Rakhine State believed that they were being marginalised once again during another time of government change.

Many of these concerns were exacerbated by the first flashpoint: the 2012 violence. Having acknowledged this, none of the grievances in local communities can justify any of the attacks that followed. But, once they had started, the 2012 violence appeared to trigger fears of a

repetition of the displacement and upheavals that had occurred during 1942, 1978 and 1992. This supported a belief that "outside" actors – whether international or domestic – were stirring up inter-community divisions. Although they came from different perspectives, there were both Buddhist and Muslim leaders who shared this view. Who, it was asked, would benefit from instability in Rakhine State? Tragically, the damage had already been done. In the aftermath of the 2012 violence, neighbours on all sides felt deeply frightened and insecure, and the challenges of inter-community division were never faced up to and addressed.

Against this backdrop, accusations were frequently made in the following years of government "divide-and-rule" as a means of increasing central authority. In one obvious shift, the USDP quickly retreated from its canvassing of support from Muslim voters after President Thein Sein assumed office. But this did not end the mood of suspicion. Opposition leaders in the state – both Buddhist and Muslim – believed that the subsequent repression of the Muslim population might have been orchestrated by the government to try and win back Rakhine support. Memories are long in Arakan politics, and the intentions of Bamar-majority parties are never completely trusted.

This sense of distrust now underpinned a hardening of views among activists in both Buddhist and Muslim communities. The government's anti-Rohingya turn was explicit (see box: "Discriminatory Measures in the Aftermath of the 2012 Violence"). But it was among the Rakhine population that increased militancy was first expressed. Arakan nationalism now took a distinctly Rakhine turn.

In the 21st century, many Rakhine advocates still see their homeland as under threat, with continuing fears of "Balkanisation" and a further loss of land. During the Thein Sein era, two fears were frequently voiced: a threat from radical Islam and domination by the ethnic Bamar majority. These twin concerns were spelled out by the ALP which, following its 2012 ceasefire with the government, called for a "state army" to protect against two perceived foes: "Burmanization and Islamization" that threaten the "existence of the Arakanese people".[37] In particular, it was alleged that the inter-community conflict in 2012 was part of a conspiracy by "Bengalis" to "convert Rakhine State into an Islamic state" – with support from Bangladesh and Pakistan.[38]

Rakhine State and the tri-border region with Bangladesh and India now became a key battleground on Myanmar's western flank. As political tensions rose, the second causal factor in socio-political breakdown – the fear of outside interference – began to take root. Opposition had already been expressed in the SPDC era by the Shwe Gas Movement against international investments that do not include consultation with local peoples (see Chapter 5). Now, as the door to Rakhine State opened, populist concerns gathered a new intensity. Three major issues stood out: the Rohingya Muslim crisis on the Bangladesh border, India's Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project in the Kaladan valley, and China's oil and gas pipelines from the Bay of Bengal. On none of these issues did Rakhine nationalists believe that they were being consulted.

From this moment, popular protest was never far away. Most obviously, from 2012 onwards demonstrations started to break out against the UN and foreign aid organisations, alleging international bias towards the Muslim population.[39] Many of the activities were reportedly coordinated by an umbrella grouping known as the Rakhine Social Network.[40] A particular focus was on the 2014 Population and Housing Census which, it was alleged, would be favourable to Muslim interests because of Western donor backing.[41] The anti-Muslim protests paid off. Following attacks on foreign property in Sittwe, a number of international aid agencies left; Muslims were not allowed to identify as Rohingya; and the conduct of the census was severely impeded.[42]

International aid organisations, however, were not the only cause of populist concern. There was frequently-expressed unease about the arrival of major international corporations. In particular, the speed of the completion of the oil and gas pipelines from the Rakhine State coast to China caused astonishment in many communities. With the Chinese government now keen to develop a deep-sea port at Kyaukpyu and inter-connecting railway to Yunnan, it was clear that a new era of foreign engagement was only just beginning. At a time of perceived exclusion, this raised the immediate question: how will international investment affect

Buddhist novices protest against international organisations (EPA)

the local people – and, indeed, who will really benefit? The RNDP leader Aye Maung had no doubts about the solution. "Rakhine", he said, should be governed by "Rakhine people".[43]

At this sensitive moment, the third element in the deepening crisis showed its public face: the failure of Thein Sein's peace process. Little noticed at first, the government's roll-out of a new peace policy during the 2011-16 period led to an escalation of conflict in Rakhine State on a scale not witnessed for many years. In some respects, this might seem counter-intuitive. During the first year of the Thein Sein administration, there had been hopes that a peace breakthrough might be achieved. But from 2012 onwards, it was not only Muslim or Rohingya-based organisations who believed that they were being excluded. At a time of resurgent nationalism, the central government embarked on a disastrous series of policy errors in its handling of relations with opposition parties in Rakhine State that were to have devastating consequences during the following years.

Ceasefires and Militarisation during a Time of Change

When President Thein Sein first assumed office, Rakhine nationalism was represented by two main groupings: electoral parties and armed opposition forces. In many cases, there were close personal connections between the two. In advocacy terms, the main lead was taken by the RNDP in the legislatures. With the administration dominated by the USDP and Tatmadaw officers, opposition leaders quickly realised that the potential for reform was very limited under the terms of the 2008 constitution. To try and develop broader support, the RNDP became a prominent member in the Nationalities Brotherhood Federation (NBF), a political alliance that grew during Thein Sein's time in office to 23 ethnic-based parties that had contested the 2010 polls.[44]

Of the NBF leaders, it was the RNDP's Aye Maung who was often the most vocal. This profile brought him onto the national stage after he was invited to "six-party" talks with Thein Sein, Aung San Suu Kyi and government leaders prior to the 2015 general election. A constitutional referendum for political reform was proposed by the NBF parties. But planning for this had to be halted after both USDP and Tatmadaw representatives blocked amendments in parliament. For his part, Aye Maung said that his aim was to reduce the Tatmadaw's role in politics "to zero".[45]

With constitutional reforms stalling, it was thus armed opposition groups that received most political attention during the Thein Sein era. Initially, the prospects for national reconciliation looked good. When Thein Sein first announced his

peace initiative in August 2011, the response had generally been positive. As the fourth government peace process since independence,[46] Thein Sein's outreach to ethnic armed organisations encouraged optimism that national peace and reconciliation might finally be achieved.[47] Thein Sein's accommodation with Aung San Suu Kyi further boosted hopes during 2011-12 of a political breakthrough. With both Thein Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi supporting calls for "federal" reform, a paradigm shift in the political landscape appeared possible. Rapprochement between the three groupings in national politics had long been a key opposition demand: the Tatmadaw, NLD and ethnic nationality parties.

From this apex, peace trends in Rakhine State ran in a very different direction to most other parts of the country where a new generation of ceasefires took root. Only in the Kachin and northern Shan States did comparable regression occur. Not only did the government fail to address conflict in Rakhine State but militancy visibly increased. There are no simple explanations for this paradox. The only common characteristic is the "gateway" location of the three states: Kachin, Rakhine and Shan. This fuelled a belief among opposition leaders that the Tatmadaw had a strategic motive in seeking to extend governmental outreach into the China and Bangladesh frontiers at this time. Documentary proof for this is scant. But certainly, the targeting of the three states for military operations marked a complete turn-around from the SLORC-SPDC era when it was the Thai borderlands that had been the Tatmadaw's main security focus.

In the case of Rakhine State, the upsurge in conflict was the least expected. When Thein Sein initially came into office, many of the conditions that had underpinned instability in the past remained unaddressed. There was, however, little activity by either Rakhine or Rohingya armed groups in the field. The subsequent outbreak of violence in 2012 should have been warning. But no remedial actions were taken to assert the importance of peace and justice. The social landscape was instead allowed to deteriorate, paving the way for the eventual escalation in fighting.

As these events took place, EAOs in Rakhine State were by no means passive observers. Just before the SPDC stepped down, Rakhine armed groups had already begun to make their moves. Like other EAOs in the country, they were very uncertain about what regime change might mean. In order to be prepared, the NUPA was one of eleven founding members of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) in February 2011 (see chart: "Ethnic Armed Organisations, November 2019").

It was potentially an epoch-defining moment. On paper, the UNFC was the most important EAO alliance since the formation of the National Democratic Front back in 1976 (see Chapter 4). In a key change of strategy from the SLORC-SPDC era, the UNFC brought together both ceasefire and non-ceasefire groups. Initial members included the KIO (then ceasefire) on the China border, KNU (then non-ceasefire) on the Thailand border, and the Chin National Front (then non-ceasefire) on the India border.[48] Such a show of inter-ethnic unity reflected nationwide unhappiness with the 2008 constitution. The UNFC's goals were twofold: federal democracy and its leadership of any future EAO negotiations with the government.

Three months later in May 2011, Rakhine parties decided to change Arakan membership of the UNFC from the NUPA to the broader Arakan National Council.[49] Critically, even at this stage the three Rakhine-majority movements did not consider making an alliance: the NUPA-ANC, ALP and ULA. The ULA later became an affiliate UNFC member, but the three organisations have retained their separate identities until the present day (see box: "Timeline: Armed Movements Arakan"). In essence, the NUPA-ANC and ALP could be considered legacy movements, while the ULA was a new generation force following its 2009 formation (see Chapters 7 and 8).

A peace breakthrough, however, between the government and UNFC never occurred. From this moment, controversy continues as to whether the subsequent failures of Thein Sein's peace process were down to governmental "divide and rule" or the sheer scale of complexities involved. But from the outset, the government's choice of "dialogue partners" was divisive, appearing to follow a selective path. This played out in both Rakhine State and on national scale. Most obviously, fighting escalated with the Tatmadaw in the northeast of the country following the breakdown of the KIO ceasefire in June 2011. In contrast, the government made rapid progress in achieving

peace agreements with the KNU and other EAOs in the Thai borderlands. On the India border, meanwhile, the CNF signed a ceasefire in January 2012, and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang) followed suit in April.

A similar division now occurred in Rakhine State. It was not to Rohingya groups or the ANC and ULA that the Tatmadaw considered for peace inclusion. Rather, the Tatmadaw turned to the ALP whose veteran Vice President Khaing Soe Naing Aung travelled to Sittwe in April 2012 to sign a ceasefire agreement. It was a rare acknowledgement by the government of the state of armed conflict within the territory. As a close ally of the KNU, the ALP's opinion to follow with a ceasefire was not unexpected. But the government's decision to choose the ALP was puzzling for activists in Rakhine State. The ALP's right to make a peace agreement was not disputed. But the ALP has historically had little military activity in Rakhine State; the ALP's armed wing was mostly based in the Thailand borders; and it was not a member of the UNFC that was leading EAO negotiations with the government.

Certainly, the ceasefire agreement marked a remarkable turnabout in the fortunes of ALP leaders. After four decades in armed struggle, the organisation was given permission to open liaison offices in Kyauktaw in Rakhine State and Paletwa in Chin State. But this recognition of the ALP in the India borderlands also proved controversial and a warning of tensions to come. Although Rakhine forces have operated in the former hill tracts since independence, not all nationality communities are comfortable with their presence. Chin leaders were quick to query the government decision.[50] The CNF, meanwhile, also claimed the right to establish a base in Paletwa Township following its January ceasefire.[51]

Concerns over "divide and rule" were at first quietly expressed. It was initially assumed that a ceasefire had been offered to the ALP as a stepping-stone on the way to including all EAOs. But as conflict deepened in the Kachin and northern Shan States, doubts began to spread. As the months passed by, it soon became clear that neither the ANC nor ULA were being treated as equal partners. With the exception of China (see Chapters 7 and 8), the international community was slow to wake up. In part, this was due to a focus on the 2012 violence. But it was also due to a vested interest by foreign donors for an incomplete peace process that a number of Western governments were now supporting.[52] In essence, those who were not included by the Myanmar government in the peace process were regarded as the problem.

In the following years, the peoples of the Rakhine, Kachin and Shan States were to pay a heavy price. This fuelled a belief that, rather than using ceasefires to achieve political solutions, they are managed by the Tatmadaw to try and advance its military control. Under the Thein Sein administration, the contrast between the peace-first tactics in the Thailand borderlands and security-based operations in the Bangladesh and China borderlands could not have been clearer.

In Rakhine State, two factors now gave an additional boost in the trends towards conflict. Almost imperceptibly at first, the political environment was becoming more militarised. The first and most obvious impetus was the outbreak of Buddhist-Muslim violence during 2012. But there was also a second ingredient: military preparation. It was during this period that the three key actors – the Tatmadaw, the ULA and Rohingya militants – stepped up planning that laid the foundations for the future escalation in fighting.

On the government side, the 2012 descent into violence was generally characterised as a succession of spontaneous events. But amidst the reports of mob attacks and provocateurs, there was also evidence of the involvement by "self-defence" militias that the Tatmadaw had been training. Quite why the Tatmadaw turned to militia tactics in Rakhine State at this time has never been explained. Dating back to independence, the formation of local "tats" or "pyithusit" (people's militia) has been encouraged by Tatmadaw strategists as a means of strengthening government outreach in conflict areas where central authority is weak. From 2009, however, this policy was accelerated with the creation of a new generation of pyithusit and Border Guard Forces in several parts of the country (see Chapter 5).

Initially, the new initiative was interpreted as a conflict transformation strategy to bring ceasefire groups under Tatmadaw control while constitutional change was ushered in. But such an explanation only tells a part of the story. A decade

Ethnic Armed Organisations, November 2019[53]

Arakan Army – United League of Arakan [1 2 3 4]

Arakan Liberation Party [2 5 6]

Arakan National Council [1 2 7]

Chin National Front [2 5 6 8]

Democratic Karen Benevolent Army [2 5 6]

Kachin Independence Organisation [1 2 3 4 8]

Karen National Union [2 5 6 8]

Karenni National Progressive Party [2 5 7]

KNU/KNLA Peace Council [2 5 6]

Lahu Democratic Union [2 6 7]

Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army [1 2 3 4]

National Democratic Alliance Army [4 5]

National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang [5 *]

New Mon State Party [2 5 6 7]

Pa-O National Liberation Organisation [2 5 6 8]

Shan State Army/Restoration Council of Shan State [5 6]

Shan State Army/Shan State Progress Party [2 4 5 7]

Ta-ang National Liberation Army [1 2 3 4]

United Wa State Army [4 5]

Wa National Organisation [1 2 4 8]

All Burma Students Democratic Front [5 **]

[1] Non-ceasefire with government
[2] Nationwide Ceasefire Coordinating Team
[3] Northern Alliance (also Brotherhood Alliance except for KIO)
[4] Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee
[5] Ceasefire with government
[6] Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement signatory
[7] United Nationalities Federation Council (suspended August 2019)
[8] Ex-UNFC member

* Also operational in India
** Non-nationality force based in ethnic territories

later, it is still the BGFs and pyithusit from the SPDC era that are still dominant elements in the security and administrative landscape of many borderland areas – not political parties. According to a Tatmadaw official, there are over 6,050 militias, with between 20 and 60 armed members each, serving as the "first line of defence" across the country today.[54] These numbers, however, do not include the BGFs nor larger militia that remain operational in many front-line areas.

Under the Thein Sein government, the activities of militias became an important dynamic in Rakhine State security. The practice was previously less established in Arakan than in other ethnic borderlands. Both Rakhine and Rohingya communities appeared to be equally distrusted by the government. The CPB (Arakan), for example, was not allowed to develop its own militia area following its 1997 ceasefire. Starting from 2009, however, the Tatmadaw began training local militia in Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships among Rakhine, Mro, Thet and other local peoples. Both Tatmadaw officers and the Nasaka Border Security Force were involved, with plans to increase militia troop numbers from 6,900 to 11,000 across the state.[55] Crucially, Muslim communities were not involved. On the surface, this would appear

to contradict the USDP's canvassing of Muslim votes in the 2010 election. But, whatever the government's intentions, a dangerous precedent had been set in ethnic separation and militarisation at the community level.

Subsequently, the militias were widely considered to have played a provocative role during the 2012 attacks on Muslim communities (see above "The 2012 Outbreak of Anti-Muslim Violence"). Rather than being discontinued, militia training was then increased by the government in the 2012 aftermath.[56] Officially, the Border Security Force was ended in 2013 and replaced with a new Border Guard Police. But both names continued to be used, and close interactions were maintained between the security forces and the "Natala" villages of resettled Buddhists who had been brought in from other parts of the country during the SLORC-SPDC era (see Chapter 5). A main focus was on the Mayu Range where a new highway was built and security forces redeployed.[57] The evidence is stark. During 2016-18, militias trained by the Tatmadaw were identified by the UN Fact-Finding Mission as prime instigators in the eruption of anti-Muslim violence that followed the first attacks by the newly-formed Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army.[58]

In the descent into conflict, it should be stressed that neither Rakhine nor Rohingya nationalists were blameless. At the time, Rohingya forces were generally quiet, while a younger generation of activists were making military preparations in the borderlands following the 2012 violence (see Chapter 7). For their part, both ANC and ULA leaders were cautious in answering media questions about Muslim or Rohingya politics and identity. The NUPA, in particular, had been a key voice in efforts to achieve Rakhine-Rohingya unity during the SLORC-SPDC era (see Chapter 5). By contrast, ALP leaders have never been hesitant to express opposition to Rohingya claims. Since the 1970s, the ALP has always sought to block Rohingya representation at political meetings. Following the party's 2012 ceasefire, this was escalated to advocacy for the use of force:

> "The Rakhine people are acting as the front-line defenders of the Union of Myanmar against the Bengali threat…The ALP has urged the Myanmar government and Myanmar people to join in this struggle against the common danger. Even if they do not join in, the ALP on its own is prepared to do its utmost to defend Rakhine State."[59]

Ominously, such words found encouragement in government circles following the 2012 violence. The Speaker of the parliamentary Lower House and former Tatmadaw Chief-of-Staff Thura Shwe Mann was quite explicit. At a 2013 meeting with Rakhine community leaders, he publicly praised endeavours to create "people's militia" at the country's "western border". "I appreciate the attempts of the Rakhine people to protect Myanmar," he said.[60]

It was a remarkable moment. After over six decades of political and ethnic conflict in Arakan, there were now government figures encouraging the Rakhine people to take up arms. During a supposed time of national reconciliation, the language of militarisation had become a common currency in Rakhine State politics. All sides were speaking in military terms.

Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement: The Political Failure in Rakhine State

Beyond the rhetoric, the Thein Sein government made a fatal mistake in its analyses of the political challenges in Rakhine State. Officials failed to recognise that the rise in militancy in Rakhine communities could not be simply put down to Buddhist-Muslim divisions or the grievances of nationalist diehards. In their defence, government advisors argued that, by making a ceasefire with the ALP, they believed the question of armed struggle had been addressed. With their leaderships based outside Rakhine State, neither the ANC nor ULA was accorded the same dialogue status as the ALP. But as the months ticked by, it quickly became clear that the security services had greatly under-estimated the strength of the ULA's Arakan Army. It was not only the Tatmadaw that was making military preparations.

Although headquartered in Kachin State, the ULA had been quietly expanding since its 2009 formation. Now, as members travelled back and forth, the new organisation had little difficulty in gaining support back at home. During a time of uncertain change, the ULA's call to support "self-determination", the protection of "cultural

heritage", and the promotion of "Rakhine interests" in the "multi-ethnic" state of Arakan struck a popular chord.[61] Critically, too, Arakan Army troops were gaining combat experience as they joined hands with their KIO, MNDAA and TNLA allies as fighting spread in the China borderlands.

Meanwhile manifestations of nationalism were visibly on the rise in Rakhine State after the SPDC stepped down. Twan Mrat Naing and the ULA leaders were not alone in their promotion of the Arakan cause. Advocacy by the RNDP in the legislatures ran parallel with the nationalist sentiments of the three Rakhine EAOs: the ULA, ANC and ALP. If there were any doubts about the political mood, many of the key issues in politics and society were raised at the "Arakan National Conference" in Kyaukpyu in May 2014. This was the largest nationalist gathering permitted by the authorities since the early 1960s, and both electoral and armed opposition supporters were involved.[62]

As a warning of the growing unrest, two main concerns were discussed: security and the economy. In military terms, an "Arakan National Defense Army" was proposed to protect the Buddhist population.[63] And on the economy, debate focused on how Rakhine State could fairly benefit from natural resources. With local communities feeling bi-passed by Chinese and Indian investments, delegates demanded a 50 percent share "for our people".[64] Three months later, protest groups stopped the construction of the proposed US$ 20 billion high-speed railway to link the Yunnan capital Kunming with Kyaukpyu. "This is one of the obvious examples of how people are being angered against Chinese projects," warned Wong Aung of the Shwe Gas Movement.[65]

In many respects, the Arakan National Conference was a harbinger of the greater upheavals to come. It also marked the first public "coming-out" of a new Rakhine political movement, the Arakan National Party (ANP), that would contest the 2015 general election (see below).[66] Once again, the authorities failed to take notice. As the clock started to run down on the Thein Sein presidency, prospects for success in the national peace process were beginning to stall.[67] Into 2015, at least, his advisors seemed to think that the government's ceasefire tactics would succeed in Rakhine State. If this was

Saw Mra Razar Lin speaking at opening of ALP office Kyauktaw, 2012 (MZ)

the case, it does not mitigate what happened. But it might explain some of the serious mistakes that were made.

Opposition leaders had initially hoped that, despite the Buddhist-Muslim tensions, the Thein Sein peace process would provide a platform that might bring the different Arakan peoples and parties together. It is important to note that Rohingya parties were never included. But optimism began to grow among Rakhine parties in November 2013 when the ALP, ANC and ULA were among 16 EAOs that formed a Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) at Laiza in KIO territory to agree a peace framework for political dialogue with the government.[68] Also in attendance during subsequent talks with the government in Myitkyina were the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy to Myanmar Vijay Nambiar and the Asian Special Representative of China Wang Yingfan. With leaders on all sides in the country advocating "federal" reform, a political breakthrough seemed at hand. On Union Day, February 2014, President Thein Sein broke a Tatmadaw taboo of half a century by invoking "Panglong Spirit" and the "march toward a peaceful, modern, and democratic nation through a federal system".[69]

Obstacles, however, did not take long to emerge. Different arguments can be advanced for the subsequent failures. In the following years, the contrast between "ceasefire" and "non-ceasefire" areas in different parts of the country became increasingly sharp. Rather than being a pathway to national reconciliation, the peace process became an instigator of conflict in the Bangladesh and China borderlands, heralding the greatest instability and loss of life in many decades. Arakan politics and society were profoundly reshaped. Underpinning this breakdown, there was one central thread: the lack of inclusion. As the peace process picked up during 2014, Snr-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing and the Tatmadaw leaders made it clear that it will be the armed forces that decide the military scope and political direction of the peace process. This immediately exposed a central flaw: who will be allowed to represent their peoples in political dialogue that could decide the future of the country?

The issue of inclusion now became a major stumbling block against future progress. For while 21 EAOs had generally been considered part of the national peace process since its 2011 inception (see chart: "Ethnic Armed Organisations, November 2019"), Tatmadaw officers began to assert in the aftermath of the Myitkyina meeting that six movements would not be allowed to become full partners: the ANC and ULA in Rakhine State; and the MNDAA, TNLA, Lahu Democratic Union (LDU) and Wa National Organisation (WNO) in Shan State. In essence, the only option for these six groups would be disarmament and surrender.[70] Meanwhile, although the RSO was often invoked by the government as a cause of the 2012 violence, there was never any suggestion of including Rohingya or Muslim representation in talks. In the case of Rakhine State, this left the veteran leaders of the ALP as the only voice of armed opposition.

Until the present day, these exclusions have delayed and held back peace and political reform. As all sides recognise, Tatmadaw leaders have never hesitated to change their choice of dialogue partners during the different political eras since independence. The current peace process is itself based on a major shift in ceasefire re-alignments that took place during the transition from the SPDC to Thein Sein governments. In defence of their position, officers have argued that the Tatmadaw will not negotiate with "new" or "inactive" forces. Rather, they will only deal on equal terms with those that have historical legacy.[71]

The difficulties, however, with such justifications are many. Starting in 1989, the Myanmar peace process has become one of the most labyrinthine in the world. In a country desperate for peace, such opaqueness has become a major impediment to national reform. Equally problematical, despite their domination in government, Tatmadaw leaders say that they do not negotiate over political issues: their only duty is to protect law, order and the 2008 constitution. Such rigidity has the effect of circumscribing the parameters for political inclusion and meaningful dialogue.

The question, then, is whether the objective of the peace process is to achieve political solutions or for the government to maintain security control. Between these two positions, many inconsistencies occur. Most obviously, included in the government's peace process are a number of small splinter groups or parties that are themselves relatively new. And yet, the six EAOs barred or downgraded by the Tatmadaw can lay claim to legacies of

political heritage.[72] Among those restricted,[73] only the ULA could be considered as new. But, as its supporters point out, the ULA includes members from other organisations and is the latest in a long line of armed Rakhine movements that date back to independence in 1948. As such, the ULA has quickly become the most powerful force in Rakhine nationalism in many decades.

As of late 2019, Snr-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing and the Tatmadaw leadership are yet to change their positions on the ANC and ULA (see Chapter 8). During the 2013-2015 period at least, both parties were active members in the peace negotiations. But, in the case of Rakhine State, Tatmadaw negotiators continued to insist that they would only conduct ceasefire talks with the ALP on the same partnership terms as other recognised EAOs, such as the KNU and CNF, in the national peace process. Somewhat provocatively, government officials also told ANC and ULA representatives behind closed doors that their "lack" of military activity was a reason to exclude them.[74] In fact, the ANC was centrally involved in NCCT initiatives, and the organisation's General-Secretary Twan Zaw met with Aung San Suu Kyi three times on UNFC peace missions to Yangon during 2013-14.[75] A small force that represented a number of nationalist movements from the past, the ANC's leaders believed that their main task was to bring the different parties in the country together.[76]

From 2014, a dangerous momentum towards conflict started to build. As the Arakan National Conference highlighted, the fractured ways in which the Thein Sein government approached peace and development in Rakhine State was compounding division in a territory where reconciliation and reform were essential. It was in the Rakhine community that resistance was first renewed. Anger was especially high after a Tatmadaw "warning shell" killed 23 young cadets at a training school in KIO territory in November 2014 during a lull in the fighting.[77] The deaths included eight ULA, eleven TNLA, two CNF and two ABSDF members. Whether in parliament or the peace process, Rakhine leaders believed that they were being deliberately marginalised. Warned the ULA leader Twan Mrat Naing:

> "Of course we want to solve the problem through dialogue, but we can see the attitude of the central government – they are not that sincere. So this could be a waste of time, scrambling over the table while already two years have passed by and nothing fruitful or beneficial or concrete has come out yet. The ceasefire is like a divide tactic."[78]

During 2014, Arakan Army troops began quietly infiltrating through the tri-border region before launching its first attacks in Paletwa and Kyauktaw townships the following year. "New Front in an Old War", headlined the Diplomat magazine.[79] As fighting increased, Tatmadaw units were rushed in to try and halt the ULA's advance. In the 1970s the Tatmadaw had been able to interdict attempts at infiltration by the ALP and Arakan Independence Organisation using similar routes (see Chapter 4). But in the 21st century, the new movement was quickly able to connect with supporters on the ground. By 2016, the new Arakan Army was estimated to have grown to 3,000 troops in strength.[80] Most were still based in the Kachin State borderlands but, month by month, increasing numbers were arriving back home.

If the Tatmadaw was worried by this upsurge, it did not show. Until the present, there has been no significant change in official policy towards the ULA. In January 2015, hopes were briefly raised when the President of the Mizo National Front, Pu Zoramthanga, joined a meeting between government officials and the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team to share peace experiences in northeast India.[81] The ALP, ANC and ULA were all NCCT members, and there has long been inter-connection between Mizo and Rakhine movements in the tri-border region (see Chapter 4). But disquiet deepened the following month when the government signed a "Deed of Commitment for Peace and National Reconciliation" with just four EAOs: the KNU, Shan State Army/Restoration Council Shan State (SSA/RCSS) and two breakaway Karen factions.[82] While electoral parties in Rakhine State were invited (see below), none of the armed movements were included.

Frustrations were then compounded in October 2015 when the government signed a "Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement" (NCA) with eight EAOs shortly before President Thein Sein stepped down from office.[83] The majority of EAOs, however, did not sign, including the KIO, UWSA and most of the country's strongest forces (see chart: "Ethnic Armed Organisations, November 2019"). On

Arakan National Conference, Kyaukpyu, 2014 (IR)

this occasion, the ALP did sign. But of the eight EAO signatories, only two could be considered of national importance: the KNU and SSA/RCSS. The others were, like the ALP, mostly small or splinter factions from other groups.[84]

While lauded in the diplomatic community, the NCA was regarded with great caution by ethnic opposition groups. Fighting was continuing in several borderlands; claims of a "nationwide" accord were considered premature; and political dialogue had yet to begin. As is the case today, the view was widespread that a nationwide ceasefire could be quickly achieved if Tatmadaw leaders truly wanted it. In response, the non-signatory EAOs came up with a new position: that they would not sign the NCA until it was reformed and all parties, including the ULA and ANC, were accepted. The viewpoint in Nay Pyi Taw was different. "The government will go ahead and cement a deal with whichever groups come on board," wrote Aung Naing Oo of the government-backed Myanmar Peace Center. "Better a half-signed deal than no deal at all."[85] Such sentiments have remained at the heart of government policy until the present day. Enormous loss of life and suffering have occurred in the meantime.

Subsequently, two more EAOs – the LDU and NMSP – signed the NCA in 2018. But the failure to promote or achieve inclusion during a time of supposed peace-building was a mistake on historic scale. Many parties share culpability. Rather than focusing on political dialogue and inclusion, the peace process became a technical game of chess that, after three years, was no closer to addressing the conflict and reform challenges in the country. One NCCT and UNFC negotiator privately compared the experience to "playing a game of football in which there is no ball and only the Tatmadaw has the whistle". There can be no doubt about the spread of peace in former conflict-zones along the Thailand borderland. Until the present day, this is heralded as the main success of Thein Sein's NCA initiative. But the government authorities appeared to show no awareness of how the perceived marginalisation of the peoples of Rakhine State was building local grievance.

Meanwhile government pressures on the Muslim population in Rakhine State were increasing (see box: "Discriminatory Measures in the Aftermath of the 2012 Violence"). In February 2015, President Thein Sein proposed that holders of the Temporary Registration Certificates (White Cards) should be allowed the right to vote. But as protests spread from Sittwe to Yangon, the government quickly backtracked, cancelling the White Cards altogether. This fuelled a further exodus of Muslims from the state. In an eighteen-month period, over 90,000 refugees were recorded as making the journey by sea to Malaysia during 2014-15.[86] Equally stark, although holders of official Citizenship Scrutiny Cards (formerly National Registration Cards),

many displaced Kamans also began relocating from Rakhine State to Mandalay and Yangon.[87] Alarm bells should have been ringing. A small minority of around 50,000 people, their leaders feared that their culture was facing extinction.[88] In effect, the Muslims of Arakan were becoming a "stateless" people.[89]

Step by step, an ethno-political storm was gathering in Rakhine State. Political consciousness was rising among both Buddhist and Muslim communities. It was not, however, the NCA that was the main focus of attention: rather, the 2015 general election that was now looming. The previous general election in 2010 had been held in very different circumstances under the SPDC government. Huge expectations now rested on political changes that, it was trusted, the 2015 polls might bring. As democracy supporters recognised, Myanmar was still at the beginning of an era of political transition – not at the end.

The 2015 General Election, Arakan National Party and Thein Sein's Departure

As the Thein Sein administration neared its end, there were still hopes that a political breakthrough might be initiated by the 2015 general election. As long as the polling was free and fair, the NLD was expected to win. In this respect, election predictions proved very correct. After five years of USDP-Tatmadaw government, the NLD won by a landslide, adding evidence to the belief among democracy supporters that an NLD victory would mark the most immediate way to national peace and reform. After nearly three decades of political struggle and hardship, the mood was euphoric among NLD members.

In Rakhine State, the atmosphere was very different. Once again, a general election became mired in controversy, and any hopes of peace breakthroughs and political reform quickly disappeared. For their part, nationality movements did seek to embrace the election. Although conflict continued, a democratic culture appeared to be taking root. Most notably, an important breakthrough was made in January 2014 when the two leading parties in Rakhine politics – the ALD and RNDP – agreed to merge in a new "Arakan National Party".[90] The new ANP was welcomed among the Rakhine public as a symbol of unity in the new political era. Aye Thar Aung (ALD) and Aye Maung (RNDP) became joint leaders, and the ANP's goals were promoted as "federalism", "democratization" and "development".[91]

Support for parliamentary politics was also shown by other nationality movements. This was highlighted in February 2015 when six Rakhine State parties were among 34 electoral parties that signed the "Deed of Commitment for Peace and National Reconciliation" with the government and four EAOs (see above). Although no armed Rakhine movement was involved, Arakan political parties were keen to take part. In addition to the ANP and smaller Rakhine State National United Party, the signatory list included the Khami National Unity Party, and three Muslim-related parties: the Kaman National Progressive Party (KNPP), Democracy and Human Rights Party (DHRP: formerly NDPHR that had stood in the 1990 election) and National Democratic Party for Development that had won two seats in the 2010 election.[92]

In the light of the breakdown that was about to occur, it was a poignant reminder that there were still other ways to achieve peace and reconciliation. The moment, however, was allowed to pass and, instead, a series of ever more worrying crises began to unfold.

First, there were difficulties within the ANP movement. These began when several ex-ALD members broke away to form a new Arakan Patriotic Party. The ANP co-leader Aye Maung, meanwhile, was criticised for trying to gain a seat in the State Assembly instead of standing again for the parliamentary Upper House where he was already an MP. By making this switch, it appeared that Aye Maung was hoping to become chief minister of Rakhine State after the polls.[93] Both events were warnings of rivalries that would emerge in nationality politics in the future (see Chapter 7).

The second crisis was altogether more urgent. Myanmar was on the brink of a historic exclusion of the Muslim population. In the countdown to the polls, parliamentary politics were completely overshadowed by the attempt to excise Muslim candidates or representatives from taking part in the election. The full consequences of the build-up of restrictions on Muslims now became clear (see

box: "Discriminatory Measures in the Aftermath of the 2012 Violence"). The impact was felt not only in Rakhine State but across the country at large. The month after Thein Sein signed the "Deed of Commitment" with the NDPD and other Muslim-based parties, around half a million Muslim adults were disenfranchised from voting by the government's cancellation of Temporary Registration Certificates.[94] Meanwhile the Ma Ba Tha movement stepped up anti-Muslim lobbying, and there were reported incidents of violence in several parts of the country.[95]

Against this backdrop, it became virtually impossible for Muslim candidates to stand or be elected in the polls. Most glaringly, despite the fact that many Muslims were members, neither of the main national parties – the NLD and USDP – put forward a single Muslim candidate in the election. Inter-faith inclusion in electoral politics was brought to an end. By the day of voting, over 80 Muslim candidates had been banned,[96] and it is estimated that just 28 of the 6,000 political candidates who stood in the polls were actually Muslims.[97]

Anti-Muslim opinion was also very evident in Rakhine State. Although Rakhine parties had generally used inclusive language in the past, RNDP leaders in the new ANP movement made it clear that their ALD partners would be expected to take a hard line on identity issues. "Love your nationality, keep pure blood, be Rakhine and vote ANP," became the party's election slogan.[98] Muslims of perceived Bengali identity were specifically the target. According to Khine Pyi Soe, former RNDP secretary who became ANP vice-chair: "Our party policy is that we don't accept the Bengalis nor do we recognise the name 'Rohingya'."[99]

Fuelled by such sentiments, the marginalisation of the Muslim population had notable impact in the north of the state. The demographic profiles of several constituencies in Maungdaw District were transformed by the mass disenfranchisement of Muslim voters. Here 19 Muslim candidates were banned, most of whom were disbarred on citizenship grounds.[100] Of those who tried to stand independently, one was the sitting USDP MP for Buthidaung, U Shwe Maung, who identified as a Rohingya. His exclusion was especially striking; in parliament, he was close to the former Tatmadaw chief and Lower House Speaker Shwe Mann. Another of those disbarred was the DHRP candidate U Kyaw Min, an MP-elect in 1990 who had subsequently been invited to join the Committee Representing the People's Parliament with the NLD and ALD (see Chapter 5). A former political prisoner, Kyaw Min had no doubt that his ban was due to his Rohingya identity. "I have lost my citizenship rights under this so-called democratic government," he said.[101]

As the clampdown intensified, the only Muslim candidates in Rakhine State who appeared to be accepted on citizenship grounds were from the

ANP headquarters in Sittwe, Rakhine State capital (IR)

KNPP.[102] But Kaman leaders complained that their plight was little better. Many Kamans remained displaced from their homes following the 2012 violence, while the government authorities ceased issuing new Citizenship Scrutiny Cards to Kaman nationals during this period amidst allegations that Rohingyas were applying under Kaman identity.[103] "We are discriminated against, just because we are Muslims," said Than Win, the KNPP candidate for Thandwe.[104]

The result was that, for the first time in Arakan history, Muslim voters were effectively cut out from a general election in the country. In this vacuum, the voting in Rakhine State effectively turned into a three-horse race between just three main parties: the ANP, NLD and USDP. On the national stage, the NLD won a resounding victory. But in Rakhine State the ANP performed notably well, improving on the results of the ALD and RNDP in the 1990 and 2010 general elections respectively. Equally striking, the new ALD-RNDP amalgamation moved the ANP up from fourth to the third largest party in terms of seats won in the country after the NLD and USDP. In total, the ANP won 45 seats to the three levels of legislature and was only one seat short of a full majority in the Rakhine State Assembly.[105] The party also gained the post of Rakhine Ethnic Affairs Minister in the Yangon Region.

For ANP supporters, the result was a strong validation for the party and Rakhine nationalism. In improving the percentage share of the vote, the ANP no doubt gained from the clampdown on Muslim voters. Importantly, too, neither the NLD nor USDP gained from their rejection of Muslim candidates. In the NLD's case, there was a lingering perception among the Buddhist population that the party was "pro-Muslim", while the USDP did not recover from its solicitation of Muslim votes in the 2010 election. In terms of seats won, the NLD finished moderately, gaining the post of Chin Ethnic Affairs Minister as well. The party also won more constituencies than the ANP in the south of the state where there is stronger influence from the politics of central Myanmar. But, in keeping with the patterns of previous elections, Bamar-majority parties again found it difficult to establish themselves among the Rakhine population. A majority of the electorate continued to prefer parties that are "Arakan" based.

The ANP victory, though, could not be considered a political breakthrough. First, the mass exclusion of the Muslim population was a divisive blow, heralding the much greater volatility about to come. Second, the situation was also unstable in Rakhine politics. Factional differences continued, and Aye Maung's attempt to switch to the State Assembly backfired when he failed to win the seat for Manaung-2. And third, conflict was escalating with the Arakan Army, which was stepping up military infiltration through the tri-border region. In an eight-day period at the turn of 2015-16, the state media reported 15 clashes with the Tatmadaw in Kyauktaw Township.[106]

Signboard of the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Project (TK)

UNFC meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi, 2013. (L to R) Nai Hongsa (NMSP), Abel Tweed (KNPP), David Thackerbaw (KNU) and Twan Zaw (ANC) (IR)

For all these reasons, there was widespread scepticism in Rakhine State that the Tatmadaw would really allow a meaningful transfer of power to the first democratically-elected administration – whether in Rakhine State or other parts of the country – in over five decades. As critics predicted, the ALP's signing of the NCA in October had negligible impact in changing the Rakhine State landscape. In contrast, buoyed by the election result, both ANP and ULA leaders believed that political trends were now running in their direction. Arakan nationalism was at its most ascendant since the 1990s, and the two leading movements appeared to be on an upward path.

President Thein Sein was to have one last throw of the dice before his departure. As a first step in the NCA process, a "Union Peace Conference" was called in January 2016 to which several of the NCA non-signatory groups were invited as "observers" – not as participants. This was perceived as a snub by the non-signatories, and the ANC, ULA and fellow UNFC members agreed to boycott the meeting together. None of the NCA non-signatories took part.

Whether this separation between signatories and non-signatories was the Tatmadaw's intention or not, it was early indication of the difficulties that would escalate in the following years. The NCA had been promoted as a vehicle to bring peace; now it was becoming a cause of division. The ANC and UNFC official Twan Zaw was highly critical: "They are discriminating against us. Signatory groups have full authority to make decisions in the meeting, and the government awards them peace. All we get from the government is more fighting."[107]

With the failure of the first Union Peace Conference, Thein Sein's political time was over. From this point, Rakhine and other nationality leaders placed more hopes on the incoming NLD government for political change than the outgoing USDP. Like the ANP, ALD and RNDP, the NLD had always wrapped itself in the democratic flag of struggle for "freedom" and "independence" from military rule.[108] In the party's 2015 election manifesto, the NLD renewed this commitment by pledging to "strive for the establishment of a genuine federal democratic union based on the principles of freedom, equal rights and self-determination."[109]

All political eyes now turned to Aung San Suu Kyi. In advance of the NLD taking office, she sought to allay ethnic nationality concerns. On Independence Day, 4 January 2016, she made a bold pledge to the country: "The peace process is the first thing the new government will work on. We will try for the all inclusive ceasefire agreement."[110] Four years later, these words are yet to become true.

Mro girl in displacement camp carrying sibling (IR)

7. The NLD-Tatmadaw Government (2016-present)

After the National League for Democracy assumed office in March 2016, any honeymoon period proved to be very brief. Events quickly showed that there had not been a significant change in government authority as the Union Solidarity and Development Party stood down. The new administration was, in effect, a "hybrid" between the NLD and Tatmadaw. With control of three ministries and 25 per cent of the seats in all legislatures, the Tatmadaw was still a dominating force in national life. Under clause 59(f) of the 2008 constitution, Tatmadaw representatives were able to block Aung San Suu Kyi from becoming president (on the grounds of having foreign relatives by marriage to a British citizen). Instead, she took on the role of "State Counsellor" that had to be especially created for her.

Compounding the NLD's troubles, the new government appeared to be very under-prepared in both personnel and policies. This was highlighted when Aung San Suu Kyi appointed a number of former military officials to key positions in the new administration.[1] Far from being eclipsed, the Tatmadaw's authority was enhanced. Whether this was a political tactic to try and gain accommodation with Snr-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing and the Tatmadaw leaders was never explained. But such collaboration cast an immediate shadow over the future direction of government. With both the NLD and Tatmadaw employing a "top-down" system of management, the new cabinet never embarked on a programme of radical reforms.

In the following years, this lack of expertise and planning came back to haunt the NLD. Upon taking office, the party made some fundamental errors. To continue the peace process, the government's Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee (UPDJC) was reformed with Aung San Suu Kyi as leader. Meanwhile a new National Reconciliation and Peace Centre (NRPC) replaced the Myanmar Peace Center (MPC) that had been responsible for ceasefire liaison under the Thein Sein administration. As a government-affiliated body, the MPC had its critics. But such abrupt changes in the peace structures adversely affected relationships among the key conflict actors. Until the present day, these failings have never been addressed.

Amidst the initial excitement, it was to take a few months for the scale of the NLD's errors to become clear. But they could not have come at a worse time. Having supported the party through its long years of struggle, expectations were high in different nationality communities around the country that the NLD would speak and act in favour of ethnic peace and political reform. Whether through such alliances as the Committee Representing the People's Parliament or the National Council Union of Burma, many different peoples and parties had been involved in the struggle for democratic change (see Chapter 5). Within a year, hopes were disappointed and conflicts began to escalate again in several parts of the country.

Nowhere were the consequences of failure felt more deeply than in Rakhine State. When the NLD first took office, the challenges of ending armed struggle within the territory were regarded by the government as only a small element in the conflict landscape. Indeed Tatmadaw officers continued to insist that Rakhine State was a "white" area: i.e., a place where armed struggle had been ended. Once again, a new government in Myanmar was to under-estimate the scale of ethno-political crisis on the ground. Repeated warnings were ignored, and violence would soon erupt again on a scale that echoed the worst upheavals during the Second World War.

The 21st Century Panglong Conference and Dialogue Breakdown

Political hopes for change had initially been very different under an NLD government. Buoyed by the party's election victory, public confidence was boosted after Aung San Suu Kyi announced two new processes to address nationality concerns upon taking office: first, a "21st Century Panglong Conference" to achieve ethnic peace and reform; and second, an independent "Advisory Commission on Rakhine State", headed by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, to make recommendations to help resolve the Rohingya Muslim crisis. Both processes suggested that there were finally political leaders in the country prepared to pursue peace and reconciliation in new ways. Initiated by Aung San Suu Kyi's late father, the 1947 Panglong Agreement remains highly symbolic in the country as a commitment to union and equality among all peoples (see Chapter 2). Aung San and Kofi Annan: these were powerful names that the NLD was seeking to bring into play.[2]

It was not long, however, before the NLD's new initiatives ran into difficulties. In the case of Panglong, this was not due to a lack of goodwill. There was a strong desire among ethnic nationality parties to move on from the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement of President Thein Sein (see Chapter 6). Only a minority of ethnic armed organisations had signed, but the NCA was thought to be repairable now that the government had changed. To try and re-gather momentum, a flurry of initiatives was launched.

First, prior to the first "Panglong-21" meeting, the Arakan Liberation Party, Arakan National Council and United League of Arakan were among 17 EAOs that met at Mai Ja Yang in Kachin Independence Organisation territory in July 2016. It was the most diverse and inclusive representation of opposition nationality parties – both armed and electoral – in history. Of the 21 EAOs recognised in the peace process, only four were absent (see chart: "Ethnic Armed Organisations, November 2019").[3] Other participants included the electoral Arakan National Party, which had won most seats in the Rakhine State Assembly, and members of the two key fronts in ethnic politics: the Nationalities Brotherhood Federation (of parties from the 2010 election) and United Nationalities Alliance (of parties from the 1990 election). Adding symbolism to the occasion, China's Special Envoy on Asian Affairs, Sun Guoxiang, was present as well as the UN Secretary-General's Special Advisor, Vijay Nambiar, shortly before the ending of his peace "go-between" mandate.

During the meeting, some concrete ideas were discussed. "Eight principles" were agreed that should be considered in an amended NCA draft to guarantee the establishment of a "Federal Democratic Union" (see box: "The 'Eight Principles' of the UNFC").[4] Meanwhile Aye Maung, the ANP chair and an UPDJC member for political parties, lobbied for "all-inclusion" so that the ULA and other EAOs barred by the Tatmadaw could join the peace process as equal partners.[5] Opposition leaders were confident that these agreements could form the basis for a political breakthrough at the forthcoming conference.

Political momentum was then carried into the Panglong-21 meeting at the end of August in Nay Pyi Taw. Initially, the Tatmadaw continued its objections against the ANC, ULA and four of their EAO allies as formal partners in the peace process (see Chapter 6).[6] But after some last-minute negotiations, United Nationalities Federal Council representation was allowed. This meant that – in technical terms – most nationality groups in Rakhine State and the rest of the country could be accounted for.[7] There was one notable exception: despite the announcement of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, those claiming Rohingya identity or considered as Bengali by the government were not included.[8]

There then followed the greatest assembly of political leaders and conflict actors in the country since independence in 1948. Over 750 delegates attended the August 2016 conference, including representatives of the government, Tatmadaw, political parties, civil society groups and EAOs. Short presentations were made and, in an unprecedented sign of international support, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon delivered a keynote speech encouraging the need for "compromise".[9]

Sadly, this marked the last moment of optimism for peace and reform under the new government. The NLD's good intentions were not generally in doubt, but a catalogue of concerns quickly developed during the meeting. There was little discussion of political issues; NLD and Tatmadaw leaders appeared to be trying to rebrand "Panglong" with a new set of principles; and government rhetoric reminded minority leaders of ethnic Bamar politicians during the parliamentary era of the 1950s who promised much but offered little in terms of meaningful reform.[10] As participants left, a historic sense of opportunity started to fade.

The events that followed remain a matter of great controversy. A major escalation in conflict was about to break out in two different parts of the country. After the Panglong-21 meeting, Aung San

Former RNDP and ANP leader, Dr Aye Maung (IR)

Suu Kyi met with the Commander-in-Chief Snr-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing. What they discussed has never been publicly revealed. But subsequently, the positions of both the NLD and Tatmadaw appeared to firm up behind Thein Sein's NCA as the only way for the peace process to move forward. This, in turn, appeared to be taken by Tatmadaw leaders as a green light to resume military operations in non-ceasefire areas of the country. Equally resonant, in counter to the "eight principles" of the EAOs, Tatmadaw representatives began to promote "six principles" of their own, built around defence of the 2008 constitution, from which said that they were not prepared to move.[11] Meanwhile the NLD government brought the intermediary peace role of UN Special Advisor Vijay Nambiar to an end.

Rakhine, Kachin and other ethnic nationality parties were shocked. Such actions seemed completely counter to the spirit and intentions of the Panglong-21 meeting that they had all just attended. Over the following months, the Tatmadaw launched some of its heaviest offensives yet against non-ceasefire forces in the Kachin and northern Shan States. This time, the EAOs fought back fiercely. The ULA's Arakan Army also joined the KIO in forming a new "Northern Alliance" with their northeast allies, the (Kokang) Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and Ta'ang National Liberation Army. As fighting spread, a combined force of Northern Alliance troops nearly succeeded in taking control of the town of Mongko on the China border until forced out by an aerial bombardment.[12]

The consequences of the renewed fighting could not have been more regressive. The tragic cycle of conflict and humanitarian emergency once again resumed – but this time under an NLD administration. As fighting spread, the number of internally-displaced persons grew rapidly to over 100,000 in the northeast of the country. Economic interests – not politics – appeared to be the driving force behind Tatmadaw operations.[13] And allegations of grave human rights violations steadily increased. "Myanmar's borderlands on fire," reported Amnesty International following an investigation.[14]

Rakhine State, meanwhile, was on the brink of an explosion in conflict. The announcement of Panglong-21 and the Kofi Annan Commission had been welcomed as steps in the right direction.[15] But having set out these new processes, the government appeared to be lulled into a false sense of security. In reality, disaffection was rife within the territory. In June 2016, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights had warned of the precarious situation of the Rohingya Muslims and other ethnic nationalities in the country.[16] But, upon taking office, the new government had begun upon a new series of errors that deepened alienation amongst both Buddhist and Muslim communities.

First, there was resentment in ethnic nationalist circles that an NLD MP, U Nyi Pu, was selected by the government as Rakhine State chief minister – not a representative of the ANP that had won the largest number of seats in the State Assembly. The NLD – through the office of President – has the mandate to choose the chief ministers in the state and region assemblies under the 2008 constitution. The NLD exercised this mandate in all 14 legislatures around the country. But, in failing to recognise the ANP's victory in Rakhine State, the NLD reinforced nationalist doubts about ethnic representation and rights under the new political system. This resulted in an ANP walkout after a meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi in protest at the government's "monopolisation of power".[17] "We don't want a puppet chief minister," said U Tun Aung Kyaw, the ANP secretary.[18]

Second, despite the promises of "Panglong", the NLD manifestly failed to promote Arakan inclusion in the peace process. As with the Thein Sein administration, NLD leaders either ignored or failed to recognise the consequences of refusing to allow the ULA and ANC full participation in national peace talks. Only the ALP – an NCA signatory – was accorded such recognition. Given the party's marginal status, Rakhine nationalists regarded this separation as "divide and rule". Such exclusion was even harder to understand as political attention focused on the NLD's 21st Century Panglong. With the long history of armed struggle in Arakan, there have always been connections between underground and aboveground movements (see box: "Timeline: Armed Movements Arakan"). This continues to be the case today, where the ANP and ULA are the most dominant forces in Rakhine politics in many decades. Most notably, U San Kyaw Hla, the speaker of the Rakhine State Assembly and ANP lawmaker for Ponnagyun, is father-in-law of the ULA leader Twan Mrat Naing.[19]

Third, as political frustrations mounted, the NLD fatally ignored the root causes of conflict on the ground. Given the Tatmadaw's control of the National Defence and Security Council, it is questionable how much influence the NLD might have on strategic decisions. But the party also appeared not to understand the deepening sense of political grievance amongst Rakhine Buddhist and Rohingya Muslim communities. Under the Thein Sein government, the language of militarisation had revived (see Chapter 6). Far from the Tatmadaw suppressing armed opposition through its tactics, support for militancy was continuing to grow, especially among the young.

The first force to reveal its hand was the ULA. Throughout the government changeover, fighting spread across the tri-border region with India and Bangladesh. By July 2016, the ULA reported over 70 clashes had taken place as Arakan Army units infiltrated into Buthidaung, Ponnagyun, Rathedaung, Kyauktaw and Mrauk-U townships from the party's footholds in the Paletwa area.[20] With the ULA now seeking to establish permanent base areas, NLD leaders were slow to recognise the scale of worsening crisis on the country's western frontier.[21] Meanwhile Arakan Army troops in the Northern Alliance were also engaged in fighting with the Tatmadaw in the northeast borderlands. During the heady optimism around the NLD's first months in office, the announcement of a nationwide ceasefire by Aung San Suu Kyi might have made a difference. Many people in the country looked to her for leadership. But such a call never came.

The neglect of Arakan politics and human rights now led to the fourth and final step in socio-political breakdown. When the next upsurge in conflict came, it was not from the ULA or the Rakhine population. Rather, it came with the arrival of a new movement in the Bangladesh borderlands: the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army. The announcement of the Kofi Annan Commission in August 2016 proved too little and too late. As with the refugee crises in 1978 and 1992, there were many parallels with the build-up in security tensions beforehand (see Chapters 4 and 5). After the 2012 Buddhist-Muslim violence, militarisation and the exclusion of Muslim communities had only deepened in Rakhine State (see Chapter 6).

The "Eight Principles" of the UNFC*

1. Bilateral ceasefire agreement between the government-military and the UNFC
2. To build a federal union with result achieved from Panglong-21
3. Agreement of tripartite dialogue composition
4. Drafting and promulgation of constitutional law based on the outcome of Panglong-21
5. Advance agreement on Military Codes of Conduct and monitoring on Terms of Reference
6. Formation of military Joint Monitoring Committee with representatives from government, EAOs and international figures acceptable to both parties
7. Formation of a neutral, enforcement tribunal for NCA involving domestic and international law experts and judges that are acceptable to both parties
8. Developmental projects to be tackled according to Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), in cooperation with the public and the EAOs.

* These are the eight points that the ANC and other UNFC members confirmed at a meeting in August 2016 should be added to the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement before further signing.

Source: Sai Wansai, "Framework for Political Dialogue: UNFC's boycott leads to peace process deterioration", S.H.A.N., 21 September 2016.

Democracy supporters trusted that the Kofi Annan Commission might find a way to achieve inter-community solutions. But the NLD did not offer any olive branches to the Muslim population in the meantime.

In Nay Pyi Taw, government officials appeared out of touch with the rising tide of Muslim unrest. Rakhine leaders, in contrast, appeared very aware. When asked in July 2016 about the "most important task" facing the Rakhine State government, the ULA leader Twan Mrat Naing answered that it was the "Bengali (Rohingya Muslims) issue".[22] The NLD, he indicated, needs to address the citizenship crisis with "responsibility" and "accountability". "It will not be easy to please all stakeholders," he warned.[23] Tragically, this presentiment was about to become true.

The Rise of ARSA and Renewed Rohingya Crisis

All nationality groups suffered in the upheavals that followed, but the plight of the Muslim population became very much worse. As of mid-2016, there were still 120,000 internally-displaced persons (mostly Muslims) scattered in camps between Ramree Island and Maungdaw Township.[24] Another 232,974 refugees were recorded in Bangladesh.[25] In theory, the appointment of the Kofi Annan Commission suggested that the government was open to new reforms. However the restrictions against Muslim voters in the 2015 general election meant that there was no effective representation of Muslim communities, whatever their ethnicity, across the country. Despair was especially felt among Muslims who identified as Rohingyas in Rakhine State.

The Ma Ba Tha nationalist movement now chose this moment to step up pro-Buddhist agitation. During May 2016, protestors demonstrated outside the US embassy in Yangon, demanding that staff stop using the "Rohingya" name.[26] NLD officials tried to curtail their activities, but the new government faced difficulties in countering the spread of anti-Muslim propaganda.[27] According to the Ma Ba Tha leader U Wirathu: "Aung San Suu Kyi would like to help the Bengali, but I block her."[28] U Wirathu was subsequently banned from preaching for one year by the State Sangha Maha Nayaka, the country's highest Buddhist body. But Ma Ba Tha supporters continued to disseminate anti-Muslim rhetoric through Facebook, YouTube and other social media that were gathering pace around the country (see box: "Facebook and the Role of Social Media").

It was against this worsening backdrop that a dramatic escalation in conflict suddenly erupted. Militant activity in Rohingya communities had come to a virtual halt in the aftermath of the 2012 violence (see Chapter 6). But on 9 October 2016, a new Rohingya force killed nine policemen during a surprise attack on three border posts in Maungdaw and Rathedaung townships.[29] At first, the new organisation appeared to be a rag-tag movement, taking care to hide its origins. Known as the Harakah al-Yaqin ("Faith Movement"), its recruits seemed under-equipped and poorly-trained. It was only later that an ethnic description – the "Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army" – was made public.[30] As conflict spread, however, its leadership was quickly revealed to have international connections. Headed by Ataullah abu Ammar Jununi, a Rohingya born in Pakistan and brought up in Saudi Arabia, the new force developed in a much more radical style to the Mujahids of the 1950s and other Muslim-based predecessors.

In a world fearful of global jihadism, the arrival of the ARSA movement proved highly counter-productive to perceptions of the Rohingya cause. Although there had been connections with militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the past, they had never resulted in effective operations on the ground.[31] Muslim traditions in Myanmar have not generally been radical, and this appeared to be the main trend until the ARSA's arrival. The Arakan Rohingya National Organisation had retired from armed struggle during the 2000s to concentrate on international advocacy.[32] Similarly, the National Democratic Party for Human Rights, which won four seats in the 1990 general election, had also set up "exile" branches in pro-democracy circles abroad.

Only the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation was reputed to be active as an armed group. But, as the International Crisis Group pointed out, this was largely as a "brand" used by different militant actors in the Bangladesh borderlands.[33] As many as six factions were reputed to exist among exiles and the Rohingya diaspora. The new ARSA arrivals,

Security personnel watching Rohingya Muslim IDP camp, Sittwe Township (AFP)

in contrast, had quickly been able to find support among young people who had been displaced during the 2012 violence. With the loss of homes and family members, a new generation was growing up in refugee and displacement camps. As Rohingya elders privately admitted, young people were very susceptible to the ARSA propaganda that they had "nothing left to lose".

Already marginalised, Rohingya communities were now to receive another shattering blow to their livelihoods and security. As the Tatmadaw launched a major crackdown, the government's handling of Rakhine and Rohingya issues became inter-linked. During the months preceding the October 2016 attacks, the Tatmadaw's Western Command had been quietly building up troop strength in order to counter the ULA advance.[34] With the security target now turned to the Rohingya population, Muslim leaders quickly expressed fears that the situation could "spiral out of control".[35] The ARSA attacks had been deadly but small-scale. But as government troops swept through local villages, there were many echoes of Tatmadaw counter-insurgency operations during the late 1970s and early 1990s (see Chapters 4 and 5). The full extent of human loss may never be known. But during the following months, over 1,500 buildings were destroyed in the Maungdaw area, 70,000 civilians displaced, and as many as 1,000 Rohingya Muslims killed.[36] Meanwhile refugee numbers in Bangladesh passed the 300,000 mark.

As international criticisms mounted, government officials denied all reports of human rights violations.[37] Instead, the remarkable counter-argument was proposed that "Bengalis" were destroying their own property. "Some did so in hope of getting a new home," claimed Snr-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing.[38] But such a defence was quickly negated by the sheer weight of evidence from the field. As the Western Command sought to tighten its control, a familiar array of tactics was stepped up. The border region was shut down; foreign media and humanitarian access were banned; and the security forces stepped up their training of non-Muslim militia.[39]

Adding to the confusion, the new ARSA movement posed a very different kind of threat to the government. Unlike the ULA and EAOs that seek to control "liberated areas", ARSA leaders proved highly elusive. They also developed a reputation for brutality, and the ARSA name quickly became feared. Using the Internet and social media for advocacy, they appeared to rely on mobilising

civilians armed with little more than sticks and knives during their first operations. In the following months, ARSA members were accused of killing or abducting over 70 villagers, both Muslims and Buddhists.[40] Subsequently, there were also allegations of killings in the refugee camps in Bangladesh.[41]

Whatever the provocation, the severity of the government's response proved highly damaging to the NLD's reputation. There was no doubt that a major security crisis existed. But coming so soon after the resumption of military offensives in Kachin State, many democracy supporters could not understand why NLD leaders appeared so quiescent over the Tatmadaw's tactics. Communities on all sides were caught in a crossfire of violence. In reality, having failed to speak up during the 2012 violence, the party had probably lost its best chance of being able to mediate now. But this was still no excuse to the NLD's long-time supporters. Aung San Suu Kyi's silence "broke my heart," said the human rights activist Khin Ohmar. "Her moral authority is what people follow. That's where her real power lies. She has forgotten it or lost it."[42]

In their defence, NLD officials admitted that they had been caught wrong-footed. In private, they recognised that many people in the country agreed with the anti-Muslim protests of the Ma Ba Tha movement. Caution had therefore been factored into the party's campaign strategy in order to win the 2015 general election. Once in government, it was argued that the Kofi Annan Commission was a considered response to address the Rakhine State crisis – and this was a path that the international community supported. Although this cannot justify the party's marginalisation of Muslims during the election (see Chapter 6), such an explanation is generally accepted in diplomatic circles. There was, however, also a darker reason for the NLD's hesitancy. Many leading figures were becoming afraid to speak out.

In January 2017, fears of attack became ominously true when U Ko Ni, the NLD's leading constitutional lawyer, was assassinated outside Yangon airport by a gunman with links to military interests.[43] A prominent Muslim, Ko Ni had already received threats on his life. The message from his killers could not have been clearer. At the time of his death, he was returning from Indonesia in a delegation of civilians and government officials, including both Buddhists and Muslims. The objective of their mission had been to discuss political transition and inter-community reconciliation in Rakhine State.[44] Such hopes now appeared at an end.

It was a shocking act of violence that, in many respects, came to define the NLD's first year in office. Once again, Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD leadership remained conspicuously silent. Ethnic peace and constitutional reform were stalling, while political crisis was deepening around the fledgling government. "In a Muslim lawyer's murder, Myanmar's shattered dream," wrote the Reuters News Agency.[45]

Political Impasse and the Entry of China

After the renewed outbreak of violence in 2016, there appeared no way back from the sectarian divide in Rakhine State. Reflecting this schism, international relations were also split over perceptions of the NLD's handling of the Rohingya crisis. For the first time since the Second World War, Arakan was again on the front-line in international geo-politics and diplomacy (see Chapter 2). While politicians in the West and such ASEAN countries as Indonesia and Malaysia were explicit in their criticism of the Tatmadaw crackdown, China positioned itself much closer to the "law and order" defence voiced by government officials in Nay Pyi Taw. On the Rohingya issue, a potentially seismic shift in international relations was about to emerge.

While the international community watched, the NLD stumbled badly in the aftermath of the 2016 crackdown by the Tatmadaw. Opposition groups recognised that the NLD was operating under enormous pressures. But with military operations continuing in several borderlands, the party had manifestly failed to speak up on the key issues of ethnic peace and human rights protection. A litany of concerns was developing. The NLD leadership appeared more pre-occupied with compromise with Tatmadaw officers than political reform; there were rumours of a military coup; and economic plans were visibly stalling. Against this backdrop, a second Panglong-21 meeting had to be postponed several times.

Disappointment in the NLD was then reflected in parliamentary by-elections held in April 2017. The party lost in three of the four nationality areas that it contested. This "wake-up call" for the NLD had especial significance in Rakhine State.[46] Here the ANP leader Aye Maung had been defeated in the 2015 general election (see Chapter 6). But, following the 2017 polls, he returned to the political stage after gaining the Lower House seat for Ann Township. His victory had not initially been expected in a constituency linked to the Magway Region. But election observers noted how much nationalist sentiment had spread from the north of the state.[47] To win his seat, Aye Maung ran on an explicitly pro-Rakhine and anti-"Bengali Muslim" platform.[48]

To try and restore confidence, NLD leaders staked their hopes on three initiatives: a resumption of the 21st Century Panglong conference; Kofi Annan's "Advisory Commission" on Rakhine State; and a turn towards closer relations with China. Their inter-connection was signalled when, on the eve of the second Panglong-21 meeting, Aung San Suu Kyi travelled to Beijing in May 2017 to hear President Xi Jinping address the first international forum for his ambitious "Belt and Road Initiative" to link China by land and sea with Eurasia. As the Myanmar Times reported, the BRI could become a "global game changer".[49]

With the BRI now a concrete goal, it was clear that Beijing's strategic goals went far beyond the oil and gas pipelines from the Bay of Bengal. Initially, access to Kyaukpyu had been perceived as a way to get round China's "Malacca dilemma" of needing to tranship energy supplies around Singapore (see Chapter 5).[50] Now Rakhine State was targeted as a key focal point in Beijing's desire to expand trade and infrastructural outreach westwards across Myanmar from its Yunnan Province borders.

It was not an opportunity to recalibrate relations that Chinese officials had initially seen coming. There had been considerable alarm in Beijing when, under the Thein Sein presidency, the Myanmar government appeared keen to distance the country from China's embrace. Until the present day, the "Myitsone shock" of September 2011 is still remembered in Chinese business and political circles when Thein Sein postponed the controversial mega-dam on the Ayeyarwady confluence in Kachin State (see Chapter 6).[51]

Chinese officials therefore assumed that a government led by Aung San Suu Kyi would align itself even more closely with Western governments than its USDP-Tatmadaw predecessor. After decades under military rule, the desire for democratic change was tangible across the country. But as the Rohingya crisis deepened, an unexpected paradox began to emerge. While Western governments promoted political transition through "good governance" and human rights protection, China laid down no such conditions. Rather, Chinese officials advanced an infrastructure-led model of development through major investments in everything from hydropower dams to high-speed railways. For the beleaguered government in Nay Pyi Taw, China suddenly appeared as a helpful ally.

The Chinese government also had another important card it could play: the ethnic peace process. It is entirely natural that the Chinese authorities should have security and economic concerns about developments across the Yunnan border. Even during its four decades of support to the Communist Party of Burma, stability in its troubled neighbour had always been the main priority of political strategists in Beijing. To deal with this, Beijing has traditionally distinguished between "government-to-government" and "party-to-party" relations, while promoting the traditional "pauk-phaw" (fraternal) relationship that is said to exist between the two countries.[52]

Today the days of support to the CPB are long gone. But, until the present, China is the only country that has maintained party-to-party relations with the three key stakeholders in contemporary politics: the NLD, the Tatmadaw and EAOs. The eye of the Communist Party of China has always been on the political long-term (see "The New Great Game: Arakan in the International Frontline" below). Equally important, whatever the government in Myanmar, Chinese officials have a long history of engagement in peace talks in the country, notably in 1963, 1980-81 and post-1989.[53] With Thein Sein's initiation of a new peace process in 2011, Chinese diplomats were keen to become once again involved.[54]

Chinese actors were now able to make use of their relationships in Myanmar to have significant impact on developments in Rakhine State. Following the announcement of the BRI, Chinese

officials became increasingly assertive in three key areas: defending the Myanmar government against international sanctions over the Rohingya crisis; promoting Kyaukpyu as the BRI gateway to the Bay of Bengal; and supporting the government peace process. In advocacy for these plans, there was a determination and coherence by Chinese officials that no other foreign government could match. Notably, too, Beijing was anxious to keep Western officials and aid organisations away from "conflict resolution" activities on the China border. The Yunnan frontier is very much regarded as China's exclusive preserve.

It was in the ethnic peace process that China's new activism could first be seen. The political landscape remained very divided as the second Panglong-21 conference approached in mid-2017. Fighting continued in several borderlands; the Tatmadaw continued to reject the ANC, ULA and four of their UNFC allies as dialogue partners; and splits had begun to occur among EAOs themselves. Most notably, the Shan State Army/Restoration Council of Shan State began moving troops in late 2015 to northern Shan State following its NCA signing. Upon arrival, they began fighting with the ULA's Northern Alliance partners for territorial control.[55]

To begin with, the ANC, ULA and their EAO allies tried to salvage the situation. In March 2017 a UNFC team travelled to Nay Pyi Taw for a meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi to promote their "eight principles" for NCA amendment in advance of the second Panglong-21 meeting (see box: "The 'Eight Principles' of the UNFC").[56] But Aung San Suu Kyi caused confusion when she subsequently announced that the ANC and four other UNFC members had agreed to sign the NCA.[57] This error by the State Counsellor went down badly in ethnic nationality circles, causing the ANC and other UNFC members to believe that they were being manipulated. They therefore decided not to attend the next Panglong-21 meeting.

Meanwhile the ANC and its UNFC allies were not the only parties frustrated by the direction of the peace process. During early 2017, the ULA joined its Northern Alliance colleagues in northeast Myanmar in establishing a new united front among ceasefire and non-ceasefire groups on the Chinese border: the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC).[58] Following its April 2017 announcement, the FPNCC grew to seven organisations: the ceasefire United Wa State Army, (Mongla) New Democratic Alliance Army and Shan State Army/Shan State Progress Party (SSA/

Aung San Suu Kyi visits Rakhine State (AFP)

SSPP); and four non-ceasefire groups, the ULA, KIO, MNDAA and TNLA (see chart: "Ethnic Armed Organisations, November 2019").

The FPNCC marked a significant development. At the time, the four Northern Alliance members were engaged in regular fighting with the Tatmadaw, while the new united front included the UWSA, the strongest EAO in the country. Although the UWSA had maintained a ceasefire with the government since its 1989 formation, it was little secret that it was providing military and political support to the ULA and its FPNCC allies. Equally resonant, various Chinese actors were involved in political and economic developments in the wings.[59] Having inherited the CPB's former strongholds at its 1989 inception, the UWSA continued to enjoy close relations with its China neighbour – a position that successive governments in Myanmar have never challenged. Reflecting the cross-border spread of peoples and cultures, Chinese remains a commonly spoken language on both sides of the Yunnan frontier today.

The omens therefore did not look good when the second Panglong-21 conference approached in May. In Rakhine State, there were many reasons for caution. Military operations were continuing against both the ULA and ARSA; an official of the ceasefire ALP was detained for alleged sedition after accusing the Tatmadaw of human rights violations;[60] and community-level meetings for political dialogue under the NCA terms were suspended by the government for "security reasons". To try and address this regression, Rakhine leaders wanted the three Arakan EAOs – the ALP, ANC and ULA – to be represented at the next Panglong meeting together. Instead, inter-party divisions further deepened. The Tatmadaw maintained its block on the ULA; the ANC joined the UNFC boycott of the meeting; and only the ALP was invited to attend.

It was at this moment that Beijing revealed its hand when an FPNCC team arrived at the last minute as "invited guests" after intercession by Chinese officials.[61] Reflecting Tatmadaw sensitivities, the FPNCC representatives held meetings with government officials in two groups during the Panglong meeting: the KIO, NDAA, SSA/SSPP and UWSA in one team, and the ULA, MNDAA and TNLA in the other. For her part, Aung San Suu Kyi raised hopes by agreeing that "political dialogue" was needed to achieve ethnic peace and political reform. "As such the NCA itself is not the ultimate destination," she said in her opening address.[62] But the meeting ended in controversy after Tatmadaw representatives introduced a new demand for a "non-secession" clause that all parties would have to sign in a future Union Peace Accord.[63]

An impasse quickly developed. The ALP, Karen National Union and other NCA signatories refused to give way. Aung San Suu Kyi and the Tatmadaw delegates responded by blocking discussion of political issues that related to equality, federalism and the right of self-determination. As arguments continued, it was eventually announced that 37 "basic principles" had been agreed. But these were largely non-contentious issues covered under existing agreements and the 2008 constitution. Nationality representatives were quick to express their frustration. Rather than Panglong-21 delivering political reform, the NLD process appeared to be turning into a "second National Convention", echoing that of the SLORC-SPDC era, to approve the 2008 constitution (see Chapter 5). "Accord or discord at Panglong?", queried the Frontier Myanmar magazine.[64]

One group, though, left Nay Pyi Taw encouraged by what they had seen: the Chinese team. Officials were disappointed that there had not been a peace breakthrough. But they had demonstrated in their behind-the-scenes activities that China's influence was very much back on track. From this moment, support for the Myanmar peace process and "Panglong Spirit" became staples in Beijing's promotion of "Belt and Road" cooperation between the two countries.[65] Many difficulties lay ahead (see "The New Great Game: Arakan in the International Frontline" below). But, at least, Chinese officials believed that the traditional "pauk-phaw" relationship between the two countries had been re-established.

The Kofi Annan Commission and the Rohingya Exodus

In mid-2017, the political climate once again deteriorated in the aftermath of a Panglong-21 meeting. It is difficult to evaluate Snr-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing's intentions, but many nationality parties believed that the Tatmadaw leadership did

not want the NLD's Panglong initiative to succeed. After the conference finished, another wave of military operations was launched in the Kachin and northern Shan States where over 100,000 people had already been displaced.[66] Amnesty International was quick to express human rights concerns. "All the civilians suffer", it warned.[67]

This time critics began to include the NLD in their allegations of culpability. The NLD government needs to be "more proactive" in the peace process, cautioned the UNFC and ANC representative Twan Zaw.[68] The most stunning rebuke, however, came from Yanghee Lee, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar. In a public statement in July, she argued that "tactics applied by the previous government" were being continued under the NLD administration.[69] These were critical words that few democracy supporters ever expected to hear when the NLD assumed office just the year before.

The conflict focus now swung to Rakhine State. In the light of subsequent history, care is needed in seeking to attribute a simple chronology or sequence of events to the extraordinary violence that followed. But, given the scale of human suffering, the regional "clearance operations" by the security forces in northern Rakhine State during 2017-18 have become among the most scrutinised Tatmadaw actions in all the years of armed conflict since independence in 1948. Within a year, the behaviour of the security forces led to a series of human rights investigations and calls for the situation to be referred to the International Criminal Court. According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, the Tatmadaw's actions constituted a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing".[70] Certainly, there was evidence of security preparation beforehand. As the UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar later alleged: "This build-up was significant, requiring logistical planning and time to implement, considerations that indicate that the subsequent operations were foreseen and planned."[71]

The question, then, was the purpose of the security build-up. In the preceding months, many communities in the tri-border region with Bangladesh and India reported their concerns. At first, it was thought that the ULA was the government's main target. Despite its "guest" status at the second Panglong-21 meeting, there had been no let-up in either Tatmadaw or ULA activities in the field. The perception of the ULA as the key focus then increased during June when the Tatmadaw deployed ten battalions under the Western Command and Military Operations Command-15 in Buthidaung to try and stop the spread of Arakan Army troops into Kyauktaw, Mrauk-U and Minbya Townships.[72]

Less noticed at the time, tensions were also increasing further north in the Kaladan valley of the adjoining Chin State (see box: "A Regional Conflict Complex"). Here the Arakan Army was reported to have attacked an outpost of the NCA-signatory ALP in Paletwa Township in August 2017, asserting the ULA's increasing control in the India border region.[73] In response, the Chin National Front – another NCA signatory – demanded that the ULA withdraw its troops from the area.[74] At this moment, the ANP leader Aye Maung also caused unease in Chin political circles by raising questions over the political status of the hill tracts that had once been part of Arakan territory (see Chapter 2).[75] As conflict spread, increasing numbers of villagers were displaced or took refuge across the India border.[76]

Meanwhile, although their leadership had gone to ground, ARSA militants had not gone away. In mid-2017, small groups of ARSA supporters were reported to be moving in rural areas between the Mayu Range and Naf River border with Bangladesh. In response, the Tatmadaw began dispatching extra troops during early August to Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships where a number of ethnic Mro and Buddhist villagers had been murdered.[77] A major escalation in inter-communal violence was feared. As concerns grew, an ANP delegation led by Aye Maung met with Snr-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing and the Tatmadaw leadership in Nay Pyi Taw to request protection for the local population. "Ethnic [Rakhine] villages are surrounded by Bengali villages, so we called for designating No-Bengali zones in the area," said the ANP Upper House MP U Khin Maung Latt.[78]

The Tamadaw leadership appeared to comply with this request for protection. But the new forces airlifted into Rakhine State were not police, but battalions from the 33rd and 99th Light Infantry Divisions. This significantly changed the complexion of the military deployment. The LIDs

were elite front-line troops, long experienced in Tatmadaw "Four Cuts" operations (see Chapter 4).[79] Sensing the deepening crisis, the UN Special Rapporteur Yanghee Lee once again cautioned the authorities about the need for a sensitive response: "The government must ensure that security forces exercise restraint in all circumstances and respect human rights in addressing the security situation in Rakhine State."[80] Her plea was ignored.

The Rohingya crisis now escalated into one of the greatest conflict emergencies in the modern world. It is a tragedy that will take long to die down in history. In the preceding months, few of the conflict actors appeared to be listening to moderating voices. Instead, it appeared that all sides were waiting for Kofi Annan's Advisory Commission report. But far from the report opening the doors to solutions, its publication date on 24 August 2017 marked the worst eruption in violence yet.

Certainly, there were recommendations in the report that leaders in the different communities would have been pleased to support. It finally seemed that the urgent challenges of politics and society in Rakhine State were receiving informed analysis and attention. Focusing on the need for equality and justice, the commission included proposals to support freedom of movement, citizenship, political representation, resettlement, trust-building and development initiatives for all peoples.[81] The commission was also deeply critical of governmental neglect, pointing out that contemporary Arakan has some of the highest levels of poverty, illiteracy and child mortality in the country.[82] Kofi Annan was very clear in his choice of words: "Once a thriving trading hub and a major producer of rice in Asia, Rakhine today is one of the poorest states in Myanmar, plagued by inter-communal tension and conflict."[83]

Any hopes, however, of a political breakthrough were quickly dashed. On the day after the Advisory Commission report was published, another series of ARSA attacks was launched on 24 security outposts in Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung townships.[84] Accusing "Bengalis" of attempting to set up an "Islamic State",[85] the Tatmadaw responded with extraordinary force in the most intense "clearance" operation against a targeted people since the country's independence

Rohingya refugees welcome UNSG António Guterres to Kutupalong camp in Bangladesh (RS)

in 1948. In the following weeks, up to 10,000 people were reportedly killed amidst arson and violence that appeared to be designed to drive the Rohingya Muslim population from the country.[86] Under this assault, around 725,000 displaced people fled across the border to join the estimated 350,000 refugees already living in Bangladesh.[87] In their history, the frontier lands of Arakan have witnessed many moments of crisis. But the scale of displacement and loss of life during 2017 was among the most extreme.

In response to media reports, Tatmadaw officials issued regular denials of human rights atrocities during security operations against what they termed as "extremist terrorists".[88] Many people were undoubtedly killed during the initial ARSA attacks. Following its emergence, the new ARSA movement was marked by a propensity for violence and intimidation. During the past three years, ARSA targets have included Rakhine, Daingnet and Mro villagers as well as Muslims accused of working with the government. Most notoriously, 99 Hindu villagers were massacred by ARSA fighters during the first days of its 2017 offensive.[89] The theme of ARSA culpability was one that government officials frequently employed in their rejection of allegations of genocide and ethnic cleansing during the following months. As Aung San Suu Kyi told a BBC interviewer:

> "I don't think there is ethnic cleansing going on. I think ethnic cleansing is too strong an expression to use for what is happening…I think there is a lot of hostility there – it is Muslims killing Muslims as well, if they think they are co-operating with the authorities."[90]

In the age, however, of satellite photos, mobile phones and international communications, it soon became impossible for the authorities to conceal the scale of military operations underway (see box: "Facebook and the Role of Social Media"). For many years, eyewitness descriptions of counter-insurgency clearance programmes by the Tatmadaw have been reported in different areas of the country (see Chapters 4 and 5). But this was the first time that such operations had been so graphically revealed and corroborated by human rights investigators. The UN Fact-Finding Mission later reported that at least 392 villages were totally or partially destroyed. This included over 70 per cent of those in Maungdaw Township where Muslim communities were in the majority.[91] Rakhine settlements, in contrast, were left untouched.[92]

The evidence appeared compelling. Although never admitted by the government, it would seem that – after seventy years of conflict – a decision had been made to clear entire areas on the west of the Mayu Range of their Muslim population. The dream of a Muslim "autonomous zone" in what Jamiatul-Ulama leaders of the 1930s had termed "north Arakan" was at an end. As Rohingya groups sought to document, the Tatmadaw expulsions were "pre-planned".[93]

As realisation of the scale of humanitarian emergency set in, international condemnation reached a new high. Human rights warnings by informed voices had been ignored by the Tatmadaw and NLD administration.[94] By their attacks, ARSA leaders no doubt intended to overshadow the launch of the Kofi Annan report. But, since the 2012 violence, the Tatmadaw's security preparations had been systematic and well-planned (see Chapter 6). And now, in a repetition of 2016, the authorities went to great lengths again to cover up what was happening on the ground. Access for foreign media was limited; humanitarian aid was severely restricted; and the UN Special Rapporteur Yanghee Lee was banned from the country. This, however, did little to halt the flow of reports from the Bangladesh borderlands, cataloguing a grave pattern of human rights violations.

In one of the most disturbing examples of repression of the media, two Reuters journalists – both Myanmar nationals – were arrested while working on an investigation into the killing of ten Rohingya men by the "security services and Buddhist civilians" at Inn Din village.[95] Despite evidence that they had been set up by military agents, they were later sentenced to seven years' imprisonment on charges of breaking the Official Secrets Act.[96] Anger later deepened when seven soldiers accused of responsibility for the killings served less time in jail than the journalists who had actually reported on the deaths.[97] Equally controversial, the Tatmadaw's Department of Public Relations and Psychological Warfare published a book using "fake photos" from Rwanda and other crises around the world, alleging that they showed "Bengalis" illegally entering the country and killing local people.[98] "Bengali

terrorists", the Tatmadaw alleged, were intent on carving out a Rohingya state called "Arkistan".[99]

For their part, NLD leaders put forward a series of emergency initiatives as their response to the crisis. During the following year, the government established a "Committee for the Implementation of Recommendations on Rakhine State",[100] a "Committee for the Union Enterprise for Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement and Development in Rakhine State",[101] and an international "Rakhine State Advisory Panel" chaired by the Thai politician Surakiart Sathirathai. Its credibility, however, was badly damaged when the veteran US diplomat Bill Richardson resigned over Aung San Suu Kyi's apparent unwillingness to stand up to the military. He was not prepared, he said, to take part in a "whitewash".[102] Subsequently, another committee was set up, an Independent Commission of Enquiry, chaired by the Filipina diplomat Rosario Manalo.[103]

International concerns, meanwhile, continued to grow. In a world already dealing with many conflict emergencies, the outbreak of a new crisis in Rakhine State was greeted with alarm. The challenges were especially acute for Bangladesh and international aid organisations seeking to address the humanitarian consequences in the field. China and Russia, however, both blocked efforts by Western governments to take action through the UN Security Council, which would usually be the most direct line of international action.[104]

Chinese officials instead proposed a "three-phase" solution, first advanced by Foreign Minister Wang Yi in November 2017: a ceasefire to restore stability; international support for consultation to promote resettlement and dialogue; and, finally, strategies that address the "root causes" of problems.[105] To date, however, little has been delivered from these suggestions (see Chapter 8). Rather, most international focus has centred on an investigation by the "Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar" that was set up by the UN Human Rights Council.

The findings of the Fact-Finding Mission in September 2018 were a searing indictment of the behaviour by the security forces. The report quickly became a landmark document in international perceptions of the crisis. Six Tatmadaw leaders were named as perpetrators of potential war crimes and genocide for investigation: Snr-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing and his deputy Vice Snr-Gen. Soe Win as well as the commanders of the Bureau of Special Operations-3, Western Regional Military Command, and the 33rd and 99th LIDs.[106]

The list, however, was "non-exhaustive". Other areas of concern were highlighted. The Myanmar police, Nasaka units and Border Guard Police were similarly identified as being responsible for human rights violations. "(L)ocal authorities, militias, militant 'civilian' groups, politicians and monks" were also accused of participation "to varying degrees".[107] Looking further afield, many of the same human rights violations were noted during Tatmadaw operations in the Kachin and northern Shan States. And the role of Facebook and other social media was criticised in the spread of a "hate campaign" against Muslims (see box: "Facebook and the Role of Social Media").[108]

The responsibility of ARSA for killings and other human rights violations was also emphasised in the research. The Fact-Finding Mission worked hard to put such a catastrophic social breakdown into national context. Its conclusions, then, were a sobering wake-up call to the scale of the militarised landscape that has long existed within the country. The Fact-Finding Mission summarised:

> The gross human rights violations and abuses committed in Kachin, Rakhine and Shan States are shocking for their horrifying nature and ubiquity. Many of these violations undoubtedly amount to the gravest crimes under international law. They are also shocking because they stem from deep fractures in society and structural problems that have been apparent and unaddressed for decades. They are shocking for the level of denial, normalcy and impunity that is attached to them. The mission concludes that these abusive patterns are reflective of the situation in Myanmar as a whole.[109]

Such words could have been written about many parts of the country since independence in 1948. Tragically, the sufferings as a result of conflict in Rakhine State and the northeast borderlands with China are by no means at an end. The reports of both the Kofi Annan Advisory Commission and the UN Fact-Finding Mission have now been added to the mounting catalogue of international recommendations for resolving the political crises

Facebook and the Role of Social Media

The UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar condemned another disturbing reality behind the violence in Rakhine State: the role played by social media. Access to mobile phones and the worldwide web came late to the country. With 18 million Facebook users, for many citizens Facebook is the Internet. As the Fact-Finding Mission reported, anti-Muslim sentiments were openly circulating throughout the security clampdown in the state media and on Facebook during the 2016-17 violence.

Most controversially, the Commander-in-Chief Snr-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing described Tatmadaw operations as "unfinished business" from the Second World War (see Chapter 2).[110] People around the world were shocked. "A Genocide Incited on Facebook, With Posts From Myanmar's Military", headlined the New York Times.[111]

Subsequently, Facebook recognised that it had been very slow in reacting to the spread of misinformation and discriminatory as well as violent language.[112] Since this time, it has continued to remove selected pages, including that of Snr-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing.[113] Under government lobbying, it has also removed the pages of such non-ceasefire forces as the ULA, KIO and MNDAA. But, for over one million refugees and displaced persons in the Bangladesh borderlands, the attention paid to the role of social media in instigating inter-community division and inter-ethnic conflict came far too late.

in the country. An agreement was eventually reached between the Myanmar and Bangladesh governments for the first resettlement of refugees, starting from November 2018. But, to date, there has been no real movement (see Chapter 8). For the present, ethnic peace, military accountability and human rights protection under the rule of law remain elusive for Myanmar's peoples.

Political Crisis and the Ascendancy of Rakhine Nationalism

While international attention focused on the Rohingya crisis, the conflict in the Bangladesh borderlands was by no means the only emergency in Rakhine State. Many of the same concerns about Tatmadaw behaviour were being expressed among other nationality groups. For although many Rakhine nationalists supported the government's clampdown on Muslims, it was widely believed that the authorities were using the Rohingya crisis as an opportunity to increase central government control. In a pattern long familiar in other parts of the country, the tactics employed by the security forces were fuelling – rather than healing – local resentments and division. According to the civil society leader Kyaw Hsan: "The communities are now even more polarised than before."[114]

As with the Muslim community, warnings of the deteriorating situation were persistently ignored. Serious human rights violations were also occurring against the Rakhine population.[115] This strengthened the belief among Rakhine leaders that they were being deliberately mistreated by the country's Bamar-majority leaders. In what often appeared a three-cornered configuration between the government authorities, Buddhist Rakhines and the Muslim minority, communities on all sides felt "squeezed".[116] The development analyst Ye Min Zaw warned: "Fear now permeates the social fabric of the state, bringing latent prejudices to the fore."[117]

Under the NLD government, Rakhine parties were by no means acquiescent as insecurity spread. Following the 2015 general election, advocacy for the Arakan cause was dominated by two key parties: the electoral ANP and armed ULA. At first, the ANP had appeared to lose momentum after the NLD took office. Despite the party's strong showing in the 2015 polls, factionalism remained a problem. In January 2017 a number of former ALD members

broke away to re-establish their former party.[118] The dispute was partly over leadership, but it also reflected disagreements over how closely the ANP should work with the NLD. In many respects, this division echoed the long-standing dilemma in every governmental era as to whether nationality parties should seek to pursue their own political paths or collaborate with Bamar-majority parties at the national centre.

Subsequently, the ANP appeared to have steadied the ship, when the party chair Aye Maung won the Lower House seat for Ann Township in the April 2017 by-election. In December, however, he abruptly resigned from the party at the height of the Rohingya crisis in a dramatic gesture that was reported to send "shockwaves" through the ANP movement.[119] At first, he appeared marginalised by this move. But from this point Aye Maung became an increasingly prominent – and controversial – figure in the deepening crisis.

Meanwhile support was growing for the ULA in several parts of the state. During 2017 the Arakan Army was able to establish supply-lines through the tri-border region into Paletwa, Buthidaung and Kyauktaw townships. To begin with, the Tatmadaw had been preparing a strong response, but the ARSA attacks in August turned the main security focus towards the Rohingya population. If, however, there were any doubts about the ULA's strengthening capabilities, 11 Tatmadaw troops were killed and 14 wounded in an ambush on the Kaladan River in November 2017.[120] This surprise attack led to the largest loss of life inflicted on government forces by a Rakhine EAO in many years.

To understand the Arakan Army's rise, questions now arose as to the source of the ULA's arms and financing. These included allegations of narcotics trafficking and coerced contributions.[121] Such accusations and counter-accusations have long been an integral feature of all the armed conflicts in Myanmar.[122] Conflict and narcotics are inextricably linked, and over the years many sides have been involved. Myanmar is today a global leader in the illicit production of opium and methamphetamines. As the International Crisis Group stated in a recent analysis of the drugs trade in Shan State, the Myanmar armed forces "should root out corruption, including among top brass, and disarm complicit paramilitaries".[123]

The reality is that, since the outbreak of armed conflict at independence, it has not usually been difficult to find weapons and financing in a country where there are still over 20 EAOs, a diversity of Border Guard Forces and numerous government militia under arms today.[124] Both the government and ethnic opposition movements have long been highly militarised. In the ULA's case, it has powerful allies on the Chinese frontier where it has been able to acquire weaponry and train large numbers of troops. ULA activists have also been able to build support networks among the Rakhine diaspora and exiles who have regrouped in several borderland territories during the past decade.[125] Today there are Rakhine militants in no less than five nationality states: Rakhine, Chin, Kachin, Shan and Karen (Kayin).

In the ULA's rise, then, a more potent question to ask is why the party was able to gain public support so rapidly during the post-SPDC era. Politically, both the ALP and ANC remained active after the launch of Thein Sein's peace process in 2011. But neither party garnered anything like the same acknowledgement or momentum during a time of national change (see Chapter 8).

At this delicate moment, another fuse in public anger was ignited. Rakhine nationalist sentiment soared at the beginning of 2018 when seven civilians were killed and eight hospitalised in a clash between protestors and the security forces in the ancient capital of Mrauk-U. The timing and location of the government crackdown could not have been more symbolic, occurring after permission was revoked for a ceremony to mark the fall of the Arakan kingdom in 1784. Two days later, the ex-ANP leader Aye Maung and the author Wai Hin Aung were arrested and charged with both "high treason" and "unlawful association" for speeches that they gave at a literary rally in Rathedaung. Well-known nationalists, the two men were accused of endorsing the ULA's bid to regain Arakan's lost sovereignty.[126] Wai Hin Aung was quoted as saying: "Today is the time when the government is in political crisis, and this situation brings good advantage to us. Also, the right time for us to take armed struggle to gain our independence. All must participate in this struggle."[127]

Today the 2018 deaths in Mrauk-U are regarded by Rakhine nationalists as a tipping point on a parallel

Arakan Army recruits at training camp in Kachin State (IR)

with the shooting of protestors by the security forces in the 1967 "Rice-Killing Day" in Sittwe (see Chapter 4). Fourteen months later, Aye Maung and Wai Hin Aung were given 20-year prison sentences, further inflaming nationalist tensions. "Rakhine people are angry about the case," said the defence lawyer Daw Aye Nu Sein.[128]

In the aftermath of the Mrauk-U killings, the political mood darkened. A government administrator in charge of handling the protests was reportedly murdered, while three bombs exploded in the state capital Sittwe near official buildings. Authorities later arrested seven suspects, including an ANC representative, for the Sittwe bombings.[129] All protested their innocence. During the following year, death threats and killings continued among the civilian population in the north of the state, with different sides accused of involvement.[130] The descent into civil war was accelerating.

As these controversies continued, a third Panglong-21 conference went ahead in Nay Pyi Taw in July 2018. Once again, there was no substantive progress.[131] In February, the government had received a boost when two UNFC members, the Lahu Democratic Union and New Mon State Party, agreed to sign the NCA. They both attended the conference along with the ALP and other NCA signatories. Despite the Tatmadaw's previous exclusion of the ANC (and LDU), government interlocutors also tried to convince the ANC to sign the NCA together with the LDU and NMSP (see Chapter 8). They were unsuccessful, with the ANC sticking to its demands that the NCA be made inclusive and amended in line with the UNFC's "eight principles" (see box: "The 'Eight Principles' of the UNFC"). Meanwhile the Rohingya crisis was again ignored in the Panglong Conference agenda. The mass exodus of refugees into Bangladesh appeared to raise no questions.

Eventually, another fourteen "principles" were agreed during the conference with the ALP and NCA signatories for inclusion in a future Union Peace Accord. But, as in the previous two meetings, ethnic nationality representatives complained that there was no real discussion of the key political and security issues that, they believe, are holding back

peace and reform. Rather, the political mood was overshadowed by the opening address of Snr-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing. Only the Tatmadaw, he claimed, can solve challenges facing the country:

> "Armed ethnic groups in some regions cannot represent the entire national people of 52 million and political parties only represent a particular walk of life that supports them. Our Tatmadaw, being a people's Tatmadaw born of ethnic people, is an organization representing the state and people."[132]

This was not the only controversial takeaway from the meeting. Many delegates expressed surprise at the influence of Chinese officials. Once again, they organised invitations for representatives to attend as "guests" for the non-ceasefire ULA, KIO, TNLA, MNDAA and other FPNCC members. Step by step, the involvement of China was increasing. It was clear that all parties – the NLD, Tatmadaw and EAOs – felt bound to accede to Chinese government requests.

The arrival of the FPNCC delegation, however, did not add any impetus towards peace at the meeting. Maintaining the Tatmadaw's division of FPNCC members, Snr-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing met with the KIO, NDAA, SSA/SSPP and UWSA, while his deputy Soe Win talked separately with the ULA, MNDAA and TNLA. During these exchanges, there was no deviation in the Tatmadaw's position that the ULA, MNDAA and TNLA must disarm as a pre-condition for joining the peace process. At the same time, all FPNCC members – including the KIO and UWSA – were told that they must accept the NCA as the only way forward to achieving nationwide peace and reform.

For Rakhine and other ethnic nationality parties, this was a very unsettling outcome. After three Panglong-21 meetings, both the NCA and new Panglong process appeared to be obstructions, rather than gateways, to political reform. Seven years after President Thein Sein launched his peace initiative, many borderlands were still in conflict or in a "neither war nor peace" limbo. In October, an attempt was made to restart dialogue at a High-Level Summit between Aung San Suu Kyi, government and NCA leaders. But Snr-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing left after an address in which he blocked government compromise on "non-secession" or "self-determination" issues.[133] Shortly afterwards, the two leading EAO signatories, the KNU and SSA/RCSS, withdrew from further NCA meetings so that they could review the lack of progress.[134] The ALP's lead negotiator, Daw Saw Mra Razar Lin, warned that the "entire peace process" was now experiencing setback.[135]

After two years in government, disillusion with the NLD was spreading in many ethnic nationality regions in the country. This was reflected in parliamentary by-elections in November when the party won only seven of the 13 seats that were up for re-election. The other seats went to the Tatmadaw-backed USDP and three nationality candidates. Of these, the most notable was a Rakhine State Assembly seat for Rathedaung, which was won by U Tin Maung Win, son of the detained MP Aye Maung. Standing as an independent, he outvoted both the ANP and ALD in a show of public solidarity with his imprisoned father.[136]

Political hopes continued to fade. Many parts of Myanmar were in crisis. But no event could be more symbolic of the deepening uncertainties than the conflicts devastating the Rakhine and Rohingya communities on the country's western frontier. Here loss of life and displacement were increasing. Far from an NLD government bringing solutions, political tensions were growing by the day.

The New Great Game: Arakan in the International Frontline

As 2018 came to a close, the political crisis in Rakhine State was locked in impasse. Different international initiatives continued that sought to address the Rohingya crisis. This was primarily through humanitarian aid and human rights investigations supported by Western governments. But they were bringing little change on the ground. No return of refugees from Bangladesh appeared imminent. The Chinese government, in contrast, chose this moment to accelerate its strategy of political and economic engagement in Myanmar. This brought a completely new dimension to the Arakan crisis. With international competition increasing, Rakhine State appeared on the brink of what could become its most important economic and geo-political changes since independence in 1948.

While these events took place, Arakan's peoples once again found themselves relegated to the position of bystanders as other actors sought to decide their political and economic future. In the vanguard of this new activism came China. As described above ("Political Impasse and the Entry of China"), the fall-out from the resurgence of the Rohingya crisis in 2016 had proven beneficial to Chinese interests. Although coincidental in its timing, the train of events set in motion allowed Chinese officials to reset relations with the Myanmar government after an unexpected period of cooling that had occurred under the Thein Sein administration (see Chapter 6). At first, China's interests were broad-based. But following Xi Jinping's launch of the BRI in May 2017, officials became more strategic. Three main areas were targeted. All are of critical importance to Rakhine State's future: settlement of the refugee crisis, ethnic peace and economic development.

For the moment, all three are in the early stages of inception. On the Rohingya question, at least, there has been no breakthrough on the proposal for refugee resettlement advanced by Foreign Minister Wang Yi in November 2017.[137] During the past two years, Chinese policy has more often been distinguished by its rejection of international courts and sanctions than particular solutions. Nevertheless efforts are still continuing, and they should not be underestimated. Beijing, though, has much to do if it is to achieve a viable settlement acceptable to all peoples and parties. During 2019, the Rohingya crisis remained one of the most intractable in Asia (see Chapter 8).

The Rohingya deadlock, however, proved no obstacle to China's pursuit of its other two areas of strategic concern: ethnic peace and economic development. With their new focus on "soft power", Chinese officials markedly stepped up initiatives in "government-to-government" as well as "people-to-people" relations. Since the BRI promotion, there have been frequent inter-governmental meetings; the Myanmar-China Friendship Association has increased community-based activities;[138] and Chinese officials have remained key actors in behind-the-scenes lobbying of both the government and ethnic armed organisations to agree a nationwide ceasefire.

China's increased activism in the ethnic peace process did not pass unnoticed. Other international actors often expressed surprise at the willingness of Chinese officials to try and engage with the complexities of Myanmar politics. "Why is China on 'overdrive' to solve the ethnic question?" the South Asia Analysis Group recently asked.[139] But, in reality, Chinese officials have long been far ahead of their international counterparts in understanding the need for peace and inclusion in the country. Two events in Myanmar politics during 1988-89 taught foreign policy specialists an important lesson: the near simultaneous collapse of both Gen. Ne Win's "Burmese Way to Socialism" and the Communist Party of Burma, long the country's strongest opposition force. Since this time, Chinese officials have returned to the long-term objective of establishing stable relationships with their often-volatile neighbour. Managing relations with the different stakeholders rather than promoting particular solutions has often appeared the main goal.[140]

With pragmatism in mind, the main thrust of Chinese engagement since the BRI's 2017 advancement is usually on the third policy area: economic promotion. All sides, however, know that the strategic ramifications go much deeper than the agreement of a few trade deals.[141] Since independence in 1948, successive Myanmar governments have historically been cautious about becoming too close to their powerful neighbour. President Thein Sein's 2011 postponement of the Myitsone Dam in Kachin State appeared to reflect that concern. But, in the aftermath of the 2016 crisis, the interests of the governments in Beijing and Nay Pyi Taw continued to come together in a re-alignment that few would have predicted when Aung San Suu Kyi first assumed office.

Since 2017, these trends have continued. Western confidence in the NLD has faltered; government leaders see Chinese investment as an economic boon; Tatmadaw officers have been comforted that China does not support war crime investigations;[142] and Chinese interests were able to restart lobbying under the BRI rubric for a raft of development projects, including the Myitsone Dam, that had previously seemed unlikely to proceed.

In the years ahead, the difficulties will be many – not least the massive disparity in economic and political conditions between the two countries. Certainly, China's roadmap for Myanmar appears considerably greater in vision than that of the

NLD administration. All parts of the country come within the BRI scope. But Rakhine State – with its land and sea gateways – is one of the most elevated in importance. Already, the geo-political implications are being felt in the Bay of Bengal. Many international eyes are now watching.

When the NLD first took office, international investment was stalling. The oil and gas pipelines to Yunnan Province had been completed, while civil society protestors had stopped the construction of a high-speed railway from Kyaukpyu to Kunming (see Chapter 6). In this vacuum, the NLD inherited three main initiatives from the Thein Sein government: the Kanyin Chaung Economic Zone and Ponnagyun Industrial Zone with Bangladesh; the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project with India; and the Kyaukpyu deep seaport with China. All three, however, were facing problems, and the escalation in the Rohingya crisis and the rise of both the ARSA and ULA movements further increased concerns among foreign investors. Attacks by the Arakan Army in the Kaladan valley sent some very sharp warnings. For their part, Myanmar economists have no doubts about the importance of Rakhine State. According to U Tun Tun Naing of the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industries: "Myanmar's economy rests on the resolution of problems in Rakhine."[143]

It was against this unpromising backdrop that Chinese officials stepped up their diplomatic efforts.[144] The strategic position of Rakhine State stood out. Having learned from the "Myitsone shock", they were much better prepared.[145] As they recognised, not only is progress in Rakhine State essential to Myanmar's development, but it is also integral to Xi Jinping's ambition to open a gateway to the Indian Ocean. Since the BRI's launching, the deep seaport of Kyaukpyu has become the main focus and, along with Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka, it is designated as a key pillar in the Belt and Road architecture. It is also considered one of the "string of pearls" by which naval strategists would like to advance China's military and commercial line of communications across the Indian Ocean to the Horn of Africa.

To take the BRI forward, Chinese officials intensified lobbying during 2018 with two foundational plans: an economic hub around Kyaukpyu and an inter-connecting infrastructure that would spread out across Myanmar. Planning success was signalled in September of that year when a Memorandum of Understanding was signed with the NLD government on a "China-Myanmar Economic Corridor" (CMEC).

The scale is technically vast, with the potential to transform socio-political relations between Myanmar and its neighbours.[146] The CMEC will be a "physical corridor" linking Rakhine State, Yangon, Mandalay and Yunnan Province; it is also a "conceptual corridor", with industrial zones, tax agreements and other socio-economic areas for cooperation between the two governments;[147] and, with an initial expenditure of US$ 2 billion, an estimated 24 projects are expected to come under the CMEC remit.[148] But this is only a start. Chinese commentators argue that delivery of the BRI will not only herald a new era of "strategic cooperation" between the two neighbours but also help to achieve solutions to Myanmar's internal problems. "Pushing forward the BRI in Myanmar is to jointly build the road to peace, development and the people's welfare," claimed China's Ambassador Hong Lian in Yangon.[149]

These are bold promises. But since the signing of the CMEC agreement, there has been a new confidence in the approach by both Chinese companies and officials. The gulf in policies and practices with Western governments is widening. In late 2018, China's State Councillor Wang Yi commended an initial agreement on refugee repatriations between the Bangladesh and Myanmar governments as a starting-point for solving the "Rakhine State issue" (see Chapter 8). But, in a notable rebuke, he criticised the role of UN human rights agencies. "Specialist bodies of the United Nations should play a constructive role in this, and not the opposite," Wang Yi said.[150] The same week, China's state-owned CITIC Group inked an agreement with the NLD government for the Kyaukpyu seaport and Special Economic Zone. Momentum then reached a new peak in December when State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi was appointed chair of the panels to oversee both BRI projects and the CMEC on the Myanmar side of the border. This is high-level endorsement indeed.

From this platform, Chinese initiatives have flourished. Chinese tourist numbers have boomed since 2018 with the introduction of visas-on-arrival, while NLD officials have become frequent

guests to China. "China woos Myanmar's NLD with junkets", wrote the Reuters News Agency.[151] More discreetly, Chinese officials have also stepped up lobbying of the government, the ULA and fellow members of the Northern Alliance and FPNCC to conclude a peace agreement.[152] The centrality of the relationship between China, ethnic peace and economic progress is frequently made explicit in the state media in Beijing. "Economic corridor with China key to Myanmar's peace process," headlined the Global Times in December 2018.[153]

China's interests are also multi-faceted. Nowhere is this more evident than at the "Chinese new town" at Shwekoko, a multi-billion real estate project in territory controlled by a Karen Border Guard Force on the Thailand border. Located 800 kilometers from the Yunnan frontier, Chinese developers regard it as another gateway to the sub-Asian region.[154] But many people feel overwhelmed by the increasing scale of China's ambitions in Myanmar. On the news that Chinese officials were making another financial donation to the government's National Reconciliation and Peace Center, the Irrawaddy magazine recently editorialised: "Leave Myanmar in Peace".[155]

The next steps are more difficult to predict. It would seem unlikely that, after decades of conflict, China has a magic wand to solve Myanmar's problems where other actors have failed. In defence of their policies, Chinese officials argue that, while often regarded with suspicion in international circles, their government has legitimate reasons for engagement. The BRI could indeed prove a catalyst in bringing different parties together. The contrast with Western governments is stark. Since their 2018 formation, Aung San Suu Kyi has headed the committees for both BRI and CMEC activities in the country.

In contrast, the US House of Representatives has declared the actions of the security forces against the Rohingya population as "genocide" and both the USA and European Union have imposed sanctions on Tatmadaw leaders.[156] A proposed US$ 100 million World Bank development project for Rakhine State has also come under fire from international non-governmental organisations for seeking to start programmes while ethnic conflict, refugee flows and internal displacement still continue.[157] Meanwhile the UN Human Rights Council continues to monitor the Myanmar situation closely.

Ultimately, much is likely to depend on how sensitive Chinese actors are to Myanmar politics in the field. In Rakhine State, Chinese officials need to counter the perceptions that they can be "dictatorial".[158] "China is very aggressive in promoting its investments," said Oo Hla Sein, the ANP Lower House MP for Mrauk-U.[159] An upsurge in fighting during 2019 raised further questions as to how quickly the BRI projects can proceed.[160] On the Rohingya question, there has also been little indication as to what the Chinese government proposes, and officials have denied that they are offering refugees money to return.[161] Most recently, China has formed a Joint Working Group with Myanmar and Bangladesh on Rohingya repatriation, but that is still a long way from substantive progress on the ground (see Chapter 8).[162]

There are also doubts among local communities as to whether China can become an honest broker. The contemporary division between Buddhists and Muslims is a major crisis, intrinsic to Rakhine State's future, that cannot be ignored. But as faith-based leaders are aware, the Chinese government takes a very different view on religious issues to many of its international counterparts. Under Xi Jinping's presidency, the tendency to look at the activities of religious groups through an "extremist" prism has intensified, with the Chinese authorities taking an increasingly tough line against Muslims and other minority groups.[163] Christian leaders in Myanmar, especially, have expressed worries after coming under Chinese lobbying pressures.[164] Meanwhile Chinese officials generally follow the Myanmar government in avoiding use of the term "Rohingya".

In the longer-term, solutions are there to be found. In many respects, the fate of the BRI is already in China's hands as officials prepare their next moves. In neither country can straight roads to the future be drawn from the past. As the Transnational Institute recently warned, it is vital that the BRI does not lead to further militarisation and conflict.[165] For this reason, sentiment is growing that, if the BRI-CMEC are to succeed, China will have to tailor its goals to the needs and realities of the Myanmar peoples rather than the other way around. As Yun Sun of the Stimson Center has written, the reworking of a "BRI-lite" project in Myanmar could become a "model for development" both within the country and across the region.[166]

Entry sign to Made Island, Kyaukpyu, China's BRI gateway to Myanmar (IR)

Certainly, the reaction of Myanmar's neighbours will be important. The twin mantras of "development" and "inter-connectivity" are usually regarded as positive in the sub-Asian region. But China's rivals also regard many aspects of the BRI as a power projection by the Xi Jinping government rather than a strategy to deliver development goals. Since the BRI's 2017 promotion, opinion has been growing in Malaysia, Sri Lanka and other countries in the region that Chinese mega-projects bring debt-traps, dependency and security risks in their wake.[167]

Nowhere are these concerns felt more deeply than in Japan, India and Bangladesh. All three have histories and relationships of their own with Myanmar, and these are likely to have significant impact on developments in Rakhine State in the coming years. Since the NLD came to office, Japan has generally concentrated on developing a trans-Asian corridor through southern Myanmar and Thailand; India has focused on the Kaladan-Sittwe gateway in the tri-border region; and Bangladesh has largely been subsumed by the Rohingya crisis. But with the growing influence of China, all three countries have stepped up efforts to respond more pro-actively in the field after the escalation of the Rakhine State crisis in 2016.

In the case of Japan, geo-political rivalries are continuing with China across the sub-Asian region. But the government of Shinzō Abe is also signalling its intention to boost involvement in Rakhine State. In February 2019, Japanese government agencies hosted the first ever "Rakhine Investment Fair". Japan's aim, diplomats say, is to take the lead in promoting foreign direct investment in the territory.[168]

Bangladesh and India, in contrast, have much more immediate roles to play. As front-line states, history has long since warned that no peace will be possible in Rakhine State without peace in the tri-border region (see box: "A Regional Conflict Complex"). After many years of neglect by government leaders in the three countries, this is now a pressing issue in Dhaka, New Delhi and Nay Pyi Taw. In defence of the BRI, Chinese analysts

claim that an earlier Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM), established in the late 1990s, has gained "impetus" since the BRI's announcement.[169] But, for the moment, the BCIM in no ways compares to the scale of outreach and ambition in Beijing's BRI goals.

The options, though, for Bangladesh are presently very limited. In many respects, the government is hostage to the refugee crisis. Politicians have few, if any, cards that they can play to resolve the Rohingya question on their own. With increasing burdens felt among communities in Chittagong District, the key priority is the repatriation of up to a million refugees back across the Naf River border. But this does not mean that Bangladesh is an insignificant actor: in fact, quite the reverse. Bangladesh is a key element in China's BRI planning;[170] the international community is very concerned about threats from Islamist militants in the country; and it is an open secret that neither ARSA nor ULA supporters would be able to move without important connections in the clandestine world of tri-border politics.[171] This opaque landscape has not changed since the modern-day borders were delineated between the three countries at the British departure in 1948.

As an emergency measure, the Bangladesh government is intending to relocate 100,000 refugees offshore to Bhashan Char Island, a move that is rejected by Rohingya leaders.[172] But Bangladesh officials say there is little else that they can do. The entire responsibility, they argue, now lies with the Myanmar government. "Rohingyas might get radicalized if Myanmar doesn't take them back," Foreign Minister Dr. Abdul Momen recently warned (see Chapter 8).[173]

The power dynamics are very different for India, which has many more points of cross-border leverage and influence. For a long time, the inter-colonial connection between British Burma and India was regarded as problematical in Myanmar nationalist circles. Under military rule, anti-Indian xenophobia was also prevalent in both the Ne Win and Than Shwe eras. But today there are increasingly few people who can remember a time when the two countries were conjoined. Since 2011, especially, the diplomatic terms of engagement between the two governments have improved. Certainly, the days of Operation Leech and Landfall Island are long since over (see Chapter 5), and India's "Look East" policy is today upgraded to one of "Act East" under the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. As 2018 came to a close, President Ram Nath Kovind made a state visit to Myanmar, highlighting the importance of New Delhi's strengthening ties.

The main difficulty for Indian officials is that China is presently leaving India far behind in political and economic influence. Essentially a land and sea route to northeast India, the Kaladan Gateway project does not come close to the international potential of Xi Jinping's BRI. No opposition is imminently expected from New Delhi to China's broader plans for investment in Myanmar. Chinese analysts still hope that the BRI might revive the BCIM Economic Corridor in which both countries are involved.[174] But such cooperation is not certain in Rakhine State, which is likely to bring an increased Chinese naval presence on to the Bay of Bengal. Indian officials are presently tight-lipped. But the Times of India has reported that the Kyaukpyu Project is keeping security officials "awake at night", posing a greater threat to Indian interests than Gwadar in Pakistan.[175] In an unstable world, such words are a sobering warning of what precipitate changes in Rakhine State might mean.

It is still early days. But these developments already appear to be having impact on India's strategic thinking. Since the BRI-CMEC promotion, both the Indian and Myanmar security forces have begun to increase military cooperation. For many decades, the tri-border region has been marked by conflict and governmental laissez-faire, with different EAOs moving on both sides of the frontier (see box: "A Regional Conflict Complex"). But despite having a ceasefire with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang, the Tatmadaw unexpectedly occupied the NSCN-K's headquarters in the Sagaing Region in January 2019, causing representatives from several EAOs in northeast India to flee.[176] In response, the NSCN-K appealed to NLD leaders to return to the ceasefire policies of the previous Thein Sein government.[177] Five Naga leaders, however, were subsequently imprisoned in northern Myanmar under the Unlawful Association Act for their contacts with armed groups from Assam and Manipur.[178]

Since this time, the armies in both countries have carried out further attacks on armed opposition camps along the common border. EAOs from

Manipur, Nagaland and Assam have all been targeted, with the Indian security forces also seeking to disrupt the ULA. The Indian media were clear about the strategic intentions: the Indian army is seeking to help the Tatmadaw "secure the Kaladan project".[179] Into 2019, this raised the security risks for Indian interests, and violence continued to spread in the Kaladan valley. Growing numbers of civilians, as well as Indian workers, were caught in the crossfire (see Chapter 8).

As, however, China, India and other Asian neighbours continued their manoeuvring, one issue appeared to be completely ignored: the representation and inclusion of the communities who actually live on the ground. Remarkably, all these plans for economic development and security coordination were taking place at a time of the greatest conflict and displacement of local peoples in many decades. Rakhine, Rohingya and Chin communities were all adversely affected. In contrast to the optimism over the potential for economic deals in China, India and Japan, resentment and resistance were growing in Rakhine State itself. But if such projects as the BRI, CMEC, BCIM and the Kaladan Gateway are ever to prosper, a real sense of participation and benefit among local communities will be essential. There have been too many unfulfilled promises in the past. Both the risks and opportunities from international investment need to be carefully considered, not only in Rakhine State but in Myanmar at large.

A critical moment has been reached. As Thant Myint-U warned at an opening seminar for the CMEC project in Yangon, such a raft of major infrastructure projects are certain to have an enormous impact on local peoples in the years ahead. "We need to think about how best to discuss and decide on future projects, future schemes, in ways that will nurture and not weaken Myanmar's still emergent democratic culture," he said.[180] Of particular concern, the regulatory framework for transparency and meaningful consultation with local peoples over foreign investments remains very weak. As the Transnational Institute warned, this brings fears of negative social, economic and environmental impacts in their wake, exacerbating the risks of further conflict.[181]

For the present, political and community leaders in Rakhine State believe that there are many reasons for caution. The Myanmar government has conducted BRI negotiations in conditions of secrecy, and there is no sense of an integrated plan or public benefit as to how such a complex array of projects can be delivered. In the case of Kyaukpyu, the creation of 100,000 jobs has been promised, and the price negotiated down from an initial US$ 7.5 billion to US$ 1.3 billion.[182] Meanwhile the stake ratio has been reduced from 85:15 in China's favour to a lower rate of 70:30. But this is still a large imbalance. Concerns have only continued to arise about the potentially negative impact of the new projects, from land-grabbing and loss of fisheries to environmental damage and Chinese workers taking local jobs.

In July 2019, China's new ambassador Chen Hai paid a visit to Kyaukpyu in a bid to improve public relations. But this did not stem criticisms. "Whoever accepts Chinese projects, if those (projects) do not bring positive impacts to the Arakanese people, then we will definitely oppose them, as was done in the Myitsone campaign," warned U Tun Kyi of the Kyaukpyu Rural Development Association.[183] Until there is real peace and inclusion, ill-considered plans by outside actors are likely to remain political rallying points. As the Kofi Annan Commission on Rakhine State warned:

> "Large-scale investment projects in Rakhine have…served to nurture local resentment towards the central government. Local communities are largely excluded from the planning and execution of such projects. Profit tends to be shared between Naypyitaw and foreign companies, and as a consequence, local communities often perceive the Government as exploitative."[184]

Community sensitivity, then, may help in commercial outreach. But, above all, there remains the essential question of ethnic peace. In the longer-term, various routes can be mapped out to pursue political reform. But, in the shorter-term, the increasing arrival of outside entrants has increased local tensions in the field. During a time of significant displacement and loss of life, economic questions cannot be separated from the need to resolve the political causes of conflict.

Not to be underestimated, though, is the political will of China. While focusing on the economic dimensions, Chinese officials do – in private –

appear to understand the ethnic and political underpinnings to the most critical challenges in Rakhine State. On the surface, China's triple mantra for proposed solutions – refugee resettlement, economic development and nationwide peace – might look rhetorical. But cognisance needs to be taken of the fact that Chinese officials made significant progress in BRI promotion during 2016-18. From this platform, efforts are now intensifying to take Xi Jinping's vision from the drawing boards to full fruition. In the meantime, Chinese officials are expending considerable energy in trying to convince different stakeholders in Myanmar that the development model of China – not the rights-based approach of the West – is the solution for socio-economic progress in the country.

Using this argument, Chinese officials stepped up efforts during 2018 to support the conclusion of a nationwide ceasefire. The main vehicle for this is the FPNCC of which the ULA is a member. These efforts reached a crescendo at the end of the year. A main difficulty was that the Tatmadaw continued to reject three FPNCC members – the ULA, MNDAA and TNLA – from becoming full partners in the peace process. But the influence of China was seen in December 2018 when the three parties signed a declaration of willingness to join political dialogue for "national reconciliation and peace". In an orchestrated response, the Global Times chronicled China's peace engagement in Myanmar. An article by Prof. Bi Shihong of Yunnan University highlighted why the country, as a "friendly neighbour", has a vested interest in securing national reconciliation and peace.[185] The ball was now in Nay Pyi Taw's court.

Events now moved quickly, and on 21 December Beijing's endeavours appeared to have paid off when Snr-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing announced a four-month ceasefire in the conflict-zones until April 2019 while peace talks could take place.[186] There was a major problem, however. Only five regional commands were included: North, Northeast, East, Central East and Triangle. Notably missing were Rakhine State and the tri-border region, both of which come under the Tatmadaw's Western Command.

This immediately raised the question among ethnic nationality parties as to whether the ceasefire announcement was intended to achieve nationwide peace or another divide-and-rule stratagem to allow the security forces to concentrate on Rakhine State. The timing of Min Aung Hlaing's "peace" declaration appeared tactically astute. The NCA process was faltering and Tatmadaw leaders were facing allegations of crimes under international law. Any publicity around a ceasefire announcement appeared a rare moment of good news.

Optimism did not last long. Min Aung Hlaing's ceasefire declaration was followed over the next few months by the greatest upsurge in armed conflict in northern Rakhine State and the tri-border region in many decades. In April, the government ceasefire in the Kachin and Shan States was nominally extended, but fighting continued to escalate in the China borderlands as well. There remained expectations that by 2020, the next scheduled date for a general election, some kind of new initiative for ethnic peace and refugee resettlement would be in place. Compromise at some stage is essential but, against expectation, this was not proving the case in an era when the NLD finally achieved public office.

In the meantime, 2019 was to be another year of instability and loss of life. The advent of an Aung San Suu Kyi government had begun by promising much. But the conflict crisis in Arakan was far from over.

ULA-AA female soldier (YouTube)

8. Arakan Today

A Land in Turmoil

With the Rohingya crisis continuing, the rise of the United League of Arakan was often overlooked during the 2016-18 period. But far from decreasing in strength, the ULA's Arakan Army was able to infiltrate increasing number of troops from its borderland bridgehead into Paletwa, Kyauktaw, Mrauk-U, Rathedaung, Buthidaung and Ponnagyun townships, reaching close to the state capital Sittwe. This was by far the greatest scale of expansion by any armed opposition group in the territory since the 1970s. Although over half its force remained in Kachin State, the ULA was estimated to have trained up to 7,000 troops, both male and female, by the beginning of 2019.[1] Having been marginalised in the peace process, the aim of ULA leaders was ambitious: the seizure of a "self-administered" area in Rakhine State itself.

During late 2018, the conflict warning signs increased. As fighting escalated, Buthidaung was put under night-time curfew and growing numbers of Rakhine, Khami and Mro villagers were displaced in fighting.[2] Government airstrikes were also carried out in Kyauktaw Township. At the same time, the security forces were reported to have resumed military "clearance operations" among Muslim communities in Maungdaw Township after two Rakhine Buddhists were murdered by suspected members of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army.[3]

In December, Snr-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing declared a four-month ceasefire in the eastern borderlands with China (see Chapter 7). But the Western Command was omitted, and any hopes of a nationwide breakthrough were quickly confounded. In theory, a ceasefire announcement for the whole country could have helped the government peace process. Instead, the exclusion of Rakhine State confirmed many opposition fears. From the outset, Min Aung Hlaing's announcement was considered a stratagem to allow Tatmadaw commanders time to re-organise their forces while concentrating on the ULA threat. As opposition leaders noted, no efforts were made by the government during subsequent months to re-start either the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement or 21st Century Panglong Conference, both of which were badly

stalling.[4] Another opportunity for peace was lost, and violence continued to accelerate during the following year.

From the moment of Arakan exclusion, the conflict intensified between the government and the ULA.[5] Anticipating a Tatmadaw offensive, the ULA escalated attacks on government positions from the beginning of 2019.[6] Operations began on 4 January, Myanmar's independence day, when the Arakan Army attacked four border police posts in a pre-dawn raid in Buthidaung Township, killing 13 policemen.[7] Over the following weeks, fighting spread ever deeper into Rakhine State, with more troops from the Tatmadaw's 22nd, 55th and 99th Light Infantry Divisions rushed in to try and halt the ULA's advance.[8] According to the Tatmadaw's account, there were 97 encounters and 39 anti-personnel mine attacks in the first three months of 2019 as opposed to 61 clashes and 19 mine attacks for the whole of 2018.[9]

As fighting continued, internal displacement increased. By the end of March, over 20,000 villagers (mostly Rakhine and Chin) were recorded as displaced from their homes.[10] In a sadly familiar pattern, it was once again civilians who often bore the main brunt of Tatmadaw operations. Anger was especially high after fighting began around the ancient capital of Mrauk-U. Here the situation remained tense after the killing of seven demonstrators the previous year. It would appear that nothing had been learned from the report of the UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar (see Chapter 7) about the need to protect civilians. The UN Special Rapporteur Yanghee Lee was quick with her warnings:

> "What is happening in Rakhine reminds me of the tactics used by the Tatmadaw against ethnic populations for decades. All the people of Rakhine State, including the Rakhine, Mro, Daignet, Hindu and Rohingya, have suffered enough."[11]

Against this backdrop, the sense of estrangement deepened between local peoples and government forces. Aung San Suu Kyi and Tatmadaw leaders were quoted as saying that the ULA should be "crushed";[12] the Tatmadaw's "True News Information Team" compared ULA demands to the "thoughts of a child daydreaming";[13] and the President's Office spokesperson U Zaw Htay caused outrage by claiming that ULA and ARSA leaders had agreed to divide territories east and west of the Mayu Range between themselves.[14] In a rare moment of government backtracking, Brig-Gen Zaw Min Tun stated that "the reason why the Tatmadaw does not completely annihilate the AA [in Rakhine] is because the AA are our ethnic brothers."[15] Such exceptionalism has never been used in the case of Tatmadaw operations against Rohingya or other Muslim groups. But behind the headlines, the conflict was becoming increasingly bitter in the field. Whether inside or outside of the towns, many communities were living in fear.

From the beginning of January, reports of violence against civilians and gross human rights violations multiplied in northern Rakhine State and the adjoining tri-border region. During the first six months of 2019, a long litany of allegations emerged. Accusations of culpability were exchanged after the state Chief Minister U Nyi Pu survived two mine attacks when travelling by car.[16] Hundreds of local officials quit their jobs after reports of threats over their loyalty by both sides.[17] Over 10 administrators and village heads were recorded as missing and six officials killed by unknown gunmen.[18] Dozens of civilians were reported to have been killed in Tatmadaw operations or following arrest by the security forces.[19] The ULA abducted 13 employees of a construction company working on the Kaladan Gateway project with India.[20] The ULA also detained 52 ethnic Khumi villagers, most of whom were Christians, for six months at a border camp in Chin State.[21] And Amnesty International documented the deaths of 14 civilians and 29 casualties in seven "unlawful" attacks against civilians by government troops during March alone.[22] In a particularly notorious incident, seven Muslim villagers were killed and another 18 wounded in Buthidaung Township when helicopters opened fire on farmers working in their fields.[23] Amnesty International warned: "Newly-deployed units, same pattern of atrocities."[24]

If the government had any intention of winning the hearts and minds of the local population, there was little evidence of this. National League for Democracy leaders continued to place their faith in economic development as the solution to all of Arakan's problems. Tourism and power electrification projects were often promoted.[25] Chaired by Aung San Suu Kyi, the Committee of the Union Enterprise for Humanitarian Assistance,

Resettlement and Development was put forward as the NLD's main vehicle to improve social conditions. But, in opposition circles, it was regarded as a body for governmental outreach and control. Across the political spectrum, it was believed that Tatmadaw commanders were the only ones making important decisions.

The deepening distrust between the government and local peoples was highlighted when the security forces ordered households not to fly Arakan flags. In many areas, residents were openly displaying nationalist emblems. Subsequently, the author Wai Hin Aung and MP Aye Maung, former leader of the Arakan National Party, were both sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment when they came to trial for alleged high treason.[26] For a Rakhine nationalist who had once been feted by Aung San Suu Kyi, Min Aung Hlaing and other government leaders, it marked a stunning turnabout in personal relationships (Chapters 6 and 7). Government officials, meanwhile, stepped up accusations that the ULA was involved in drugs-trafficking, claims that ULA leaders denied.[27]

During April-May 2019, there was a brief hiatus in fighting as the Chinese government tried again to exert influence from behind the scenes. Unlike their Western counterparts, Chinese officials maintained relations with the key stakeholders throughout the escalation in conflict. A rare synchronicity was now achieved. On the second anniversary of the BRI inception, Snr-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing and Aung San Suu Kyi made visits to China.[28] "Myanmar regards China as an eternal friend and a strategic partner country," Min Aung Hlaing told his hosts.[29] "China has always supported Myanmar and will continue to do so," President Xi Jinping replied.[30]

Momentum appeared to be growing. The same month, the ULA President Twan Mrat Naing voiced support for China and the Belt and Road Initiative at the 30th anniversary ceremony of the United Wa State Army on the Yunnan border. Here the Chinese government delegation was headed by its Special Envoy for Asian Affairs Sun Guoxiang.[31] The Kachin Independence Organisation and the ULA's fellow allies in the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee were also represented. "We are trying to get along with the powerful countries as much as we can," Twan Mrat Naing told the assembled media.[32] The Rakhine people, he argued, are being marginalised while the Myanmar government is "misusing the country". For this reason, he said, the ULA has nothing against "Chinese projects being implemented in our state".[33]

In nationalist circles, Twan Mrat Naing's words caused some surprise. While they share concerns with civil society organisations over Chinese investment, ULA officials say in private that the key is political reform in Rakhine State. Once this is achieved, the Arakan peoples can participate in decision-making and ensure that the local population truly benefits. Business and development, whether supported by China or the West, have always been welcomed. It is exploitation by outside interests that is rejected. Both the present system of government under the 2008 constitution and business companies connected to Tatmadaw interests are perceived as falling into this category.

Another peace opportunity appeared to be in the offing. For a brief moment, the NLD, Tatmadaw and ULA were all in agreement about developing relationships with China. There was, however, no political breakthrough. In reality, Snr-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing's declaration of a ceasefire in northeast Myanmar had never been observed by the government or any of the combatant parties.[34] Yet the ceasefire was rhetorically extended by the Tatmadaw in April and again in September.[35] As fighting continued, the ULA stepped up military cooperation with two of its FPNCC and Northern Alliance partners, the Kokang-based Myanmar National Defence Alliance Army and Ta'ang National Liberation Army. Like the ULA, the MNDAA and TNLA were both excluded by the Tatmadaw from full participation in the government peace process. Now operating under the name of the Brotherhood Alliance, the three forces prepared to coordinate counter-attacks in the northern Shan State.

In Rakhine State, meanwhile, the Western Command continued to launch military operations. The human toll was rising. By mid-year, the number of newly-displaced persons had passed the 50,000 mark in the north of the state and the tri-border region. In a seven-month period, the Rakhine Ethnic Congress estimated that 71 civilians had been killed, 53 injured, nine still missing and 156 detained by the security forces.[36]

Losses among fighters were even higher. Both sides traded accusations. The Tatmadaw rejected ULA claims of inflicting over 1,000 casualties (killed and wounded) on the security forces, instead asserting that it had killed 100 Arakan Army soldiers and captured 48 others during the first half of the year.[37] During July and August, the ULA responded by claiming that the security forces suffered the loss of another 236 troops.[38] Tatmadaw casualties were certainly significant, with reports of the deaths of a colonel, four majors and more than a dozen captains during the first seven months of 2019.[39] Such battlefront mortality testified to the severity of the fighting. But there are no reliable figures.

As the frontline widened, the Arakan Army launched rocket attacks on naval vessels in Rathedaung and Sittwe townships. Most of the fighting had been concentrated in northern Rakhine State and the adjoining Paletwa Township. But from July fighting spread further into Myebon and Ann townships in the central state. Here several hundred Chin villagers were forced to flee from their homes.[40] This was the first time conflict had occurred in the area since 1986 when the Communist Party of Arakan briefly occupied Minbya town (see Chapter 4). Conflict was gradually shifting southwards towards Ramree Island and the key seaport at Kyaukpyu.

In response, the Tatmadaw reverted to ever more severe tactics. Helicopter attacks and artillery shelling were repeatedly carried out on areas where ULA forces were believed to be moving. Civilian casualties continued to mount and, by the middle of the year, 16 civilians were reported to have died after being arrested on suspicion of ties to the ULA.[41] In July, the military authorities set up their own court of inquiry. But there was little local confidence about the impartiality or independence of military-run tribunals. Concerns then further deepened when the government imposed an Internet shutdown under the 2013 Telecommunications Law in eight townships in northern Rakhine State and the adjoining Chin State.[42] In an area that had an estimated population of over one million people in the 2014 census, the UN Special Rapporteur Yanghee Lee expressed fears that a new wave of human rights violations were being committed under the cover of a security blackout.[43] "Rakhine in the dark," headlined the Frontier Myanmar magazine.[44]

The prospects for peace then took another turn for the worse in August when a new spiral into conflict began in the northeast of the country. On 15 August the ULA's Brotherhood Alliance partners, the MNDAA and TNLA, launched a new series of attacks in northern Shan State. Arakan Army troops also joined the offensive. Claiming that the government was trying to neutralise ethnic opposition parties under the guise of "ceasefires", alliance leaders said that the attacks were an attempt to stop Tatmadaw offensives and bring the government to the negotiating table. "The Aung San Suu Kyi-led government is trying to make peace, but nothing can happen if the military doesn't participate in it," said an alliance spokesperson.[45] Fifteen people were killed in the first strikes, which included the Defence Services Technological Academy in Pyin Oo Lwin. It was a highly symbolic attack.

The Tatmadaw's military response was immediate, and fighting has since continued to spread in the Kachin and Shan States as well as deeper into Rakhine State. In October, Amnesty International issued a new report alleging "relentless and ruthless" human rights violations against civilians in northern Shan State.[46] But fighting escalated further into November. Brotherhood Alliance leaders warned that they would no longer allow the security forces to concentrate warfare in "our ethnic areas".[47] Instead, they would reply with attacks in Tatmadaw garrison towns.

In Rakhine State, meanwhile, fighting reached its highest peaks yet. In mid-October, the ULA launched attacks on military targets in Buthidaung, Ponnagyun, Kyauktaw, Mrauk-U and Minbya townships.[48] Arakan Army troops were also reported to be ambushing transport and taking government soldiers and staff away as prisoners.[49] The Tatmadaw responded with a combination of naval, helicopter and ground force attacks that now covered much of northern Rakhine State. The war was becoming increasingly personal. Family members on both sides were being targeted, and allegations of extrajudicial killings were once again exchanged.[50] In early November, five Indian workers and the Chin NLD MP U Whei Tin were also abducted when travelling on the Kaladan River from Paletwa to Kyauktaw.[51] Chin leaders and civil society organisations issued statements of concern, warning of the need to avoid "disagreement" between Chin and Rakhine peoples.[52]

The violence in Rakhine State now spread a shadow over the whole country. Away from the conflict-zones, a sense still continued that it will be in the interest of all sides – the NLD, Tatmadaw and ULA – to agree to a ceasefire sooner rather than later. With a general election looming, 2020 will be a critical year. In private, all sides express the belief no side can truly gain from continuing the escalation in conflict. The critical issues of the Rohingya refugee crisis and China's Belt and Road Initiative also remained to be addressed. But promises of peace are scant consolation to the growing numbers of civilians caught in the crossfire. By November the number of internally-displaced civilians of Rakhine, Chin and Mro ethnicity had increased to over 90,000 people in camps that now stretched between Maungdaw and Paletwa in the north and Myebon in the south. In part response, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) agreed during 2019 to extend protection for the estimated 35,000 Chin refugees taking sanctuary in India and Malaysia.[53]

The end of 2019 thus approached with no imminent solutions for the ethno-political conflicts in sight. International concerns remained, and the territory is high on the list of UN priorities for humanitarian and political recovery. But, as the Irrawaddy magazine warned, displaced people saw "no hope of return" at any time soon.[54] "We will be able to go back only when there is peace," a Kyauktaw villager warned.[55]

After another year of increasing violence, Arakan was still a land in turmoil and despair.

New Conflicts or New Ways to Solutions?

As conflict revived in Rakhine State over the past few years, Arakan nationalism has only continued to grow. Whether among activists in Rakhine State, those living in other parts of the country or the growing diaspora abroad, there has been an upsurge in populist sentiment, strengthened by social media in the digital age (see box: "Facebook and the Role of Social Media"). In July, six people – including the younger brother of Twan Mrat Naing – were arrested and deported from Singapore for allegedly fundraising and promoting support for the ULA.[56] The inter-relationships attracted media attention. But, in reality, such international networking was further evidence of the movement's widening appeal.

Back in Rakhine State, veteran leaders compared the nationalist upswing after 2011 to those that had occurred during previous eras of governmental change in 1948, 1962 and 1988. Neither the government's Internet blackout nor the banning of the ULA from Facebook stopped the spread of ULA support. "People have lost faith in the democratic transition," warned the ANP leader Oo Hla Sein.[57]

Engaging, however, with the conflict emergencies in Rakhine State is by no means straightforward. On the surface, Arakan's nationalist movement remains divided. Rifts have occurred within the electoral ANP during the past three years. Breakaway members have sought to revive the Arakan League for Democracy that contested the 1990 general election. There is no real inclusion for Muslim communities. And the former ANP leader Aye Maung had already quit the party before his 2018 arrest and imprisonment for alleged high treason in early 2019 (see Chapter 7).

At the same time, the Rakhine cause is currently marked by three armed movements: the ceasefire Arakan Liberation Party, non-ceasefire Arakan National Council and ULA. They, in turn, are represented in three groupings: the ALP is one of the 10 NCA signatories; the ANC is a member of the United Nationalities Federal Council;[58] and the ULA is a member of the four-party Northern Alliance and seven-party FPNCC in the northeast of the country. But, in many respects, the power balance has changed considerably among these parties during the upheavals of the past three years.

Today the ULA is very much the leading voice of Rakhine advocacy and resistance, while the ALP and ANC have become largely residual organisations embodying a history of political militancy that dates back to the 1950s and 60s (see box: "Timeline: Armed Movements Arakan"). Their veteran leaders, notably the ANC's Khin Maung and ALP's Khaing Ye Khaing, have been engaged in armed struggle against the central government since the times of their youth half a century ago. For the moment, the two parties remain keen to retain their own identities. The ALP leaders maintain close relations with their Karen National Union ally in seeking reform through the NCA

Cyclist passing "Rakhine State Day" billboard (TK)

process. In contrast, the ANC has kept to its UNFC position of not signing the NCA until there are amendments and nationwide inclusion (see box: "The 'Eight Principles' of the UNFC").[59]

In private, however, there are tensions. Other than a small force in the Thai borderlands, the ALP is no longer militarily active since signing its 2012 ceasefire and the 2015 NCA. Its border foothold in the tri-border region has also been effectively subsumed by the ULA and a number of lives lost in reported conflict between the two parties. In the ANC, meanwhile, the AASYC is today the most active member. A new generation of young people are seeking to keep the AASYC alive, and a small "Arakan (State) Army" has armed members in the Thai borderlands with traditions that date back to Khaing Raza and the original Arakan Army of the early 1990s (see Chapter 5).

Faced with these schisms, Arakan nationalists perceive the present divisions as symptomatic of "divide and rule" strategies that have continued under all central governments since independence.[60] The government authorities appear to pursue selective policies towards the different ethnic nationalities, political parties and armed opposition groups. Rakhine State and its peoples are not dealt with holistically from the perspective of Arakan but only from the point of view of the central government. This accusation is a familiar refrain in all the country's ethnic borderlands, and it could have been made at any time since conflict began in 1948.

In the counter-view of Arakan nationalists, it has always been the instabilities and power struggles among ethnic Bamar leaders in the central state that are the fundamental problem. No self-governance or democracy for local peoples are allowed. Instead, Arakan and other ethnic nationality lands are primarily regarded from the perspective of natural resources and security. The situation is especially acute at present, with a dysfunction between the Tatmadaw and NLD. Ethnic nationality parties repeatedly complain that it is never clear whom they should seek to work and negotiate with: the NLD or Tatmadaw. The two have competing agendas, and all other parties are subordinate to their interests.

In the view of veteran leaders, a very similar division existed in the parliamentary era after independence (see Chapter 3). According to this argument, rivalries and divisions at the seat of government then permeate outwards and destabilise Rakhine State and other ethnic nationality territories around the country. Similar trends exist today. Despite the strong showings of the ALD, ANP and Rakhine Nationalities Development Party in the three general elections during the past three decades, none has subsequently been allowed any meaningful role in political representation and governance. Whatever the election results, all executive, political and security power remains with the central government and Tatmadaw.

The same division is perceived in the peace process. While making a ceasefire with the ALP in 2012, both the USDP and NLD governments have followed the Tatmadaw in continuing to exclude both the ANC and ULA from any formal role in political negotiations. In the case of Rohingya and Muslim parties, this began very much earlier with the 1978 Nagamin operation and 1982 Citizenship Law by which many Muslims were denied equal rights in the territory. A perfect storm was in the making.

With the rise of the ARSA and Tatmadaw crackdown on the Rohingya population, Rakhine State quickly became one of the main epicentres of conflict after the NLD assumed office. But this did not bring about any immediate change in government policies. During a time of supposed peace-building, Rakhine State and the tri-border region were the only territories excluded from the Tatmadaw ceasefire announced in December 2018. This, as Arakan nationalists point out, is under an NLD administration and during a time when the UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission recommended the investigation of Tatmadaw leaders for alleged war crimes committed against the peoples of the state (see Chapter 7).

In response to this sense of marginalisation, both the ANP and ULA have strengthened their nationalist positions during the past year. No conflict actor is blameless in the violence. But the Mrauk-U killings, the loss of life and displacement,

Twan Mrat Naing, ULA leader, with guards (IR)

and the arrest of Aye Maung and other nationalist supporters have further heightened a historic sense of persecution and neglect by the central government. Demands for the restoration of Arakan's lost sovereignty have only grown, and the language of politics has become increasingly ethnicized.

Equally resonant, it has not only been armed movements promoting the Arakan cause on the national stage. While it has been ULA activities and the Rohingya crisis that have gained most media headlines, electoral parties have also been active in political lobbying and the legislatures. During his trial, the former ANP leader Aye Maung expressed optimism that "federal democracy" can be achieved through the Panglong-21 process and "cooperation between armed organizations, political parties and government".[61] Despite their diversity, all nationality parties in Rakhine State have focused on the need for a political resolution. The escalation in pressures from the Rohingya crisis and China's BRI has only elevated nationalist concerns to take control of Arakan's destiny into their hands.

The ANP's position is clear: military-appointed representatives should be completely removed from the legislatures in "one fell swoop".[62] In support of these objectives, the ANP submitted the second highest number of proposed changes (858) to the 2008 constitution of any political party to the parliamentary Charter Amendment Committee.[63] Only the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy advocated more.

There is, however, one major omission from the current argument between the government and Rakhine parties: the voice and rights of Muslim communities. Neither Rohingya nor other Muslim movements are presently factored into the peace and reform landscape. For the present, there is no political movement that is effectively recognised by the government to speak up for their rights. Rakhine parties are also being held responsible by Muslim organisations for this ostracism and neglect. In 2019 a coalition of Muslim groups in north America accused the electoral ANP of being "xenophobic" and holding "anti-Rohingya and Islamophobic" views.[64]

In reply, Rakhine leaders admit that there are differences of opinion within nationalist circles. Some activists are indeed vehemently anti-Muslim. In their defence, ANP, ALD and ULA officials claim that the underlying causes of inter-community conflict lie with the Bamar-dominated government. As with previous administrations, they argue that the current Tatmadaw and NLD leaderships – whether at the state or national levels – continue to go over the heads of local peoples. This, in turn, undermines the ability of local communities to resolve their problems together. According to the ANP's Oo Hla Sein, the NLD leadership in Rakhine State "doesn't know what is happening on the ground".[65]

Some Rakhine leaders go even further, arguing that – in a pattern that has been repeated since independence – the Tatmadaw has been responsible for creating the conditions of division as a pretext for retaining its authority in the territory. As the ULA leader Twan Mrat Naing recently claimed:

> "Because the Myanmar Army wants to stay in Rakhine State, it sows discord between Arakanese and Muslims. It created conflict… It doesn't just want to sow discord between Arakanese and Muslim in Rakhine State. It also wants to cause ill feelings between Arakanese and Mro, Arakanese and Khami. It paved the way for problems to create an excuse for its rule in certain places. This is what it does."[66]

The critical question, then, is to what extent the ULA's emergence might act as a political focus to bring different parties together and forge a new way to solutions. Certainly, the simplicity of the ULA's "Way of Rakhita" philosophy and "2020 Arakan Dream" has found support for its sense of urgency in many parts of the state, especially among young people.[67] As the ULA states in its promotional material:

> "Under the Burman colonial rule and racist regime, Arakan has now become the poorest state of Myanmar where people of Arakan are falling into the vicious cycle of inequality, poverty and famine. These great sufferings and tragedies have given the Arakanese new generations no choice but to launch national revolution."[68]

In defence of its militancy, the ULA leader Twan Mrat Naing has denied that the party is advocating secession. Instead, the ULA's present objective appears different to the ALP, ANC, KNU and many

other EAOs that have turned to federalism over the past four decades. Looking at the marginalisation of Arakan, the ULA's strategy is closer to the model of "armed movements first" pursued by the UWSA, MNDAA, TNLA and other parties in the current FPNCC alliance.

There are two elements to this: political and military. First, in political terms, FPNCC leaders believe that, even after parliamentary elections or ethnic ceasefires, history has repeatedly shown that the Tatmadaw will never seriously negotiate over issues such as federalism, economic rights or democratic reform. This is a major reason why so many EAOs remain reluctant to give up their arms, whether in ceasefires with the government or not. In political expectations, the ULA is still in a preparatory stage.

Second, in military terms, there is presently a great deal of focus on the UWSA movement. In recent years, ULA and other EAO leaders have noted how the UWSA has steadily built up its strength from an unpromising start in 1989 to restore Wa identity on the national map. There is, of course, no guarantee that the UWSA's model is sustainable. The organisation's rise was largely achieved during a time of ceasefire with the government. But there is no denying the UWSA's authority in eastern Shan State today. With over 30,000 troops under arms, Wa leaders control a "self-administered" territory that is recognised under the 2008 constitution.

The ULA's strategy, therefore, is to follow the road of the UWSA and other FNPCC forces in the Chinese borderlands in seeking to build up its own base area in Rakhine State. According to Twan Mrat Naing, the ULA's goal is to gain the "sovereignty of our state in our hands" that will lead to a "confederation" of ethnic nationality states around the country.[69]

For its escalation in armed struggle, the ULA is receiving increasing criticisms. But campaigning on its "Way of Rakhita" ideology, the ULA has quickly become a movement to take seriously. In Myanmar politics, there are many parallels to the "1988 generation" of students who galvanised protests against the military government of Gen. Ne Win (see Chapter 5). Organisations such as the AASYC and civil society groups have kept this spirit alive and, during its first decade of existence, ULA leaders have confounded their critics by achieving a new space in the contested landscape of national politics. In the process, they have become the strongest nationalist force in the territory since U Seinda's Arakan People's Liberation Army in the 1950s (see Chapter 3). Whether the ULA can sustain such momentum is less certain. But the first ULA objective has been achieved: the Arakan cause is very much back on the political map (see box: "Timeline: Armed Movements Arakan").

The next steps in Rakhine State are more difficult to predict. In the light of disappointments with the government peace process, several other nationality parties have recently been looking at the UWSA and ULA as models for pursuing political change.[70] As critics point out, the goals of pro-federal reform were agreed by such leaders as ex-President Thein Sein, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and ethnic ceasefire groups as long ago as 2012. But, as another general election nears in 2020, there has been little progress.

Ethnic nationality parties – both electoral and armed – feel that they are being deliberately sidelined. Indeed many political leaders fear that the ongoing state of conflict could be used as a reason to ban polling in front-line constituencies in the Rakhine, Chin, Kachin and Shan States in 2020. This would have the effect of diminishing the vote of such peoples as the Rakhine, Kachin, Kokang and Ta'ang, while providing advantage to the NLD and pro-Tatmadaw Union Solidarity and Development Party. For this reason, 2020 is likely to be a critical year in determining the likely trends in Rakhine State politics.

It is hoped that wiser counsels will prevail. At root, the challenges of representation, equality and justice in Arakan have always been political. It is long since time for meaningful steps to be taken to redress the legacies of conflict that began in 1939 with the advent of the Second World War. In late 2019, government officials again started to speak of imminent ceasefires, a new Panglong Conference and constitutional amendments that could take place before the 2020 election.[71] The ULA and Brotherhood Alliance also announced a unilateral ceasefire which, they said, would last until the end of the year in the hope that peace momentum will build.[72] Meanwhile China again stepped up efforts in its three focal areas to try and encourage political breakthroughs: ethnic peace, economic

development and settlement of the Rohingya refugee crisis. In early November, China's Special Envoy for Asian Affairs Sun Guoxiang provided another US$ 1 million donation to the government peace process.

There was little evidence, however, of any imminent breakthrough. In the conflict-zones, many people expressed their frustration. With the political will, there is nothing in practical terms to stop peace and reform initiatives moving ahead. If Rakhine State is ever to have peace and stability, the causes of conflict must be addressed and the inclusion of local peoples guaranteed. This must also mean resolution of the long-standing crisis over Rohingya rights and identity. But as the NLD moved towards the end of its first term in government office, there still appeared a very long way to go.

As 2019 neared its close, disaffection was rife in different ethnic nationality communities across the country, the gap between rich and poor was deepening, and the humanitarian crisis on Myanmar's western frontier remained among the most serious in Asia. As Thant Myint-U warned, "tired prescriptions about the importance of elections and free-market reform" will not be enough to resolve the country's problems.[73] Fresh thinking is clearly required in which discrimination is ended, all citizens enjoy equal rights and the institutions of state are reformed.

At the Panglong Conference in February 1947, the independence hero Aung San delivered a famous speech. Today his legacy is controversial.[74] As ethnic nationality parties complain, his pledges of equality, union and justice are yet to be fulfilled. But never have his words appeared more prophetic and true. Seven decades after the British departure, the ancient land of Arakan is one of the most conflict-divided territories in the modern world.

> "If we want the nation to prosper, we must pool our resources, manpower, wealth, skills, and work together. If we are divided, the Karens, the Shans, the Kachins, the Chins, the Burmese, the Mons and the Arakanese, each pulling in a different direction, the Union will be torn, and we will all come to grief. Let us unite and work together."[75]

A Rohingya Postscript

While the main political narrative is focused on the Rakhine nationality cause, there appears little prospect of resolving the Rohingya crisis at any time soon. The Muslim population is unlikely to be represented in any meaningful way in the 2020 general election. Even if repatriations and resettlement begin, the majority of those who identify as Rohingya are likely to remain in exile or internal displacement camps for the foreseeable future. In the meantime, the main focus of security attention will be on the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army that remains an underground presence in refugee camps and along the Naf River borderlands.

It is a very bleak scenario that could destabilize Bangladesh-Myanmar relations for many years to come. The consequence will be to leave over one million people effectively stateless with nowhere left to move. Meanwhile those Rohingya Muslims who still live in Rakhine State face an equally uncertain future. They live in a political no-man's land, with little prospect of having their rights to citizenship effectively guaranteed. Despite persistent criticism by human rights groups, the 1982 Citizenship Law remains the basis for all discussion of political rights and ethnic identity in the country today (see Chapter 4).

Since the publication of the 2018 UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission report, little has since changed for the displaced Muslim population, whether inside or outside of the country. Under an agreement between the Myanmar and Bangladesh governments, it was announced that the first refugees would be resettled back to Rakhine State, beginning in November 2018. They would not, however, be returning to their homes or with the rights of citizenship guaranteed. Under present conditions, a "system of apartheid" appears to await those returning.[76]

These concerns have prompted a constant stream of criticism from humanitarian agencies during the past year, who warn that they will not be complicit in "permanent segregation".[77] As they point out, the strategies of social engineering that were initiated under the State Law and Order Restoration Council during the 1990s were stepped up by the Thein Sein government after the inter-communal violence in 2012 (see Chapters 5 and 6). Segregation was then further intensified in the

Young Muslim man, Buthidaung (TK)

name of protecting Myanmar's "Western Gate" during the Tatmadaw's 2016-18 offensive.[78] The authorities are "remaking Rakhine State", Amnesty International warned.[79] Vacated Muslim villages have been bulldozed, more Buddhist settlers brought in, and refugees remain highly fearful of what awaits them should they return.[80]

Meanwhile the continuing exodus of Muslim refugees has caused deepening strains with Asian neighbours. As of mid-2019, there were 913,000 refugees in formal camps in Bangladesh and estimates of a further 200,000 living outside.[81] Over 100,000 Rohingyas and "Myanmar Muslims" have also registered with the UNHCR in Malaysia.[82] And this year the Indian authorities attempted to begin the deportation of 40,000 Rohingya refugees back to Myanmar amidst human rights protests.[83] The UN Secretary-General António Guterres commented: "In my experience I have never seen a community so discriminated in the world as the Rohingyas."[84]

In response, both NLD and Tatmadaw leaders remained in public denial. NLD officials continued to assert that they are determined to implement the recommendations of the Kofi Annan Advisory Commission on Rakhine State (see Chapter 7). The intention is to deliver these objectives through the government-sponsored Enterprise for Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement and Development and the Independent Commission of Enquiry on Northern Rakhine. The Tatmadaw also set up two more research teams during 2019: a "Commission of Enquiry" to respond to human rights reports by the UN, Amnesty International and other international organisations; and an "Investigation Team" to probe civilian deaths during anti-ULA operations.[85] But confidence in independence and impartiality is very low within the country. This was graphically highlighted when two Reuters journalists served longer jail terms for reporting the murder of Rohingya men than the soldiers responsible for the killings (see Chapter 7).

As these various investigations continued, the NLD appeared in no hurry to deal with the legal complexities in addressing the citizenship rights of the Rohingya population. Since the 2015 cancellation of the Temporary Registration Certificates (White Cards), the authorities have tried to coerce people without documentation to accept digitized National Verification Cards. This, however, is a step that few Muslims want to take because it effectively identifies Rohingyas as "Bengalis" – and hence as "foreigners".[86] In September, the government agreed to form a Joint Working Group with China and Bangladesh on refugee repatriations. But there remained considerable opposition among both refugees and humanitarian aid agencies for any resettlement before "safe, dignified and voluntary" return can be guaranteed.

As 2019 came towards a close, the plight of the Rohingya Muslim population looked very bleak. The Muslim-based movements of the Democracy and Human Rights Party and National Democratic Party for Development from the 2010 and 2015 general elections were both effectively dead (see Chapter 6). Meanwhile community leaders feared that, unless the refugee crisis is swiftly resolved, young people will become increasingly susceptible for recruitment by ARSA militants who remain active in both the refugee camps and border areas of northern Rakhine State. Fear and insecurity permeate the tri-border region.

Myanmar's Rohingya crisis is becoming Bangladesh's political crisis. The Islamic advocacy

group Hefazat-e-Islam is active in the camps, while six Rohingya refugees were killed by the police after the assassination in August of a local youth leader of the ruling Awami League in Cox's Bazar.[87] To date, a total of 39 Rohingya have been reported as killed in "gunfights" with the Bangladeshi security forces during 2019.[88] In September the Bangladesh authorities began imposing restrictions on aid organisations and Internet access after a mass protest by over 200,000 refugees at the largest camp, Kutupalong, near Cox's Bazar.[89] In the meantime, international aid funding that is required for minimal survival in the camps has now reached to over US$ 920 million per annum.[90]

As this disaster unfolds, the scale of human rights abuses has shocked many pro-democracy supporters who are sympathetic to Myanmar's challenges in political transition. After a pause of a several years, the ethics of business investment and tourism are once again being discussed in international circles. This was given extra impetus when a follow-up report by the UN Fact-Finding Mission in September 2019 urged foreign companies to sever all ties with the Tatmadaw and the estimated 120 businesses that it controls.[91] Domestic companies also came in for criticism. It was argued that their activities could also be considered war crimes. Specifically named were businesses that donated funds during Tatmadaw operations or financed "development projects" that further the "objective of re-engineering the region" to erase Rohingya identity.[92]

Raising the political temperature further, US Congressman Bradley Sherman caused consternation on both sides of the border by suggesting that the refugee crisis could be resolved by joining territory in Rakhine State to Bangladesh if the Rohingya people are not granted citizenship.[93] Such a radical solution would be a return to one of the demands of the Mujahid Party that controlled much of the Mayu frontier region in the early years after independence (see Chapter 3). The notion of a separate state was quickly rejected by government officials in both Nay Pyi Taw and Dhaka. But subsequently, a similar idea was echoed by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad who called for the right to citizenship or a self-governing territory for the Rohingya people.[94] It was not only foreign politicians promoting radical thoughts. During the past two years, the Islamist movement Hefazat-e-Islam has threatened to declare a jihad to liberate Rakhine State "if the army and its associates do not stop torturing the Rohingya Muslims".[95]

For the present, all these ideas can be considered fanciful. But they do beg the question that, if participatory solutions are not achieved that grant basic human rights and justice to distressed and marginalised peoples, what will the alternatives be? The answer is that there are, and have always been, solutions. In domestic politics, the entire premise of the 21st Century Panglong Conference is based upon recognition of the need to achieve peace and political inclusion for all the country's peoples. In the international arena, both the Kofi Annan Advisory Commission and UN Fact-Finding Mission have also made important recommendations during the past two years. The need is now urgent to follow up with substantive policies and actions that support transformative and peace-building solutions.

On this basis, foreign diplomats have lately been promoting a three step-plan for the "safe, dignified and voluntary" of refugees: the implementation of

Buddhist monk in Sittwe (TK)

Porter pulling rice sacks by cart, Sittwe (TK)

recommendations by the Kofi Annan Commission; a pathway to citizenship for those who have been denied such; and an independent process of human rights investigation that ensures equal rights and justice for all peoples.[96] The Chinese government is proposing many of the same elements in its own three-step proposal: resolution of the refugee crisis, ethnic peace and economic development. In November, the Chinese ambassador reiterated these ideas on Myanmar television, stating that China wants to support both consultation and physical assistance.[97] Certainly, there is no shortage of international rhetoric to support the achievement of peace and national reconciliation in Rakhine State.

The difficulty is that, as in every era of government since independence, the success of these ideas is dependent on a political system being in place by which the human rights of all peoples are respected and guaranteed. And this is where major obstacles remain. Ultimately, solutions have to be found and achieved among the peoples of Myanmar themselves. But, for the present, there is no consensus as to how to address the ethno-political crises of Arakan and collectively move forward together. The Rohingya question is just one of many ethnic challenges within the country, and it is one that few political leaders are prepared to prioritise in national politics.

The reality is that there is little sympathy for the situation of Muslims more generally in Myanmar today. Since political transition began in 2011, the Rohingya question has become a fraught issue that populist leaders have sought to play upon. Hopes of imminent change are presently restrained, and the rights of the Muslim population are expected to become an important factor again during the countdown to the next general election in 2020. With his preaching ban over last year, U Wirathu and the Ma Ba Tha movement – now rebranded as the Buddha Dhamma Charity Foundation – wasted no time in returning to public displays of anti-

Muslim protest and pro-Tatmadaw support.[98] In response, Snr-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing welcomed "patriotic members of the public" for holding rallies.[99] In May this year, an arrest warrant was issued for U Wirathu after he verbally abused Aung San Suu Kyi.[100] But ultranationalist monks still remain a latent force.

For democracy supporters who had high hopes of "regime change" when the NLD took office, the party's failure to address the crisis in Rakhine State is a regressive step, emblematic of political weakness and the Tatmadaw's continuing hold on power. Only civil society groups, the independent media and ethnic nationality organisations have expressed concerns publicly about the Rohingya plight. In conflict-zones around the country, fears of Tatmadaw "clearance operations" remain widespread, and other minorities fear that they could be next.[101] According to the Karen National Union Concerned Group: "The pattern of crimes committed against the ethnic Karen and other ethnic populations are part of the Myanmar Tatmadaw's strategy to terrorize, subjugate and ethnic cleanse, as happened to the Rohingya people in Rakhine state."[102]

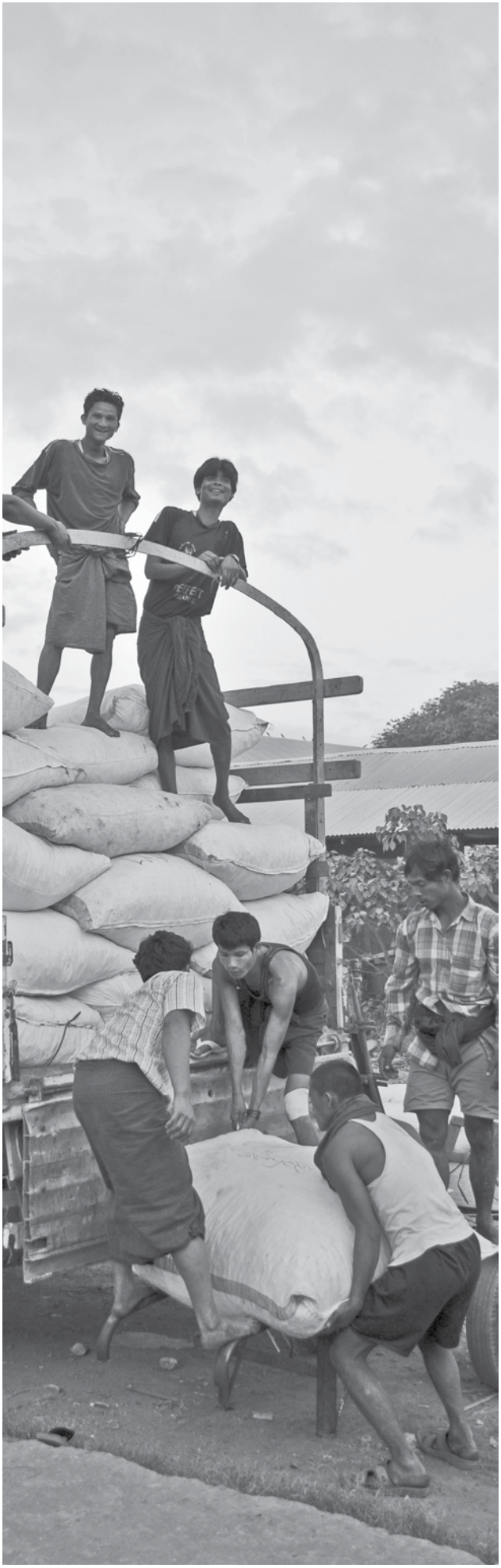
International human rights experts may be speaking of war crime tribunals at The Hague. This prospect moved closer in November when the International Criminal Court approved an investigation into allegations of "'systematic acts of violence', deportation as a crime against humanity, and persecution on the grounds of ethnicity or religion". The International Court of Justice also opened a case under the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, following an application lodged by Gambia.[103] But such procedures are for the long-term. With attention focused on the 2020 general election, the Rohingya question is likely to remain unaddressed in any significant way in the meantime. The crackdown on the Rohingyas has elicited approval in nationalist circles in Myanmar, and Aung San Suu Kyi pledged to defend the case at the International Court of Justice. Even the news of international legal investigations appeared to prompt no government awareness of the urgent need to address the conflict crisis.[104]

As another year of political uncertainty begins, the present trends are very unsettling for the Rohingya and other minority groups. It had been hoped that President Thein Sein and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, in their pledges of federal reform, had understood the need to address the ethno-political failures from the past. But, through their experiences in government, there are now fears that the present generation of political leaders have learnt much more regressive lessons about how to keep power in a multi-ethnic country of fragmentary democracy. National leaders are "falling back on populism", warned Khin Zaw Win of the Tampadipa Institute. He wrote:

> "What really counts for them is not the racist overtones but the votes that it can bring in the next elections…With an antiquated first-past-the-post electoral system, the politicians and generals know very well that if you have the ethnic and religious majority sewn up, you don't have to bother much about the minorities."[105]

For solutions to be found, it is therefore vital that the plight of the Rohingya population is understood in both local and national context. In Rakhine State today, the Rohingya minority are not the only suffering peoples. In terms of marginalisation and displacement, their plight is outstanding. But their exclusion and ill-treatment are not unique. Rather, they are symptomatic of the ethno-political failures of state that have caused division and loss in many parts of the country since independence in 1948. Whatever the ethnicity or faith of peoples, this can never be used as the basis for expulsion, displacement and the denial of the most fundamental human rights. As in any country in the world, all challenges facing the peoples of Myanmar today have legal and political answers, based upon equality and justice, and it is these that must be urgently sought and addressed. The way forward, as Nehginpao Kipgen recently wrote, is through "consensual political transition" in which all peoples are engaged.[106]

In 2020, Myanmar is entering a new cycle of elections and precarious change. More than ever, it is essential that resolution of the Rohingya crisis is treated as an integral element in building peace and democracy that all peoples can enjoy. In 1948, conflict with the central government began amongst both Buddhist and Muslim communities on the Arakan frontier. It is long since time that this was brought to a just and peaceful end.



Loading food supplies in Sittwe (TK)

9. Conclusion

Arakan today stands at a very uncertain crossroads. As in previous times of crisis, many of the present emergencies are centred in the north of the state. But, in many respects, the challenges facing Arakan's peoples are reflective of the political failures in Myanmar at large. Only the identities and histories of the peoples are different. And this is where the post-colonial crisis has become so acute, with enduringly complex characteristics of its own. Reflecting Arakan's geo-political position, the outcome of events in the modern-day Rakhine State has abiding implications for peace and stability not only in Myanmar but in neighbouring countries as well.

As in other unstable states, many of the causes of fragmentation and instability can be found in Arakan's colonial past. But it is also important to acknowledge that ethnic conflict and political turbulence has continued during every political era after Myanmar's independence in 1948. Many of the divisions in politics and society then deepened during half a century under military rule. Arakan became an impoverished backwater in which armed struggle and repression became virtual ways of life. These failings remain to be redressed. In terms of conflict, Arakan is presently at one of the most divided moments in its history.

The political crisis is now urgent. Ethnic unrest and reform impasse have both intensified during the past year. All key decisions continue to be made by a central government and national armed forces that are dominated by Bamar-majority leaders and the interests of central Myanmar. Economic interventions – whether hydropower dams in the Kachin and Shan States or China's Belt and Road Initiative in Rakhine State – are only fuelling a local sense of insecurity and exclusion. As affected communities ask, how can such projects be considered without democratic inclusion and while many parts of the country remain in conflict and a militarised state?

Many of these uncertainties are deeply felt in Rakhine State and the tri-border region with Bangladesh and India. Once again, contestations in national politics are being played out on the Arakan stage. The Bangladesh borderlands are presently the scene of one of the greatest refugee crises in the modern world. At the same time,

Arakan itself is again the source of international competition as China, India, Japan and various Western actors seek to gain outreach and influence over the geo-political direction of the territory. There is a tragic familiarity in these cycles: 1784, 1824, 1942, 1978, 1992, 2012 and 2016 – changes in government have coincided with conflict and political volatility at critical times before. Since Myanmar's independence, these complexities have been amplified and diversified during every era of governance.

As these political failures continue, the peoples of Arakan have not been passive or acquiescent actors. Alignments have changed, movements have risen and fallen, and new struggles begun as different parties have sought to gain control over the territory's future. And now, during the time of the first democratically-elected government in half a century, the struggle for Arakan has reached a new high point. Such an escalation was not widely predicted. But, under the joint administration of the National League for Democracy and Tatmadaw, two major crises have erupted: the Rohingya exodus into Bangladesh; and the emergence of the United League of Arakan in the Rakhine heartlands of the northern state.

Future progress is inconceivable until the causes of conflict are addressed, and the equal rights of all peoples are secured and guaranteed. The second poorest territory in the country, Rakhine State faces many difficult years ahead. Rakhine, Rohingya, Chin, Kaman, Mro and other nationality groups – all the local peoples have been suffering. If peace and stability are to be achieved, inter-community bridges must be built, political reforms instituted and a major crisis in population displacement redressed on the basis of fundamental human rights and justice.

Resolution of the crisis in Rakhine State also has much wider ramifications in both Myanmar and the wider region. Located on a strategic meeting-point in Asia, Arakan has historically reflected a vibrant diversity of peoples, faiths and cultures. If rights and justice cannot be assured for the peoples of Rakhine State, it not only sets a dangerous precedent for the future of Myanmar but also for other multi-ethnic states in the region. In a volatile world, never has the need for peace and inter-community understanding been more essential. Diversity is to be celebrated – not repressed.

The question, then, is whether there are solutions. The answer must be yes. But, as in every era of government, this will depend on the agreement of peace, political dialogue and meaningful reforms that truly reach out to all peoples. For too long, a highly unequal status quo has existed in the institutions of state within the country. This is not simply a challenge between the central government and Rakhine State. During the present time of national transition, it is also vital that Arakan's peoples – from all faiths and ethnic backgrounds – are able to regain responsibility and democratic control over determining their futures by working in partnership together. There can be no sustainable peace until this is achieved.

Since 2011, there have been moments of hope and opportunity. The President Thein Sein peace process, the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, the NLD's advent to government and the inception of the 21st Century Panglong Conference – all signalled recognition that peace and reform are essential after decades under military rule. At times, the notion of national breakthroughs looked tantalisingly close. But, during the same period, there are parts of the country that have witnessed their worst conflict, loss of life and displacement in several decades. The Rakhine, Chin, Kachin and Shan State borderlands are all experiencing violence and human suffering today.

The challenge is how to break this conflict cycle. Sustainable solutions will mean the decentralisation of powers to the different regions and peoples. This was the founding promise of the 1947 Panglong Agreement that brought the post-colonial Union into being. But, for the moment, there is no consensus on how to reach a national platform by which meaningful dialogue and constitutional reforms can be achieved. Political deadlock and ethnic conflict are inextricably inter-linked. As the UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar highlighted, a culture of impunity developed during the long decades of conflict in which security interests dominate and human rights violations have long been commonplace. This has to end.

In the case of Rakhine State, there has been no shortage of recommendations and reports. Kofi Annan's Advisory Commission, the UN Fact-Finding Mission and a stream of international analyses have identified the key issues that need

to be addressed. These include peace-building, democratic reform, military accountability, human rights respect, transparency and participation in economic decision-making, the resettlement of refugees and displaced peoples, and an end to the impasse on the integral issues of citizenship rights and Rohingya identity. There is no reason why these goals should not be achieved. There was nothing in Arakan's pre-colonial past to suggest the scale of societal and political division that exists today. On all sides, a halt to militarisation and military-based strategies is essential.

Equally important, there presently exists a rare degree of consensus in the international community – whether the United Nations, Western governments, China, India or other Asian neighbours – about the key issues that need to be resolved: ethnic peace, political reform, economic development and settlement of the Rohingya crisis. As long as focus reaches to the roots of problems, then this is an international environment in which progressive solutions can be sought.

The recent decisions of the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice to open investigations into crimes against humanity and persecution is a further measure that should concentrate minds on the need for far-reaching reforms. As this report seeks to analyse, the conflict, displacements and human rights crisis in Rakhine State today are not new. The patterns of political contestation and state breakdown date back to independence and the failure to achieve ethnic peace during the transition from colonial rule.

There are, however, four major caveats. First, it is essential that such vital issues as politics, economics, ethnic peace and human rights are not seen as distinct entities that can be engaged with separately. In Arakan's conflict impasse, they are closely inter-connected. International terms like democracy, federalism and development are not mantras that will bring instant solutions. Rather, it is essential to engage from the ground up on the basis of understanding the peoples, their challenges and their needs in the field.

Second, with Myanmar's weak regulatory framework, investment plans and business operations must be subject to the highest international standards and open to scrutiny by all parties, including the government, civil society organisations and independent media groups.

Third, the key is that international actors work together in ways that bring peoples together rather than fuel divisions from the past. In many respects, Arakan has never recovered from the disaster of the Second World War when it was a major theatre of conflict. In the 21st century it is vital that Rakhine State does not become a fault-line again in international geo-politics and rivalries.

And fourth, new understandings on ethnicity and identity must be developed that reflect Myanmar's diversity and bring peoples together. The highly ethnicized politics since independence and attempt to build a nation-state around the identity of the Bamar-majority population have failed. Projecting modern aspirations back into the past has resulted in the neglect of equally valid political and cultural centres, including Arakan, Mon and Shan. As Prof. Tun Aung Chain warned two decades ago, the need is the formulation of a "Myanmar nationhood" that truly embraces all communities and faiths.[1]

Above all, the futures of both Arakan and Myanmar must be in the hands of the people. During the past three years, the prospects for peace and reform have faltered. But "2020" presents the opportunity for all sides to revisit the challenges anew. A fresh peace approach is essential; another general election is looming; and leaders in both Rakhine State and the government have targeted 2020 as a landmark moment by which to achieve national change. During a half-century of military government, there were long years when new initiatives were not possible. But during the present era of transitional reform, inter-community dialogue and new thinking are vital that seek to address the conflict legacies from the past.

Arakan is a land of deep history, and there are many lessons to be learned. During the past seven decades, the marginalisation of the modern-day Rakhine State from the government's processes for peace and reform has been a constant failure with the most devastating consequences. The peoples of Arakan need to be at the heart of national reconciliation and building political change. In the transition from military rule, freedoms and equal rights must be enjoyed by all peoples. As the Ramon Magsaysay Award winner Lahpai Seng Raw once said: "Peace requires the people. It is a social state and cannot be developed by military men."[2]

Early morning in Buthidaung (TK)

Notes

1. Introduction

1. There are different opinions over the modern-day name to use for the ancient land of "Arakan" ("Aracan"). "Rakhine State" ("Rakhaing State"), or increasingly "Rakhine", is most commonly used for the present territory in Myanmar. This name was first officially introduced under the 1974 constitution. But in nationalist circles, Arakan is still often preferred. Although less prevalent, the term "Arakanese" is still sometimes used to refer to the general population. For consistency, this report will use Arakan as a general term from history and Rakhine State for contemporary events. The same difficulties exist over other names: e.g., "Khine" or "Khaing", "Mrauk-U" or "Mrohaung". This account does not claim to be definitive but, after first use of a term, employs the same spellings for consistency.

2. The term "conflict" occurs frequently in this analysis, reflecting the complexity and diversity of upheavals. In general, it is used to refer to armed struggles and violence under international humanitarian law rather than disputes or tensions.

3. For a Transnational Institute (TNI) report on the challenges of the contemporary Kayah State, see, Tom Kramer, Oliver Russell, and Martin Smith, *From War to Peace in Kayah (Karenni) State: A Land at the Crossroads in Myanmar* (Amsterdam: TNI, 2018).

4. Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, "Towards a Peaceful, Fair and Prosperous Future for the People of Rakhine: Final Report of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State", August 2017.

5. UN Human Rights Council, "Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar", 12 September 2018.

6. The panel is chaired by Filipina diplomat Rosario Manalo.

7. Transnational Institute, "Selling the Silk Road Spirit: China's Belt and Road Initiative in Myanmar", Myanmar Policy Briefing No.22, November 2019; Transnational Institute, "The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): An AEPF Framing Paper", 29 October 2019.

8. The analysis in this account is based upon research that began in the early 1980s. Interviews have been conducted with present or former members of many of the parties mentioned, on both the government and opposition sides, in the post-independence era. By reflecting the different perspectives, the intention is to support understanding and discussion of the histories, issues and events that continue to underpin conflict and state failure.

2. The Forgotten Kingdom of Arakan

1. These much quoted remarks occurred in Edmund Burke's "Speech on Conciliation with America", House of Commons, 22 March 1775.

2. Under Tatmadaw designations, a "white area" is considered free of "rebel" groups, a "black area" is under insurgent control, and a "brown area" is contested by both government and opposition forces.

3. National United Party of Arakan (NUPA), "Brief Analysis on Arakan Politics and Draft of the Policy of the National United Party of Arakan", Information Department, 17 September 2001, pp.3,12; Michael Charney, "Rise of a Mainland Trading State: Rahkaing Under the Early Mrauk-U Kings, c.1430-1603", Journal of Burma Studies, 1998, Vol.3, pp.1-33.

4. Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps: Histories of Burma* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2006), p.73.

5. Rakhine Education Programme for Advancement of Democracy in Myanmar, "Publicity Letter 2", 27 March 1992.

6. Maurice Collis, *The Land of the Great Image* (London: Faber & Faber, 1946), p.250.

7. See e.g., NUPA, "Brief Analysis on Arakan Politics", pp.7-10; Aye Chan, "The Development of a Muslim Enclave in Arakan", SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research, Vol.3:2, Autumn 2005, pp.398-9.

8. For an analysis of Arakan under the Konbaung Dynasty, see, Jacques Leider, "Politics of integration and cultures of resistance: A study of Burma's conquest and administration of Arakan (1785-1825)", in, Geoff Wade (ed.), *Asian Expansions: The Historical Experiences of Polity Expansion in Asia* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp.184-213.

9. In Letter, "No.3, J. Stonehouse, Magistrate of the Zillah of Chittagong, to George Barlow, Secretary to the Government", 8 November 1798, India Office Records, British Library, F/4/71.

10. In Ibid., Letter, "No.1, J. Stonehouse, Magistrate of the Zillah", 10 November 1798.

11. In Ibid., "Translation of Letter from Great Rajah, second Rajah and Vizier of the Kingdom of Arracan to the Chief of Chittagong", in Letter, "No.1, J. Stonehouse, Magistrate of the Zillah".

12. See e.g., Jacques Leider, "From Aracan Mahomedans to Muslim Rohingyas", in, Surakarn Thoesomboon & Aurapin Khamson (eds.), *Past, Identity and Authenticity of Ethnology, Art and Archaeology* (Bangkok: Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, 2018), pp.213-270.

13. B.R. Pearn, "Arakan and the First Anglo-Burmese War, 1824-25", The Far Eastern Quarterly, Vol.4:1, 1944, pp.27–40.

14. International Crisis Group, "Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State", Asia Report No.261, 22 October 2014, p.1.

15. See e.g., Transnational Institute, "Ethnicity without Meaning, Data without Context: The 2014 Census, Identity and Citizenship in Burma/Myanmar", TNI-BCN Burma Policy Briefing No.13, February 2014; Mary Callahan, "Distorted, Dangerous Data? Lumyo in the 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census", Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia, Vol.32:2, July 2017, pp.452-478. Despite classifying a supposed 135 "national races" for the conduct of the census,

an ethnic breakdown of counted figures has never been released.

16. Department of Population, "The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census: Rakhine State, Census Report Volume 3–K", Ministry of Immigration and Population, May 2015, p.11.

17. Ibid.

18. UNOCHA, "Myanmar: New Displacement in Rakhine", 13 May 2019, p.13.

19. Nyein Nyein, "IDPs in Myanmar's Rakhine See No Hope of Return Home", The Irrawaddy, 10 October 2019; "More than 92,500 civilians displaced by conflict in Rakhine – REC", Mizzima News, 28 November 2019.

20. "Laymyo Dams to Put Tens of Thousands of Villagers' Homes Underwater", Khonumthung News, 5 November 2019.

21. See e.g., "The education of Paletwa destroyed by war", Chin World, 21 August 2019.

22. Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London: Zed Books, 2nd ed. 1999), p.53.

23. Rajashree Mazumder, "Illegal Border Crossers and Unruly Citizens: Burma-Pakistan-Indian borderlands from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries", Modern Asian Studies, Vol.53:4, 2019, pp.1162.

24. Smith, *Burma: Insurgency*, p.53.

25. Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1972), pp.89-94.

26. J.J. Bennison, *Census of India, 1931: Volume XI, Burma Part I Report* (Rangoon: Government Printing and Stationery, 1933), pp.61-2. For a description of the British era and the delineations of what became known as a "plural society", see, Thant Myint-U, *The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020), pp.16-27.

27. See e.g., *Final Report Of The Riot Inquiry Committee* (Rangoon: Supdt. Govt Printing And Stationery, Burma, 1939).

28. Myanmar-Institute of Strategic and International Studies (M-ISIS), "Background Paper on Rakhine State", Yangon, 28 May 2018, p.12.

29. Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma*, p.95.

30. For an overview of different movements during the war years and their fall-out, see e.g., Smith, *Burma: Insurgency*, pp.60-77.

31. Jacques Leider, "Conflict and Mass Violence in Arakan (Rakhine State): The 1942 Events and Political Identity Formation", in Marie Lall & Ashley South (eds.), *Citizenship in Myanmar: Ways of Being in and from Burma* (Chiang Mai University Press & ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, 2018), pp.193-221.

32. Smith, *Burma: Insurgency*, pp.62-4.

33. Leider, "Conflict and Mass Violence", pp.193, 221.

34. For an analysis, see, Ibid., pp.208-10.

35. For different accounts, see e.g., Chan, "The Development of a Muslim Enclave", pp.402-9; A.F.K. Jilani, *The Rohingyas of Arakan: Their Quest for Justice* (Ahmed Jilani, 1999), pp.142-8.

36. James Hookway, "Myanmar Says Clearing of Rohingya Is Unfinished Business from WWII", Wall Street Journal, 2 September 2017.

37. James Holland, *Burma '44: The Battle That Turned Britain's War in the East* (London: Bantam Press, 2016).

38. For an account of Myanmar events, see e.g., Smith, *Burma: Insurgency*, pp.65-87.

39. Reference courtesy of Prof. Robert Anderson. Letter, "Kenneth Lindhop, Commissioner Arakan Division Akyab to E.R.L. Leach", 28 March 1946 (Leach Papers, King's College Archive, Cambridge University).

40. U Aung Zan Wai, *Memoirs* (Yangon: unpublished, 1972), p.164: quoted in Smith, *Burma: Insurgency*, pp.80-81.

41. Ibid.

42. East Bengal became a province of Pakistan at its 1947 creation, East Pakistan in 1955, and Bangladesh in 1971 following a violent "Liberation War".

43. Leider, "Conflict and Mass Violence", p.203.

44. Mazumder, "Illegal Border Crossers", p.1163.

45. Ibid., p.1163-72.

46. See e.g., Kyaw Minn Htin, "The Marma from Bangladesh: A 'de-Arakanized' Community in Chittagong Hill Tracts", Suvannabhumi, Vol.7:2, December 2015, pp.133-53.

47. Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma,* pp.96-7.

48. Officially, the 1947 Panglong meeting was only for AFPFL and Frontier Area representatives. But Arakan leaders believed that – like the Chin Hills and the Shan and Karenni States – they should have been included because of the territory's independent status in pre-colonial history.

49. Jamiatul-Ulama, "To the Honourable A.G. Bottomley, His Majesty's Under-Secretary for Dominions", Rangoon, 24 February 1947. Available at: http://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/1947-Jamiat.pdf

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.

52. Bonbauk Tha Kyaw, *On the Journey in the Revolution* (In Burmese: Yangon, Thatin Journal, 1973), pp.276-8.

53. "Weekly Intelligence Summary", No.19, 10 June 1947, in "Law and Order, Arakan", India Office Records, M/4/2503.

54. "Law and Order, Arakan", Minute Paper, B/C 1011/1947, 9 June 1947; Reuters, 3 June 1947. Smith, *Burma: Insurgency*, p.82.

55. The issue of the Arakan Hill Tracts was not raised at the Panglong Conference, but it was taken up at the Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry the following month: *Report of the Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry* (Rangoon: Government Printing and Stationery, 1947).

56. Josef Silverstein, *Burmese Politics: the Dilemma of National Unity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1980), pp.185-205.

57. Maung Maung, *Burma's Constitution* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), p.189.

58. Ibid.

59. "Better use of natural resources for development of Rakhine State stressed", Global New Light of Myanmar, 1 June 2016.

60. Jilani, *The Rohingyas of Arakan*, pp.171-2.

61. For a "Rohingya-Bengali" analysis, see, Su-Ann Oh, "Rohingya or Bengali? Revisiting the Politics of Labelling", ISEAS Perspective, 10 December 2012.

62. Nyi Nyi Kyaw, "Myanmar's Other Muslims: The Case of the Kaman", in, Lall & South (eds.), *Citizenship in Myanmar,* pp.279-300.

63. Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, "Towards a Peaceful" (ref: Ch.1, n.4), p.19.

64. Rohingya Patriotic Front, "Rohingyas' Outcry and Demands", RPF Information & Publicity Department, October 1976, p.1.

65. Hannah Beech, "'No Such Thing as Rohingya': Myanmar Erases a History", New York Times, 2 December 2017.

66. For examples of how arguments are framed in different Myanmar circles, see e.g.: Chan, "The Development of a Muslim Enclave"; Myanmar-Institute of Strategic and International Studies, "Background Paper on Rakhine State"; Dr Mohammed Yunus, *A History of Arakan (Past and Present)* (Chittagong: Magenta Colour, 1994); Zul Nurain (a) Kyaw Min, *Rohingya History: Reality, Devoid of Myth* (Yangon: Revised Edition, 2012); U Kyaw Min, "An Assessment of the Question of Rohingya's Nationality: Legal Nexus between Rohingya and State", Arakan Monthly, 23 October 2012. International literature is also increasing. See e.g., Jacques Leider, "Rohingya: The History of a Muslim Identity in Myanmar", Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History, May 2018; Leider, "From Aracan Mahomedans to Muslim Rohingyas". For an overview of contemporary perceptions, see, Anthony Ware & Costas Laoutides, *Myanmar's 'Rohingya' Conflict* (London: Hurst Books, 2018).

67. Francis Buchanan, "A Comparative Vocabulary of Some of the Languages Spoken in the Burma Empire", in, Asiatic Researches 5, London, 1799, p.237. For Buchanan's research and travels, see, Willem van Schendel (ed.), *Francis Buchanan in Southeast Bengal (1798): His Journey to Chittagong, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Noakhali and Comilla* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1992).

68. In discussing the history of Muslims in Arakan, some Rakhine organisations concentrate less on "ethnicity" but more on times of presumed origin in the territory. The All Burma Students Democratic Front (Arakan), for example, described the arrival of Muslims in four time groups: before 1784 and the Konbaung annexation; during British rule 1824-1948; "illegal immigration" during the AFPFL era 1948-62; and after the Ne Win "takeover" to the present "epoch". Military Regional Committee, "Historical Point of View of Arakan", ABSDF (Arakan), 29 April 1992.

69. Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides that "[e]veryone has the right to a nationality" and that "[n]o one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality".

70. Schendel (ed.), *Francis Buchanan in Southeast Bengal,* p.31.

71. A resonant example is the Kokang region adjoining Yunnan Province where Chinese-speaking peoples live on both sides of the border. Since independence, the Shan State side of the frontier has also remained a conflict zone. See e.g., Transnational Institute, "Military Confrontation or Political Dialogue: Consequences of the Kokang Crisis for Peace and Democracy in Myanmar", Myanmar Policy Briefing, No.15, 15 July 2015.

72. Mratt Kyaw Thu, "Rakhine, the parlous state", Frontier Myanmar, 2 April 2019.

73. See e.g., Htin, "The Marma from Bangladesh". The name Marma was encouraged in preference to the earlier, colloquial expression of "Magh" ("pirate") that was often used by Bengali speakers for Rakhine peoples. Today "Magh" is considered pejorative.

74. "Assam NRC: What next for 1.9 million 'stateless' Indians?", BBC, 31 August 2019.

75. For a discussion, see, Haradhan Mohajan, "History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims", IKAT: The Indonesian Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, Vol.2:1, 25 July 2018, pp.19-46. It has also been suggested that the name might have come from the "Ruha" people or other migrants from Afghanistan or northwest India.

76. See e.g., Mohamed Ashraf Alam, "The etymology of Arakan, Rohingya and Rakhine", Kaladan News, 20 June 2007.

77. This explanation was provided to this author during the mid-1980s by two RPF founders, Muhammad Jafar Habib and Shabbir Hussein. At the time, there was not the degree of conjecture over these words that exists today. It is also quite likely that they were unaware of other attributions. Rohingya was generally used by Muslim leaders and communities in the Mayu frontier region, but not among Muslim populations elsewhere. It can be added that Rakhine communities, outside of political circles and northern districts, were not broadly familiar with "Rohingya" – as distinct from Arakanese Muslim, Indian/Bengali or the pejorative term of "Kala" – as a name for identity. According to Rohingya groups, the inter-related people in the Bangladesh borders are also sometimes known as "Roi" if from Rakhine State and "Chattai" from Chittagong Division.

3. The Parliamentary Era (1948-62)

1. They had respected histories: U Seinda – a leading Buddhist monk; Kyaw Mya – an ex-government officer in Paletwa; Bonbauk Tha Kyaw – ex-Socialist Party; Bo San Tha Kyaw – ex-BIA and son-in-law of the AFPFL minister Aung Zan Wai; and Bo Kra Hla Aung – ex-ADA leader.

2. The other two commands were "Eastern" (Kachin State, Shan State and central Myanmar) and "Southern" (Delta and Tanintharyi).

3. Smith, *Burma: Insurgency* (ref: see Ch.2, n.22), p.136.

4. Ibid., p.182. For example, such future leaders of the Communist Party of Arakan (CPA) as Shwe Tha and Khaing Soe held theology degrees, while several central committee members of the pro-Marxist Arakan National Liberation Party (ANLP) were previously Buddhist monks.

5. Cassim was leader in Buthidaung and southern Maungdaw townships, while various Mujahid commanders remained active in northern Maungdaw under the leadership of Abas. For an account of the Mujahid movement during the first years, see, R.B. Pearn, "The Mujahid rebellion in Arakan: Professor R B Pearn Foreign Office 1952": available at: http://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/Pearn-1952-rev.pdf

6. The Chin Liberation Organisation (established 1950 and linked to the APLP); the Hill Peoples Organisation (established 1954 and linked to the PVO); and the Tribal National Organisation (Sittwe area: established 1956 and linked to the White Flag CPB).

7. Hugh Tinker, *The Union of Burma: A Study of the First Years of Independence* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), p.68.

8. U Nu, *Towards Peace and Democracy* (Rangoon: Ministry of Information, 1949), p.151.

9. On the 28-man committee, there were seven Bamars, six Karens, six Mons, five Arakanese and four other representatives of frontier peoples. For details, see, "Report of the Regional Autonomy Enquiry Commission" (Rangoon: Government Press, 1952).

10. Jilani, *The Rohingyas of Arakan* (ref: Ch.2, n.35), p.188. In the 1951 and 1956 elections, the votes were for five seats. The 1947 election was for the Constituent Assembly.

11. Ibid., p.173.

12. Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma* (ref: Ch.2, n.25), pp.101-2.

13. Ibid., pp.89-90. There were also theological differences between what were described as "Indian" and "Burmese" Muslims in the vernacular of the time. Eventually, the BMC asserted its position as the main political voice for Muslim representation, with its president Khin Maung Lat serving as a government minister.

14. Pearn, "The Mujahid rebellion in Arakan", pp.8-12.

15. Ibid., p.9.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid, pp.8-9. In this report, the Rohingya are referred to as "Rwanga".

18. Aman Ullah, "Mr MA Gaffar (1910-1966) MP and His Memorandum", The Stateless Rohingya, 4 August 2016.

19. Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma*, p.102.

20. Pearn, "The Mujahid rebellion in Arakan", p.5.

21. Jilani, *The Rohingyas of Arakan,* p.172.

22. Smith, *Burma: Insurgency*, pp.159-67. After the CPB took a Maoist direction in the late 1960s, the "peace and unity" line was denounced by party leaders.

23. Ibid. The main party in the coalition was the Burma Workers and Peasants Party. Together the NUF parties and allies gained 37 per cent of the vote at the polls.

24. Ibid., pp.168-9.

25. Leider, "Rohingya: The History" (ref: Ch.2, n.66), p.8.

26. For the official account of these events, see, *Is Trust Vindicated?* (Rangoon: Ministry of Information, 1960).

27. There was also a Panglong meeting in 1946, but this is not generally counted as part of the agreement process.

28. "The Shan Federal Proposal: Document containing proposals for the Revision of the Constitution of the Union of Burma, submitted by the Shan State", translated by Sao Singha. The document was ratified by the Convention, held in Taunggyi, 25 February 1961.

29. The Rakhine delegates came from two parties: the ANUO (Ra Ta Nya) and Arakan People's United Front (Ra Pa Nya Ta). For a history of these events, see, Sai Aung Tun, *History of the Shan State: From its Origins to 1962* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009), pp.377-423.

30. Ibid., p.422.

31. See e.g., Transnational Institute, "Beyond Panglong: Myanmar's National Peace and Reform Dilemma", TNI Myanmar Policy Briefing No.21, September 2017; Sai Wansai, "Jump-starting the stalled peace process: Is Revitalization of the 1961 Federal Amendment Proposal the Way to Go?", TNI Commentary, 4 May 2017.

32. The other better-known forces active at the time were the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), New Mon State Party (NMSP) and Chin National Vanguard Party (CNVP). The three were allied with the White Flag CPB along with a left-wing KNU movement known as the Karen National United Party.

33. Quoted in Smith, *Burma: Insurgency*, p.194.

34. Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma,* p.104; Leider, "Rohingya: The History", p.7.

35. See e.g., "Arakan Muslims ask for constitutional safeguards", The Nation, 27 October 1960; Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma,* p.103.

36. Ibid.

37. For a contemporary description, see, U Tha Htu, "The Mayu Frontier Administrative Area", The Guardian, February 1962.

38. Smith, *Burma: Insurgency*, p.194.

39. Leider, "Rohingya: the History", p.8.

40. See e.g., Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma*, p.102. In 1960, for example, four new groups were set up in Yangon: students, labour, Rangoon University and a local branch of the Rohingya Jamiatul-Uluma.

41. The Guardian, 6 July 1961. In both Burmese and English translations, this speech has been closely examined. In essence, Aung Gyi said that the Rohingya were a Chittagong-related people, living on both sides of the frontier for generations.

42. See e.g., TNI, "Beyond Panglong", pp.7-9; Wansai, "Jump-starting the stalled peace process".

43. The Times, 3 March 1962.

4. The "Burmese Way to Socialism" (1962-88)

1. Smith, *Burma: Insurgency* (ref: Ch.2, n.22), pp.206-12. Those taking part included Karen, Kachin and Shan nationality forces as well as the White Flag and Red Flag CPB.

2. Ibid., p.209.

3. For an early analysis, see, Robert Holmes, "Burmese Domestic Policy: The Politics of Burmanization", Asian Survey, Vol.7:3, March 1967, pp.188-197. For a discussion in the modern-day context, see, Matthew Walton, "The 'Wages of Burman-ness:' Ethnicity and Burman Privilege in Contemporary Myanmar", Journal of Contemporary Asia, Vol.43:1, 2013, pp.1-27.

4. Smith, *Burma: Insurgency*, pp.258-62.

5. See e.g., Stephanie Nebehay, "Brutal Myanmar army operation aimed at preventing Rohingya return: U.N", Reuters, 11 October 2017.

6. See e.g., Human Rights Watch, "Burma: New Satellite Images Confirm Mass Destruction", 17 October 2017.

7. See e.g., Simon Lewis, Zeba Siddiqui, Clare Baldwin & Andrew Marshall, "Tip of the Spear: The shock troops who expelled the Rohingya from Myanmar", A Reuters Investigation, Reuters, 26 June 2018.

8. The other members were the NMSP, Chin Democracy Party and U Nu's Parliamentary Democracy Party.

9. For an account of the CPB and other opposition groups in Arakan during the BSPP era, see, Smith, *Burma: Insurgency*, pp.236-46.

10. For many years, Red Flag CPB operations had largely been confined to Pakkoku Township, the adjoining Chin hills and Minbya Township in Arakan. In 1971, most of the remaining force retreated into Arakan, where a remnant group remained in the tri-border region until 1992.

11. Sani called himself "Jafar the second" in memory of the first Mujahid leader, Jafar Kawal, who was assassinated in 1951.

12. See e.g., Alex Ellgee, "Mae Sot-based Arakanese Remember Famine", The Irrawaddy, 14 August 2009; "Rice Killing Day observed in Sittwe", Narinjara News, 14 August 2017.

13. At the time, San Kyaw Tun was a masters' student. "Hidden Colony: The New Outlook on Nationalism" became the name of an AIO journal during the 1980s in which this theory was developed.

14. Quoted in, Smith, *Burma: Insurgency*, pp.323-24. AIO and other ethnic nationality organisations also believed that Gen. Ne Win was using the ideology of a one-party state to try and restore the "Fourth Burmese Empire", following those of Anawrahta, Bayinnaung and Alaungpaya.

15. For a history of the ALP by its veteran Vice-President, see, Khaing Soe Naing Aung, "Inceptive History of Arakan Liberation Party and Its Long Liberation Struggle", Monograph, 2012.

16. This account generally follows that provided by Muhammad Jafar Habib, the RPF founder: see, Smith, *Burma: Insurgency*, p.219 and passim. For more details on events and organisations, see, Jilani, *The Rohingyas of Arakan* (ref: Ch.2, n.35), pp.227-69.

17. Ibid., p.232.

18. The other main force operating on the India border at the time was the Naga National Council, a forerunner of the present-day National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN).

19. Smith, *Burma: Insurgency*, p.242.

20. During the 1970s, the main bases of the White Flag CPB were in Sittwe District and the central Arakan Yoma range; ANLP members mainly moved in Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships along the Naf River frontier; the CPA operated in rural areas around Kyauktaw, Minbya and Myebon, with underground movement down to Ramree Island and Thandwe; the AIO was seeking to develop a base in the hills around Kyauktaw and Mrauk-U; ALP troops were in Karen State with political liaison in the tri-border region with India and Bangladesh; and the RPF concentrated its activities in the Mayu frontier region. A remnant group from the Red Flag CPB was also still active in the Chin-Arakan borders but was no longer a real factor in Rakhine politics. See, Smith, *Burma: Insurgency*, pp.237-46 and passim.

21. For the parties forming the 1957 Tribal Nationalities Organisation, see Chapter 3, note 6.

22. M. Ismael Khin Maung, "The population of Burma: An analysis of the 1973 Census", Paper of the East-West Population Institute, No.97, April 1986, pp.16-17. The three groups were distinguished as "indigenous races, non-indigenous or foreign races, and Burmese mixed with foreign races".

23. Ibid., p.17.

24. Some reports refer to this as the "1974 Emergency Immigration Act": see e.g., Human Rights Watch, "The Rohingya Muslims: Ending a Cycle of Exodus?", Vol.8:9(C), September 1996. But this also appears to be a promulgation of the 1947 legislation.

25. See note 22. The statistics were released as a percentage of the total population: Burman 68.0, Shan 8.9, Karen 6.6, Arakanese 4.4, Other indigenous races 6.7, Mixed Burmese and foreign races 1.5, Chinese 0.8, Indians and Pakistanis 1.9, Other foreign races 1.2.

26. "Ne Win Speaks on Racial Purity at Party Meeting", Rangoon Home Service, 11 December 1979, as translated in, BBC Survey of World Broadcasts, FE/6298/B/2, 15 December 1979.

27. Smith, *Burma: Insurgency*, p.308.

28. For a description of these events, see, Aung, "Inceptive History of Arakan Liberation Party".

29. Smith, *Burma: Insurgency*, pp.241, 308-9.

30. At the time of his death, he was 79 years-old and president of the Rohingya Refugee Welfare Organisation. He had also served as parliamentary secretary in the Ministry of Minorities after the British departure.

31. Ian Lindquist, "Report on the 1978-1979 Bangladesh Refugee Relief Operation", (Head of UNHCR Sub-office Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, 1978), June 1979. There are no reliable statistics about conflict and internal displacement from this period. One source, based upon incomplete ANLP records, claimed that over 250 villages were destroyed between Myebon and Maungdaw townships during 1978-83, with Buddhist communities suffering the highest loss: Shwe Lu Maung, *Burma: Nationalism and Ideology* (Dhaka, University Press, 1989), pp.62-5.

32. See e.g., Forward, August 1978; Smith, *Burma: Insurgency*, p.241.

33. UN Human Rights Council, "Report of the Independent" (ref: Ch.1, n.5), p.6; Amnesty International, "We Will Destroy Everything: Military Responsibility For Crimes Against Humanity in Rakhine State, Myanmar" (London, 2018), pp.9, 21.

34. Arakan Independence Organisation Central Committee, "Statement on the Expulsion of Muslims from Arakan", Arakan, 20 May 1978.

35. Ibid.

36. Many of the conflicts in neighbouring countries are under-researched. For overviews, see e.g., Willem van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia* (London: Anthem Press, 2005); Subir Bhaumik, *Troubled Periphery: Crisis of India's North East* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2009).

37. The post-colonial territories are today marked as: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura in India; the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh; and Rakhine State, Chin State, Kachin State and Sagaing Region in Myanmar.

38. See, Peter Wallensteen & Margareta Sollenberg, "Armed Conflict and Regional Conflict Complexes, 1989-97", Journal of Peace Research, Vol.35:5, 1998, pp.621-34.

39. Mazumder, "Illegal Border Crossers" (ref: Ch.2, n.23), pp.1144-82.

40. See note 37.

41. See e.g., Lian Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity: A Study in Religion, Politics and Ethnic Identity in Burma* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2003); Telsing Letkhosei Haokip, "Ethnic Separatism: The Kuki-Chin Insurgency of Indo-Myanmar/Burma", South Asia Research, Vol. 35:1, 2015, pp.21-41; Human Rights Watch, "'We Are Like Forgotten People': The Chin People of Burma: Unsafe in Burma, Unprotected in India", 27 January 2009.

42. Mizo or Zomi is the name commonly used among related groups in India, while some Chins in Myanmar also prefer Zomi. In one of the most extraordinary confusions in the 2014 census, 53 Chin sub-groups were oddly recorded. Chin leaders, in contrast, generally speak of seven main groups today: Zomi, Asho, Lai, Cho, Thado-Kuki, Matu, Mara: see e.g., "The interview of U Ngai Sak, A Chairperson of CNLD", Chin World, 9 September 2019.

43. In recent years, the most active organisations have been reported as the Kuki National Organisation and Zomi Reunification Organisation on the India side, and the CNF, ALP and ULA on the Chin State side.

44. See Chapter 3, note 6.

45. Other groups included the Minority Organisation, which split in 1963 from the Red Flag CPB and allied with the CPA, and an organisation of the same name that split in 1965 from Bonbauk Tha Kyaw's new ANUO movement.

46. See e.g., Rajkumari Chandra Roy, *Land Rights of the Indigenous Peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh* (Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs No.99, 2000).

47. Farid Hossain, "Peace Accord must not remain on paper only", The Daily Star, 2 December 2013; Amnesty International, "Pushed to the Edge: Indigenous Rights Denied in Bangladesh's Hill Tracts", London, 2013.

48. "Chin Environmental Activists Call on Burma Govt to Halt Laymyo Dam Projects", Network Media Group, 7 November 2019.

49. This figure includes civilians still displaced by the violence in 2012 and 2016-17, as well those more recently displaced during the escalation in conflict with the ULA during 2018-19.

50. "Assam NRC: What next for 1.9 million 'stateless' Indians?", BBC, 31 August 2019. See also, box: "Rakhine, Rohingya and the 'Politics of Labelling'".

51. These include movements in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. See e.g., Nyein Nyein, "NSCN-K Denies Violating Ceasefire", The Irrawaddy, 7 February 2019; Rajeev Bhattacharyya, "Are Indian Separatist Rebels in the Myanmar Army's Crosshairs?", The Diplomat, 20 February 2019; Rajeev Bhattacharyya, "ULFA in disarray after Myanmar Army's crackdown: Has endgame begun for the separatist outfit?", Firstpost, 30 March 2019.

52. For a description of the border world in the mid-1980s, see, Martin Smith, "Sold down the river: Burma's Muslim borderland", Inside Asia, No.9, July-August 1986.

53. India's foreign intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing, provided support in these decisions. For an Indian media report, see e.g., Ramesh Ramon, "Trickle of Chakma refugees fleeing into Tripura from Bangladesh becomes a flood", India Today, 15 March 1987.

54. See e.g., Rinchen Norbu Wangchuk, "Mizo Peace Accord: The Intriguing Story Behind India's Most Enduring Peace Initiative!", The Better India, 2 July 2018.

55. The CPA, for example, developed supply

routes by sea with the NMSP and KNU in southeast Myanmar; the ANLP was active on the Bangladesh borders; and the AIO maintained contacts with the KIO on the China border.

56. The Red Flag CPB was a largely defunct force, headed by Thaw Da, which sheltered with members of another remnant group, the Chin National Liberation Organisation, near the India border. See note 10.

57. See Bertil Lintner, "Tension Mounts in Arakan State", Jane's Defence Weekly, 19 October 1991; Bertil Lintner, "Bangladesh: Breeding ground for Muslim terror", Asia Times, 21 September 2002; Bertil Lintner, "Bangladesh Extremist Islamist Consolidation", Faultlines, Institute of Conflict Management, New Delhi, Vol.14, July 2003.

58. Ibid. On occasion, international instructors were also witnessed in RSO camps, while RSO supporters were reportedly trained in Mujahideen territory in Afghanistan.

59. A short-lived Rohingya Liberation Army (RLA), headed by Raschid Ba Maung, also became part of the new alliance.

60. For interviews with several ARIF, RPF and RSO leaders from this time, see, Edith Mirante, "'Our Journey': Voices from Arakan, Western Burma", Project Maje, 1991.

61. Ibid, p.22.

62. "Genocide in Burma against the Muslims of Arakan", Rohingya Patriotic Front, RPF Information and Publicity Department, 11 April 1978.

63. "Map of Rohingya Homeland", Rohingya Patriotic Front, Roang (Arakan), undated (mid-1980s).

64. Muhammad Jafar Habib, "An Ardent Appeal of Rohingya Patriotic Front", 15th Session of Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers, Yemen Arab Republic, 12 November 1984, pp.2, 6.

65. INSAF, "Rohingyas' Voice and Vision", Vol.11:1, July 1985, p.21.

66. The population of Bangladesh is estimated to have doubled during the past 40 years to over 160 million today.

67. Quoted in Smith, "Sold Down the River".

68. Private communication, 15 December 2018. The representative is a veteran armed opposition leader who was involved in political liaison between the different groups at the time. He has worked with Rakhine, Rohingya and different opposition groups for over four decades.

69. The ALP always rejected that there should be more than one organisation – i.e. the ALP – representing Arakan in united fronts.

70. At the time, the armed Rohingya movement was split between the RPF, RSO and brief Rohingya Liberation Army (see note 59), some of which were about to join together in the new ARIF. All were reportedly involved in the halt of the ALO.

71. An Arakan United Front, led by Karim Ulla, was also set up in 1984 but ended in 1986 under pressures from Rohingya groups.

72. National United Party of Arakan, "Brief Analysis on Arakan Politics" (ref: Ch.2, n.3), p.35.

73. It was not only in Rakhine State where the issues of Muslim rights and identity were coming under threat. Following anti-Muslim riots in Mawlamyine and several other towns during 1983, Muslim communities in the Karen and Mon States also feared for their safety. In the 1980s, activists formed Muslim armed units in the KNU, and a short-lived "Kawthoolei Muslim Liberation Front" was established. See e.g., Smith, *Burma: Insurgency*, pp.399-400.

74. Amnesty International, "Legal Concern", 4 September 1986.

75. In an insight into how quickly armed groups can be formed, the CPA brought up fresh arms supplies by sea from the Thailand borders in the months beforehand, while new recruits were trained in the hills.

76. Following the appeal, the state media acknowledged some of the arrests. See, Amnesty International, "Burma: Arrests in Arakan State", 15 September 1986; Working People's Daily, 7 November 1986.

77. For Arakan-related reports, see e.g., Amnesty International, "Burma: Extrajudicial Execution and Torture of Members of Ethnic Minorities" (London, 1988); Amnesty International, "Union of Myanmar (Burma): Human Rights Violations against Muslims in the Rakhine (Arakan) State" (London, 1992); Human Rights Watch, "The Rohingya Muslims"; Human Rights Watch, "Burma/Bangladesh: Burmese Refugees in Bangladesh: Still No Durable Solution", Vol.12:3(C), May 2000; Amnesty International, "Myanmar: The Rohingya Minority: Fundamental Rights Denied", May 2004; Chris Lewa, "Asia's new boat people", Arakan Project, Force Migration Review, April 2008, pp.40-42; Arakan Project, "Issues to be raised concerning the situation of stateless Rohingya children in Myanmar (Burma): Submission to the Committee of the Rights of the Child", Bangkok, January 2012; Fortify Rights, "Persecution of the Rohingya Muslims: Is Genocide Occurring in Myanmar's Rakhine State: A Legal Analysis", Prepared by the Allard K. Lowenstein International Human Rights Clinic at Yale Law School, October 2015; Amnesty International, "Caged without a roof: Apartheid in Myanmar's Rakhine State" (London, 2017); Amnesty International, "We Will Destroy Everything".

5. Military Government: The SLORC-SPDC (1988-2011)

1. In addition to the Bangladesh-Rakhine State frontier, exiles and activists concentrated on the Mizoram and Manipur borders around Champhai and Moreh. From here, liaison with the AIO, CPA and armed members of the NUFA began.

2. During the election, Saw Mra Aung drew attention to a Rakhine claim to the west bank of the Naf River, which he said they had "inherited from their ancestors" but been forced to evacuate. Reported in the Working People's Daily, 11 April

1990; as quoted in, "1990 Multi-Party Democracy General Elections", compiled by Khin Kyaw Han, MP-NLD, Yenangyaung (2), DVB, 16 May 2000, p.9.

3. For Kyaw Hla Aung, see, e.g., Kamala Thiagarajan, "Rohingya lawyer Kyaw Hla Aung on the price of fighting for justice", Devex, 17 September 2018. For Kyaw Min and his family, see, e.g., Ahmedur Rahman Farooq, "U Kyaw Min: An Imprisoned Rohingya MP without Citizenship", Asian Tribune, 3 May 2009. For an analysis in his own words, see, Min, *Rohingya History* (ref: Ch.2, n.66).

4. The others were the New Democratic Army-Kachin (NDA-K) and Mongla-based National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA).

5. "Manifesto of the National United Front of Arakan", Arakan, 8 September 1988.

6. The 901 Battalion had three branches in the Bangladesh, India and Thailand borderlands, with two main camps: Wakhet-Choung on the Bangladesh borders and Minthamee in the KNU's 4th Brigade Area in the Tanintharyi valley.

7. Subsequently, the CNF had only limited success in the Paletwa area. At the time, the party had troops training with the KIO in Kachin State, while activists were working with Zomi and other nationality groups on the India border (see box: "A Regional Conflict Complex").

8. Smith, *Burma: Insurgency* (ref: Ch.2, n.22), p.382.

9. During 1990-92, the SLORC's other key goals were to roll out its ethnic ceasefire policy in the China borderlands and capture the KNU-NDF's headquarters at Mannerplaw. The Manerplaw offensive was halted in April 1992 when Snr-Gen. Than Shwe became the SLORC leader.

10. See Chapter 4, note 57. For footage of the RSO training, see, "Bangladesh: Burmese Rebels", Reuters, 27 August 1991: https://reuters.screenocean.com/record/226863

11. As often happened in operations at that time, there is little on-the-ground documentation. The author was provided with information about 44 villages that were relocated but it was not possible to verify these figures.

12. Myanmar-Institute of Strategic and International Studies, "Background Paper on Rakhine State", Yangon, 28 May 2018.

13. Amnesty International, "Myanmar: 'No law at all'", November 1992, p.27.

14. Ibid.

15. Amnesty International, "Union of Myanmar (Burma)" (ref: Ch.4, n.77). See also, Asia Watch, "Burma: Rape, Forced Labour and Religious Persecution in Northern Arakan" (New York, 1992); Human Rights Watch, "Burma/Bangladesh" (ref: Ch.4, n.77).

16. See e.g., International Crisis Group, "Myanmar's 'Nasaka': Disbanding an Abusive Agency", 16 July 2013.

17. Natala is a Burmese acronym of the Ministry of Progress of Border Areas, National Races and Development Affairs, set up in 1992.

18. ABSDF (Arakan), "Statement on Solving the Refugee Issues on Bangladesh-Burma Border", 29 April 1992.

19. Ibid.

20. "Towards Bangladesh and Her People", Coordinating Committee for Bangladesh Affairs of All Revolutionary Forces of Arakan, 20 December 1992. The members were NUFA (CPA, ALP [-AIO], ANLP, TNP, NDFA), AA[1], "Chin Army", ABSDF (Arakan), Red Flag CPB, and "patriotic individuals".

21. Human Rights Watch, "Burma/Bangladesh", p.9.

22. Working People's Daily, 25 January 1992.

23. Archived reports are maintained by the UN Office of the Human Rights Commissioner on this link: https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Countries/AsiaRegion/Pages/MMIndex.aspx

24. See e.g., Human Rights Watch, "The Rohingya Muslims" (ref: Ch.4, n.24): International Federation of Human Rights Leagues, "Burma: repression, discrimination and ethnic cleansing in Arakan", International Mission of Inquiry, Report, No.290/2, April 2000.

25. Amnesty International, "Myanmar: Twenty Years On, More Than 2,000 Political Prisoners", 3 August 2008.

26. Another faction led by Khaing Arna-Ni remained with the AIO-NUFA. These events were emblematic of frequent confusions over names and histories in Arakan politics. In this case, the AIO and ALP – in an agreement between Khaing Ye Khaing and Maung Kyaw Hlaing – unified in 1988 under the "ALP" name as a political party and "Arakan Independence Army" as its military wing: "Statement on the Unification of Arakan Liberation Party and Arakan Independence Organisation", 5 September 1988. Khaing Ye Khaing announced termination of the ALP-AIO merger on 11 January 1991. It was presumed by other Rakhine parties that this decision was advised by ALP members on the Thailand border who wanted the party to continue as a separate entity for political advocacy. For the ALPs view, see, Aung, "Inceptive History" (ref: Ch.4, n.15).

27. To justify their actions, they accused the AA leader Khaing Raza of "corruption" and monopolising power: Central Committee NUPA, "Proclamation No.1/96", 15 October 1996. N.B., the breakaway group initially continued to use the NUPA name.

28. National United Party of Arakan, "Brief Analysis on Arakan Politics" (ref: Ch.2, n.3), p.34.

29. All Arakan Students and Youths Congress, Press Release, 7 October 1995.

30. Ibid.

31. For the personal accounts of Khaing San Thein and Dynyalin, student activists who joined with the AASYC and NUPA, see, Nandita Haksar, *Rogue Agent: How India's Military Intelligence Betrayed the Burmese Resistance* (India: Penguin Books, 2009), pp.56-64. Khaing Mrat Kyaw later left the NUPA and became editor of the Narinjara News.

32. International Crisis Group, "Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State", Asia Report No.283, 2016, p.4.

33. For a detailed account of these events, see, Haksar, *Rogue Agent*.

34. "'We helped India, but we were betrayed'", Mizzima News, 20 May 2011. They were later resettled in the Netherlands.

35. In a protest letter to the India Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, NUPA's foreign affairs secretary Khin Maung reminded of the "traditional ties" between the peoples of Arakan and India and asked for New Delhi's continuing support in the post-colonial struggles for democracy. Letter, "To the Honourable Prime Minister, the Government of India", NUPA General Head Quarters Arakan, 15 August 1998.

36. See e.g., Earthrights International, "Another Yadana: The Shwe Natural Gas Pipeline Project (Burma- Bangladesh-India)", 2004.

37. Following this setback, NUPA members became best known for their advocacy of the Arakan cause under such veterans as Khin Maung (ex-AIO) and Shwe Tha (ex-CPA) in networking with other opposition groups in the Bangladesh, India and Thailand borderlands.

38. Aye Thar Aung was released after two years due to ill health.

39. The founding members were: ALD, SNLD, UNLD, Mon National Democratic Front, Zomi National Congress, Chin National League for Democracy, Kachin State National Congress for Democracy, Kayah State All Nationalities League for Democracy, and Kayin (Karen) National Congress for Democracy.

40. Amnesty International, "Report 2006: Myanmar", 23 May 2006. See also note 3.

41. Human Rights Watch, "Burma: 20 Years After 1990 Elections, Democracy Still Denied", 26 May 2010.

42. An Arakan Rohingya Union was also set up in 2011. For an overview of networking activities during this period, see e.g., Paulus Rudolf Yuniarto, "Dynamics of Muslim Rohingya's Insurgencies Movement", in, PSDR LIPI, *Multiculturalism, Separatism and Nation State Building in Burma* (Jakarta: LIPI Press, 2005), pp.87-129.

43. "Rohingya Revolutionary Leader Dies in Saudi Arabia", Kaladan News, 5 May 2005.

44. "Manifesto of Arakan Rohingya National Organisation", ARNO, 13 December 1998.

45. See e.g., Arakan Independence Alliance, "Joint Press Release", 2 November 2001.

46. Arakan Independence Alliance, "Joint Press Release", ARNO, Press & Publication Dept, 11 September 2002.

47. ARNO, "Press Release: Facts about Arakan Rohingya National Organisation", 20 October 2007.

48. All Arakan Students and Youths Congress, "Statement on the 224th Anniversary of the Downfall of the National Sovereignty of Arakan", 31 December 2008.

49. For a US embassy report in Yangon, dated 10 October 2002, released by Wikileaks, see, "Arakan Rohingya National Organization Contacts with Al Qaeda and with Burmese Insurgent Groups on the Thai Border", https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/02RANGOON1310_a.html

50. In 2001, the ARNO commander Salumullah Selim had previously been arrested after crossing the Bangladesh border.

51. Lewa, "Asia's new boat people" (ref: Ch.4, n.77), pp.40-42; Human Rights Watch, "Perilous Plight: Burma's Rohingya Take to the Seas", 26 May 2009.

52. Ibid. Amnesty International, "Myanmar: The Rohingya Minority" (ref: Ch.4, n.77). See also, "Conflict Resumes, Militant Reorganisation and the 1991-92 Rohingya Exodus" above.

53. Dr Khin Maung, "The view of present situation of Arakan from a Rakhaing politician", First Rohingya Consultation: "Working together to find a solution", Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, in cooperation with the National Reconciliation Programme, 2-3 August 2006.

54. Ibid.

55. See e.g., Shau Khat (MSK Jilani), "Toward Understanding Rohingya", Kaladan News, 6 October 2006.

56. Haksar, *Rogue Agent*, p.117.

57. Ibid. It was not just the NUPA that received criticism for its alliance with the ARNO. During the same period, ARNO leaders were also urged by other Rohingya groups to break with the NUPA.

58. The New Light of Myanmar, 23 February 2006. This edition carried a detailed analysis and breakdown of the government's perspective on opposition groups. There were many inaccuracies.

59. In 1995, the newly-formed NUPA had left the DAB.

60. The AASYC group generally used "Arakan State Army" as its name. For 2013 footage of training with the KNU, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p4bRM0i2iec

61. See e.g., William Gomes, "Rohingyas trained in different Al-Qaeda and Taliban camps in Afghanistan", Asian Tribune, 1 April 2009.

62. For materials, see e.g., http://www.rohingya.org

63. See e.g., Tom Kramer, "Civil Society Gaining Ground: Opportunities for Change and Development in Burma", Transnational Institute, Amsterdam, 2011.

64. The most prominent news organisations were Narinjara News, set up by Arakan democracy activists in exile in September 2001: http://narinjara.com; and the Kaladan Press Network, established in February 2001 by Rohingyas in exile in Bangladesh: http://www.kaladanpress.org

65. Shwe Gas Movement, "Corridor of Power: China's Trans-Burma Oil and Gas Pipelines" (Chiang Mai, September 2009). The movement was initiated by the AASYC.

66. Daewoo International Ltd. and Korea Gas Corporation of South Korea, and ONGC Videsh Ltd. and GAIL Ltd. of India.

67. See e.g., Transnational Institute, "China's Engagement in Myanmar: From Malacca Dilemma

to Transition Dilemma", TNI, Myanmar Policy Briefing No.19, July 2016.

68. AASYC, PYO and MYPO, "Holding Our Ground: Land Confiscation in Arakan and Mon States, and Pa-O Area of Southern Shan State", March 2009, p.9.

69. Marn Thu Shein & Chan Myae Thu, "Sixty-five percent of foreign investment concentrated in resource rich Kachin, Rakhine, Shan States", Eleven Media Group, 20 October 2011. Kachin State was estimated to have received about 25 per cent of total investment, or US$ 8.3 billon, while Rakhine State received US$ 7.5 billion.

70. See e.g., San Kyawt Khine et al, "Epidemiological Situation of Malaria in Rakhine State, Myanmar during 2000-2014", OSIR, Vol.10:3, September 2017, p.16-21.

71. Shwe Gas Movement, "Corridor of Power", p.12.

72. See e.g., John Buchanan, Tom Kramer & Kevin Woods, "Developing Disparity: Regional Investment in Burma's Borderlands", TNI-BCN, Amsterdam, 2013.

73. Shwe Gas Movement, "Corridor of Power", p.29.

74. "Rakkhaing" is a said to be an older spelling of "Rakhaing". The new AA[3] is not related to the AA[2] (Rakhaing-Pray Tatmadaw) of the NUPA-ANC.

75. Twan Mrat Naing, for example, is a former tour-guide and AASYC activist. ULA-AA leaders attribute such experiences to their determination to take responsibility for Arakan into their own hands rather than criticise the situation to foreigners or wait for other groups to take action.

76. See e.g., Global Witness, "Jade: Myanmar's 'Big State Secret'", October 2015. See also Chapter 7.

77. See e.g., "Arakan Army: The Way of Rakhita 2018": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0zQGZ8VE1PY

78. KIO leaders were initially wary about allowing the ULA to become a political movement that organised in Kachin State. The increasing numbers of Rakhine migrants in the territory over the past two decades is a sensitive issue. But, as conflict escalated with the government during 2011-12, reservations were generally lifted.

79. As quoted in, David Scott Mathieson, "Myanmar's Rakhine torched anew by insurgent fire", Asia Times, 3 January 2019.

80. This is a list of the main armed movements in Arakan, including the former hill tracts, since the end of the Second World War. It is not intended to be definitive: rather, the major organisations as they have been known in the English language. Over the years, there have been considerable variations in troop strengths and political outreach. All the forces have had more supporters than active personnel at any one time. Since the late 1970s, no organisation has controlled base areas outside northern Rakhine State and the tri-border region. Sometimes there is a variation between the formation (and ending) of groups and actual activities in the field. Such dates are given in brackets.

81. The MNF did not have political aspirations for Arakan but was an important actor in the tri-border region over a two-decade period.

82. The NUFA grew into an alliance of six parties: the AIO, ALP, CPA, ANLP, TNP and short-lived National Democratic Force of Arakan.

83. The ARIF was formed through the merger of the RPF and two RSO factions.

84. The CNF is active in the former Arakan Hill Tracts, today in Chin State.

85. The NUPA was formed through an amalgamation of the AA[1], AIO-ALP (1988 merger group), ANLP, CPA and TNP.

86. There have often been two elements within the AASYC movement: civil society and armed.

87. The ARNO was formed by the merger of the ARIF and two RSO factions. It has continued as a political front after its military wing, known as the Rohingya National Army, ended armed struggle in 2003.

88. Membership has varied since its foundation. In recent years, its main members have been the AASYC and NUPA. From 2012, the ANC replaced the NUPA as the main front for political representation and its armed wing is known as the ANC-AA[2] (also Arakan State Army).

89. Under the 2008 constitution, nationalities are represented by Ethnic Affairs Ministers in states or regions where they have populations of 0.1 per cent or greater of the country population – approximately 51,400 citizens. But they do not have such a seat for a state identified by their nationality: i.e., there is no Rakhine Ethnic Affairs Minister for Rakhine State.

90. The complete list: Bamar (5), Karen (5), Chin (3), Shan (3), Pa-O (2), Rakhine (2), Lisu (2), Akha, Intha, Kachin, Kayan, Lahu, Mon, Rawang (1).

91. The CPB group renamed itself the Rakhine State All National Races Solidarity Party. The "Arakan Army" or NUPA's representation was more nominal, relating to a splinter group led by Khaing Lunn Nai: see e.g., Kyaw Zwa Moe, "Burma's National Convention Resumes", The Irrawaddy, 10 October 2006. In total, 29 ceasefire groups were represented during the later stages of the National Convention. This included 15 major groups; the rest were small breakaway factions that operated as local militia. For a chart of ethnic-based parties in 2006, see Martin Smith, *State of Strife: The Dynamics of Ethnic Conflict in Burma* (East-West Center Washington: ISEAS, Singapore, 2007), pp.67-9.

92. Amnesty International, "Amnesty International Report 2010: Myanmar", 28 May 2010.

93. "Rohingya Party Prevented from Campaigning", The Irrawaddy, 22 October 2010. In total nine parties contested the polls in Rakhine State. The USDP, National Unity Party (former BSPP), Rakhine State National Force, Khami National Development Party and Muslim-based NDPP, which were regarded as pro-government; and the RNDP, NDPD, Mro or Khami National Solidarity Organisation, and Kaman National Progressive Party. Only the USDP and NUP had the resources to run in all 17 constituencies.

94. "Rohingya refugees watch Burmese elections nervously", The Guardian, 3 November 2010; "Election Overview Arakan State under Burma election 2010", Kaladan News, 2 November 2010. For analyses of the election, see e.g., Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, "2010 Myanmar General Elections: Learning and Sharing for Future", Observation Report, April 2011; Burma Fund UN Office, "Burma's 2010 Elections: a comprehensive report", New York, January 2011.

95. Bill O'Toole, "How the USDP went from courting to spurning Rakhine State's Muslims", Myanmar Times, 19 February 2015; Aung Kyaw Min, "Courting of Rohingya in 2010 comes back to haunt USDP", Myanmar Times, 26 August 2015; Republic of the Union of Myanmar, "Final Report of Inquiry Commission on Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State", 8 July 2013, p.15.

96. "USDP's Aung Zaw Win returns to Naypyidaw in defeat", Kaladan News, 9 November 2010; "Rohingya Party Prevented from Campaigning", The Irrawaddy, 22 October 2010; Burma Fund UN Office, "Burma's 2010 Elections", pp.15-23.

97. Ahunt Phone Myat, "No delay on vote in cyclone-hit region", DVB, 1 November 2010.

98. Transnational Institute, "A Changing Ethnic Landscape: Analysis of Burma's 2010 Polls", Burma Policy Briefing No.4, December 2010, p.2.

99. The USDP won a total of 883 seats, the NUP 62 and, with the SNLD boycotting the polls, a newly-formed Shan Nationalities Democratic Party 57. The RNDP won 7 seats in the Upper House, 9 in the Lower House and 19 in the State Assembly.

100. Transnational Institute, "A Changing Ethnic Landscape".

101. One Upper House, two Lower House, and two to the State Assembly: International Crisis Group, "Myanmar: The Politics" (ref: Ch.2, n.14), p.19.

6. Quasi-Civilian Government: The Era of President Thein Sein (2011-16)

1. Transnational Institute, "China's Engagement" (ref: Ch.5, n.67), 12-14.

2. See e.g., Buchanan, Kramer & Woods, "Developing Disparity" (ref: Ch.5, n.72).

3. David Steinberg, "Burma in the US-China Great Game", YaleGlobal Online, 5 December 2011.

4. See e.g., Mandy Sadan (ed.), *War and Peace in the Borderlands of Myanmar: The Kachin Ceasefire 1994–2011* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute for Asian Studies, 2016).

5. The TNLA was a successor to the ceasefire Palaung State Liberation Party, which technically transformed into a Tatmadaw-aligned militia in 2005 following a 1991 ceasefire.

6. International Crisis Group. "The Dark Side of Transition: Violence Against Muslims in Myanmar", Asia Report No.251, 2013, p.7.

7. Ibid., pp.7-8; Nyein Nyein, "Six Suspects Confess to Thandwe Murders: Home Affairs Ministry", The Irrawaddy, 15 October 2013.

8. By the calculation of the Rakhine State government, there were 192 fatalities (58 "Rakhine" and 134 "Bengali"), and 1,192 Rakhine homes were destroyed and 7,422 "Bengali". No mention was made of other nationalities who live in the territory. Republic of the Union of Myanmar, "Final Report of Inquiry Commission" (ref: Ch.5, n.95), Appendix C.

9. Human Rights Watch, "'All You Can Do is Pray': Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Burma's Arakan State", 22 April 2013.

10. Republic of the Union of Myanmar, "Final Report of Inquiry Commission", pp.15-6.

11. Ibid., pp.8, 16.

12. International Crisis Group. "The Dark Side of Transition", pp.12-15.

13. Alex Bookbinder, "969: The Strange Numerological Basis for Burma's Religious Violence", The Atlantic, 9 April 2013; Kate Hodal, "Buddhist monk uses racism and rumours to spread hatred in Burma", The Guardian, 18 April 2013.

14. Ibid. Jailed in 2003 for inciting religious conflict, U Wirathu had only recently been released in January 2012 as part of a government amnesty.

15. "How Aung San Suu Kyi sees the Rohingya crisis", BBC, 25 January 2018.

16. Khin Maung Soe, "Burma: Rakhine conflict highlights law concerns", RFA, 14 June 2012.

17. Human Rights Watch, "'All You Can Do is Pray'"; Human Rights Watch, "Southeast Asia: Accounts from Rohingya Boat People", 27 May 2015.

18. Vivian Tan, "Two camps of thought on helping Rohingya in Bangladesh", UNHCR, 28 January 2013.

19. Republic of the Union of Myanmar, "Final Report of Inquiry Commission".

20. "UN rejects Thein Sein's potential Rohingya plan", DVB, 13 July 2012. There were later suggestions that Thein Sein's meaning was lost in translation and that he was referring to illegal immigrants, estimated by officials to be "at most" 20 per cent of the Muslim population: Myint-U, *The Hidden History* (ref: Ch.2, n.26), p.182.

21. Republic of the Union of Myanmar, "Final Report of Inquiry Commission", p.55.

22. Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, "Towards a Peaceful" (ref: Ch.1, n.4), p.50.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. UN Human Rights Council, "Report of the Independent" (ref: Ch.1, n.5), p.7.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Transnational Institute, "Ethnicity without Meaning" (ref: Ch.2, n.15). See also, Chapter 2, "Rakhine State: A Contemporary Snapshot".

29. See Ibid.

30. Yen Snaing, "Week of protests planned against suffrage for white card holders", The Irrawaddy, 5 February 2015; "Myanmar nullifies temporary ID cards after nationalist protest", AFP, 11 February 2015; Transnational Institute. "The 2015 General Election in Myanmar: What Now for Ethnic Politics?", TNI Myanmar Policy Briefing No.17, 2015, p.13.

31. Ibid., p.5.

32. Amnesty International, "Myanmar: Parliament must reject discriminatory 'Race and Religion' Laws", 3 March 2015; Fortify Rights, "Persecution of the Rohingya Muslims" (ref: Ch.4, n.77), pp.17-18, 33-4.

33. UN Secretary-General, "Secretary-General's remarks at the meeting of the Partnership Group on Myanmar", New York, 29 September 2015.

34. See e.g., Human Rights Watch, "'All You Can Do is Pray'"; International Crisis Group, "The Dark Side of Transition"; "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee", UN General Assembly, Human Rights Council, 23 March 2015; Amnesty International, "Myanmar: Four years on, impunity is the Kachin conflict's hallmark", 9 June 2015.

35. UNICEF, "Rakhine": https://www.unicef.org/myanmar/overview_25052.html

36. A fourth smaller party, the Democratic Party of Arakan, remained active until 2014 when its members returned inside the country. Its veteran leader Thein Phay died at the age of 86 in Sittwe in 2019. See also box: "Timeline: Armed Movements Arakan".

37. "ALP urges for a stronger National Army for Arakanese", Narinjara, 7 June 2013.

38. Republic of the Union of Myanmar, "Final Report of Inquiry Commission", p.14.

39. Maung Aye, "Local Ethnic Victims Refuse Aid from Foreign NGOs", Narinjara News, 6 July 2012.

40. Aubrey Belford, "As Myanmar's Rakhine Buddhists gain strength, so does anti-Muslim apartheid", Reuters, 18 June 2014.

41. Eight Western governmental agencies were contributory donors to the US$ 74 million budget. Transnational Institute, "Ethnicity without Meaning", p.20.

42. "Mobs Attack Offices of UN, Aid Groups in Myanmar's Rakhine State", RFA, 27 March 2014; Belford, "As Myanmar's Rakhine Buddhists".

43. Sithu Aung Myint, "The race in Rakhine", Frontier Myanmar, 8 October 2015.

44. Moe Myint, "Ethnic Bloc Seeks Powerbroker Role in Next Parliament", The Irrawaddy, 22 July 2015.

45. "Myanmar to Hold Six-Party Talks on Constitutional Change", RFA, 6 April 2015. Those who took part: President Thein Sein, Snr-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, Upper House speaker Khin Aung Myint, Lower House speaker Shwe Mann, Aung San Suu Kyi and Aye Maung.

46. The predecessors were the AFPFL's "Arms for Democracy" initiative in 1958, Ne Win's Peace Parley in 1963-64, and the ethnic ceasefires of the SLORC-SPDC era.

47. Transnational Institute, "Ending Burma's Conflict Cycle? Prospects for Ethnic Peace", TNI Burma Policy Briefing No.8, February 2012, p.4.

48. The founding members were the ANC, CNF, KIO, KNU, KNPP, NMSP, Lahu Democratic Union (LDU), Pa-O National Liberation Organisation (PNLO), Shan State Army/Shan State Progress Party (SSA/SSPP), TNLA and Wa National Organisation (WNO). Parties variously joined and left during the following years, including the Kokang MNDAA. For a history, see e.g., Transnational Institute, "Beyond Panglong" (ref: Ch.3, n.31), pp.6, 33 and passim.

49. At the time, the ANC's members were the NUPA, AASYC, ALD (E) and RSU.

50. "Chin leaders oppose setting up of ALP's liaison office in Paletwa", Khonumthung News, 11 April 2012.

51. "Chin kidnapped for eleven lakh kyat ransom in Paletwa", Khonumthung News, 19 September 2012.

52. Pioneered by the Norway-backed Myanmar Peace Support Initiative, collaboration evolved during 2015 into the present-day Joint Peace Fund. After 2012, there were many foreign organisations, including Western governments and Japan, that sought to become involved in the government peace process. Given the diversity of actors, generalisations are difficult. But there was a fundamental problem. It was assumed that the "process" would bring all conflict actors together. This never happened. Once they began funding programmes related to Thein Sein's initiative, foreign organisations had an institutional interest in wanting the government process to succeed. This meant working closely within the parameters laid down by the Tatmadaw. This, in turn, empowered the positions of the government and military leaders who, until the present day, have treated different organisations and parts of the country differently. Whatever the original intentions, Thein Sein's peace process did not come to mark a time of peace and inclusion.

53. These are the 21 organisations broadly recognised in the national peace process since 2011. There are considerable variations in size, history, outreach and influence. The list should not be considered as final, and further change can be expected. The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army is new, and its objectives and organisation are not clear. It is not presently included in the framework for national peace discussions. There are also numerous Tatmadaw-backed pyithusit (militias) and Border Guard Forces, some of which are former ceasefire groups. The BGFs include the former Democratic Karen Buddhist Army and Karenni Nationalities People's Liberation Front.

54. Myat Thura, "Tatmadaw to keep people's militias part of defence policy", Myanmar Times, 13 September 2019. For the government's development of militias, see also, Transnational Institute, "Bouncing Back: Relapse in the Golden Triangle", Amsterdam, June 2014; Kim Jolliffe, "Ethnic Armed Conflict and Territorial Administration in Myanmar", Asia Foundation, June 2015; John Buchanan, "Militias in Myanmar",

Asia Foundation, July 2016; International Crisis Group, "Fire and Ice: Conflict and Drugs in Myanmar's Shan State", Asia Report No.299, 8 January 2019.

55. "Locals Ordered to Serve in Militias", Narinjara News, 2 September 2009.

56. Tun Tun, "People militia training conducted for native residents in Maungdaw", Narinjara News, 6 October 2012.

57. For a description of the build-up in southern Maungdaw Township, see, "The Killing Fields of Alethankyaw", Kaladan Press Network, November 2018.

58. UN Human Rights Council, "Report of the Independent", pp.270-71, 278, 312-3 and passim.

59. Republic of the Union of Myanmar, "Final Report of Inquiry Commission", pp.15-16.

60. Ei Ei Toe Lwin, "Speaker Pledges 'Support' for Rakhine People", Myanmar Times, 4 October 2013. For an analysis of Tatmadaw organisation in Rakhine State during this period, see, Andrew Selth, "Myanmar's Armed Forces and the Rohingya Crisis", United States Institute of Peace, Peaceworks No.140, 2018.

61. Burma News International, *Deciphering Myanmar's Peace Process: A Reference Guide 2016* (Chiang Mai: 2017), p.111.

62. In addition to the ALP, representatives of both the NUPA-ANC and remnant DPA were present. Aye Nai, "Arakan armies to join peace process", DVB, 7 May 2014. The DPA stopped its organisational activities shortly afterwards: see also note 36.

63. Lawi Weng, "Arakan Conference Calls for Creation of 'Arakan Army'", Irrawaddy, 2 May 2014.

64. Ibid.

65. Gabrielle Paluch, "China-Backed Railway Expansion Stalls in Myanmar", VOA, 1 August 2014.

66. Belford, "As Myanmar's Rakhine Buddhists".

67. See e.g., Transnational Institute, "Beyond Panglong", pp.17-26.

68. The other NCCT members were the CNF, KIO, KNPP, KNU, MNDAA, NMSP, TNLA, Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA), Karen Peace Council (KPC), LDU, PNLO, SSA/SSPP and WNO. The three Rakhine representatives were Mra Raza Lin (ALP), Twan Zaw (ANC) and Kyaw Han (ULA). See also chart, "Ethnic Armed Organisations, November 2019".

69. Simon Roughneen, "President's Union Day Message Flags-up Federalism", The Irrawaddy, 12 February 2014.

70. Transnational Institute, "Beyond Panglong", p.23.

71. For example, the KNU was founded in 1947, the KNPP in 1957 and the KIO in 1961. The rationale of Tatmadaw officers is that "new" groups are considered "enemies" of the government in the era when they are formed. They also say that they do not want to allow a situation to develop whereby new groups of dissidents take up arms in the belief that this will allow them to be included in political dialogue.

72. The ANC includes elements from such older parties as the CPA, AIO, NUPA and AASYC; the MNDAA was the first breakaway group from the CPB in 1989 and had a government ceasefire between 1989 and 2009; the TNLA in many respects resumed armed struggle from the Palaung State Liberation Party (formed 1976) that agreed a 1991 ceasefire; the LDU is the successor to the armed Lahu movement founded in 1972; and the WNO was established in 1974. It can be noted, though, that the LDU and WNO have been largely residual organisations in recent years. More recently, the WNO has been effectively subsumed by its political relationship with the UWSA.

73. Despite the Tatmadaw's rejection of the LDU, a ceasefire was subsequently agreed in 2018 under the NLD government.

74. The author has heard this accusation from both ANC and ULA leaders.

75. See e.g., Zarni Mann, "UNFC Reiterates Call for Suu Kyi's Voice in Peace Talks", The Irrawaddy, 26 November 2013.

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77. "Myanmar's military says deadly attack on KIA center meant to be 'warning' strike", Radio Free Asia, 21 November 2014.

78. Richard Potter, "Myanmar: New Front in an Old War", The Diplomat, 22 July 2015.

79. Ibid.

80. Burma News International, *Deciphering Myanmar's Peace Process*, p.111.

81. "Former Mizoram Chief Minister returns from Myanmar peace talks", Khonumthung News, 3 February 2015.

82. The DKBA and KPC.

83. Transnational Institute, "Beyond Panglong", pp.24-5.

84. The other signatories were: the CNF, DBKA, KPC, PNLO and ABSDF. In military terms, the CNF is a small force in the India borderlands, but its political cause has become well known since its 1988 formation.

85. Aung Naing Oo, "The time for waiting is over in Myanmar", Nikkei Asian Review, 13 October 2015.

86. UNHCR, "South East Asia: Mixed Maritime Movements", April-June 2015, p.2.

87. Kay Zun Nway, "Newly arrived Kaman Muslims in Yangon defy govt pressure to return to Rakhine State", Myanmar Now, 23 December 2015; Moe Myint, "Displaced and Forgotten, Kaman Search for a New Home", The Irrawaddy, 2 June 2017.

88. Ibid. For a recent study on the Kamans, see Kyaw, "Myanmar's Other Muslims" (ref: Ch.2, n.62), pp.279-300. For continuing discrimination facing the Kaman population, see, Moe Myint,

"Analysis: Party Says Gov't Issuing Fake Kaman Citizenship Cards to Rohingya, Demands Probe", The Irrawaddy, 12 September 2018.

89. Karin Roberts, "Rohingya Refugees From Myanmar Have Been Persecuted for Decades", New York Times, 12 May 2015.

90. The two parties had come out top in the Rakhine State polls in the previous elections in 1990 and 2010 respectively. The ALD had boycotted the 2010 election in protest at restrictions on political freedoms (see Chapter 5).

91. "Arakan alliance", DVB, 9 March 2014.

92. Burma News International, *Deciphering Myanmar's Peace Process*, pp.25-8. The deed was also signed by the Kha Me (Khumi) National Development Party that is seeking a self-administered zone in Paletwa Township.

93. Mratt Kyaw Thu, "Rakhine National Party in 'chaos'", Myanmar Times, 26 June 2015. Under the 2008 constitution, chief ministers can only be appointed from State Assembly representatives.

94. Transnational Institute, "The 2015 General Election", p.5.

95. Aung Kyaw Min, "Courting of Rohingya in 2010 comes back to haunt USDP", Myanmar Times, 26 August 2015; Jonah Fisher, "Myanmar's Ma Ba Tha monks flex their political muscle", BBC News, 8 October 2015.

96. Transnational Institute, "The 2015 General Election", p.5; Courtney Weatherby, "Myanmar's Election: The 'Real Burmese' Dilemma", The Diplomat, 30 September 2015.

97. International Crisis Group, "The Myanmar Elections: Results and Implications", Asia Briefing No.147, 9 December 2015, p.2.

98. Timothy Mclaughlin, "Rising Rakhine party looming threat to Myanmar's Muslim minority", Reuters, 3 September 2015.

99. "Arakan alliance", DVB.

100. Nine were from the DHRP, six from the NDPP, one from the NLD and three independents: Ei Ei Toe Lwin, "Election commission rejects Muslim candidates en masse", Myanmar Times, 1 September 2015. A justification given was that the candidates were "Bengalis" because their parents may not have been Myanmar citizens when they were born. In total, the DHRP said that 17 of its 18 candidates were disbarred in the country: see, Moe Myint, "Muslim Party Facing Political Oblivion After Candidates Rejected", The Irrawaddy, 1 September 2015. After an appeal, two candidates were reportedly permitted to stand.

101. Lwin, "Election commission rejects Muslim candidates en masse". For an analysis of citizenship rights during this time, see, UNHCR, "Study on Community Perceptions of Citizenship", Documentation and Rights in Rakhine State, UNHCR Myanmar, August 2016.

102. Myint, "Muslim Party Facing Political Oblivion".

103. Myint, "Displaced and Forgotten".

104. Swe Win, "Myanmar's Kaman Muslims look to elections to restore their rights", Mizzima News, 6 November 2015.

105. Transnational Institute, "The 2015 General Election", pp.5-10. The ANP won 23 seats in the State Assembly, 12 in the Lower House and 10 in the Upper House.

106. "AA insurgents ambush Tatmadaw columns", Global New Light of Myanmar, 6 March 2016.

107. Lun Min Mang, Ye Mon & Guy Dinmore, "Key players to miss peace conference", Myanmar Times, 11 January 2016.

108. See e.g., Aung San Suu Kyi, F*reedom from Fear and Other Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1991 & 1995).

109. National League for Democracy, "2015 Election Manifesto Authorised Translation", p.5.

110. Hnin Yadana Zaw, "Myanmar's Suu Kyi says peace process will be government's priority", Reuters, 4 January 2016.

7. The NLD-Tatmadaw Government (2016-present)

1. See e.g., Htet Khaung Linn, "The Outsiders: Who Are The NLD's Military-Linked Leaders?", Myanmar Now, 10 December 2018.

2. In behind-the-scenes talks with nationality leaders, Aung San Suu Kyi said that she considered the 21st Century Conference to be the third "Panglong" initiative in the country's history after the 1947 agreement of her father and the federal seminar movement in 1961.

3. The UWSA, MNDAA, TNLA and NSCN-K.

4. Transnational Institute, "Beyond Panglong" (ref: Ch.3, n.31), p.28. The "eight principles", which were drafted by the UNFC, were initially counted as "nine". For a synopsis, see, Sai Wansai, "Framework for Political Dialogue: UNFC's boycott leads to peace process deterioration", S.H.A.N., 21 September 2016.

5. Htet Naing Zaw, "UPDJC Agrees to All-Inclusion at Union Peace Conference", The Irrawaddy, 16 August 2016.

6. The LDU, MNDAA, TNLA and WNO.

7. Although not a member, the ULA was an affiliate of the UNFC.

8. Shwe Yee Saw Myint & Antoni Slodkowski, "Myanmar's Suu Kyi kicks off peace conference with appeal for unity", Reuters, 31 August 2016.

9. Ban Ki-moon, "Myanmar's promising path to reconciliation to require compromise, Ban tells peace conference", UN News Service, 31 August 2016.

10. See e.g., Transnational Institute, "Beyond Panglong", pp.28-9.

11. Ibid.

12. Lawi Weng, "Ethnic Armed Groups Launch Joint Offensive in Northern Shan State", The Irrawaddy, 20 November 2016.

13. See e.g., Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Myanmar Maneuvers: How to Break Political-Criminal Alliances in Contexts of Transition", United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, Crime-Conflict Nexus Series No.9, April 2017.

14. Amnesty International, "Myanmar: 'All the Civilians Suffer': Conflict, Displacement, and Abuse in Northern Myanmar", 14 June 2017. See also, "A Far Cry from Peace: Ongoing Burma Army offensives and abuses in northern Burma under the NLD government", Kachin Women's Association Thailand, November 2016.

15. See e.g., Amnesty International, "Myanmar: Kofi Annan to head Commission on Rakhine state", 24 August 2016.

16. "Situation of human rights of Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar", Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Human Rights Council, 28 June 2016.

17. Nyan Lynn Aung, "ANP members stage defiant walk-out on state parliament", Myanmar Times, 29 March 2016.

18. Ibid.

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21. See e.g., Nyan Lynn Aung, "Rakhine chief minister says IDPs from all communities need aid", Myanmar Times, 28 April 2016; Mratt Kyaw Thu, "IDP numbers rise in Rakhine as forced labour allegations fly", Frontier Myanmar, 6 May 2016.

22. Htet Kaung Linn, "Arakan Army commander: 'The president must have total authority over the military'", Myanmar Now, 24 June 2016.

23. Ibid.

24. UNOCHA, "IDP Sites in Rakhine State", July 2016.

25. UNHCR, "Bangladesh Factsheet", March 2016.

26. Poppy McPherson, "'No Muslims allowed': how nationalism is rising in Aung San Suu Kyi's Myanmar", The Guardian, 23 May 2016.

27. Aung Kyaw Min, "Ma Ba Tha hits back at minister's calls for termination", Myanmar Times, 8 July 2016.

28. Marella Oppenheim, "'It only takes one terrorist': the Buddhist monk who reviles Myanmar's Muslims", The Guardian, 12 May 2017.

29. International Crisis Group, "Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency" (ref: Ch.5, n.32), p.9.

30. Ibid., pp.12-14.

31. Ibid., p.4.

32. For the ARNO website, see, https://www.rohingya.org.

33. International Crisis Group, "Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency", p.4.

34. For an analysis of Tatmadaw structures in Rakhine State, see, Selth, "Myanmar's Armed Forces" (ref: Ch.6, n.60).

35. Poppy McPherson, "'It will blow up': fears Myanmar's deadly crackdown on Muslims will spiral out of control", The Guardian 18 November 2016.

36. Human Rights Watch, "Burma: Military Burned Villages in Rakhine State", 13 December 2016; "More than 1,000 feared killed in Myanmar army crackdown on Rohingya – U.N. officials", Reuters, 6 February 2017.

37. See e.g., The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, State Counsellor Office, "Government Refutes Rights Group Report", 17 November 2016.

38. Kyaw Phyo Tha, "Burma Army Chief Persists in Denying Rights Abuses", The Irrawaddy, 7 December 2016.

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9. Conclusion

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Rakhine State, historically known as Arakan, represents the post-colonial failures of Myanmar in microcosm: ethnic conflict, political impasse, militarisation, economic neglect and the marginalisation of local peoples. During the past decade, many of these challenges have gathered a new intensity, accentuating a Buddhist-Muslim divide and resulting in one of the greatest refugee crises in the modern world. A land of undoubted human and natural resource potential, Rakhine State has become one of the poorest territories in the country today.

The current crisis is often characterised as a "Buddhist Rakhine" versus "Muslim Rohingya" struggle for political rights and ethnic identity. But the challenges of achieving democracy, equality and the right of self-determination have always been more complex and nuanced than this. Arakan's vibrant history reflects its frontline position on a cultural and geo-political crossroads in Asia.

Taking a narrative approach, this report seeks to analyse the challenges facing Rakhine State and its peoples during a critical time of transition from military rule. As always in Myanmar, a balanced understanding of local societies and perspectives is essential in a territory that reflects different ethnic, religious and political viewpoints. In the case of Rakhine State, the social and political challenges facing the peoples have been little documented or understood. Decades of civil war and international isolation have resulted in a dearth of reporting on the ethnic conflicts and governmental failures that have had a devastating impact on the ground.

The situation is critical. While armed conflict and humanitarian suffering continue, a new "great game" is underway as the United Nations, China, India and other international actors seek to engage over Arakan's political and economic future. It is vital that the voices of the local peoples are heard. Rakhine State should not be considered a peripheral or exceptional case of ethno-political crisis in modern-day Myanmar. The ambition must be that in the coming decade Rakhine State becomes a model for informed and progressive change. Equality and justice for Arakan's peoples are integral to peace and stability in the country at large.

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