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# The Rohingya crisis
**Guest Editorial by Elliott Prasse-Freeman**

As this article went to press, Myanmar military clearance
operations in northwest Arakan state had already displaced
over 600,000 Rohingya,[1] the country's long-oppressed Muslim
minority. Often aided by Buddhist Rakhine people who claim
the land as their own, these attacks have resulted in the torching
of hundreds of Rohingya villages and the slaughter of over
1,000 men, women and children.

The simple facts of the crisis require reiteration because of
the prevarication emerging from both Myanmar's military and
Aung San Suu Kyi's government. Each has suggested that the
Rohingya are burning their own homes, conjuring fake accusa-
tions of rape and are solely responsible for the recent conflagra-
tion. This narrative is unsupported by evidence.

On 25 August 2017 a militant group calling itself the Arakan
Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) did launch attacks on secu-
rity installations that killed perhaps 100 people. But ARSA,
a collection of Saudi-trained Rohingya emigres (ICG 2016),
appears less like an organic expression of Rohingya resist-
ance and more like a group of interlopers machinating to insti-
gate an uprising. Content to play its part in such escalation,
the Myanmar military used ARSA 'terrorism' to justify the
initiation of a campaign of collective punishment and ethnic
cleansing that shows no sign of ending. Indeed, even though
the active destruction of Rohingya homes has currently ceased,
no political solution is in sight, leaving the possibility of further
conflict perpetually open. This is not the first time Rohingya
people have been the victims of collective punishment at the
hands of the Myanmar state apparatus – Rohingya were also
expunged in the 1940s, 1978, the early 1990s and 2012 – and
Myanmar's leaders have given no reason to believe that fur-
ther cleansing will not be forthcoming. This history of abuse
and marginalization displaces attention from the recent events
onto the political conditions that have enabled them. What is
noteworthy is not ARSA's attack but that the Rohingya have
eschewed armed response in the face of humiliation and
despair for so long.

Yet policymakers and academics, tasking themselves with
solving the Rohingya problem, seem to ignore those political
conditions even as they attempt to overcome them. For instance,
many insist that the state should grant the Rohingya citizenship,
asserting that this procedural fix will be sufficient to end hostil-
ities and integrate society (Holliday 2014). But such solutions,
which call for 'rights' for the Rohingya and the 'rule of law'
for the polity, presuppose the very ends that must be created.
They risk arriving as dead letters; as some of the few Rohingya
villagers who have achieved citizenship know bitterly well,
attaining citizenship may mean nothing more than holding a
pink piece of paper while remaining immured in one's village,
denied permission to leave (Galache & Avezuela 2017).

For citizenship to actually come to mean substantive oppor-
tunities, it will be necessary instead to address the collective
Burmese perception of Rohingya ethnicity as allochthonous
and their religion as incompatible with Burmese society.

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A first task is to understand why the Rohingya are seen as not
belonging. It is necessary here to discuss how colonial and
post-colonial state regulatory techniques have helped construct
conceptions of autochthony and foreignness. Burma here does
not, however, recapitulate the now-classic story familiar to
students of Benedict Anderson, Bernard Cohn or Thongchai
Winichakul in which state apparatuses applied knowledge/power
to produce fine-grained ascriptive markers with which they
differentiated subjects. Burma's various ruling regimes lacked
the sophistication, will and willingness to expend resources to

*Elliott Prasse-Freeman is a PhD candidate in anthropology at Yale University. He can be reached at elliott.prasse-freeman@yale.edu.*

1. Small numbers of Hindus and other ethnicities have also been caught up in the dragnet (Das & Jain 2017).
2. State Law and Order Restoration Council/State Peace and Development Council.

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develop forms of power of a 'disciplinary' kind in Foucault's sense, through which power's capillary nature could encompass and resubjectivize individuals. Instead, colonial and post-colonial regimes all deployed an obtuse, blunt-force 'sovereign' mode of power in which direct attempts at domination allowed remarkable space for the subversion and refraction of state will.

For instance, unlike in India, where the British colonial state used caste to efficiently demarcate and hierarchize subjects, British censuses of Burma stumbled from one remarkably confused classificatory schema to the next, using caste (which hardly existed among Burmese), religion, language, even birthmarks to fail to produce intensive knowledge (McAuliffe 2017). While ethnic categories became increasingly essential and essentialized – because the British made them vehicles for resource acquisition – these categories remained hollow integuments that actual people could move between with relative ease.

The post-colonial regimes did no better in defining and refining the ethnic concept. The constitutional (1948-1962) and socialist (1962-1988) regimes attempted to subsume ethnic differentiation under civic and socialist identities, respectively. And while the SLORC/SPDC[2] military government (1988-2011) attempted to homogenize the polity as Myanmar (often synonymous with the majority ethnicity) and Buddhist, even scholars who emphasize this project (Callahan 2004) are unable to show this had real effects on the ground. With the state too infrastructurally unsophisticated to inscribe upon subjects irrefragable ethnic labels they could not shed while moving across contexts, the entire concept has remained context dependent. The irony is that while ethnicity became something that people were willing to die for in some cases, they could also choose to change that identity by wearing different clothes, speaking a different language or learning the basics of a different religion – manoeuvres which Francis Wade (2017) documents in his new book on Myanmar's Muslims.

While 'ethnicity' remains mutable in Myanmar, both colonial and post-colonial governments did, however, create a clear distinction between the various Myanmar ethnicities on the one hand (those *taingyintha* or 'sons of the soil') and Chinese and South Asians on the other – as the latter actually conformed to the classically racial physiognomy-based logic of the British census, and as the British favoured them in the economy and administration, making them convenient objects of populist anger (Taylor 1981). Nick Cheesman has traced the genealogy of the term *taingyintha*, showing how it has become the *sine qua non* of belonging in Myanmar even as the actual people it has indexed have changed over time. Cheesman relays how the current constitution even 'puts *taingyintha* over and ahead of citizenship, addressing the political community not as an aggregation of "citizens" but as "national races"' (2017: 470).

This brings us back to the Rohingya. They have committed the dual sin of having perceived characteristics of 'foreignness' while demanding *taingyintha* status. Cheesman highlights the brutal irony for Rohingya: 'the surpassing symbolic and juridical power of *taingyintha* is at once their problem and their solution' (ibid.: 461). But while Cheesman declares *taingyintha* a 'term of state', a 'contrivance for political inclusion and exclusion' (ibid.: 462), and notes how the state thus has the power to welcome the Rohingya into the fold (ibid.: 474), he underestimates the way that *taingyintha,* or rather the political belonging it confers, is dialogically constructed through interaction with the public. Hence, even though the state has mainstreamed the *taingyintha* logic, it no longer decides who gets to be counted as such.

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But there is a vast difference between rejecting the Rohingya as *taingyintha* and violently driving them out. Why, for instance, have the Rohingya and not the similarly foreign Chinese been the objects of ethnic cleansing? More research must consider the way precarity, affective and participatory deficits within Burma's current democratic experience, ethno-nationalist mobilizations and Islamophobia are combining in Myanmar to scapegoat the Rohingya.

First, concomitant with Burma's 'transition' to democracy has been a rapidly evolving political economy. For instance, while land grabs have defined Myanmar's last half-century, their dynamics have recently evolved: whereas land was once simply stolen by elites who exploited its productive capacity (by inviting dispossessed farmers to work as sharecroppers), today land is worth more for its minerals or as a site for investment. Farmers, once considered essential to production, are today rendered superfluous as lands sit fenced off and fallow in order to prevent adverse possession claims. Critically, farmers become transformed into floating populations, travelling to zones of extraction until the land is used up, which displaces them again. The new democratic regime seems impotent, or unwilling, to mitigate the conditions of precarity created by these dislocations. Aung San Suu Kyi has not only neglected land grab victims, but has done so by telling them that they must sacrifice for the nation (Prasse-Freeman 2016). Hence, belonging in the nation becomes increasingly relevant, providing a ticket for eventual compensation for current suffering. In this context, the Rohingya's desire for *taingyintha* status takes on material repercussions.

Second, nationalist movements seem to be providing marginalized Burmese with ways of confirming and reaffirming belonging in the nation. *Pace* Aung San Suu Kyi, who coldly lectures her constituents that 'the responsibility of the people is simply to vote for the party' and nothing more (RFA 2015), Buddhist and racial/ethnic movements recruit and enrol followers by politicizing their everyday conduct. For instance, monk-led beef-eating prohibition campaigns are both promoting rural values (by not killing the socially esteemed cow) and undermining Muslim business owners (who operate most slaughterhouses). 'Protection of Race and Religion' campaigns have succeeded in rewriting national laws and capturing local governance institutions so as to police religious conversion, marriage, sexual relationships and even procreation. Prosaic acts are turned into vital opportunities for performing belonging and excluding imposters.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is the way that Islam has been demonized. Opportunistic political entrepreneurs, including Buddhist monks, have explicitly associated the Rohingya with transnational jihadists. The 'global war on terror' discourse that has cast suspicion and derision on Muslims worldwide has been redeployed in Myanmar (Schissler et al. 2017), to depict the Rohingya as a conduit for the incursion of a massive Islamic horde. Nationalists present themselves as defending the nation's very existence against this imminent Islamification, warning that Rohingya (and Muslims in general) would use any citizenship privileges offered them as the means to ultimately forcibly convert all Burmese. While the extent to which average Burmese subscribe to this narrative is unclear, Suu Kyi herself amplified and ratified it as reasonable when she declared that many around the world – including in her own country – fear 'global Muslim power'. In an environment of precarious existence, the affectively laden imagery and narratives associated with 'radical Islam' take on new potency.

This all leaves the Rohingya in a miserable predicament. But there is some hope. Schissler et al.'s research suggests that what appear to be intractable hatreds are actually quite contingent: informants report only recently becoming 'aware' of 'the Muslim threat'. This provides more support for the thesis that the conflagration against the Rohingya is as much due to the political factors adumbrated above than putatively primordial racism. One prospect is for Burmese leaders to focus on those political issues, especially on the crony capitalists and elites who are producing the precarious economy that is exploiting the masses and spurring much of the angst. Indeed, while many have recently spoken of a need for a broader cultural shift to take place in Myanmar vis-à-vis ethnicity and religion, such a politics provides an actual means for producing such a shift. It can begin to deconstruct the exclusionary meanings of *taingyintha* and imagine the Rohingya as part of Myanmar's future. ●