



‘Illegal migration’ in Arakan : myths and numbers

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One of the rationales underlying the persecution of the Rohingya by the Burmese state is that they are “illegal immigrants from Bangladesh”, having flooded Rakhine State (formerly known, and referred to here, as Arakan State) over the last century. But how valid are such claims in the face of available evidence?

The [border between Bangladesh and Burma is extremely porous](#) and has been poorly guarded on both sides for long stretches of time; smuggling of all kind of goods, including narcotics, is a common feature there, and often happens with the connivance of corrupt officials. Moreover, the grip of the Burmese state in border areas is very



ROHINGYA REFUGEES, BANGLADESH, 2017 (PHOTO: AUTHOR)

tenuous, and Northern Arakan is no exception.

Nobody, however, has provided any evidence of massive waves of “illegal Bengalis”. Nevertheless, the government and institutions linked to it have repeated such claims over and over again, and [they are believed by many Burmese](#). In 1965, Ne Win visited Pakistan, and [the West German ambassador reported](#) that discussions took place about “the problem of the roughly 250,000 Moslems resident in the Province of Arakan whose nationality is unclarified because the Burmese regime *regards them as* illegal immigrants from East Pakistan.” This figure was literally doubled in a [paper published as recently as 2018](#) by the Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (Myanmar-ISIS), a government think tank [founded in 1992](#) by the military junta then ruling the country. The paper asserts that “in 1971, there were around half a million war refugees who fled into Myanmar [...] to escape the violence of the Bangladeshi war of independence.”

Myanmar-ISIS gives two sources for such an extraordinary assertion: a book written by Moshe Yegar, a former Israeli diplomat, and a conversation that the British and Bangladeshi ambassadors in Rangoon maintained in 1975, as recounted by the British diplomat. But [Moshe Yegar merely wrote that](#) “an *undetermined* number of Bengalis who were opposed to the cessation of Bangladesh from Pakistan fled to Arakan. Subsequently almost 17,000 Bengalis returned though the number that remained in Arakan continues to be unknown.” And in the [conversation between the two diplomats](#), the British ambassador recounts that his Bangladeshi counterpart “admitted that there were upward of ½ million Bangalee [sic] trespassers in Arakan whom the Burmese had some right to eject”. The problem is that nowhere is given any indication of what the Bangladeshi diplomat meant by “Bangalee trespassers”.

In a context in which young modern nation-states had been built on the basis of ethno-religious identities—as it was the case of the partition on India and Pakistan and the subsequent partition between West Pakistan and East Pakistan which generated Bangladesh—the Bangladeshi ambassador could have meant that the “Bengalis” didn’t belong to Arakan State as a consequence of their ethno-religious identity: in short, that many of them had trespassed during colonial times. There is no reason to believe he meant that half a million Bengalis migrated to Arakan after Burmese independence, let alone after the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971. And whatever he meant, there is no reason to believe that he was right. His credibility is seriously put in doubt by no other than the British ambassador himself, who at the end of the report asserts: “I do not regard [the Bangladeshi ambassador] Mr Kaiser as an entirely reliable source of evidence. I have found his views in the past highly subjective and sensational.”

Such is the flimsy “evidence” for the invasion of “illegal immigrants” narrative. It is important to recall here that, in the strict sense, “illegal immigration” only refers to such migration that may have occurred after Burma attained independence in 1948. According to colonial laws, migration from any part of India to Burma was perfectly legal. And no law enacted after independence by the Burmese government, not even the infamous 1982 Citizenship Law, has made immigration during the colonial period retroactively illegal. Therefore, I will focus on the period after independence, not on the heated debate on the term “Rohingya”, [as I have done already in *New Mandala*](#), or migration waves during colonial times.

What census data suggest

In order to ascertain the extent of “illegal immigration” from East Pakistan/Bangladesh, we need to take a look at censuses. A comparison between the 1931 census, the last conducted by the British in Burma whose full results have been preserved, and the 1983 and 2014 censuses, carried out by the Burmese government, should throw some light on the question. It is a task complicated by the fact that the ethnic, and national categories employed in these censuses are far from consistent. Comparing ethnic categories is almost impossible, given how arbitrary such classifications were both under the colonial period and after independence. For instance, in the 1983 Census, most Muslims in Arakan were incongruously classified as “Bangladeshis”, that is, as citizens of a nation-state which at that time had only existed for 12 years.

The only category that has been kept constant throughout censuses is that of religion. Given that the overwhelming majority of Rohingyas are Muslims and that most Muslims in Arakan are Rohingya (Kaman Muslims account for a very

tiny fraction of Muslims in all the censuses), we need to look at the growth of the Muslim population in those periods, with the caution that our conclusions can only possibly be approximations. But they can give us realistic orders of magnitude. I will divide our analysis in two periods: from 1931 to 1983 and from 1983 to 2014, as the late seventies and early eighties marked the beginning of the persecution of the Rohingya.

Population growth by religion in Burma and Arakan (1931-2014)							
	1931 ¹	1941	1973	1983 ²	2014 ³	Growth rates (1931-1983)	Growth rates (1983-2014)
Muslims in Arakan	255,361 25.87% (Arakan) 1.74% (Burma)			582,984 28.5% (Arakan) 1.65% (Burma)	1,118,731 ⁴ 35.08% (Arakan) 2.17% (Burma)	128.30% (2.47% per year)	91.90% (2.96% per year)
Non-Muslims in Arakan	731,756 74.13% (Arakan) 5.00% (Burma)			1,462,575 71.5% (Arakan) 4.63% (Burma)	2,070,076 64.92% (Arakan) 4.02% (Burma)	99.87% (1.92% per year)	41.54% (1.34% per year)
Non-Muslims in Arakan (except Hindus)	713,186 72.25% (Arakan)			1,458,482 71.30% (Arakan)	2,060,285 64.60% (Arakan)	104.50% (2.01% per year)	41.26% (1.33% per year)
Buddhists in Arakan	651,135 65.96% (Arakan) 4.45 (Burma)			1,425,754 69.7% (Arakan) 4.04% (Burma)	2,019,370 63.33% (Arakan) 3.92% (Burma)	118.96% (2.29% per year)	41.63% (1.34% per year)
Christians in Arakan	1,868 0.19% (Arakan) 0.01% (Burma)			8,182 0.4% (Arakan) 0.02% (Burma)	36,791 1.15% (Arakan) 0.07% (Burma)	338.01% ⁵ (6.50% per year)	349.66% ⁶ (11.28% per year)
Animists in Arakan	60,183 6.10% (Arakan) 0.41% (Burma)			24,546 1.2% (Arakan) 0.07% (Burma)	2,711 0.09% (Arakan) 0.01% (Burma)	-59.21% ⁷ (-1.14% per year)	-88.96% ⁸ (-2.87% per year)
Christians & Animists in Arakan	62,051 6.29% (Arakan) 0.42% (Burma)			32,728 1.60% (Arakan) 0.90% (Burma)	39,502 1.24% (Arakan) 0.08% (Burma)	-47.26% ⁹ (-0.91% per year)	20.70% (0.67% per year)
Hindus in Arakan	18,149 1.84% (Arakan)			4,091 0.2% (Arakan)	9,791 0.30% (Arakan)	-77.46% ¹⁰ (-1.49% per year)	139.33% (4.49% per year)
Total Arakan	987,117 6.74%	1,186,738 ¹¹ 7.05% 17.67% >	1,712,838 ¹³ 5.92% 73.52% > 1931	2,045,559 5.79% 19.43% g. 1973	3,188,807 6.19%	107.23% (2.06% per year)	55.89% (1.80% per year)

		1931 ¹² (1.77% per year)	(1.74% per year)	(1.94% per year)			
Muslims in Burma	384,839 3.99%			1,377,008 3.9%	2,237,495 4.35%	135.43% (2.60% per year)	62.49% (2.02% per year)
Muslims in Burma (except Arakan)	329,478 2.25%			794,024 2.25%	1,118,764 2.17%	140.99% (2.71% per year)	40.90% (1.31% per year)
Non-Muslims in Burma	14,062,308 96.01%			33,930,905 96.1%	49,248,758 95.65%	140.95% (2.71% per year)	45.14% (1.45% per year)
Non-Muslims in Burma (except Arakan)	13,330,552 91.01%			32,468,330 91.96%	47,178,682 91.63%	143.56% (2.76% per year)	45.31% (1.46% per year)
Buddhists in Burma	12,348,037 84.30%			31,565,274 89.4%	45,185,449 87.76%	155.63% (2.99% per year)	43.15% (1.39% per year)
Buddhists in Burma (except Arakan)	11,696,902 79.86%			30,139,520 85.36%	43,166,079 83.84%	157.67% (3.05% per year)	43.22% (1.39% per year)
Christians in Burma	331,106 2.26%			1,659,472 4.7%	3,172,479 ¹⁴ 6.16%	401.19% ¹⁵ (7.72% per year)	91.17% ¹⁶ (2.96% per year)
Animists in Burma	763,243 5.21%			423,693 1.2%	408,045 0.79%	-44.49% ¹⁷ (-0.86% per year)	-3.69% ¹⁸ (-0.12% per year)
Christians & Animists in Burma	1,094,349 7.47%			2,083,167 5.90%	3,580,524 6.95%	90.36% (1.74% per year)	71.88% (2.32% per year)
Christians & Animists in Burma (except Arakan)	1,032,298 7.05%			2,050,439 5.81%	3,541,022 6.88%	98.63% (1.90% per year)	72.70% (2.35% per year)
Hindus in Burma	570,953			176,339	252,763	-69.08% ¹⁹	43.18%
Hindus in Burma (except Arakan)	532,804 3.77%			172,448 0.49%	242,972 0.47%	-1.33% per year -68.80% (-1.32% per year)	40.90% (1.32% per year)
Total Burma	14,647,147	16,823,798 ²⁰ 14.86% g. 1931 (1.46% per year)	28,921,226 ²¹ 71.91% g. 1941 (2.25% per year) 97.45% g. 1931 (2.32% per year)	35,307,913 22.08% g. 1973 (2.21% per year)	51,486,253 ²²	141.06% (2.71% per year)	45.82% (1.48% per year)

Population growth by religion in Burma and Arakan (1931-1983)						
	1931	1951	1967	1983	Growth rates (1931-1983)	Growth rates (1983-2010)
Muslims in Arakan	205,363 (1.37% (Burma))	242,864 (1.37% (Burma))	342,864 (1.87% (Burma))	528,205 (1.47% (Burma))	1,124,712** (1.80% per year)	91,876** (1.80% per year)
Non-Muslims in Arakan	711,796 (1.1% (Burma))	1,462,376 (1.1% (Burma))	2,075,076 (1.1% (Burma))	3,075,076 (1.1% (Burma))	2,363,310** (1.12% per year)	45,745** (1.12% per year)
Non-Muslims in Arakan except Buddhist	711,796 (1.1% (Burma))	1,462,376 (1.1% (Burma))	2,075,076 (1.1% (Burma))	3,075,076 (1.1% (Burma))	2,363,310** (1.12% per year)	45,745** (1.12% per year)
Buddhists in Arakan	101,101 (0.4% (Burma))	1,421,714 (0.7% (Burma))	2,075,076 (0.7% (Burma))	3,075,076 (0.7% (Burma))	2,363,310** (1.12% per year)	45,745** (1.12% per year)
Christians in Arakan	1,868 (0.01% (Burma))	1,868 (0.01% (Burma))	1,868 (0.01% (Burma))	1,868 (0.01% (Burma))	0.00% (Burma)	0.00% (Burma)
Animists in Arakan	10,101 (0.01% (Burma))	10,101 (0.01% (Burma))	10,101 (0.01% (Burma))	10,101 (0.01% (Burma))	0.00% (Burma)	0.00% (Burma)
Christians & animists in Arakan	12,969 (0.02% (Burma))	12,969 (0.02% (Burma))	12,969 (0.02% (Burma))	12,969 (0.02% (Burma))	0.00% (Burma)	0.00% (Burma)
Hindus in Arakan	10,101 (0.01% (Burma))	10,101 (0.01% (Burma))	10,101 (0.01% (Burma))	10,101 (0.01% (Burma))	0.00% (Burma)	0.00% (Burma)
Total Arakan	917,159 (0.74% (Burma))	1,705,180 (0.74% (Burma))	2,417,940 (0.74% (Burma))	3,603,281 (0.74% (Burma))	2,686,122** (1.12% per year)	137,621** (1.12% per year)

TABLE P1

	1931	1951	1967	1983	Growth rates (1931-1983)	Growth rates (1983-2010)
Muslims in Burma	588,480 (0.74% (Burma))	742,864 (0.74% (Burma))	1,042,864 (0.74% (Burma))	1,528,205 (0.74% (Burma))	939,725** (1.60% per year)	91,876** (1.60% per year)
Non-Muslims in Burma	7,117,960 (1.1% (Burma))	14,623,760 (1.1% (Burma))	20,750,760 (1.1% (Burma))	30,750,760 (1.1% (Burma))	23,633,100** (1.12% per year)	45,745** (1.12% per year)
Non-Muslims in Burma except Buddhist	7,117,960 (1.1% (Burma))	14,623,760 (1.1% (Burma))	20,750,760 (1.1% (Burma))	30,750,760 (1.1% (Burma))	23,633,100** (1.12% per year)	45,745** (1.12% per year)
Buddhists in Burma	101,101 (0.4% (Burma))	1,421,714 (0.7% (Burma))	2,075,076 (0.7% (Burma))	3,075,076 (0.7% (Burma))	2,363,310** (1.12% per year)	45,745** (1.12% per year)
Christians in Burma	1,868 (0.01% (Burma))	1,868 (0.01% (Burma))	1,868 (0.01% (Burma))	1,868 (0.01% (Burma))	0.00% (Burma)	0.00% (Burma)
Animists in Burma	10,101 (0.01% (Burma))	10,101 (0.01% (Burma))	10,101 (0.01% (Burma))	10,101 (0.01% (Burma))	0.00% (Burma)	0.00% (Burma)
Christians & animists in Burma	12,969 (0.02% (Burma))	12,969 (0.02% (Burma))	12,969 (0.02% (Burma))	12,969 (0.02% (Burma))	0.00% (Burma)	0.00% (Burma)
Hindus in Burma	10,101 (0.01% (Burma))	10,101 (0.01% (Burma))	10,101 (0.01% (Burma))	10,101 (0.01% (Burma))	0.00% (Burma)	0.00% (Burma)
Total Burma	14,440,440 (1.1% (Burma))	17,145,180 (1.1% (Burma))	22,825,940 (1.1% (Burma))	33,803,281 (1.1% (Burma))	19,365,122** (1.12% per year)	137,621** (1.12% per year)

TABLE P2

<p>1. See Census of Burma, 1931, pp. 238-239. Most of those (197,000) were classified as "Indian Muslims", see ibid., p. 276. The rest were classified as "Indian Mohammedans" (26,415), "Indian Moslems" (2,075), under the rubric "Indian Moslems", "16, "Indian Moslems" (20), and other "Indian Moslems", see ibid., p. 281, 282. We don't include the Arakan 101,101, which were part of Arakan under the British, and part of the Special Frontier Areas after independence. The 1931 census is available online: http://www.census.gov/burma/1931/1931.htm</p> <p>2. For data on Arakan, see 1983 Population Census, Rangoon State, p. 38. Available online: http://www.census.gov/burma/1983/1983.htm</p> <p>3. See Census of Burma, 1951, pp. 238-239. Most of those (197,000) were classified as "Indian Muslims", see ibid., p. 276. The rest were classified as "Indian Mohammedans" (26,415), "Indian Moslems" (2,075), under the rubric "Indian Moslems", "16, "Indian Moslems" (20), and other "Indian Moslems", see ibid., p. 281, 282. We don't include the Arakan 101,101, which were part of Arakan under the British, and part of the Special Frontier Areas after independence. The 1951 census is available online: http://www.census.gov/burma/1951/1951.htm</p> <p>4. For data on Arakan, see 1967 Population Census, Rangoon State, p. 38. Available online: http://www.census.gov/burma/1967/1967.htm</p> <p>5. According to the government, 10,101,000 people were enumerated in the census. 1,000,000 were not enumerated. An estimate 1,000,000 were not enumerated because they were living in Arakan who refused to be classified as Burghis. 80,000 were not enumerated because they were classified as "Burghis". The 1983 census is available online: http://www.census.gov/burma/1983/1983.htm</p> <p>6. The figure indicates an estimate of 1,000,000 non-enumerated people. The non-enumerated were living in Arakan who refused to be classified as "Burghis". It is impossible to know exactly how many were in Arakan, as the government has not released the classification by ethnicity. By comparing the figures of regions who have 101,101 Muslims between 1931 and 1951 with 100,000 figures of population in Arakan by township in 1951 to which I have had access, I think 1,000,000 is not too far from the mark, even if it is possibly a slight overestimation.</p> <p>7. Mostly due to conversions, particularly of animists.</p> <p>8. Same.</p> <p>9. Possibly mostly due to conversions to other religions, given that conversions to Christianity were not numerous, possibly Buddhism and Islam through intermarriage.</p> <p>10. Same.</p> <p>11. Only conversions to Buddhism and Islam, possibly immigration too.</p> <p>12. Due to the Indian exodus in World War II and conversions to other faiths, some conversions to other religions cannot be discounted.</p> <p>13. There were a census carried out in 1941, but no complete results for ethnicity or religion were released as a result of World War II. Only the total population is given. Total population appears in 1983 Population Census, p. 1. Figure for Arakan can be found in Peter Wintner, The British Administration of North Burma, 1947-1948, available online: http://www.burmesecolonies.com/1947-1948/1947-1948.htm</p> <p>14. Growth has been calculated from the total population of the British provinces of Arakan (2,000,535), which included Arakan 101,101, an area that was included from Arakan after independence. As we had information on how many people lived in that area in 1931, comparisons between results in the 1931 census and 1951 census for Arakan have not been made.</p> <p>15. See 1983 Population Census, Rangoon State, p. 38.</p> <p>16. Figure does not include non-enumerated population in Rangoon and Karen States. It's likely that many of them are Christian.</p> <p>17. This extremely high growth of the Christian population is mostly due to the high rates of conversion during the period.</p> <p>18. A great part of it is probably due to conversions.</p> <p>19. Most animists converted to Christianity during the period.</p> <p>20. Same as this period.</p> <p>21. The Indian exodus in World War II and the wave of nationalisations in the Indian account for most of the shrinkage of Hindu population.</p> <p>22. See 1983 Population Census, Rangoon, p. 38.</p> <p>23. See 1983 Population Census, Rangoon, p. 38.</p> <p>24. Including non-enumerated population.</p>
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TABLE NOTES

As we can see in the table comparing different censuses [[view PDF here](#)], the demographic growth of the Muslim population between 1931 and 1983 in Arakan (128%) was higher than the growth among non-Muslims (99.9%) or any religious group in the state, albeit lower than the total for Burma (141%) and not much higher than that of the Buddhist population (119%), so it can't be regarded as inordinately high.

It is interesting to note that the Christian population in Arakan grew much than any other (by 338%), albeit from an extremely low base of 1,868 Christians in 1931. Like in the rest of the country, such a high Christian growth rate is due to conversions, mostly of animists (the majority of them in Arakan would have been ethnic Chin, Mro or Daingnet). But the *combined* Christian and Animist population declined enormously in the state (with a negative growth of 59.2%), against the tendency in the rest of the country (in which it grew by a 98.7%). The key factor in such a decline, apart from emigration, must be conversions of animists to Islam and Buddhism, probably through intermarriage.

The Hindu population in Arakan, as well as in Burma as a whole, also declined during the period 1931-1983. That was mostly due to the Indian exodus during World War II, when up to half a million Indians fled Burma, and during the nationalisations of Ne Win during the mid-1960s, when around 300,000 left. Some conversions to other faiths cannot be discounted.

To play the devil's advocate, in ascertaining how many Muslims in Arakan may be "illegal" we can make a projection of growth for the Muslim population according to the growth of the non-Muslim population in the state except the Hindu population (as it shrank considerably due to specific factors) That rate was 104.5%. If such had been the growth rate among the Muslim population, there would have been 522,213 Muslims in 1983 instead of 582,984. Therefore, to continue the thought experiment, we could say that by 1983 there was a "surplus population" of 60,771 Muslims, amounting to 10.4% of the total Muslim population.

But that doesn't mean that 10.4% of Muslims enumerated in Arakan in 1983 were "illegal immigrants". Many surely migrated to the state in the ten years between 1931 and the beginning of World War II, when it was still legal to do so. During that period, it was easier than after independence, as there was not an international border, however poorly guarded, as well as much less risky, given that there was no serious conflict in Arakan during those years.

We have no detailed records of Arakan, or Burma for that matter, from the census conducted in 1941, as these were lost as a consequence of the war, but according to the available data, growth in Arakan was higher than in Burma as a whole between 1931 and 1941. Some of it would have been due to immigration from the Chittagong region in Bengal, following a decades-long pattern. Also, we lack information about birth rates among the Muslim and Buddhist communities of Arakan during the period between the 1931 and 1983 censuses, but a higher birth rate among Muslims is very likely. [According to the 1983 Census](#), Arakan State had the highest gross fertility rate in the whole of Burma, with an average of 3.2 children per woman. In all likelihood, the Muslim Rohingya community contributed to that.

Another likely factor contributing to the difference in growth rates between Muslims and non-Muslims in Arakan is a possibly slightly higher rate of internal [migration from Arakan to more economically promising urban centres](#) like Rangoon among the Rakhine Buddhist community. Internal migration was often more difficult for Muslims, as immigration authorities had [imposed some restrictions of movement](#) on Muslims in Northern Arakan as early as the 1950s. Conversions to Islam through intermarriage cannot be ruled out either, as we have already mentioned.

Given the available data, we can't deny forcefully that there was some "illegal immigration" from Chittagong to Arakan after independence, but we can conclude that it would have been of a much smaller order of magnitude than that claimed by government sources and Rakhine and Burmese nationalists. Taking all the mentioned factors that would account for a higher growth among Muslims, I would venture that post-independence immigrants couldn't have surpassed 5% of the total Muslim population of Arakan in 1983, or 1.4% of the total there (that is, around 30,000 people), and it is possible that the real figure was lower.

So, to claim that half a million, or even a quarter of a million, of "Bengali illegal immigrants" entered Arakan after independence is a ludicrous exaggeration that contradicts any serious reading of the available data. In any case, as we have seen, there was much movement back and forth across the border during the period. For instance, thousands of Muslims fled to East Pakistan in the late 1940s and early 1950s as a consequence of the conflict between the *mujahideens* and the Burmese Army, and some "illegal immigrants" could be people among them—that is, simply returning to their lands they had occupied before independence. It is also important to remember that Operation Naga Min in 1978, when up to 200,000 Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh from brutal operations by the Army in search of "illegal immigrants", did little to alter the demographic balance in the region, as the overwhelming majority of refugees returned after one year. And, whatever illegal immigration there may have been until that point, it was reduced significantly as a result of a more tight control of the border imposed from then on.



MAUNGDAW TOWNSHIP, 2016 (PHOTO: AUTHOR)

Effects of migration

The Burmese government started in earnest its persecution of the Rohingya population around 1978, beginning to subject them to an increasingly harsh regime of apartheid which has included an almost complete denial of access to education and healthcare services, unprecedented restrictions in their freedom of movement, even to nearby villages, and sporadic campaigns of violence. As a result, the Rohingya population has been largely confined to Northern Arakan and some pockets in central Arakan. In such circumstances, whatever illegal immigration that occurred since the late 1970s and early 1980s would have been offset by a larger flow of Rohingya fleeing the country.

Many Rohingya have fled poverty and oppression to countries like Bangladesh, Malaysia or Saudi Arabia. At the same time, many Rakhine have migrated to Malaysia or Thailand in search of economic opportunities denied at home. Also, against the idea of recent “illegal immigration” from Bangladesh, all relevant indicators reveal that, as impoverished as Bangladesh is, Burma is even more impoverished, and [the gap widens in relation to Arakan](#), the second poorest state in the country. It would make very little sense for a Bangladeshi to seek a better life in a more impoverished region where he or she would be severely oppressed.

But the most astonishing finding in reading the census data is that growth rates among the Rohingya population in Arakan (whose demographic evolution, again, we are analysing through the category of Muslims in the censuses) are higher after policies of apartheid began to be imposed on them. If the growth rate between 1931 and 1983 was 2.47% per year, then between 1983 and 2014 it was 2.96% per year—higher than Myanmar as a whole (1.48% per year), Arakan (1.80% per year) or the Rakhine Buddhist population in that state (1.34% per year). The 2014 census revealed that the Myanmar population [had grown much less than expected since 1983](#), due to lower birth rates and emigration to neighbouring countries. The Rohingya seem to be an exception. Why?

Part of the explanation is to be found in the containment of the Rohingya in certain areas during the period. Most Rohingya are blocked from migrating to other regions in Burma. Meanwhile the Rakhine enjoy freedom of movement, and many have moved to Rangoon and other places, including the Jade mines in Hpakant, in Kachin State, searching for more promising economic opportunities. As the results of the classification by ethnicity in 2014 census have not been released, it is impossible to know the exact number of Rakhine internal migrants living elsewhere in Burma. [But it is probably high](#), and it would narrow the difference in growth rates between both communities. Nevertheless, such narrowing probably wouldn't be very significant, as the growth rate of the Rohingya population is still much higher than the national rate.

Some Rakhine ultranationalists accuse the Rohingya of waging a “demographic jihad”, by begetting an inordinate number of children to overwhelm the Rakhine population and eventually take over the state. The idea that hundreds of thousands of people have decided to take part in a well-coordinated conspiracy to bear as many children as possible is absurd and doesn't need any further analysis. But public officials have constantly exaggerated differences in demographic growths among the Rohingya, thus implicitly contributing to fuel the narrative of a “demographic jihad”.

For instance, in 2013 state officials gave the order to Muslims in Maungdaw and Buthidaung to not have more than two children. “The population growth of Rohingya Muslims is ten times higher than that of the Rakhine Buddhists. Overpopulation is one of the causes of tensions,” Win Myaing, Arakan State spokesman, [said at the time](#). It was, of course, an exaggeration; the growth was about two times higher. And arguably it was not so much demographic growth among Rohingya what was causing tensions, but the constant repetition by local media, state officials, politicians of all stripes and Buddhist monks that such growth was dangerous. The higher growth among Rohingya is not to be explained as some nefarious Islamist conspiracy or as a consequence of massive waves of “illegal immigrants” from Bangladesh. The most probable cause lies precisely in the conditions imposed on them by the government. It has often been shown that [factors like poverty or lack of education](#) are strongly related to high birth rates. Northern Arakan is one of the poorest regions of Burma and the Rohingya community have much less access to education than any other in the state and, probably, most of Myanmar as a whole. The grinding poverty in the Rohingya-majority areas, as well

as the lack of education, the complete isolation from the rest of the country and the world, have arguably contributed to the high birth rates that the government decided to curtail. The irony is that the very same policies carried out over four decades by the Burmese state in its attempts to contain the Rohingya population have contributed to its demographic explosion.

A dangerous delusion

In November 2015, Aung San Suu Kyi, asked about the accusations of genocide against the Rohingya during a press conference, said: “I think it’s very important that we should not exaggerate the problems in this country.” But that’s what most governments in Burma, including hers, have been doing regarding massive waves of “Bengali illegal immigrants” that only exist in their imagination, to exaggerate what in reality was a very small problem. This is not a phenomenon unique to Burma. Human beings everywhere tend to exaggerate the numbers of people they perceive as threatening for one reason or another. For instance, research conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in several European countries revealed in 2011 that their citizens believed that there were as many as three times the numbers of immigrants living in their countries that was actually the case.



REFUGEE CAMP, BANGLADESH, 2017 (PHOTO: AUTHOR)

ENDNOTES:

1 See *Census of Burma, 1931*, pp. 238-9. Most of them (197,560) were classified as “Indian Muslims”, see *ibid.*, p. 274. The rest were classified as “Arakan Mahomedan” (51,615), “Arakan Kaman” (2,677), under the rubric “Indo-Burman races”, 76 “Arakanese Muslim” (76), and other “Indo-Burman races”, see *ibid.*, p. 242, 245. We don’t include the Arakan Hill Tracts, which were part of Arakan under the British, and part of Chin Special Division/State after independence. The 1931 census is available online: <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/1931-Census-Tables.pdf>

2 For data on Arakan, see *1983 Population Census: Rakhine State*, p. 16. Available online: http://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/1983_Rakhine_Census_Report_.pdf For data on the whole of Burma, see *1983 Population Census: Burma*, p. 22. Available online: <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/1983-Census-Book.pdf>

3 According to the government, 50,279,900 people were enumerated in the census. 1,206,353 were not enumerated. An estimate 1,090,000 were not enumerated because they were Rohingya in Arakan who refused to be classified as Bengali. 46,600 were not enumerated in territories in conflict in Kachin State where the census was not conducted. Same goes for 69,753 in Karen State.

4 This figure includes an estimation of 1,090,000 non-enumerated people. The non-enumerated were Rohingya who refused to be classified as “Bengalis”. 28,731 Muslims were enumerated, most were probably Kaman, and some may be Rohingya who accepted to be classified to be enumerated as “Bengalis”; it is impossible to know exactly how many were Kaman, as the government has not released the classification by ethnicity. By comparing UN figures of refugees who have left Burma between 2012 and late 2017 with GAD figures of population in Arakan by township in June 2017 to which I have had access, I think 1,090,00 Rohingya is not too off the mark, albeit it’s possibly a slight underestimation.

5 Mostly due to conversions, particularly of animists.

6 Idem.

7 Probably mostly due to conversions to other religions, given that conversions to Christianity were not numerous, probably Buddhism and Islam through inter-marriage.

8 Idem.

9 Likely conversions to Buddhism and Islam, possibly emigration too.

10 Due to the Indian exoduses in World War II and nationalization in the sixties. Some conversions to other religions cannot be discounted.

11 There was a census carried out in 1941, but complete results by ethnicity or religion were lost as a result of World War II. Only the total population is preserved. Total population appears on 1983 Population Census, p. 1. Figure for Arakan can be found in Peter Murray, *The British Military Administration of North Arakan: 1942-1943*. Available online: http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/NM-1943-The_British_Military_Administration_of_North_Arakan-en.pdf

12 Growth has been calculated from the total population of the British province of Arakan (1,008,535), which included Arakan Hill Tracts, an area that was excluded from Arakan after independence. As we lack information on how many people lived in that area in 1941, comparisons between results in the 1941 census and 1973 census for Arakan have not been made.

13 See *1983 Population Census: Rakhine State*, p. 9.

14 Figure does not include non-enumerated population in Kachin and Karen States. It’s likely that many of them are Christian.

15 This extremely high growth of the Christian population is mostly due to the high rates of conversion during the period.

16 A great part of it probably due to conversions.

17 Most animist converted to Christianity during the period.

18 Idem in this period.

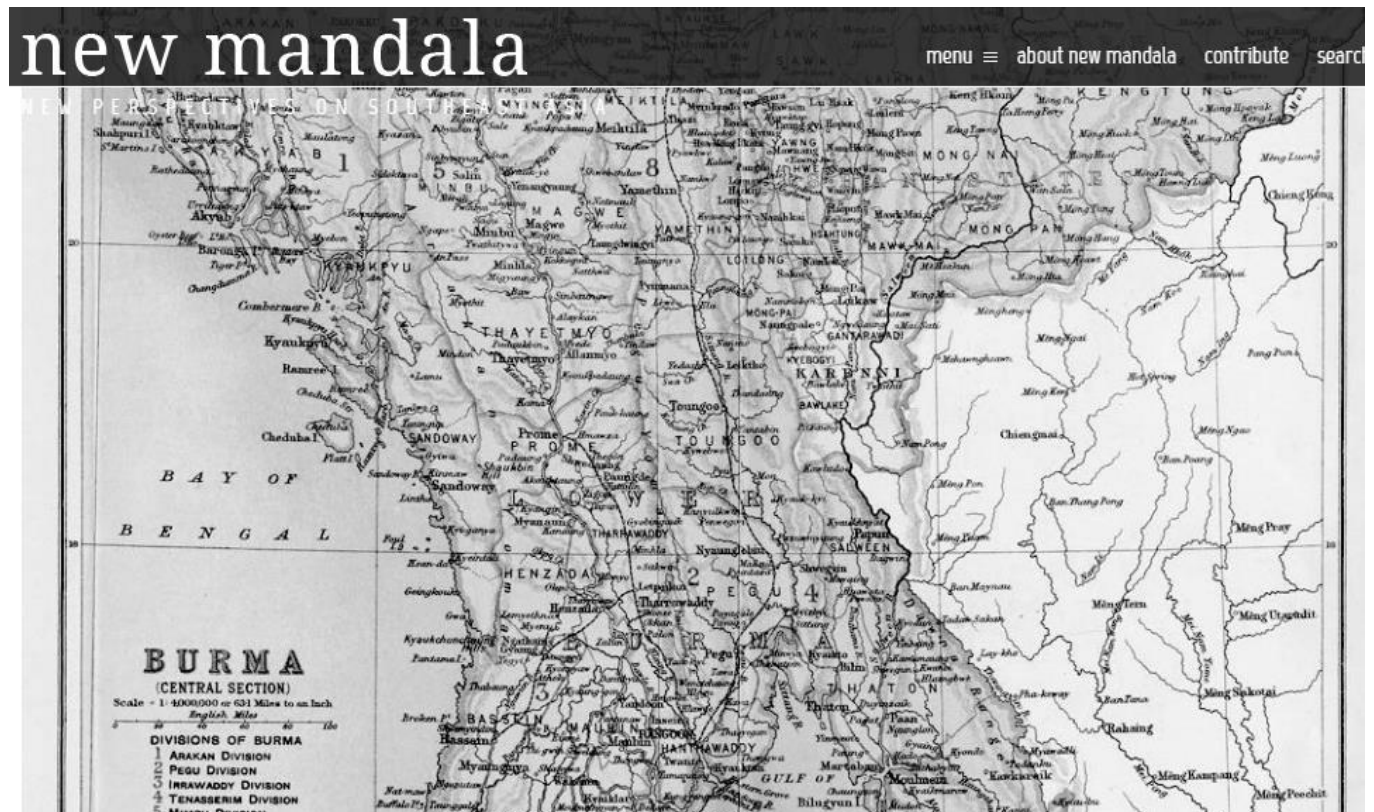
19 The Indian exodus in World War II and the wave of nationalizations in the sixties account for most of the shrinkage of Hindu population.

20 See *1983 Population Census: Burma*, p. 1.

21 See *1983 Population Census: Burma*, p. 14.

22 Including non-enumerated population.

Source: <https://www.newmandala.org/illegal-migration-arakan-myths-numbers/>



Rohingya identity and the limits to history



JONATHAN SAHA - 17 SEP, 2017

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Public discussions around Rohingya people currently fleeing violence in Rakhine state, Myanmar, have often involved arguments about history. While critical historical analysis is useful in offering insights into

conflicts, History—if treated as a single, knowable past—is not. This is especially true when dealing with ethnicity. Whatever the past was, no amount of historical research can justify the current violence against Rohingya people.

The debate around Rohingya ethnicity lacks awareness of wider historiography (the history of historical research). On the one side, those denying that this is ethnic cleansing argue that there is no such thing as a Rohingya ethnic group. It is claimed that these people are actually Bengali Muslim migrants. The writings of historians such as Jacques Leider have been used, by some, to support this position. He argues that the use of the term Rohingya to connote this Muslim population, although noted by eighteenth-century European travelers, is a modern one. For him, Rohingya is primarily a political identity. On the other side, Rohingya activists have resisted this characterisation. They have countered that there is evidence of Muslims living in the Rakhine region for centuries, and that these groups have periodically been called Rohingya.

Writing in *The Diplomat* last year, one commentator attempted to disentangle these debates by arguing that “the Rohingya are *not an ethnic, but rather a political construction*. [emphasis in original]”. This is wrong. Not only wrong in the sense of it being inaccurate, but wrong in two other ways: 1) in that it relies on a false division between the categories “political” and “ethnic”, and then treats the two as if they are mutually exclusive; and 2) in that it assumes that we can definitively know people’s ethnic identification in the past.

Starting with 1). There is no ethnic identity that is not also, in part, a political construction. Ethnicity has proved a difficult object for historians to pin down. Its definitions and modes of expression have changed over time. As a result, surviving evidence of ethnic identification is often hugely varied across time. However, historians working on a range of different time periods argue that ethnic identification is intimately connected to political arrangements. Victor Lieberman, global historian of the medieval and early modern periods, argued, specifically on the case of Myanmar, that developments in state structures were intertwined with shifts in ethnic identification. As polities became more bureaucratic, ruling ethnic identities hardened. Historians of the nineteenth century, such as David Scott, [have argued that colonial regimes fostered a further hardening of ethnic identity](#), as it became central to how groups interacted with the state. Anti-colonial nationalism and decolonisation only made the political import of ethnicity greater, [as work on nationalism has shown](#). It is not only Rohingya ethnicity that is a political construct, so too is Bengali, so too is Rakhine, so too is Bama. What is more, the use of these different political constructions of ethnicity shape how people self-identify.

2) Just because there is limited historical evidence of Muslims in this corner of the Bay of Bengal referring to themselves as Rohingya, this does not mean that there was not a form of ethnic identification that could be traced back to earlier periods if (and it’s a big if) we could know how this population self-identified. But can we know this? What records would have been left that could evidence how these populations would have seen themselves? We might even ask, if such records were produced, would we be able to fully understand

them on the same terms as those past peoples? The terms used or adopted by ethnic groups are historically fluid. Mandy Sadan's amazing book on the Kachin captures this process of “being and becoming” in detail.

Since we can not know, or necessarily entirely understand, ethnic self-identification in the past, its recorded absence is no basis for denying current ethnic self-identifications. This is just as true for Burmese nationality as it is for Rohingya ethnicity. As historians such as Alicia Turner have shown, nationalism as a primary identity is a modern phenomena in Myanmar (as I would argue it is globally), one that has emerged partly out of anti-colonial politics. Just because there was no Burmese nation in the seventeenth century—at least not as we would understand the term today—does not mean that contemporary Burmese people are not really Burmese.

History has limits. We can only know so much. It can only answer certain questions. The discussion around the history of the Rohingya, at its worst, deflects attention away from the problem of defining citizenship through ethnic indigeneity. Such a definition is premised on bad history and ethnic chauvinism, and it is a problem across the world. More urgently, right now in Myanmar it is contributing to an ongoing ethnic cleansing of a people who *today* identify as Rohingya, irrespective of what we may or may not know of the past.

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This post originally appeared at his personal research blog, [Colonizing Animals](https://colonizinganimals.blog)

[https://colonizinganimals.blog/2017/09/15/the-limits-to-history/](https://colonizinganimals.blog/2017/09/15/the-limits-to-history/Race-and-Ethnicity,Ramblings%3AThe-Limits-to-History)
Race and Ethnicity, Ramblings : The Limits to History



Posted by [JONATHANSAHA](https://twitter.com/Jonathan_Saha) on [SEPTEMBER 15, 2017](https://colonizinganimals.blog/2017/09/15/the-limits-to-history/)

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<https://thediplomat.com/2016/03/the-truth-about-myanmars-rohingya-issue/>

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The Truth About Myanmar's Rohingya Issue

It is much more complex than is often portrayed by some.



By Jasmine Chia
March 05, 2016



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This article is part of “Southeast Asia: Refugees in Crisis,” an ongoing series by The Diplomat featuring exclusive articles from scholars and practitioners tackling Southeast Asia’s ongoing refugee crisis. All articles in the series can be found [here](#).

After over 50 years of military rule, Myanmar is finally making the long-awaited transition to elected government. Its second liberation is brought about by Aung San Suu Kyi, the head of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) and the daughter of Aung San, the man who is known for engineering Myanmar’s first liberation from the British. Yet, as foreign media converges on the nation, coverage in recent months has been focused on one issue: the Rohingya.

Nicholas Kristoff’s [recent article](#) in *The New York Times* begins: “Soon the world will witness a remarkable sight: a beloved Nobel Peace Prize winner presiding over 21st-century concentration camps.” Tens of thousands of Rohingya have been forcibly confined in deplorable conditions in Sittwe, whilst [there is evidence](#) that the ethnic cleansing perpetrated under the military government amounts to genocide. In May 2015, stranded Rohingya off the coast of Thailand [elicited humanitarian outrage](#) from the international community. Ever since, foreign commentators have called for an end to what appears to be government inaction or lack of accountability for extreme human rights abuses in Rakhine state.

But international attention directed at the issue – meant to hold the government accountable – may have in fact inadvertently played a role in exacerbating tensions between the Rohingya and the Rakhine Burmese. Increasing resentment is bred within the Rakhine Buddhist community, who believe the situation has been mischaracterized.

In most cases the situation *has* been mischaracterized. Rakhine history expert Jacques P. Leider may have put it best in his analysis [Rohingya: The Name, The Movement, The Quest for Identity](#). “By narrowing the debate on the Rohingyas to the legal and humanitarian aspects, editorialists around the world have taken an easy approach towards a complicated issue... where issues like ethnicity, history, and cultural identity are key ingredients of legitimacy,” Leider states.

In even a cursory survey of Rohingya history, it is clear that the Rohingya are *not an ethnic, but rather a political construction*. There is evidence that Muslims have been living in Rakhine state (at the time under the Arakan kingdom) since the 9th century, but a significant number of Muslims from across the bay of Bengal (at the time a part of India, now Bangladesh) immigrated to British Burma with the colonialists in the 20th century. They are, as defined by Benedict Rogers (himself a prominent critic of the military regime’s persecution), “Muslims of Bengali ethnic origin.” The group referred to as “Rohingya” by contemporary Rohingya scholars (and most of the international community) today actually display huge diversity of ethnic origins and social backgrounds, and, as Leider argues, the existence of a “single identity” is difficult to pinpoint.

This is not to deny the Rohingya’s claims for citizenship. This is, however, to point out that claims to legitimacy are much more complicated than is currently understood. As one diplomat told me: “On all issues, the people of Myanmar are with you. But on the Rohingya issue, the people will never be with you.” What is at the heart of this huge gap between perspectives of the majority of Burmese and the

international community, and how does this inform making progress on alleviating the genuine humanitarian crisis facing the Rakhine Muslims in Sittwe?

At stake are issues of legitimacy. The international community's use of the term 'Rohingya' validates the narrative of essentializing a Muslim identity in Rakhine state. In the most conservative terms, we can say that scholars of Rohingya history have not understood this to conclusively be the case. Yet, the lack of nuance with which the international community has approached *very important* issues of legitimacy has contributed to a sense that Rakhine Buddhists are misunderstood, and besieged. On the other side of the political tension in Rakhine state, [as shown by Schissler, Walton and Phyu Thi's "listening project" in this series](#), are Rakhine Buddhists who are genuinely afraid of a (false) Muslim takeover.

Myanmar remains a rumor driven society. In Kyaw Yin Hlaing's analysis of Buddhist misapprehension of Muslim Burmese, surveys were conducted in seven cities in Myanmar, with 500 participants in total. It is clear that anti-Muslim propaganda has become part of regular nationalist discourse. Of the survey respondents, 85 percent cited fear of Muslims turning the country Islamic as the main reason for their dislike of Muslims. In Rakhine state, this discourse is repeated and amplified due to the outbreaks of communal violence.

Yet, in [New York Times coverage of the tensions between Muslim and Buddhist Burmese](#), very few Rakhine Buddhist voices were heard. When asked why, Kristoff replies, "The problem is the trade-offs with length... we didn't want to exceed 10 minutes for fear of losing viewers." This careless portrayal of the Rohingya's claims to legitimacy is not just a matter of academic nit-picking. It has real implications for humanitarian aid.

Just after the May 2015 boat crisis, there were [large protests in Sittwe](#) – largely ignored by the rest of the world – by Rakhine Buddhists protesting misrepresentation of the situation in Sittwe, with protestors carrying signs like "No UN, No INGOs [international non-governmental organizations]." Protests like this ([of which](#) there have been many) are aimed at the international community, from media to INGOs, and often lead to increased violence in their aftermath. This makes it more difficult for these INGOs, as well as local NGOs, to deliver humanitarian aid to those in Rakhine state.

For Aung San Suu Kyi to retain legitimacy where it matters most, it is understandable that she is not outspoken on an issue that could spark even more violence. As mentioned before, this is not simply a case of the military government leaving Rakhine state. The NLD must aim to resolve this crisis peacefully, which means cooperating not only with Rakhine Muslims but also Rakhine Buddhists.

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For a Buddhist, Burman-majority nation like Myanmar, it is difficult for Aung San Suu Kyi to portray herself as a neutral arbiter. Especially in Rakhine state, where most official positions are held by Rakhine Buddhists, it is important that she be seen as someone understanding to their plight – and therefore someone who can negotiate with them to potentially seek a humanitarian alternative to the

concentration camps of Sittwe. As Aung San Suu Kyi says herself, “If you want to bring an end to long-standing conflict, you have to be prepared to compromise.”

If she loses legitimacy with them, not only will future negotiations on the Rohingya be closed off to her and the NLD, but the peace process itself will come under fire for her seeming partisanship, and with it, the entire process of building Myanmar’s democracy. What happens in Rakhine state will be watched by the rest of the world, but it will be felt most acutely in Myanmar.

It is important that the international community tread more carefully in their currently unbridled calls for awareness about the Rohingya issue. The Myanmar people are not unaware that the Muslim minority of Rakhine state are being mistreated. Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, deep in negotiations on the peace process, are being constantly reminded of the importance of granting appropriate rights to ethnic nationalities in Myanmar. Myanmar will not be built in a day, nor will the camps in Sittwe be torn down in a day. The fact that lives are on the line makes it all the more important that we channel efforts intelligently.

Jasmine Chia is a student at Harvard University and one of the organizers of the Refugees in Crisis series. This article was written following research recently conducted in Yangon and Rakhine State.

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