



How Myanmar's 'national races' trumped citizenship



NICK CHEESMAN - 01 MAY, 2017

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How Myanmar's Courts Make Law and Order' is published by Cambridge University Press (2015).

'National races' or *taingyintha* is among the pre-eminent political ideas in Myanmar today. It has animated brutal conflict over who or what is 'Rohingya' as well as communal violence that human rights researchers and advocates have variously characterised as a crime against humanity, ethnic cleansing and genocide. Although more scholars are struggling to make sense of how and why the 'Rohingya problem' appears to be so intractable, little explicit attention has been paid to how the conflict over Rohingya identity specifically, and contemporary politics in Myanmar generally, is contingent on the idea of national races. How did the idea of *taingyintha* become politically salient? How has it grown, developed and changed?

Taingyintha is a term that, like so many other politically salient modern terms in Southeast Asia, has a history that is neither long nor glorious. It was not a politically significant term in anti-colonial politics. Although at the end of the Second World War it featured in negotiations on the draft constitution, it failed to get a special mention in the 1947 Constitution on the matter of minority rights, succeeding only in getting two modest references in the chapter on citizenship, where in the English version it is translated as 'indigenous races'. Nor is it found in the 1947 Panglong Agreement, which is commemorated annually on Union Day and mythologised as laying the foundations for *taingyintha* unity. It remained on the periphery of political language over the next decade.

But on February 12, 1964, a new day dawned for *taingyintha*, one in which it would go from being a term of limited political salience to the paradigm for military-dominated statehood. General Ne Win, who had seized power for a second time two years earlier, now grasped the idea of *taingyintha* and wielded it with hitherto unprecedented enthusiasm. Lamenting the mistrust between *taingyintha* and the failure to achieve reconciliation some 16 years after independence, he used the Union Day address to urge over and over that the national races come together in unity and amity for the good of the nation. He closed the speech by announcing that his government would work systematically to bring economic and social equality to the national races; and, would help them in projects for support of their literature, languages and cultures. Within the same year, the government had set up an Academy for the Development of National Races. The following year, staff from universities around the country began state-directed fieldwork to document and publish authoritative studies on national races' culture. *Taingyintha* hereafter obtained a hitherto unprecedented place in state lexicon, and in the state-building programme and its rituals of national unity. By the 1980s

it was orthodoxy that political texts at some point refer to national races' eternal solidarity, their historical fraternity and their intentionality in working together for a new socialist economic order.

Although that economic order collapsed under the weight of nationwide protests in 1988, the national-race idea not only prevailed, but also emerged stronger than ever. The newly comprised military junta that seized control of government announced *ad nauseam* that 'non-disintegration of national [*taingyintha*] solidarity' was the second of its three main causes. For want of any other unifying motif, national races were invoked on every broadcast and publication, and at every major event. The following year, the junta picked up on the institutional work of its predecessor to establish a new Central Committee for the Development of Border Areas and National Races, which later became a government ministry concerned with the material development of frontier regions.

If the 1940s marked the early emergence of *taingyintha* as a term of state, and the 1960s its institutionalisation, then the 1990s witnessed its renaissance, yet with at least two distinct meanings at play. In one, national races comprised the members of a single political community, united in struggle against common enemies inside and out. In the other, national races were a sub-section of that community: people living far away who had failed to progress due to civil war and ignorance. Between them, these usages worked to justify relentless military campaigns against armed groups operating under the banners of multitudinous national races. The state's guiding hand was required to draw all *taingyintha* together into the natural condition of unity from which they had been driven by historical circumstances.

These messages were conflated with a third message, via the project Gustaaf Houtman described as the 'Myanmafication' of the state in which 'Burma' became 'Myanmar' on the grounds that whereas the former term and its analogues refer to the Burman, the latter supposedly denotes the inclusion of all *taingyintha* in the Union. Children in schools across the country now sang of Myanmar to signify *taingyintha*, yet the books from which they learned, 'Myanmar' readers, did not include the languages and alphabets of all *taingyintha*, or even the biggest linguistic groups; merely those of the dominant group. 'Myanmar', while signifying national races, above all was to signify the pre-eminent linguistic and cultural group, the Burmans. To speak and read the language of the Burman, to be civilised and cultured like a Burman was nothing other than to belong to Myanmar, which is to say, to be *taingyintha*.

Today, the 2008 Constitution cements national races in the country's formal institutions, addressing the political community not as an aggregation of individual 'citizens' but as one of aggregated 'national races'. From its opening words, it establishes a conceptual relation between national races and citizenship, such that the former is irreducible to the latter. Lexically and legally, national races trump citizenship. To talk of the political community 'Myanmar' is to talk of *taingyintha*, and to talk to that community is above all to address its members not as citizens but as national races.

Because *taingyintha* identity had trumped citizenship, the place of people belonging to non-national-race groups is precarious. Those people excluded juridically from Myanmar but living within its territory now have to find a way back in to the political community. And the only way available to them politically, as a collectivity, is to submit to the politics of domination inherent in the national races project, and insist that they too are *taingyintha*, which is exactly what Rohingya advocates have done.

Rohingya advocates make their claim to be *taingyintha* in two parts: one evidentiary, establishing the existence of 'Rohingya', the other typological, situating Rohingya as a category in the national races schema. The first part, aimed at demarcating the Rohingya as a distinctive linguistic and cultural group deserving of a category in the schema, emerged out of political and ideological struggle in the same period that *taingyintha* grew in stature, from the 1930s or 1940s onwards. The second part of the claim requires advocates of Rohingya claims to be *taingyintha* to work inferentially and establish their credentials consistent with the conditions that attach to being members of the national races in official histories published since. To write history for this purpose of establishing the existence of Rohingya is to rely upon the official history-writing project and the claim that 'national races' also exist. It is to engage in a box-ticking exercise: national races have lived in the territory now designated Myanmar anterior to 1823, and so have Rohingya; national races lived together amicably prior to the British invaders' arrival, and so did Rohingya; national races fought together against the imperialists from the time of their incursion until the time of national independence, and Rohingya also laid down their lives for this cause.

Thus, the alternative history that Rohingya advocates articulate does not question the premises of the national-race idea. Instead, Rohingya advocates also must reproduce the idea in order to be heard. They have little choice but to give assurances that if included in the schema of national races they will be demonstrably good citizens by showing their commitment to the idea of *taingyintha*. Because people in a tenuous position have more to gain from showing their commitment to a project for political

domination than people who are secure in their membership, ironically they aim to show that given the chance they could be the more vociferous defenders of national-race identity than anyone.

Under these circumstances, a special responsibility falls to people who are not beholden to the politics of *taingyintha*, not subject to its practices of elision and domination, to ask questions of it, to interrogate it. This responsibility extends beyond pointing to specific arrangements to deny Rohingya a place in the political community, and rightly condemning the gross and manifest abuses of human rights that people who identify or are identified as Rohingya suffer. It also extends to recognising and explaining how ultimately Myanmar's problem is not a 'Rohingya problem' but a national-races problem: how the idea of *taingyintha* itself is the problem.

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Source: <https://www.newmandala.org/myanmars-national-races-trumped-citizenship/>



10 RESPONSES

1. [Kirt Mausert](#) 1 MAY 2017 AT 2:02 PM

Excellent analysis, but rather over generalizes "Rohingya advocates" - many are acutely aware that the notion of taingyintha is the root of the problem, and their advocacy reflects that; but, yes, some do also recapitulate the very terms of this deeply problematic (and leaky) notion in their demands for equal treatment qua taingyintha, notably the band of naive fools "leading" HaY/ARSA.



2. [David Feingold](#) 1 MAY 2017 AT 6:11 PM

Nick – Excellent and clear analysis of a murky cultural concept. It is implicated not only in the Rohingya case, but also in the designation and acceptance of "legitimized" ethnic groups and sub-groups. The conflicts over the census show how well that has worked out.



3. [Susanne Kempel](#) 1 MAY 2017 AT 6:33 PM

Any plans to translate the article and the special volume of the journal?



4. [Hrk](#) 2 MAY 2017 AT 7:44 PM

Interesting article. We have to be aware though that the whole idea of races resulted from colonial policy. The colonial administration defined (including legal status) to groups as races. Thus, have those now referred to as Rohingya been mentioned as races or special groups in the colonial census'?

Another question concerns the status of persons with an indian or chinese genealogy. They are certainly citizen, but to what race are they assigned?



5. Burmese citizen [5 MAY 2017 AT 2:32 PM](#)

It's funny to see how Western researchers would love to point finger at Ne Win and the military for all Burma's ills but ignore the elephant in the room: the British colonization. The concept of taingyintha was created due to animosity toward the deep inequality between British-favored races (Indians and Chinese who held vast portions of the country's wealth) and the native population. After independence, most of the businesses were owned either by Indians or the Chinese due to deliberate British policies to exclude Burmans. Ne Win and many nationalists loathed this situation and taingyintha was created as a part of the solution to this problem.

Rohingyas were among the least of Ne Win's concerns in his times for an administration beset with communist and ethnic rebels as well as the Cold War. Myanmarification was seen as an easy solution to the divisions and rebellions left behind by the British. i.e. "Hey, if you belong to an ethnic group or are a Bamar, you belong to the country and stop fighting to build your own."

Talking about colonialism today would invite diehard apologists to argue "Hey, it's 70 years ago, stop blaming us and start building your own country!" Yet nobody would say, "Hey, Holocaust was 70 years ago, and just forget about it and move on." Integration has never been a problem for Chinese and Indians as they can say both groups have been in Myanmar since Anawrahta. It shouldn't be a problem for Rohingyas too if they just mingle themselves as Indians. But the problem begins when you start saying "This is our land. We have been here since the world begins. All Arakanese kings were Muslims." etc. etc.

So, Rohingya issue will never be resolved. Once the Western involvement has begun, there has never been an issue resolved quickly. Two sides will fight on and diverge, with all their name-calling and victim playing. For example, Myanmar democratization, which could have taken place as early as 1991, took additional 20 years under Western "intervention." So keep fighting, while I take a back seat and observe the games being played.

0  0  [REPLY](#)

6. NoAmnesty [8 MAY 2017 AT 10:51 PM](#)

It is telling that virtually all academics, save Leider—and still more journalists—fail to subject the claims of the so-called "Rohingya" to the same level of scrutiny as they do for other groups. Is this because the Rohingya are about as real as the Tasaday? Pitiful how the wholly legitimate grievances of the Rakhine receive almost no attention.

0  0  [REPLY](#)

7. BurmeseDaze [9 MAY 2017 AT 9:36 PM](#)

Echoing the propaganda of the ruinous socialist era (1962-1988) is a cop-out. Uber-nationalist Burmese should confront reality for once – and stop living in the past.

Since independence in 1948, the rustic nationalists never tire of flogging the dead horse of *British imperialism*. And the Indian, Chinese and Karen horses . . .

Although Burmese citizens by birth, the resident Indian and Chinese were discriminated against, even harassed, at every turn. The communities were descendants of early foreign traders who married local women, including Burman, Shan, Mon, Karen . . .

Before the disastrous 1962 military coup, these groups had made a contribution to Burma's economic development out of all proportion to their numbers. And they possessed the potential for even greater contribution, spurred by innovation, enterprise and hard work.

This potential they have not been permitted to realise: in March 1964, the socialist dictatorship under Gen Ne Win confiscated all businesses and trades – Soviet-style.

Soon after, several million Burmese would flee the Burmese Gulag. The 1988 nationwide uprising was about rice, cooking oil and salt. Time to throw away the crutch, Burmese Citizen.

0  0  [REPLY](#)

8. Burmese citizen [17 MAY 2017 AT 1:04 AM](#)

Well, it's not about the West is bad or Ne Win is good. No other force in the past 500 years has ever been more impactful on the world history than the West. If you look at the good sides, you'll say communicable diseases eradicated, development in science, etc. If you look at the bad sides, you'll say disappearance of native populations, colonialism, world wars, arrogance, etc. That aside. What I meant was that in instances like the Rohingya issue, what the West is doing won't lead to the resolution of the conflict.

The critical need lacking here is compassion. Compassion to understand Ne Win in the context of his times. Compassion to understand Rakhine grievances. Compassion to understand Suu Kyi. For the Burmese, compassion to understand the motives of ordinary Rohingyas, and compassion to understand their leaders.

Say for example, the Burmese like to label all Rohingyas as liars because for ordinary Burmese who know soldiers for decades, it's fairly obvious that a lot of allegations have never happened. But if we look from the perspectives of a Rohingya who is unemployed, unwanted, and has no hope in the country, his only chance for a better life is to gain a refugee status in a developed country. Everything becomes justifiable then. In similar circumstances, a lot of Burmese, unemployed and hopeless under sanctions, went to Malaysia and did and said whatever they could to register with UNHCR.

Compassion alone won't lead to resolution but to understanding. From there, we can start asking questions such as, "Are we giving the right incentives that favor resolution, instead of entrenching the status quo? Will our actions lead to an equilibrium condition in which the dominant strategy for all parties involved is to work for resolution? Or do our actions give a lot of benefits to "maintain" the conflict for individual and short-term gains (such as aid, asylums, victim status, political recognition) instead of seeking a resolution and long-term gains (such as economic development, citizenship, and mutual understanding)?



[REPLY](#)

9. John Smith [10 MAY 2017 AT 8:11 PM](#)

The Rohingya are an ethnic minority subject to persecution, crimes against humanity, and even genocide. They have always lived in Rakhine State, indeed all of Arakan's past rulers have been Rohingya. Unless Myanmar ceases its genocide against this nation the International Community will have no choice but to intervene on humanitarian grounds. (doubleplusgoodthink)



[REPLY](#)

10. Hup [11 MARCH 2018 AT 2:20 PM](#)

Hi Nick, very good piece and this "National races' or taingyintha" is the political fault line not just for Rohingya but also for other ethnic minority. State sanctioned and institutionalised national racial line enforced which ethnic minority could be marginalised, ignore and discriminate. If you are not one of the national races, you are alien and unwelcome. As you put it rightly, some one may be a citizen of Myanmar, but it can not be equate with national races. This means that even if Rohingya are a citizen of Myanmar, they will still face substantial discrimination by Burmese majority at every turn, in education, social services, health care and many other state provided services. In 2001, I came down from frontier Chin state to Rangoon. Several of my friends and I caught train on Mandalay to Rangoon and I was taken aback and felt horrible when I saw Burmese public treatment of color in this case Rohingya. They just call them "gala" the term is insulting to me. They are human being. It is the same in Rangoon metropolitan bus rides.

Some Chinese and Indians may hold Myanmar citizenship, but they will always be second class citizen never ever equate to National race. Thank for the article.

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