

## **Rakhine State Conflict Analysis**

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Between independence in 1948 and the coup d'état of 1962 there was a significant Muslim insurgency in Rakhine state, while most Muslims failed to achieve citizenship. During military rule force was used to contain the ethno-political genie in Rakhine in an ill-fitting bottle – at least partially – but in 2010 the bottle was uncorked once more in Rakhine state, and maybe Burma more widely, with the onset of elections. It was the issuing of voter registration cards to Muslims which may well have created expectations that Muslims would be given full citizenship in due course, a process that alarmed “Rakhine” people and emboldened Muslims. These heightened tensions were probably the real trigger for violence in 2012. And the issuing of these cards may have been part of a broader government strategy to ensure that “Rakhine” ethnic secessionists did not gain a majority in a state with important oil and gas resources. Whatever the causes, conflict in Rakhine in state has not been checked, and unless the ethnic foundations of Myanmar/Burma politics are diluted, Rakhine may yet become a harbinger of future racially motivated conflict across the country if the greater expectations of economic and political representation that all ethnicities will demand from the reform process are not met equitably.

The key conflict implications of these rules of the game for Myanmar/Burma are:

- Ethno-politics is concerned with a spatial hierarchy of controlled access, to limit the territorial expansion of rival peoples – especially to urban areas and areas which have access to resources;
- Focuses political concerns on controlling demographic expansion; and
- Thus controlled access, ruralisation, expulsions, denial of citizenship, expulsions and ultimately pogroms or even genocide become useful options for political action.

This analysis suggests that the creation of a political platform around promoting the idea of a universal de-ethnicized set of citizenship rights and freedoms is urgently required. Bringing together the myriad separate peace processes under this banner could be an excellent start-point, and one which the international community and programmes such as Pyoe Pin could help catalyze. A single overarching peace ‘umbrella’ under which the same rights and freedoms form the basis for each individual peace process could help both build longer term stability between ethnicities, and more importantly, create a broader Myanmar/Burma citizenship platform that can eventually take the place of the current patchwork of fragmented ethnic groups, and form the context in which parliamentary democracy might prove a more effective system for embracing political choice and competition.

Yet even in the context of concerted government, opposition and international will to bring about change, escaping its ethno-political past will be a difficult task for Burma/Myanmar. Ultimately government policy will need to place new emphasis on providing access to the universal benefits of the state. A focus on universal citizen benefits such as social insurance provision – perhaps learning from models elsewhere in Southeast Asia – and equality before the law may be good places to begin.

Finally, the political, economic and social dimensions of ethnic segregation in Myanmar/Burma and Rakhine state pose specific challenges to the DFID and British Council's Pyoe Pin's approach. In particular:

1. On the face of it, the formation of community-based 'user groups' – a central tenet of the programme – has the potential to shift attention from a mobilised ethnic

identity to shared economic or social identities as fellow citizens; and in so doing reduce the importance of ethnic distinctions by bringing diverse ethnic groups together around an issue of mutual concern. However, this is only likely to work in communities of mixed ethnicity, which were, until the 2012 forced expulsions, largely an urban phenomenon in Northern Rakhine state.

2. Yet economic and social segregation has often been a component of the mobilisation of ethnic identity. In these situations user-groups may aggregate either side of pre-existing ethnically defined occupational or social boundaries, reinforcing separation and ethnically defined hierarchies.
3. In the case of Muslims in Rakhine state, this may be further compounded by their absence of rights to citizenship. This means that *de jure*, much of Muslim economic activity and social participation is illegitimate, and recognition of these people's economic activity or social welfare and protection requirements will require an initial acceptance of their right to full participation in the state – i.e. a resolution of the core short-term driver of conflict, which seems an impossible pre-condition for engagement at this point in time.
4. As such, it is entirely possible that Muslim people may become “invisible” to the programme (as they are to all other forms of “legitimate” social and economic participation) – reinforcing an outcome that the denial of citizenship is designed to achieve throughout the mainstream social and economic milieu.
5. Recent expulsions from urban areas is also having the effect of denying Muslims access to the limited informal livelihood opportunities and access to social services they have enjoyed up until 2012. Thus further exclusion from potential usergroups may have been *de facto* achieved by spatially excluding Muslims from access to these value chains and services.
6. Spatial segregation between Muslims in the border areas and the Rakhine population at large – exacerbated by recent expulsions - further ensures that user groups are likely to be defined along ethnic lines. Although there was some intermixing in urban areas before the recent clashes, villages in Northern Rakhine state are generally either Muslim or Rakhine – not both. Muslim districts in urban areas have been largely emptied during recent violence, and their populations displaced into rural ghettos.
7. Finally, the programme relies upon building consent for reform in an increasingly permissive environment for economic and social liberalisation. Yet, recent conflict in Rakhine state has polarised opinion and further marginalised the Muslim community. In Rakhine state the environment for defusing ethnic distinctions is not permissive, and the door to ethnic liberalisation is not opening, but has been shut more firmly than before.

However, opportunities exist that can address these issues. These will most often not be community or village based, but working with user-groups that are not defined by residential areas, but based around meeting points – workplaces or market places – where

Muslim and Rakhine people find economic co-dependence. A good example is the in the fisheries and mangrove sectors. Synergies between the Bangladeshi and Rakhine shrimp industry may be a good starting point where wider incentives for co-existence could be formed on the back of better terms of trade for elites. Similarly, concerns about the radicalisation of Islamic education may provide an entry point for Pyoe Pin's informal education programme to address both monastic and Islamic schools in the state. Work with education could also help build a foundation upon which negotiations for a return of urban Muslim populations to their places of residence could begin in the future.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

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### **1.1 APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY**

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Conflict analysis and approaches to understanding fragility are not identical or interchangeable. This analysis takes a political economy approach closely informed by historical and poststructuralist research into the origins and underpinnings of ethnonationalism. In particular the analysis examined a range of historical primary and secondary sources, and through interviews in London, Northern Rakhine and in Yangon triangulated these insights with first-hand accounts from international, Arakanese (both Muslim and Buddhist) and Burmese politicians, religious leaders, journalists, academics, aid workers, policemen, traders, fishing folk and farmers. Visits were made to both Muslim and Rakhine settlements in Northern Rakhine in the immediate aftermath of the first outbreak of violence in 2012. In particular the analysis investigates the perceptions and narrative descriptions of the participants and onlookers to violence, and how they understand the background to and events that led to crisis in 2012.

The analysis understands that people are capable of multiple identities, and that ethnic or other political or religious identities are not necessarily the most important. It also understands that conflicts generally occur when the “rules of the game” – under which the majority agree to be governed’ – are no longer fit for purpose, yet consensus on those changes has not been achieved. There can be no reversion to an idealized colonial or post-colonial political settlement – such a state of affairs did not exist. Experience from elsewhere (East Timor, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo) shows that emphasising state transformation in the absence of a coherent understanding of the fragility of the political settlement can be a cul-de-sac, within which donors risk becoming ensnared. Conflict is a deadly serious enterprise – it marks the point where people are willing to lose their lives to change the rules of the game in their favour.

Identifying the drivers of conflict therefore has to be accompanied with work to identify the drivers of consensus building. The analysis examines how Pyoe Pin can encourage the drivers of peace, though recognizing that donor programmes and Pyoe Pin’s vision will not fundamentally change the course of history. History is made by local and regional actors and is probably unpredictable. Yet outsiders can help most by being principled, flexible, open to changing realities and ready to support localized solutions.

The analysis proceeds by:

1. Establishing immutable structural factors that determine the particular context (“terrain”) in which conflict takes place
2. Understanding “the rules of the game” as they relate to the political economy of conflict in northern Rakhine state, and where they are contested;
3. Understanding the political events that led directly to conflict in 2012 – and gauging the effects of the actions of influential political actors; and,
4. Identifying recommendations for both Pyoe Pin and the wider international community to build incentives for peaceful political evolution in Rakhine and Myanmar/Burma more broadly.

## **1.2 TERMS OF REFERENCE**

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The Terms of Reference sets out four objectives for the assessment:

1. An analysis of the conflict, describing what happened, and providing both immediate and longer-term (including structural) explanations, and an assessment of current tensions and immediate and longer-term prospects for resolution;
2. On the basis of this, an assessment provided of each of Pyoe Pin's current and proposed IBP interventions – each assessment will provide both a risk analysis of the project in the environment of the conflict, as well as the prospects for it to lead to conflict resolving results;
3. Proposals for how each existing project (or shortly to commence project) might be modified in order to reduce risks and to enhance the prospects for contributing to conflict resolution/management – the option to put each project on hold until such time as the risks have reduced should be considered;
  - In particular with respect to the recently approved Fisheries Project – intended in collaboration with LIFT – how might the criteria for selection of villages be modified, and is appropriate village selection likely to derail the project or actually raise its potential to help reduce conflict – what should be the way forward;
4. Proposals for additional issues, together with justifications, which might offer positive conflict resolution/management opportunities, through which Pyoe Pin could provide assistance.

## **1.3 STRUCTURE OF THIS REPORT**

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Given the fundamental requirement to base any conflict sensitization of Pyoe Pin in a strong understanding of the causes and drivers of conflict, the relatively under-researched nature of the Rakhine issue, the complexity of the conflict and the deep seated, intractable and potentially destabilizing impacts of the violence in Rakhine state on Myanmar/Burma's transition, much of the report is necessarily focused upon the first output, developing a detailed and nuanced historical and political economy analysis of the underpinnings of conflict in Rakhine state.

Thus sections 2 to 4 provide a theoretical overview and cover the evolution of the ethnopolitical foundations of conflict from pre-colonial times through to the present day. Through this analysis the key issues of ethnopolitics and citizenship underpinning conflict in Rakhine are established, evidenced and explained:

- Section 2 summarises the structural factors – borders, populations, colonial history;
- Section 3 sets out the theories of ethnonationalism (for readers interested in the theoretical underpinnings), and identifies the events of 1942 as the central historical narrative, or pivotal event, for current ethnopolitics;
- Section 4 describes the 2012 conflict in detail and relates these events to the democratic transition and economic liberalisation process ongoing in Myanmar/Burma, and to the ethnopolitical heritage set out in sections 2 and 3.

Section 5 then provides a conflict sensitized analysis of the Pyoe Pin programme, focusing on the Issue Based Projects (IBPs) currently underway or planned in Rakhine state. A detailed risk and opportunity assessment of the two most important interventions – fisheries and education is developed, along with commentary on modifying these projects to take account of the conflict and ethnopolitics issues identified in the earlier analysis.

Section 6 concludes with a summary of the implication of this analysis for Myanmar/Burma as a whole, and provides wider recommendations for the international development community, and those engaged in humanitarian programming in Rakhine state.

## **1.4 A NOTE ON LANGUAGE AND TERMINOLOGY**

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Language is a key issue in the ethnopolitical worldview. The words used to describe different peoples and territories in particular are themselves politicized. Each ethnic claimant uses or creates their own language to enhance that claim. The fact that the analyst is required to choose whether to call this country either Burma or Myanmar – where each term suggests a political perspective - tells the informed researcher that this country is a contested ethnopolitical space. Similarly the use of the terms Magh, Arakanese or Rakhine for the Buddhist population, Rohingya, Bengali or Arakanese Muslim for the state's Muslims and Arakan or Rakhine for the state itself are all political signposts to different viewpoints in the world of ethnic politics. The analyst is literally made speechless if they attempt to take another worldview.

Throughout the document nomenclature has been used interchangeably – attempting to adopt the term in common use at the time described. Burma or Myanmar is described as “Burma” only during the period of colonial rule. The composite term “Myanmar/Burma” is used at other times. The name of the territory and settlements in use at the time described is used in the text, and in the present the consultant has resorted to using quotation marks for the “Rohingya” and “Rakhine” supposed primordial ethnicities, on the understanding that neither makes much sense.

## 2 STRUCTURES

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Structural factors are largely immutable, but help to explain the terrain upon which conflict takes place. Key issues in Northern Rakhine are:

- A pre-colonial cultural border zone history – of hegemony over and resistance to central authority from the Delta and Islamic and Bengali/south Asian influence in the Bay of Bengal;
- A colonial legacy which mobilised ethnic identity as a political force (and created it where it was not obviously present), and used racial segregation as a means of managing the state, which has subsequently led to a litany of ethnic civil wars (1948-60 in the lowlands, 1960-2012 in the highlands);
- A further colonial legacy of labour migration from Bengal and Madras, especially into Northern Rakhine; and
- A later colonial policy to restrict south Asian migration that used a racist narrative associating south Asians with health risks and comparing them unfavourably with British Burma's pre-colonial 'races', creating prejudices that survive to this day.

### 2.1 PRE-COLONIAL PERCEPTIONS:

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Present-day Burmese scholar Aye Chan believes that the Muslims in the Arakan State can be divided into four different groups, namely *"Chittagonians on the Mayu Frontier; the descendants of the Muslim Community of Arakan in the Mrauk-U period (1430-1784), presently living in the Mrauk-U and Kyauktaw townships; the descendants of Muslim mercenaries in Ramree Island known to the Arakanese as Kaman; and the Muslims from the Myedu area of Central Burma, left behind by the Burmese invaders in Sandoway District after the conquest of Arakan in 1784"*<sup>4</sup>.

Of these groups the greatest historical confusion is over the origins the Muslims of the border areas. It is well known that British colonists brought labour from Bengal to the Akyab peninsula (now Sittwe area), to develop a rice production industry from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is much less clear whether the Muslim population of the Maungdaw (Nef valley) and Buthidaung (Mayu valley) areas were all brought to these valleys as migrant labour by the British, or represent a wider Muslim community which sought refuge in this region from other parts of Myanmar/Burma and Arakan during the Japanese occupation, or are recent migrants from Bengal, East Pakistan and Bangladesh (as government and "Rakhine" nationalists have claimed) or were indigenous to the border areas in pre-colonial times.

The following section will attempt to understand the pre-colonial and colonial structures that forged the peoples of modern day Rakhine state.

#### 2.1.1 The View from Arakan

We know from scholarship and historical records that there were strong south Asian influenced Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms in the Arakan from ancient times – and that the border

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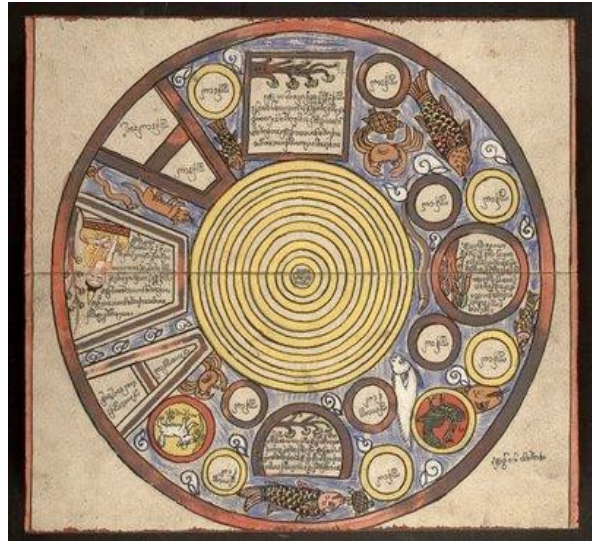
<sup>4</sup> Aye Chan. *"The Development of a Muslim Enclave in Arakan (Rakhine) State of Burma (Myanmar)"* SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research, Volume 3, Issue 2, Autumn 2005



between Arakan and Bengal shifted with the tides of war. We also know that Muslim Bengali and Buddhist Arakanese dynasties collaborated in the face of rising Burman and Mon power in southern Myanmar/Burma. This led to cultural exchange and peoples from both Buddhist and Muslim traditions' settling in each other's heartlands. For example Aye Chan states that *"King Min Saw Mon, the founder of Mrauk-U Dynasty (1430-1784) regained the throne with the military assistance of the Sultan of Bengal, after twenty-four years of exile in Bengal, his Bengali retainers were allowed to settle down in the outskirts of Mrauk-U, where they built the well-known Santikan mosque"*<sup>5</sup>. Indeed the Mrauk-U kings adopted some Muslim fashions, such as minting coins that bore their Muslim titles in Persian (the language of the Moghul Dynasties), and even adopting Muslim dress<sup>6</sup>. "Collaboration" with Portuguese pirates (more likely the Arakanese Kings had no option) also brought Muslim slaves to the Arakan.

In 1662-3 the Persian historian Shiahabuddin Talish noted that the Arakanese employed all of their Muslim prisoners in agriculture and other kinds of services. Talish also noted of neighbouring Assam that *"Muslims who were taken prisoner in former times and have chosen to marry here ... have nothing of Islam except name, their hearts are inclined more to mingling with the Assamese than towards association with Muslims"*<sup>7</sup>, and one can expect, and indeed see from the shared physical features and language, that the Myanmar border populations - whether Buddhist or Muslim - are historically and biologically intertwined, and share the same language and many customs to this day.

Furthermore, during the four decades of Burmese rule in Arakan (1784-1824), many Arakanese fled to British occupied Bengal. According to the records of the British East India Company, about 35,000 Arakanese fled to Chittagong District to seek protection in 1799<sup>8</sup>. Many of these Arakanese took up permanent residence in Bengal.



**Figure 1: 19th Century Burmese depiction of the world, with Mount Meru at its centre (US Library of Congress)**

Perhaps more importantly, Burmese actions and world views seem to imply a more assimilated and supportive relationship between faith communities in the border areas at that time – with conflict confined to elite dynasties and not among the “peoples” of Bengal and Arakan, who had learned to co-exist and often relied upon one another in times of strife.

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<sup>5</sup> Aye Chan. Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Aye Chan. Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Qadri F.A. “Pre-colonial North East India: A Portrait from Persian Accounts”. Guwhati: Omeo Kumar Das Institute for Social Change and Development, 2004

<sup>8</sup> East India Company. Asiatic Annual Register, 1799

Since ethnopolitics ensures that the current conflict is primarily contested on evidence of the absolute boundaries of legitimate occupation by Buddhist Arakanese and Muslim peoples, historical texts that describe territorial occupation are important. Maps are key texts in illuminating how people understand their spatial world, or that of others. Figure 1 illustrates how the people of Myanmar viewed their universe in the period immediately prior to British colonization in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It's a pre-modern world vision, not dissimilar to the German world map of 1581 (Figure 2) included for comparison, in that it locates the place of God on earth (Mount Meru for Buddhists and Jerusalem for Christians) at the centre of the universe, and arranges the remainder of creation not in measurable absolute alignment, but in terms of its relative spiritual symmetry. What is clear is that the Burmese map makers thought that the ethnic, linguistic, territorial and political dimensions of the universe where much less important than the spiritual terrain through which life is experienced. In pre-modern times conflicts were about control of souls and spiritual spaces much more than "peoples" or the territory they occupied (in European terms the Crusades, Thirty Years War and English Civil Wars are good examples).

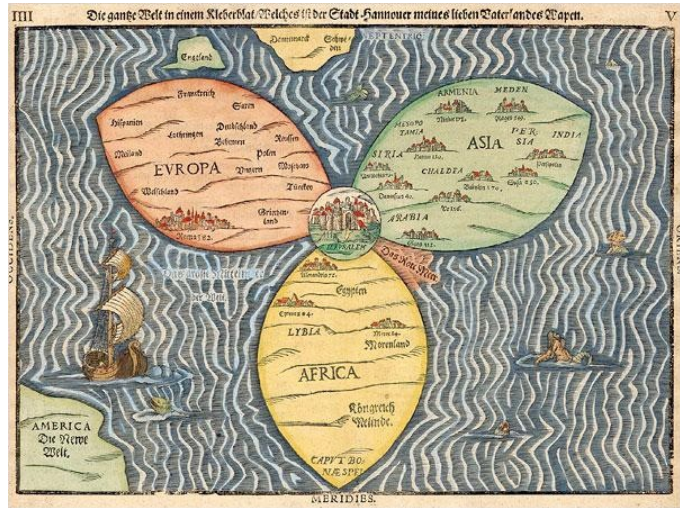


Figure 2: German map of the world 1581, depicting Jerusalem at its centre

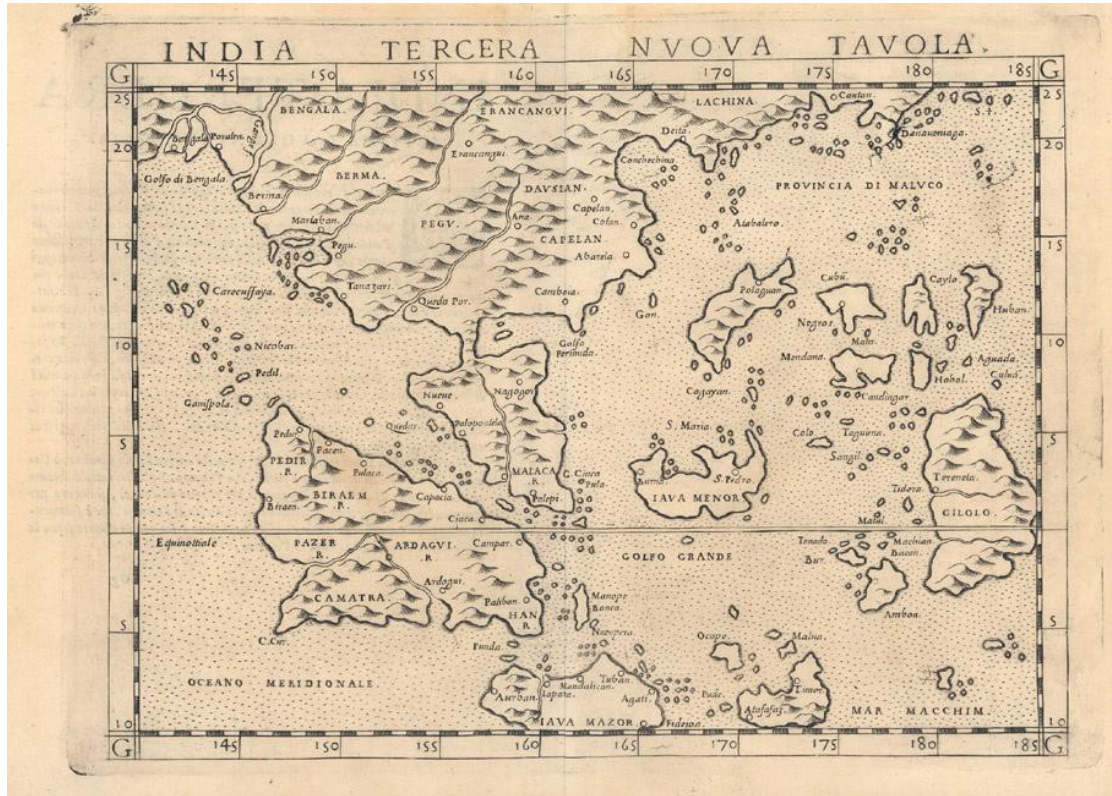
### 2.1.2 Pre-Colonial European Interpretations

As a modernizing science and philosophy took root in the west, European maps began to become more concerned with absolute navigable space, people and territories, and it is these texts that provide the earliest spatial indications of the location of different dynasties and ethnic groups in Myanmar/Burma. Yet these sources are themselves unreliable as they are based on limited and often ill-informed experience of the cultures they map. What is clear from the European maps from 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries is that they regarded the border between Arakan and Bengal as either blurred or beginning somewhere close to the Akyab peninsula – south of the Nef and Mayu valleys (Figures 3, 4, 6).

By the 16th century the economic, scientific and philosophical drivers that would ignite the European enlightenment were beginning to be put in place. Map making was central to maritime navigation and overseas trade, which was becoming the lynchpin of the Western European economy. Yet ideas of biology as more important than spirituality in defining the human condition had yet to take hold. Nevertheless, Figures 3, 4 and 6 demonstrate that European cartographers had begun using ethno-geographical names for the region where Myanmar/Burma and India intersect. In 1561 they seemed not to be able to distinguish any different peoples between Bengal and the "Brama" (Burman) and Pegu peoples. By 1729, the renowned Dutch cartographer Herman Moll continues to use the term Bengal for the Moghul controlled region to the north of present day Sittwe and beyond that only recognizes the Ava Kingdom – for what looks to be present day Rakhine State, and relocates the Brama (Burman) and Pegu peoples towards the delta. By 1764 a clear region called



Arakan has been defined between Bengal and Ava, although the Arakanese border with Bengal appears to overlap considerably. Indeed as late as 1970 US army cartographers failed to recognize either Arakanese or Muslims as separate ethnic groups within Myanmar/Burma (Figure 9).



**Figure 3: 1561 European Map of Myanmar/Burma and South East Asia (Northern Illinois University, Centre for Burma Studies, collection)**

What is clear from both pre-colonial indigenous sources and European and Moghul maps and commentaries, is that there was little political or economic concern about the absolute extension of Muslim or Buddhist “peoples”, rather more a concern for which ruling elite – Arakan, Moghul, Ava or Burman - held sway over those populations. As in Europe, pre-nationalist Asian states were defined by the extent of elite rule, rather than the ethno-linguistic make up of their subject peoples. There is also strong evidence of a degree of cultural intermixing in the borders areas, at both the general population and elite levels, and if anything, the Arakan Kingdom was more reliant upon political support and economic ties with Bengal to the north – for military support to hold off Burman expansion and as a refuge - than in conflict with Bengal over territorial or spiritual hegemony.



Figure 4: Enlargement of the Myanmar/Burma section of an English map of India and Burma, 1729 (Northern Illinois University, Center for Burma Studies, collection)

## 2.2 LABOUR MIGRATION IN COLONIAL NORTHERN ARAKAN

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century British interests began to develop rice production in lowland areas of Arakan, and encouraged the use of migrant seasonal labour from Bengal. This suited not only the requirement for provincial government in Burma to develop the economy to pay for colonisation, but also the desire of Imperial government in India to relieve congestion in the most densely populated districts, where – in the absence of social



provision - famine was a regular occurrence. Akyab district became one of the major rice producing areas of the world and its population increased by 155% during 1871-1911. Evidence from contemporary accounts suggests that some of this in-migration came from Bengal, and that this took place through the employment of what we would now call 'gang masters', some of whom set up residence in the Akyab (Sittwe) area. Over time many of the migrants' settled and the Muslim population of Akyab soared from 58,000 in 1871 to 178,000 in 1911 according to census records. Nevertheless the census data also makes it clear that as an overall proportion of the population the relative importance of Indian migrants as compared to other groups barely increased between 1881 and 1931 (a modest increase from 19.3% – 21.6% of the total population of Arakan (Figure 5).

Through migration the British transformed Burma into the largest rice granary in India and the whole British Empire and the volume of Indian immigrants itself steadily increased. Competition between shipping companies drove down passenger fares from Chittagong, Calcutta and Madras, and as the labour market expanded Indian immigrants no longer relied upon government assistance for transport to Burma. Most Indians who immigrated to Burma were people of lower castes from the Madras and Bengal Presidencies. According to the census records in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, over 60% of the Indian population in Burma were born in Madras Presidency. Most of them were Telugu or Tamil speakers. 25-30% of Indian population in Burma in the same period was from Bengal Presidency. Among Indians from Bengal, Chittagonians constituted around 40% - the majority in the Arakan (Osada 2011).

Many of these Indian immigrants were migrant labourers who sought temporary employment in the paddy fields during the harvest seasons. Most of the immigrants who came to Burma alone left their families behind in the home country. Over this period Arakanese and Burmese populations in Arakan district also increased significantly too: Burmese from less than 5,000 to over 92,000 and Arakanese from 171,000 to 209,000 between 1871 and 1911.

	Burma			Arakan Division			Burma excluding Arakan		
	Total Population	Indian Population	%	Total Population	Indian Population	%	Total Population	Indian Population	%
1881	3,736,771	243,123	6.5	587,518	113,557	19.3	3,149,253	129,566	4.1
1891	8,098,014	420,830	5.2	671,899	137,922	20.5	7,426,115	282,908	3.8
1901	10,490,624	568,263	5.4	762,102	173,884	22.8	9,728,522	394,379	4.1
1911	12,115,217	743,288	6.1	839,896	197,990	23.6	11,275,321	545,298	4.8
1921	13,212,192	887,077	6.7	909,246	206,990	22.8	12,302,946	680,087	5.5
1931	14,667,146	1,017,825	6.9	1,008,535	217,801	21.6	13,658,611	800,024	5.9

Figure 5: The Indian Population of Arakan and Burma 1881-1931 (source Osada, 2011)

### 2.3 BRITISH BURMA: ETHNOPOLITICAL RULE

As elsewhere, ethno-nationalism in Myanmar/Burma dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and specifically to the British colonial occupation of Burma. Colonization almost perfectly coincided with the evolution of ethnographic and eugenic ideas in western scientific thought. The extent to which ethnic categorisation influenced British thinking is revealed by a reading of the various comprehensive ethnologies which were commissioned to divide the territory of Burma into administrative units.

British Burma was divided geographically into different 'divisions'. The core division was the 'Burman Natural Division' (in which the "natural" – i.e. "primordial" – "Burman" ethnicity held pre-eminence in the eyes of both colonists and later the Burmese themselves). The Burman Natural Division included four different geographical zones: the Delta, Coast, Centre and North. The Delta area included the capital city Rangoon and surrounding areas such as Insein, Hanthawaddy, Tharrawaddy, Pegu, Toungoo and Thaton. Pegu is regarded as a centre of the Mon kingdom known historically as Hamsavati. Thaton is another centre of early Hindu-Buddhist civilisation, which was perceived in racially driven colonial scholarship as 'Mon' rather than 'Burman'. The 'Centre', according to British mapping, included Prome, Pakokku, Magwe, Mandalay, Shwebo and Sagaing. The 'North' includes cities like Bhamo, Myitkyina, Katha and UpperChindwin.

The 'Coast' as an administrative, geographic unit included cities such as Akyab (Sittwe), Sandoway, Amherst, Tavoy and Mergui – and the lowland areas of modern day Rakhine State. These were the first possessions that the British gained after the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1824, and were thought to have been populated by people regarded by British ethnographers as non-"Burmans", principally "Arakanese" and "Mon" (although both groups were believed to be 'related' to "Burmans"). In fact the Arakanese language was a dialect of Burmese, and the colonial distinctions between "Burmese", "Arakanese" and "Mon" peoples probably had more to do with their historical political organisation than the biological and ethno-linguistic "primordial" differences that the ethnographers recorded. Akyab (Sittwe) was considered populated by "Arakanese" and both native and Indian Muslims, whereas Amherst was an important centre for the "Mon" people. Tavoy was regarded as a mixed "Burman" and "Mon" city, whereas Mergui was imagined as wholly "Burman" (Heikkila-Horn 2009).

The British ruled Burma under two entirely different administrative systems: direct rule in 'Burma Proper' and indirect rule through local potentates in the 'Frontier Areas'. Local rulers were identified through ethnic profiling beyond the 'Burman Natural Division' in the "tribal" Frontier Areas – hill regions bordering India, China and Thailand. These were called Chin, Salween and Shan, an amalgam of ethnic and geographic definitions. Chin Division included the districts of the Arakan Hill Tracts and the Chin Hills. These areas were believed populated by both "Arakanese" and "Chin" peoples.

## **2.4 THE ORIGINS OF PREJUDICE: COLONIAL RACIAL NARRATIVE**

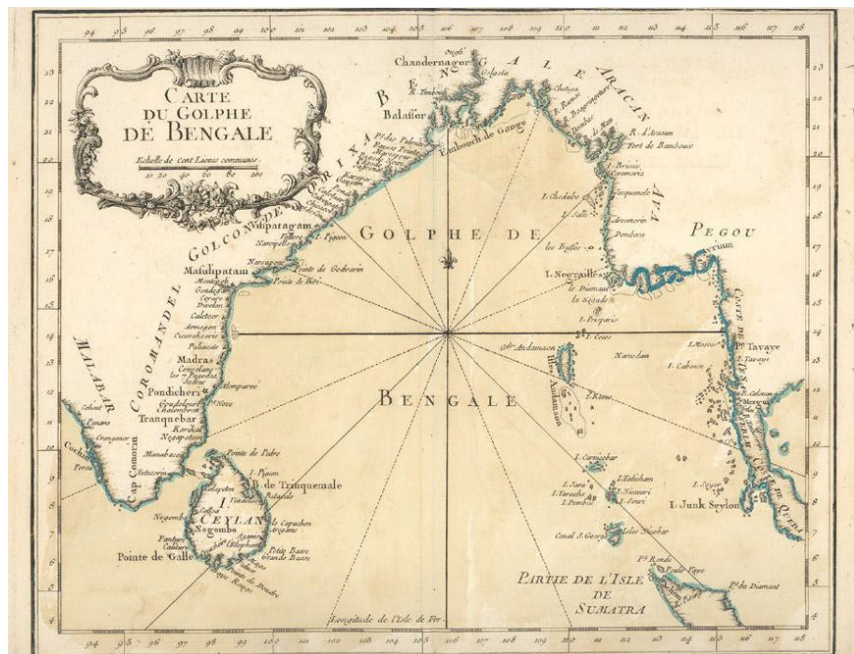
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The British had used partly geographical and partly ethnic nomenclature when mapping Myanmar/Burma. The original purpose of this may have been entirely practical. Yet categorising the entire population into different ethnic groups and subsequently openly favouring one ethno-religious group against another created the ethnic divisions that have survived to this day. In addition to the 'natural division' of the administrative entity, the population was also classified according to different 'races' invented by the census takers. During the 1931 census the British divided the population of Burma into nine different races:

1. Burmese
2. Other indigenous races
3. Chinese
4. Indians born in Burma
5. Indians born outside Burma
6. Indo-Burman races
7. Europeans and allied races

8. Anglo-Indians
9. Other races

As illustrated above, Indians are categorised as four different races, indicating implicitly the importance of these people in the British administration and in the overall colonial economy. The British census takers had struggled with the concept of 'Indians' for decades, since the work was started in 1871 (Osada 2011). In earlier censuses, the Hindus had been classified by caste, whereas the Muslims had been classified by tribe.



**Figure 6: French map of the Bay of Bengal, 1764 (Northern Illinois University, Center for Burma Studies, collection)**

The first evidence of racial prejudice against Indian migrants vis-a-vis “Burmese” and “Rakhine” peoples - and its use as justification for curbing migration – is provided by British administrators in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the course of colonization, Myanmar/Burma had formally become a province of India. There was no formal administrative border between Burma and the rest of India until 1937, when the Union of Burma was separated from British India. This connection with India brought Burma an unrestricted labour supply which was necessary for the growth of the rice economy in Arakan. From 1910 onwards immigration controls began to emerge between Bengal and Burma to reduce the hitherto unrestricted circulation of peoples<sup>9</sup>. British administrators in Rangoon were concerned that immigration from India would incite social problems via a prejudicial view of Indian populations as insanitary and prone to disease and likely to promote disease among the “Burmese” people. Rather than addressing this as an issue for public health provision, they attributed the insanitary conditions in “coolie barracks” to Indian racial traits, culture and habits.

<sup>9</sup> Noriyuki Osada. “An Embryonic Border: Racial Discourses and Compulsory Vaccination for Indian Immigrants at Ports in Colonial Burma, 1870-1937” *Moussons: Social Science Research on SE Asia* 2011



Figure 7: Migration to Burma from India 1886-1936 (source Osada, 2011)

Colonial government statements consistently emphasized difference in the style of living between India and Burma, and how climate and style of living mattered in health terms - forming the constitution and the health condition of inhabitants. A “healthiness” racial hierarchy was formulated by administrators: while the “Burmese” were not considered as inherently healthy as Europeans, they were perceived positively once compared with Indians. Ashley Eden, Chief Commissioner of Burma 1871-74 observed that, *“while distrusting the statistics submitted by the Sanitary Commissioner, he does not wish it to be understood that British Burma is not one of the healthiest provinces of the East. The conditions which occasion so much sickness and mortality in India have no counterpart here. In India, the dwellings of the poorer classes are close, ill-ventilated, confined mud buildings; in Burma, they are raised from the ground, and the plank walling and bamboo and grass floors allow free ingress and egress of air. There is no lack of space or overcrowding, and cattle are not, as a rule, kept under the same roof as their owners. Observation alone sufficiently establishes the fact that no place in India can show such swarms of plump, healthy-looking children or such vivacious, manly inhabitants as Burma”* (quoted in Osada 2011). This contrast of images for the Burma peoples and Indians survived well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and is still current in popular perception of ethnicities in Myanmar/Burma today.

On the basis of these understandings the British authorities introduced medical examinations for all immigrants at Burmese ports after the middle of the 1910s. While no border existed as yet, port cities assumed the function of checking people who arrived from India by sea. A key component of this phenomenon was the development of ever more stringent sanitary regulations for Indian migrant labourers in colonial Burma, including compulsory vaccination at ports (Osada 2011). Thus the beginnings of a racial justification for denying citizenship to people of Indian decent began in the British Colonial administration – one which established prejudices that continue to this day.



## 2.5 CONCLUSIONS

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Census data shows that while labour migration into Arakan from India was significant in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, most was seasonal. By the 1871 census permanent Indian migrants made up around 19% of the total population of Akyab district (present day Northern Rakhine), the highest percentage of any region in Burma. **Yet census data also makes clear that as an overall proportion of the population the relative importance of Indian migrants as compared to other ethnic groups in Arakan barely increased between 1881 and 1931** (Indian migrants made up 21% of the overall population of Akyab in 1931), and migration to Burma from India stabilised during the First World War when immigration controls were introduced after 1910.

**Ethnic violence against Muslims and Indians during the colonial period – in particular the 1926 and 1938 communal rioting against the south Asian population – did not originate in Arakan. Indeed both Muslim and Buddhist communities appear to have coexisted peacefully up until 1942.** There is no doubt however that the colonial administration developed a process of creating negative perceptions of low caste and Muslim migrants from India including Bengal, and used these as justification for restricting migration and segregating society into an ethnic hierarchy with both implications for economic opportunity and access to services (which also included employment profiling – which assigned Bengali workers menial or agricultural tasks).

**Validation by the colonial administration of ethnic categorisation through the census, and ethnic prejudices through the use of ethnographic, medical and scientific texts, created the context in which violence between ethnic groups was possible.** There is also good evidence that the Muslim population had been given a subaltern<sup>10</sup> status vis-à-vis “Rakhine” Buddhists in Arakan, attested to by significantly lower educational attainment than “Rakhine” or “Burmese” population groups (Osada 2011) – suggesting a lower placement in the racial hierarchy, a perception that is sustained in Rakhine to this day.

**By 1941 ethnicity had been politically mobilised to such an extent that it had successfully segmented society into racial groups that despite sharing the same territorial space had little co-dependence beyond their legal and economic obligations, and little social or cultural interaction with one another.** Ethnicity also defined the boundaries of economic opportunity and educational attainment. Political competition in Myanmar/Burma was about to be defined as a struggle between these disaggregated groups for power and privilege.

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<sup>10</sup> Meaning being ranked or ranged below; subordinate; inferior.

### 3 THE RULES OF THE GAME

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The rules of the game represent the institutions which have grown up to sustain conflict, and often the issues which conflict is either attempting to protect or redefine. In Northern Rakhine – as in Myanmar/Burma as a whole – the key institution (rule of the game) underpinning instability and conflict is ethnopolitics because:

- Ethnopolitics creates lines of separation (and often glass ceilings) between citizens and the state;
- Ethnic identity becomes a prerequisite for citizenship for those on the periphery – people without such identity can be justifiably excluded;
- Ethnopolitics render the idea of a social contract between citizens and the state redundant – politics are all about group rights rather than state provision for individuals; and
- Democracy becomes impossible – political power is gained through securing demographic and territorial hegemony rather than acting in the common good.

#### 3.1 ***ETHNOPOLITICS: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS***

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Despite its preeminent role in 19<sup>th</sup> century politics, intellectual thought on nation-building since 1945 has largely discounted the idea of ethnic politics or ethnonationalism as a founding principle. Rather ethnonationalism has been regarded largely as an unwanted throwback, with no place in modern political thought or understandings of the state. Economic and political settlement approaches to state-building and nation-building - viewed as emerging patterns of social mobilization, trade and communications<sup>11</sup> - have been much more attractive propositions for both academics and policy makers in the international relations and development fields. Yet as Connor has pointed out, politicians have been much more ready than academics and policy makers to recognize that people associate the “nation” with a visceral idea – real or imagined – of a shared ancestry: as the widest interpretation of “family” – over and above the logic of social or economic connectivity<sup>12</sup>. From a western perspective, rejection of ethnonationalism is also not at all surprising. After the excesses of ethnonationalist politics in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, it was convenient to discredit ethnonationalism as a pre-modern impulse unrelated to modernizing political and economic principles.

Yet there is strong theoretical and historical evidence that ethnonationalism is neither ancient nor a throwback, but rather a rational outcome of those very same modernizing political processes. Despite the spread of western democratic political traditions, we know ethnonationalism remains a very potent force in our world - a persistent source of legitimacy for challenging sovereign power, and a driver of societal violence and conflict. Political violence in places such as Nigeria, Myanmar/Burma, Rwanda/Burundi/DRC, Liberia/Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Somalia, Kenya, Indonesia, Thailand and the Balkans are testimony to the force of ethnopolitics as a popular and visceral legitimizing principle. It is

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<sup>11</sup> Deutsch, K. W. *“Nationalism and social communication: an inquiry into the foundations of nationality”*. M.I.T. Press, 1966.

<sup>12</sup> Connor, W. *“Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding”*: Princeton University Press, 1994

not however confined to less well developed states: we also know that ethnonationalism plays a part in the domestic politics of western nations around issues of self-determination (e.g. in Belgium, Quebec, Wales, Northern Ireland, Lombardy, Gibraltar and the Falkland Islands), devolution (e.g. in Belgium, former Czechoslovakia, former Yugoslavia, former Soviet Union, Scotland, Catalonia, Bosnia, Kosovo, the Basque lands and Ukraine), and racially motivated violence and immigration policies (across the Russian Federation, Europe, Japan, Korea and the United States).

Perhaps the most important modern writer on ethnonationalism, Walker Connor, regards the phenomenon as the major political weakness of post-enlightenment modernization politics<sup>13</sup>. He has traced the beginnings of ethnopolitics to 19<sup>th</sup> Century industrialization in Europe, where a combination of increased social and territorial mobility, higher incomes and the creation of a new middle class intersected with the *biopolitics*<sup>14</sup> of enlightenment political and scientific thought to bring about political mobilization for the mass “nation” – and within this idea a conviction that “alien” was also “illegitimate”<sup>15</sup>.

Connor’s work is both validated and theoretically nuanced by a reading of the work of post-structuralist political thinkers, who have used historicist approaches to track the refocusing of the primary popular source of political legitimacy away from the theological (political legitimacy derived from God) and towards the biological (political legitimacy derived from the body politic – the people), and the governance implications of this shift<sup>16</sup>. Giorgio Agamben in particular has investigated how the pure rationalism of enlightenment political philosophy intersected with sovereign power has created an opportunity to ‘define the exception’ and separate ‘the people’ into forms of life to be represented and presented in society and subaltern forms of life which are presented but not represented<sup>17</sup>. He sees such separation as an essentially religious process, by which certain parts of society are made *sacred*, and put beyond use - contrasting with Connor, who sees ethnonationalism as a psychological response to modernity.

A reading of Foucault suggests that the creation of new scientific knowledge, especially advancements in biology, has helped realize this process - 19<sup>th</sup> century understandings of animals and plants as separate “genus” that could be divided into evolutionary family kinship lines<sup>18</sup>, and the scientific imperatives to classify those species and families were found to be transferrable to “peoples”<sup>19</sup>. Indeed the term ‘genocide’ could not have existed prior-to Darwinist scientific knowledge, for it was this knowledge that gave us an understanding of what a ‘genus’ might be.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the political claims of both “Rakhine” and “Rohingya” nationalists is that they both fight for their claim to political recognition in Northern Rakhine on the same intellectual turf: historical validation of the credibility of their claims to

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<sup>13</sup> Connor, W. *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding*: Princeton University Press, 1994

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault coined this terms to denote a modern politics concerned with the biological improvement of the human species, rather than a politics focused on spiritual improvement, as was implicit in the pre-modern world,

<sup>15</sup> Smith, A. D. *Dating the Nation* in *Ethnonationalism in the Contemporary World*: Conversi, D. ed. Routledge, 2002

<sup>16</sup> Foucault, M. *Society Must be Defended*: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*

<sup>17</sup> Agamben, G. *Profanations*: Zone Books 2010

<sup>18</sup> Darwin, C. *On the Origin of Species* 1859

<sup>19</sup> Foucault, M. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Part 2* Allen Lane 1976

ancestral occupation of Northern Rakhine state. Elites in particular need to prove that their peoples have a legitimate political identity in the territorial space they have been allocated by history. Irreconcilable<sup>20</sup> narrative collisions such as these are the bread and butter of nationalist disputes (Israel-Palestine and Northern Ireland for example) and have led some writers, notably Anthony Smith<sup>21</sup>, to contest Connor's assertion that the idea of the "ethnic nation" did not exist before the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Yet few researchers have been able to disprove the notion that the nation as a conscious mass body-politic rather than an elite governance construct - only came into being after 1789. While people were certainly aware of a shared ethnic or linguistic identity and a common allegiance to a monarch or other dynasty, they were unlikely to have associated this with a self-actualizing political consciousness until the onset of enlightenment political ideas. Although they ushered in a new era of humanity and moral improvement, Immanuel Kant's "Metaphysics of Morals", Tom Paine's "Rights of Man" and Voltaire's "Candide" also unwittingly unleashed ethnic politics by displacing the source of political power from "God", through elite interlocutors, to the 'people' through elite representatives: and in so doing relocated the terrain for political competition away from the religious beliefs of Monarchs towards the ethnic and cultural definitions of "peoples". Prior to 1789 there were plenty of counter-examples of mass uprisings against ethnically identical ruling classes, in favour of alien elites (in support of the Austrians in Poland and the Turks in Bosnia, for example). Yet globally, there are no examples of popular uprisings in the name of a shared national identity before 1789<sup>22</sup>.

Any attempt to understand how conflict might be addressed also needs to understand how these largely colonial governance concerns were transferred onto the domestic political agenda as an ethnonationalist political canon among the people of Myanmar/Burma, and northern Rakhine state in particular.

### **3.2 THE ROOTS OF ETHNOPOLITICS IN COLONIAL BURMA: JOHN FURNIVALL'S PLURAL SOCIETY**

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In modern Myanmar/Burma ethnicity is an essential prerequisite to political participation: the keystone upon which the political system is founded. How has a society in which language and religion were so intertwined developed such a strong understanding of political segmentation, that political participation is dependent not upon common citizenship but upon membership of one of these disaggregated bio-cultural categories? The former Indian Civil Service administrator turned scholar John Furnivall used a comparative study of British rule in Burma and Dutch rule in the Netherlands East Indies to show how colonial rule resulted in the destruction of pre-colonial political societies by transforming them into a distinctively new form of social order which he called "plural society".

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<sup>20</sup> In the sense that there is no right or wrong argument, just ones that favour one group over another

<sup>21</sup> Smith, A. D. Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> The 1776 American Revolution was a halfway house, although it was founded upon enlightenment principles that the source of political power resided in the people, it was not made in the name of a common national identity, but of the separate States of America. The nationality issue was only finally resolved after the civil war in 1867.

It's worth summarizing some of Furnivall's conclusions here, because he was one of the few colonial administrators and researchers that tackled the issue of the creation of ethnic identity at that time, and as his research was specific to Burma, the lessons are particularly pertinent to this analysis. For Furnivall, plural society *"....is in the strictest sense a medley, for they [ethnic groups] mix but do not combine. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the market-place ... [and] ... with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit. Even in the economic sphere there is division of labour along racial lines, Natives, Chinese, Indians and Europeans all have different functions, and within each major group subsections have particular occupations."*<sup>23</sup>

Furnivall believed that plural society was created by using economic forces and rule of law to segment society into racially defined ethnic groups that are divided into separate communities, where each group is *"an aggregate of individuals rather than an organic whole"*. He believed such a society is inherently unstable because there is no common social will to integrate the different ethnic groups. Economically, the atomized individuals will not create social demand that can produce a shared set of wants and values to guide or check social action among the ethnically-separated society. Without a common social will, order in plural society cannot be attained through a voluntary union of ethnic groups. Instead, order in the colonies was imposed by the colonial regime and by the force of capital and economic circumstances.<sup>24</sup>

While the creation of a plural society was perhaps driven by ethnonationalist understandings of eugenic differentiation (and thus each distinct 'species' of native having qualities suited to different economic tasks within a subaltern population), it also undoubtedly had a political function supporting a divide and rule policy which disabled the formation of a common opposition to colonial rule. And critically, as the ultimate self-justification: the colonial power - which created the plural society in the first place - was also needed to ensure that the plural society did not dissolve into anarchy<sup>25</sup>. This construct was continued when the post-colonial military apparatus soon came to use it as justification for the ascension to power.

Thus in Northern Rakhine State, the search for a political identity is focused on an unwinnable set of arguments over the longevity of the Muslim people's presence. And in Myanmar/Burma as a whole and Rakhine state in particular, the right to representation in society is defined not by an appeal to the commonwealth of humanity, but on a racist discourse on the biological and cultural differences between individuals and the construction of narratives to prove the primordial occupation of territory by each distinct racial group.

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<sup>23</sup> Furnivall, J. S. *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India*. New York: New York University Press, 1956 (first published 1948)

<sup>24</sup> Furnivall also thought that nationalism could be a creative resource to generate a common social will to re-integrate society. Yet as discussed above, Connor suggests that nationalism is almost certainly a product of the politicisation of ethnicity – one goes with the other. And Lee Hock Guan suggests that post-colonial history in Southeast Asia has affirmed this interpretation - nationalism has not provided a solution, rather it has further aggravated ethnic divisions: *"the problem is that Furnivall did not realize that the very strong link between ethnicity and nationalism can have adverse effects on ethnic relations. Indeed, today Furnivall's idea of using nationalism to facilitate the reintegration of ethnically heterogeneous Southeast Asian societies must come to terms with the concept and reality of multiculturalism."*

<sup>25</sup> Lee Hock Guan: *Furnivall's Plural Society and Leach's Political Systems of Highland Burma*: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia. Volume 24, Number 1, April 2009

### **3.3 ANCHORING ETHNOPOLITICAL IDEAS IN MYANMAR/BURMA**

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Settlement in pre-colonial times does not fully explain either the presence of Muslim communities in the Buthidaung and Maungdaw areas in the far north on the border with modern-day Bangladesh, or settlement in the Akyab (Sittwe) area - which was largely unpopulated in pre-colonial times. Before British colonial expansion in 1824, the Arakanese Kingdom had been continuously occupied by Burman conquerors for four decades, creating great deprivations for Arakanese people, as the new rulers attempted to eradicate all vestiges of the former Arakan Kingdom. Many Arakanese had fled to the West and at that time Muslim Bengal was probably considered a much more benign neighbour than the Buddhist Burma Kingdom. Scholars have recognized that there was no territorial entity that coincided with the modern Myanmar state at that time. In fact the geography of the modern day Union of Myanmar was imagined by the British as a means of categorizing the lands to the East of India, and constructed in the minds of the new administrators as a union of ethnicities: those occupied by the Burman Kingdom as 'Burma Proper' and the remainder as the "Frontier Areas"<sup>26</sup>. As in similar colonies and protectorates (India and Nigeria, for example), the British employed two different governance systems: direct rule, through colonial administrators (many from British India) in the lowlands occupied by the former Burman Kingdom (including the Arakan region); and indirect rule, through local leaderships in the mountainous – and less developed - Frontier Regions.

It is unsurprising that the ethnicity of resident 'peoples' rather than the territorial boundaries of the realms of elite dynasties was used as the political currency to define these governance boundaries. On the one hand the British did not want to sustain potentially competitive political dynasties, and on the other a non-European ethnicity – with its connotations of backwardness - provided a more subaltern formula for identifying the local potentates through which indirect rule could be sustained.

Enlightenment thinking had also encouraged a classification of the biology of newly 'discovered' worlds into species and genus, and these classifications provided a useful tool for dividing newly occupied territory up into biological rather than political sub-units – based on the ethnic distinctions of their human inhabitants: and one which could be aligned with spatial units of governance. This classification of course made some sweeping assumptions. First, of the primordial nature of each ethnicity – that each was as distinct as a species of plant or animal, and derived from a unique biological as well as cultural heritage: the widest form of an extended family. Second, that the territories occupied by these groups were also primordial, and had remained largely fixed over the passage of time. Common sense and historical evidence suggests that neither of these assumptions hold true - in the Arakan or anywhere else. Modern day DNA analysis suggests that a primordial ethnicity derived from purely biological kinship is hard to find beyond a few oceanic Islands, and historical evidence suggests that movements and intertwining of peoples over different territorial spaces is the norm rather than the exception. Nevertheless it is these assumptions that underpin ethnonationalism, and its central concern that only the indigene has a legitimate right to representation within an ethno-politically defined territorial space. These assumptions are neither questioned by the "Rohingya" nor "Rakhine" nationalists in modern Myanmar/Burma, or indeed any of the other ethnic groups. In fact they form the intellectual domain upon which conflict is fought out.

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<sup>26</sup> Heikkilä-Horn, Marja-Leena: *Imagining 'Burma': a historical overview*. *Asian Ethnicity*, Volume 10, Number 2, June 2009, pp. 145-154(10)

### 3.4 THE CENTRAL ETHNOPOLITICAL NARRATIVE: 1942

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Every great ethno-political cause has its central affirmation or injustice, a historical event upon which its right to ethnic self-determination can be unambiguously asserted: The Field of Blackbirds for the Serbs, the Battle of the Boyne for Northern Irish Protestants, the Treaty of Versailles for the Nazis. Throughout our fieldwork in northern Rakhine state, in discussions with “Rakhine” and “Rohingya” people and politicians, the events of 1942 were put forward as this seminal event.

1942 is an important moment in Burmese history. It was the year when the Japanese invaded Burma, and Burmese nationalism began to achieve political expression. A chaotic British withdrawal, during which 900,000 Burmese and migrant Indians also attempted to flee back across the border into Bengal (100,000 died en route), saw flare-ups of ethnic violence throughout Burma – despite the best efforts of Burmese nationalists to prevent it. The previous century of colonially-sponsored ethnic atomization had created a profound disunity, and in the absence of military rule by the British – and before the Japanese established control – lingering ethnic tensions manifested themselves as pogroms, against Indian, Karen and Muslim people.

The Rakhine border was a particular case in that the British retained control in India and the Mayu river valley was contested and never fully under Japanese control. Ethnic violence – initially against Muslims in southern Arakan – resulted in Muslims from throughout Rakhine State fleeing to the border areas, creating the current concentration of Burmese Muslims in Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships (which straddled British and Japanese lines). This narrative runs counter of current “Rakhine” and successive government assertions that the Muslim population densities in Northern Rakhine are the result of immigration in post-colonial times.

Yegar (1972) suggests that when the British administration was withdrawn to India in 1942, Arakanese militants began to attack the Muslim villages in southern Arakan and the Muslims fled to the north where they took vengeance on the Arakanese in Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships<sup>27</sup>. The violence certainly worked in both directions. Throughout World War Two in Burma, the British and Americans recruited disaffected ethnic groups as ‘scouts’ and spies. In the border areas the British recruited and armed a Muslim anti-Japanese militia - “V force” - from among the Arakanese Muslims. “V force” soon gained a reputation not for killing Japanese, but also for exacting revenge for the ethnic violence of 1942 by terrorizing the “Rakhine” population in the border areas.

Anthony Irwin suggests Northern Arakan was a “no man’s land” during the three years of Japanese occupation<sup>28</sup>. Irwin explained how the ethnic violence divided a previously mixed population in Arakan State into distinct Buddhist and Muslim dominated areas: *“the area then occupied by us was almost entirely Mussulman Country... (from which) we drew most of our “scouts” and agents. The Arakan before the war had been occupied over its entire length by both Mussulman and Maugh (“Rakhine”). Then in 1941 the two sects set to and fought.*

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<sup>27</sup> Yegar, Moshe. *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*. Wiesbaden 1972.

<sup>28</sup> Irwin, Anthony. *Burmese Outpost (Memoirs of a British Officer who fought in Arakan with the Arakanese V Forces during the Second World War)*. London: Collins. 1945



*The result of this war was roughly that the Maugh took over the southern half of the country and the Mussulman the North. Whilst it lasted it was a pretty bloody affair...My present gun boy, a Mussulman who lived near to Buthidaung, claims to have killed two hundred Maughs (Arakanese)".*

### 3.5 CONCLUSIONS

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Taken together the work of Connor, Foucault, Agamben and their contemporaries suggest that the sciences of ethnography and eugenics and the politics of ethnonationalism grew from the rational biological understandings of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century enlightenment, not the pre-modern urges of tribal groups. **If ethnonationalism is an unwanted bi-product of modernization, then its solutions are likely to be found by re-evaluating modern conceptions of the political-economy of state and nation-building.** It is insufficient to explain ethnic tensions as entirely the result of economic and social drivers, when ethnicities themselves are often the product of deliberate categorization of populations, often in the absence of preexisting distinctions<sup>29</sup>. Connor suggests that ethnopitics is a likely side-effect of economic and political liberalization in states with a history of ethnic mobilization under colonial or subsequent military rule.

In ethnopitics numbers are important. The dimensions of the body politic are an indication of its relative importance, as are the territorial boundaries of the space which an ethnic group views as its homeland. **Technical democracy is all but impossible in a truly ethnopolitical and atomised "plural society" in which sustaining one's identity as worthy of representation is a more crucial objective than expressing individual political choice.**

All of the members of an ethnicity will by necessity vote for their own group's representatives to sustain their voice vis-à-vis their rival ethnic groups – if only to retain their credibility as a citizenship group. This process both politicises the census – which becomes a key tool for controlling the population - and negates plebiscites. Since all people of a given identity will inevitably choose an ethnic representative, then the winners of a plebiscite will always be the ethnic group with the largest number of voters. **In such circumstances democracy is redundant as a means of political competition, as it's not possible to win votes from other competing ethnicities (the logjam which has stymied attempts to use democracy to bring Bosnia back together, for example). Thus the real political battleground is over determining the number of people within each ethnic group. And methods for shifting these numbers inevitably result in either a requirement to 'fix' statistics, to disenfranchise certain groups or resort to violent means of adjusting population numbers through expulsions, or killings.**

So, once population numbers and territorial space are so highly politicised, democracy can also provide a spur for radical action to control these dimensions. In Rakhine state this has included bureaucratic and juridical tactics in colonial and post-colonial times, such as immigration controls and the denial of citizenship, and disenfranchisement on ethnic grounds, to more radical actions such as forced expulsions, and pogroms. **In this sense ethnopitics is both unstable and likely to result in the repression of human rights and the**

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<sup>29</sup> The Katchin political identity, for example, did not exist before colonial categorisation created this ethnicity from an amalgam of language groups in northeast Burma.



**promotion of communal violence. It is also the only context in which genocide can take place.**

Despite the modernity of ethnonationalism as a political force, it derives its legitimacy from an appeal to real or imagined ancient lineage ties. Indeed without a historical narrative, it is impossible for an appeal to ethnopositional legitimacy to succeed. So defining a definitive chronology is vital for a successful nationalist cause, and conversely deconstructing the ethnic validity of counter claimants is essential to enable exclusion on alien grounds. Yet as Connor points out *"the issue of when a nation came into being is not of key significance: while in factual/chronological history a nation may be of recent vintage, in the popular perception of its members, it is 'eternal', 'beyond time', 'timeless'. And it is not facts but perceptions of facts that shape attitudes and behaviour"*. In this sense, despite the earnest attempts of both "Rakhine" and "Rohingya" peoples to provide their own and disprove their opponents claims to ethnic legitimacy in Northern Rakhine, it is not the facts - such as they are – but the perceptions among both groups that their ethnic identity is real and thus 'timeless' that matters. **There can be no resolution to this or any of the other ethnic disputes in Myanmar/Burma by re-examining history, only by deconstructing ethnonationalism.**

While conveniently discounting the expulsions of Muslims from southern Rakhine state in early 1942, it is the expulsions of "Rakhine" Buddhists from the Mayu valley border areas by Muslims during 1942-3 that provides the central narrative justification for the expulsion of Muslims from Rakhine state by "Rakhine" nationalists. However, a central fact is that the Muslims who fled to the Mayu and Nef valleys in 1942 were "Rakhine" Muslims from southern Rakhine state, and not recent incomers from Bengal. And although many undoubtedly were descended from migrant labourer families originating in Bengal in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries (a process encouraged by the British colonists), the evidence suggests that the vast majority were second or third generation assimilated Arakanese speakers. **The real culprit is neither the "Rakhine" people nor what became known as "Rohingya", but the atomisation of society into politically and economically distinct ethnic segments during colonial rule.**

Thus in Rakhine state, within the ethnopositional canon, and along a blurred cultural border, a process of denying ethnic identity to Muslims has advantages for both government and "Rakhine" nationalists:

- It enables spatial control through the denial of citizenship (e.g. limits on movement, and ruralisation) i.e. through denial of ethnic identity, 1982 constitution;
- It enables demographic control through either denial of political voice and/or forced expulsions (e.g. 1982, 1998, 2012); and
- Similarly the subaltern status of "Rakhine" people in comparison with the centre can be addressed by improving their status in the hierarchy vis-a-vis those of perceived Bengali decent rather than improving state provision.

## 4 POLITICS

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This section describes how the politics of post-colonial Myanmar/Burma have led to the current conflict in Northern Rakhine, and how the unequal political settlement that existed prior to 2010 was unsustainable in the context of democratic elections. Before the current rush to liberalisation and the democratic elections of 2010, an unhealthy status quo was preserved in Rakhine state, the key dynamics of which were:

- Ethnopolitics ensured that “Rakhine” people’s political voice was principally threatened by demographic and territorial expansion of those of their rival Muslim population in Rakhine state;
- Demographic hegemony of “Rakhine” could only be sustained by denial of ethnic status – and thus citizenship – to “Rohingya” peoples; and,
- Territorial hegemony was sustained by both government and the “Rakhine” peoples through using a denial of citizenship to control population movement.

### 4.1 EMBEDDING ETHNONATIONALISM: POSTCOLONIAL EXPERIENCE IN RAKHINE STATE

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The newly independent Burmese democracy dealt with ethnic diversity in the first constitution of 1947 by retaining the British induced categorisations and dividing the country into ethnically based 'states' and 'divisions'. Both government and the international community have continued to support the political rights of these colonial sub-categories over and above those of a de-ethnicised Burmese citizenry. These ethnic categories continue to be reimagined, invented, manipulated and politicized – and provide the seeds of instability and violence - to this day<sup>30</sup>.

On the eve of independence, in late 1940, Burmese nationalists elected to sustain the colonial racial divisions created some 60 years earlier in the post-colonial settlement. Further widening of racial and ethnic conflict occurred during the Second World War. That war saw the Burman majority and “Rakhine” Buddhists supporting the Japanese, and fighting Karen, Chin, Shan, Kachin and Muslim groups who were variously supported by the British, Americans and Chinese. As a result Myanmar/Burma faced independence in 1948 as a deeply divided society.

The 1947 Constitution translated the ethnic mapping of British census takers into law. The Constitution aimed to create a state which bridged the three colonial divisions under the single administration of the Union of Burma. Ethnic disaggregation of society in the new state of Myanmar/Burma was initially addressed by granting a high level of autonomy to the former British “Frontier Areas”. However, the relatively autonomous legal position of the states was not enough to overcome the historical divisions (which had been exacerbated during the world war). Insurrections by non-Burmese ethnic groups began in the lowlands immediately after independence. Beginning with insurrection by the Karen in July 1948 (a group which had been favoured by the British), closely followed by the Mon, insurrection

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<sup>30</sup> Heikkila-Horn, Marja-Leena: Op.Cit.

was further fuelled by both economic interests of the local rulers, (particularly in the former Frontier Areas) and by Cold War strategies. Interestingly however, the malleability of ethnicities was also demonstrated by the formation of a united front against Communist Chinese advances.

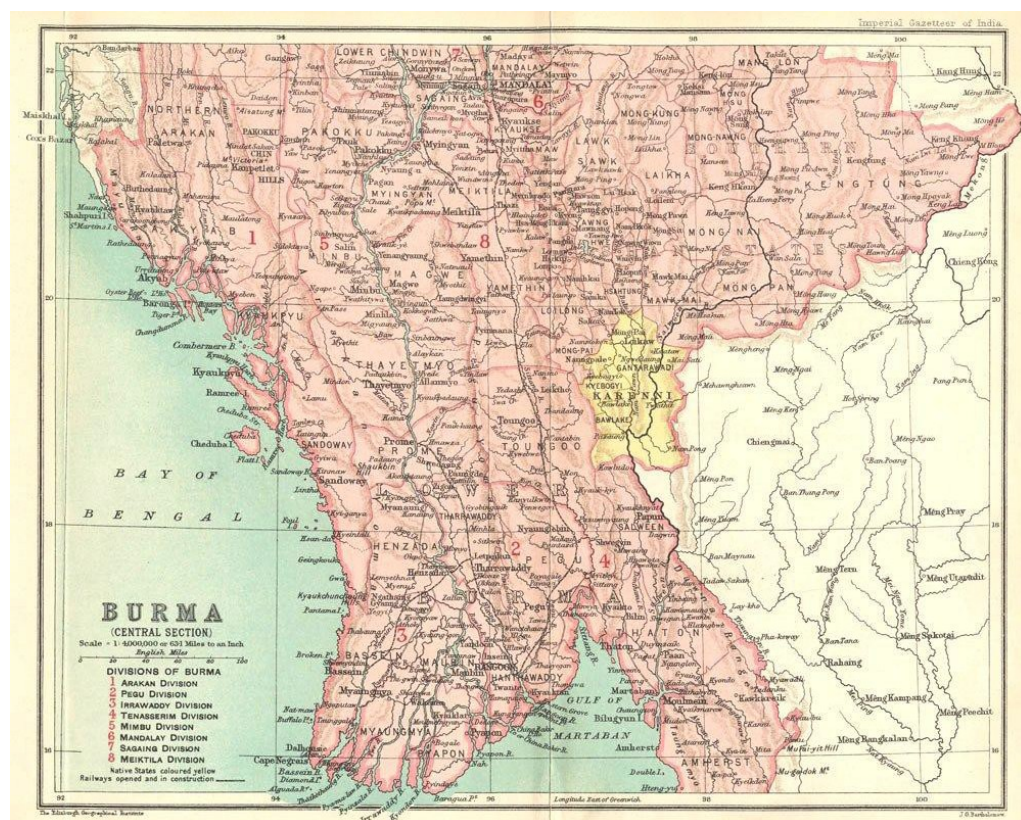


Figure 8: British colonial map of Northern Burma, J. G. Bartholomew: Imperial Gazetteer of India, new edition, Clarendon Press, 1907-9 (accessed from GlobalSecurity.org)

Turmoil over the partition of India and the creation of an independent Muslim state also revitalized conflict in Arakan. One of the least well known of these post-1948 insurrections was that of Arakanese Muslims which was aimed at the creation of an autonomous Muslim state within newly independent Myanmar/Burma. This insurrection was a direct response to insecurity felt within the Muslim population in the aftermath of the Second World War. Arakanese Muslims believed at that time that they would be better off under Pakistani or autonomous rule than that of their erstwhile enemies in Rangoon or the Arakanese Buddhists (whom they had persecuted in British controlled regions, and who had persecuted themselves under Japanese control). This attitude has notably cooled since the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, according to “Rohingya” politicians met during the course of the fieldwork.

Moshe Yegar believes that discrimination was the underlying reason for insurrection<sup>31</sup>. Lall (2009) further suggests that one of the reasons for Muslim uprisings in Arakan was the new government's declaration of Buddhism as the official religion of Myanmar/Burma. This declaration questioned the rights of the Muslim, Christian Karen, Chin and Kachin peoples to

<sup>31</sup> Moshe Yegar: Op. cit.

practice their religions and contributed to the establishment of secessionist movements among those minority groups<sup>32</sup>.

In July 1946 the North Arakan Muslim League was founded in Akyab (modern Sittwe, capital of Arakan State), advocating annexation of modern day Northern Rakhine by Pakistan as part of the post-independence settlement. According to nationalist politicians interviewed, this political move created deep and long-lasting distrust among Arakanese Buddhists of the political motivations of Muslim politicians – and a passionate desire to keep Muslims out of politics in the state. The British colonists and Burmese independence leaders also refused a proposal to establish an autonomous Burmese Muslim state in the Mayu river region around Buthidaung and Maungdaw. As a consequence, the Muslim rebels from Northern Arakan attempted to force the issue by seizing control of the Mayu and Nef valleys on independence from Britain. By June 1949, government control was reduced to Akyab city only (Sittwe), while the insurgents were in possession of all of northern Arakan. At this time the Burmese government accused the insurgents of encouraging illegal immigration into Arakan from Bengal, although evidence for these assertions is anecdotal.

Martial law had been declared in 1948, and the rebellion collapsed in the face of a concerted military campaign, and the Muslim insurgents fled to the hills of northern Arakan. Arakanese Buddhist monks were prominent in opposing the Muslim insurgents and the government launched Operation Monsoon against the remaining rebels under popular pressure in October 1954. After this operation the insurgency declined in both capacity and intent. The last formed units of Muslim fighters in Myanmar/Burma surrendered in 1961, although a few small groups continued to operate from Bangladesh. After the coup d'état of General Ne Win in 1962 brought about hard line military oppression, and the political issue was held in abeyance and the last remnants of insurgency quashed.

## 4.2 ETHNICITY AND CITIZENSHIP: THE BURNING ISSUE

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The Burmese state inherited the British concern with racial categories – and through the progression from democratic to military rule membership of one of these categories increasingly became the only gateway to citizenship. The Constitution of 1947 deliberately divided the country into a Burman heartland and four additional (and implicitly subaltern) ethnic states – Kachin, Chin, Karenni and Shan – to which later Karen, Rakhine and Mon states were added. Given the critical importance of territorial “homelands” and population numbers in an ethnopolitical state, the Burmese government also inherited the British understanding of the importance of census data in managing the segmented populous. By 1953 the Burmese were able to produce a similar census to those generated by the British each decade from 1871. The first Burmese census was the ‘First Stage Census of 1953’ and was followed by ‘Second Stage Census of 1954’. After the coup d'état of General Ne Win, further censuses were compiled<sup>33</sup>. The legacy of these detailed racial and ethno-religious statistics is that they sustained the politically divisive ethnic atomisation introduced in colonial times.

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<sup>32</sup> Lall, Marie (23 November 2009). *Ethnic Conflict and the 2010 Elections in Burma*. Chatham House.

<sup>33</sup> These censuses carefully list the religious affiliation of people. According to the 1953 statistics, 70% of the urban population in Arakan were Buddhist and only 22% were Muslim.

The constitutional requirement for citizens to have an approved ethnic identity dates back to the 1947 constitution and was exacerbated by the 1982 citizenship act. The 1982 citizenship legislation enacted by Ne Win further racialised the constitution by defining citizenship as membership of one of the ethnic groups recorded in Myanmar/Burma before British occupation in 1824, making it more difficult for those of south Asian descent to claim full citizenship. The act recognises the 135 national races in Myanmar/Burma but specifically excludes the “Rohingya”. It replaced the 1948 citizenship act, which had stipulated that any person who has resided in Myanmar/Burma for more than two generations is entitled to citizenship. The 1982 legislation was widely condemned as incompatible with international human rights standards, including the right to a nationality. Amnesty International has slated the law for its *“over-burdensome requirements for citizenship”* and its *“discriminatory effects on racial or ethnic minorities particularly the Arakanese Muslims”*<sup>34</sup>. Considered “illegal Bengali immigrants” by the government, the Arakanese Muslims were restricted in their freedom of movement within Rakhine state and Myanmar/Burma as a whole and denied basic civil rights, such as access to public health and education services (although these services were also denied to other groups to a lesser degree too).

It is almost certain that these preconditions for citizenship have led directly to attempts by Arakanese Muslims to create the “Rohingya” ethnic identity from 1952 onwards. Some Burmese scholars and the Myanmar military authorities rejected the Arakanese Muslim label “Rohingya” as an invention to disguise their immigrant roots as Bengalis – and to avoid the connotations of Burmese ethnic credibility. While undoubtedly many “Rohingya” are descended from late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century immigrants and small numbers may have arrived in 1948-9 and 1971, this analysis has attempted to demonstrate that most are likely to be at least third generation Burmese, and could have been granted citizenship under the 1948 constitution on these grounds. But even if these people are more recent migrants, under international human rights law all are undoubtedly entitled to residency and most to citizenship<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> <http://www.thestateless.com/2012/11/the-myanmar-parliament-block-amendments.html>

<sup>35</sup> Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) provides that “everyone has the right to a nationality” and that “no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.” Enshrining citizenship and the right to be free from arbitrary deprivation of citizenship as human rights in and of themselves, article 15 of the UDHR establishes the bedrock legal relationship between individuals and states. While all states are bound to respect the human rights of all individuals without distinction, an individual's legal bond to a particular state through citizenship remains in practice an essential prerequisite to the enjoyment and protection of the full range of human rights.



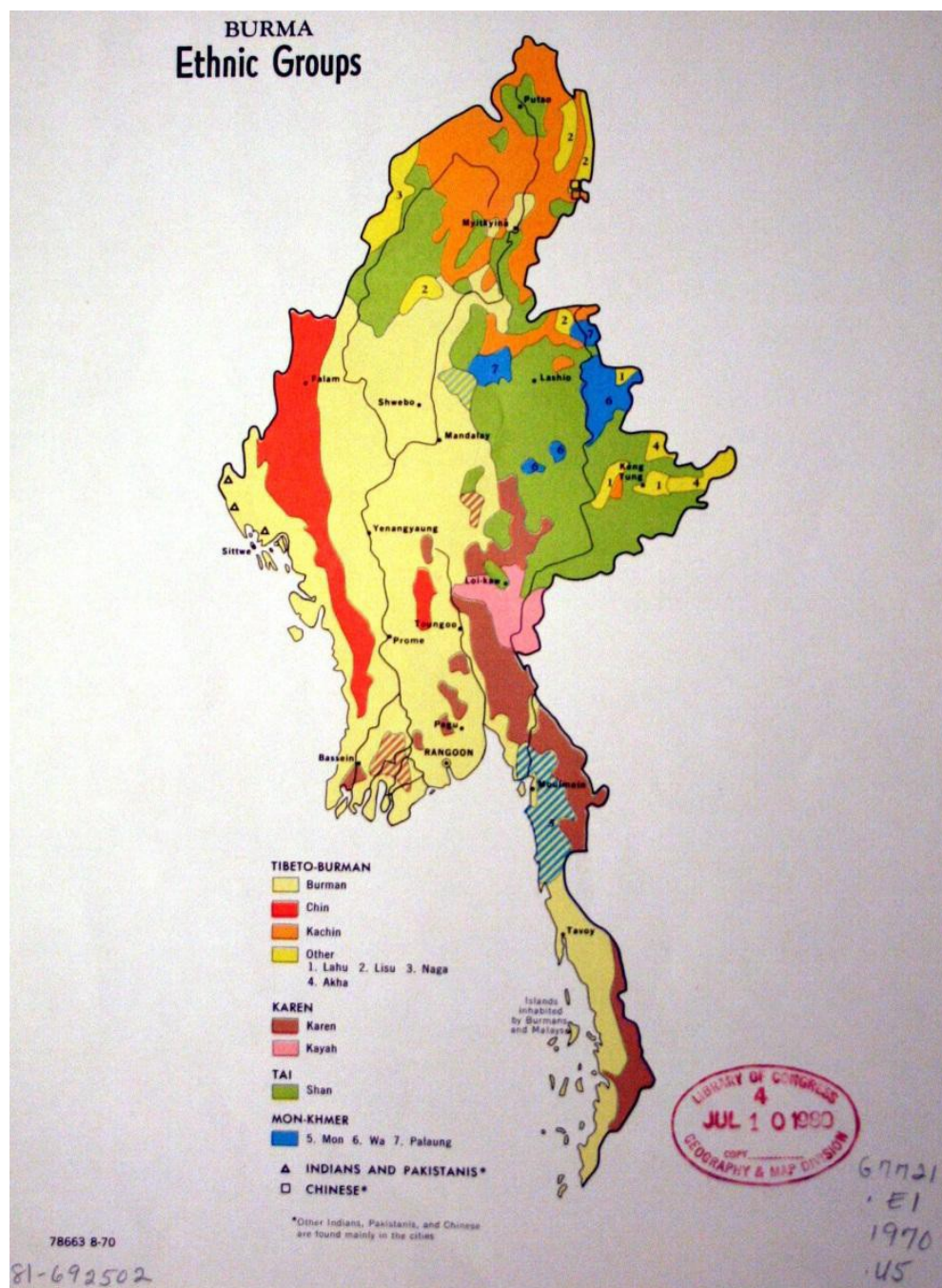


Figure 9: US Army Corps of Engineers: Ethnic Map of Burma 1970 (Library of Congress)

It is likely that most government claims that many Bengalis migrated from Bengal into the Mayu border area during the chaos of 1948-49 had been fabricated by the state to prevent these citizenship claims gaining currency at that time, as there is little evidence for this assertion – nor incentive for Bengali immigration at that time. The refugee influx in 1971 seems to have been restricted to a few thousands. The 1982 citizenship law closed the “loophole” of residency, and defined a pre-1824 ethnic identity as the precondition for citizenship. The scope of that definition – much wider than needed to deal with the contemporary influx of refugees – perhaps suggests that it could have been crafted explicitly to exclude Arakanese Muslims who would have been eligible for citizenship under the 1948 act.

If pre-1824 ethnicity is a precondition for citizenship it is not surprising that Arakanese Muslims have attempted to prove their ancestral heritage in northern Rakhine state, and it is for this reason that the etymology of the self-appellation “Rohingya” has become a burning political issue. Arguments are made by the “Rohingya” nationalists that they are Burmese Muslims with deep roots in Arakan, while “Rakhine” nationalists claim they are recent immigrants escaping the economic and political instability of East Pakistan/Bangladesh.



**Figure 10: Towns under curfew in Rakhine state during 2012 violence (source: Radio Free Asia)**

During the war between India/Bangladesh and Pakistan and after Bangladeshi independence in 1971, some Bengali refugees fled to Arakan due to political turmoil. In 1974, Arakan State was formed by the Ne Win regime to identify Arakanese (now known as Rakhine) as the legitimate ethnicity in the region (interestingly even western ethnic maps prior to 1971 conflate “Rakhine” and “Burman” peoples: Figure 9). In 1974 an emergency immigration act was ratified and action taken against refugee flows which were portrayed as illegal immigration from Bangladesh. In 1975, several thousand Muslims fled from Arakan to Bangladesh (it is unclear whether they were recent migrants or not), and in 1978, Operation “King Dragon” was launched to determine the citizenship of residents in border areas. Arrests during this Operation fermented communal violence in Arakan and a mass exodus of Muslims to Bangladesh occurred (around 252,000 refugees according to UNHCR). Between August 1978 and December 1979, the UNHCR resettled many back in Arakan, although significant diaspora communities have become established across the region from this time, particularly in the Gulf and Malaysia. These events also triggered the enactment of the draconian 1982 citizenship act, which denied most Muslims in Arakan civil rights (see above).

After the 1988 pro-democracy movement triggered a further military coup d’état, international support for the struggle against the military junta grew – inside and outside Myanmar/Burma. During the early 1990s, the military junta signed cease-fire treaties with seventeen armed groups, now known as ‘cease-fire groups’ which created a further fissure between opposition groups and within the international community. “Insiders” – those who supported a reform agenda from within Myanmar/Burma confronted “outsiders”, who held out for a complete capitulation by the military regime and supported those who still took up arms against the government.

Despite these issues, changing regional and international dynamics, in China and India in particular, and greater will among western nations to engage with the Myanmar/Burma Tatmadaw military government led to a reform agenda which unexpectedly progressed to an unprecedentedly fast economic and political liberalisation process from 2008 and to the current democratic settlement and economic liberalisation programme. Yet despite these profound changes, the spectre of ethnopolitics remains the most problematic obstacle in the path of peaceful development. All of the key parties to peace in Myanmar/Burma – government, pro-democracy and ethnic opposition parties and the international community – continue to imagine a Myanmar/Burma not of individual citizens with a political choice, but rather one that is shaped by the unbending demands of the racial and ethnic categories created by the British census takers for colonial administrative purposes a century before.

Throughout this process the international community has tended to engage on the same ethnopolitical territory and accept and mirror the ethnopolitical power struggles within Myanmar/Burma. This has unintended consequences at it, unwittingly reinforces the essentially ungovernable nature of Myanmar/Burma's plural society – in which ethnic groups live in the same spaces but have no common will to coexist. International engagement with the ethnopolitical agenda in Rakhine state dates from this time. After the 1988 takeover the new military regime (State Law and Order Restoration Council – SLORC) initiated a programme to re-ethnicise the border areas with “Rakhine” Buddhists – displacing some Muslim communities in the border areas and creating new Buddhist enclaves in Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships. This provoked another mass exodus of 280,000 Muslims to Bangladesh. By 1994, most of these refugees had been repatriated under the auspices of UNHCR, a process that brought significant numbers of international humanitarian agencies to Northern Rakhine State to support the “Rohingya” population (e.g. Medecins Sans Frontier, 2009). Around 20,000 registered refugees also remained in camps along the Bangladeshi-Myanmar/Burmaborder.

At the same time, the military government had created a special form of policing in the region, by which the *Hluntin* (State Security) governed the border areas as an occupied region, using the citizenship laws to extort labour and resources from resident Muslims. In this context a parallel universe was created where residents of obvious longevity are denied the benefits of the state, and policed as “aliens”, while a large international humanitarian operation picked up the reigns of the state and provided a semi-permanent and yet inferior form of the health and education services denied to these people. In both cases the actions of the government and the international community served to both articulate and reinforce the narrative of ethnic separation implicit in ethnopolitics.

From the international communities' perspective, the actions of humanitarian agencies in sustaining ethnic differentiation by not engaging with the “Rakhine” population may have also created a context in which humanitarian space was limited during the 2012 crisis, by associating international assistance with the politics of the “Rohingya” cause. Similarly the litany of human rights violations and forced expulsions in the Arakan from 1948-92 also began to create a radicalised “Rohingya” ethnopolitical consciousness among diaspora populations, which according to diplomatic and journalistic sources interviewed has also forged links with extreme Islamist organisations elsewhere.



### **4.3 THE 2010 ELECTIONS AND ETHNOPOLITICS IN RAKHINE STATE**

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Ethnopolitics were uncorked again during the elections of 2010. Beyond the National League for Democracy (NLD) and Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), ethnopolitics remain the bedrock on which political parties and platforms are constructed in Myanmar. In Rakhine state the pre-existing inequitable political settlement between “Rakhine” and “Rohingya” elites, (by which “Rakhine” leaders backed by the military government agreed to coexist with Muslims on the understanding that they were denied citizenship, confined to the far North of the state and denied access to land ownership) was largely destroyed during the 2008-10 run up to the plebiscite. As in the period prior to 1962, the incompatibility between constitutional democracy and an instable ethnopolitics probably ignited the flame that led to conflict in 2012. Key issues were:

- Government raises hopes of “Rohingya” citizenship by issuing election registration ‘white cards’ to many Muslims in Rakhine state. This also creates fear of losing hegemony among “Rakhine” politicians;
- Muslim candidates and parties use the election as a platform to campaign for citizenship, further exacerbating the insecurities of “Rakhine” politicians;
- Government responds to “Rakhine” nationalist fears by disallowing some elected national and regional Muslim representatives from taking their seats post-election – creating anger among the Muslim population in Rakhine state;
- Competition for opportunities in a liberalising economy also makes the provision of citizenship to Muslims a threat to elite interests (especially as Muslims have hitherto provided a source of compliant cheap labour), and the requirement for Muslims to obtain livelihoods beyond the law a pretext for officials to extort rents from Muslims in border areas
- These actions, taken alongside a relaxation of military rule (including travel restrictions for Muslims), ramp up ethnopolitical competition in Northern Rakhine and create a tinderbox for conflict – which is ignited in 2012.

While it is difficult to get a simple answer from people in Rakhine state on the precise origins of violence, beyond the highly publicised rape and murder in May 2012, commentary from journalists and politicians suggests that government attempts to procure the vote for “Rakhine” Muslims in the 2010 elections led directly to the 2012 violence in Rakhine state. According to both “Rakhine” and “Rohingya” politicians interviewed, the USDP almost certainly thought that offering votes to Muslims would help ensure that potential “Rakhine” secessionist politicians did not gain control of the state which has most of Myanmar/Burma’s oil and gas resources. The registration of Muslim voters probably also raised concerns among “Rakhine” nationalists that Muslims would receive citizenship in the new democratic dispensation – and informants suggested to the researcher that those concerns ultimately led to radicalisation and violence in 2012.

There is a parallel with similar trigger events in other cases of extreme ethnic violence. When an unpalatable elite-brokered political settlement is looming, a radicalised segment of opinion may plan to resort to any means to change the population dynamics that underpin ethnopolitics. Examples of such settlements as triggers, include the Arusha Accords in Rwanda, which almost certainly served that purpose in the Rwandan genocide of 1994, and the Good Friday Agreement in Ireland, which was followed by a bombing campaign instigated by the Real IRA. The key lesson here is that what might appear to be political progress may have within it the seeds of a backlash against threatening population groups,

and thus reform processes in an ethnopolitical state are fraught with the threat of ethnic violence, pogroms and even genocide.

Evidence collected from key informants during the fieldwork for this report suggests that the issuing of ‘white cards’ (voter registration cards) to Muslims in the run-up to the 2010 elections was a key indication to “Rakhine” nationalists that more radical action might be necessary to sustain hegemony in Rakhine state. “White Cards” were interpreted by Muslims and “Rakhine” alike as the first step on the road to full citizenship. Since perceptions are everything in ethnopolitics, the impact of generations of prejudicial racial narrative led many “Rakhine” residents to believe that an enfranchised Muslim population would demand either secession or the imposition of Sharia Law in the state – and more importantly deny the “Rakhine” people their own rights and freedoms in retaliation for historical persecution. For the “Rakhine” political elite and radicalised religious and youth

leaders this became an issue of life and death.

Muslim politicians actively campaigned in 2010 on the citizenship issue, further stoking the insecurities of “Rakhine” nationalists. Although after the election the government attempted to quell “Rakhine” fears by disallowing Muslim representatives from sitting in the state and national assemblies, they did relax some of the pernicious travel restrictions imposed during military rule. In the light of ethnopolitical conflict elsewhere, one interpretation of the violence in 2012 is a last ditch attempt by “Rakhine” nationalists to prevent “Rohingya” citizenship by using violence to change the populations dynamics in the state.

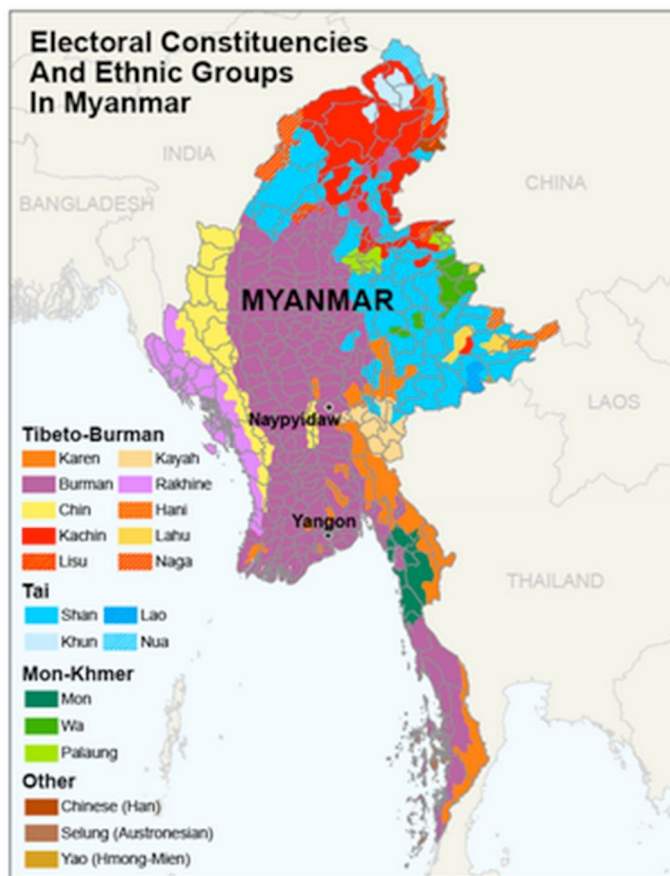


Figure 11. Map of Electoral Constituencies and Ethnicities (Burma Campaign 2010)

## 4.4 2012 VIOLENCE IN RAKHINE STATE

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### 4.4.1 The Chronology of Violence

The rape and murder of a young Buddhist woman in southern Rakhine in May 2012 set off a chain of events which lasted for months and resulted in:

- The deaths of probably hundreds of people,
- The displacement of more than 100,000 mostly Muslim residents,
- Expulsions of Muslims from Sittwe and other towns; and,
- Further attacks on Muslims throughout Rakhine state in October, including those from communities of proven pre-colonial ancestry.

Three Muslim men were later arrested for the rape. Two were sentenced to death and one died in custody. The rape and murder was extensively covered by a Rakhine nationalist paper which has been accused by human rights groups of inciting retaliation. The paper was belatedly shut down by government and has subsequently been accused of "hate media". On 4th June, "Rakhine" mobs killed 10 Muslim men in retaliation, although they were not from Rakhine state, but travelling by bus from Central Myanmar/Burma to Rakhine for a pilgrimage and were unconnected with the earlier incident.

On 8<sup>th</sup> June, Muslim organized protest demonstrations took place in Maungdaw Township. According to government reports a mob of Muslim youths attacked Buddhist houses in Bohmu Village, in the border areas of Northern Rakhine. Government reported 5 people were killed that day. On 9th June five army battalions arrived to reinforce the existing security presence in Maungdaw and Buthidaung and the following day a state of emergency was declared across Rakhine State. It was the first time that the current government used this provision which instigated martial law, giving the military administrative control of the region. The move was welcomed by many as the border police were already deeply compromised in the eyes of the "Rohingya" although it was also criticized by Human Rights Watch, who accused the government of handing control over to a military which had historically brutalized people in the region.

On 12 June, a "Rakhine" nationalist mob attacked Muslim areas in Sittwe and Muslims were "relocated" to camps in rural areas beyond the state capital. The numbers of casualties were officially revised to 21 on 13<sup>th</sup> June. A top United Nations envoy visited the region affected by the riots. On 14 June, The government also estimated 2,500 homes had been destroyed and 30,000 people displaced by the violence. Thirty-seven camps across Rakhine housed mostly Muslim refugees. As of 28<sup>th</sup> June, casualty figures were updated to 80 deaths and an estimated 90,000 people were displaced and taking refuge in temporary camps according to official reports. Several thousand Muslims attempted to flee across the border to Bangladesh, though most were forced back to Myanmar/Burma. Tun Khin, the President of the Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK (BROUK), stated that as of 28<sup>th</sup> June 650 "Rohingyas" had been killed, 1,200 were missing, and more than 80,000 had been displaced. Muslims who fled to Bangladesh also claimed that the Myanmar/Burma army and police shot groups of villagers.

The Government of Myanmar arrested 10 UNHCR workers and charged three with "stimulating" the riots. António Guterres, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, visited Yangon and asked for the release of the UN workers which Myanmar's President Thein Sein

said he would not allow, but asked if the UN would help to resettle up to 1,000,000 Rohingya Muslims in either refugee camps in Bangladesh or some other country. The UN rejected U Thein Sein's proposal.

Violence between Muslims and Buddhists broke out again in late October. According to the Burmese government, more than 80 people were killed, more than 22,000 people were displaced, and more than 4,600 houses destroyed. The outburst of fighting brought the total number of displaced since the beginning of the conflict to 100,000. The violence began in the towns of Min Bya and Mrauk U, but spread across the state. Muslims of all ethnicities were reported to be targets of the violence. Several Muslim groups announced that they would not be celebrating Eid al-Adha because they felt the government could not protect them.

On 27<sup>th</sup> October, a spokesperson for U Thein Sein acknowledged "incidents of whole villages and parts of towns being burnt down in Rakhine state", after Human Rights Watch released a satellite image showing hundreds of Muslim buildings destroyed in Kyaukpyu on Ramree Island. The United Nations reported on 28 October that 3,200 more displaced people had fled to refugee camps in Bangladesh, and an estimated additional 2,500 were still in transit. In early November, Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) reported that pamphlets and posters were being distributed in Rakhine State threatening aid workers who treated Muslims, causing almost its entire local staff to resign<sup>36</sup>.

#### **4.4.2 Analysis**

The initial rape was heavily publicized by media outlets in Rakhine state. This sparked suggestions by journalists interviewed in Yangon that the issue was being deliberately used by Rakhine nationalists to incite violence against Muslims in the state to forestall further moves towards full citizenship that had been implicit in the issuing of election registration cards in 2010, and were likely to proceed from the liberalization of Myanmar/Burma's politics and economy.

The outcomes indicate that the **violence may well have fulfilled a political objective to resolve the "Rohingya" question through changing the population dynamics in the state**. This sets a dangerous precedent for the resolution of other outstanding ethno-political issues in Myanmar/Burma. Key issues include:

- The trigger was a rape and murder. Rape is a metaphor in war for the genetic dominance of another – by 'taking by force a people's bloodline', the perfect issue to use as a precept for expulsions or pogroms;
- The bus killings occurred well away from Muslim areas – at the spatial gateway to Myanmar/Burma Proper;
- Muslim demonstration in Maungdaw led to communal violence and reciprocal action in Sittwe, which included the ethnic cleansing of Muslims from the city;
- The Buddhist clergy was very active in promoting an anti-Muslim position in the state;
- The violence subsequently spread to other cities in October, affecting Muslim communities previously seen as ethnically legitimate;

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<sup>36</sup> This account is drawn from a number of sources including the BBC Website, UNHCR website and Wikipedia.

- The violence has legitimized the expulsions of Muslims from the major cities in Rakhine state, and the “ruralisation” of the Muslim population; and,
- The violence initially provoked the President to offer an ethnopolitical solution, to forcibly evict the Muslim population from Rakhine to neighbouring states, a statement that was subsequently changed.

The fact that the violence spread beyond the border regions and into communities whose coexistence with Buddhist communities pre-dates the colonial period, also exposes the spurious nature of the debate over the historical legitimacy of the “Rohingya” for what it is – a veil to disguise the real issue, which is to ensure that those racially characterised as ‘alien’ are not allowed to participate in the more open politics of a democratic dispensation, and remain either presented but not represented in Myanmar/Burma society as second class citizens, or are excluded from society altogether – through expulsion or death. Given the virulent nature of the racial discourse against south Asians and Muslims in Myanmar/Burma, with its historical roots in colonial stereotyping, these populations are probably the most vulnerable to forced exclusion. Nevertheless, when other ethnic issues emerge during the coming years, these events may well create a precedent for further coercive expulsions and killings which may put democracy itself at risk once again.

#### **4.5 CONCLUSIONS**

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What is clear from the historical record is that **the post-independence democratic settlement was unable to hold together the plural society created during colonial times without coercion**, and in the end collapsed under its inability to use ethnopolitics to govern by consensus a society whose members perceived themselves as pursuing separate, competitive and conflicting agendas from their ethnic neighbours.

As in similarly disaggregated states such as Nigeria and Pakistan, **it was only through the recreation of the colonial modality of coercive rule, through centralised military apparatus controlled by the most dominant ethnic group, that peace could be enforced (and then only partially) and the integrity of the Myanmar/Burma state sustained**. What is also clear from this analysis is that only a refocusing of politics away from the relationship between ethnic group leaderships and the state, and towards direct citizen-state relations is likely to hold out the possibility of consensual rule in future. Without the will of all ethnic groups to coexist as citizens, it is unlikely that a more stable and less divisive non-ethnic politics can emerge.

**There is no doubt that the Muslims in Arakan have suffered disproportionately from racial engineering under successive Burmese administrations.** Colonial and post-colonial documentary evidence, and fieldwork undertaken for this study in Muslim settlements around Sittwe, suggests that most are native Arakanese speakers descended either from 19th and early 20th century immigrant communities who fled to the border areas in 1942, or from pre-colonial Muslim communities resident in these areas. Most are therefore Arakanese Muslims rather than recent incomers from East Pakistan/Bangladesh.

**Since 1948 the use of narratives of ethnic violence, coercion and the law to deny Muslims civil rights has served a useful political purpose for both government (to preserve unity) and “Rakhine” nationalists (to retain hegemony) and the international community (to justify humanitarian intervention within Myanmar’s borders).** For “Rakhine” nationalists a Muslim claim to citizenship will deny them historical hegemony in Northern Rakhine state. In many ways this is not a dissimilar issue to the apprehension felt by Protestants over giving civil rights

to Catholics in Northern Ireland, or the causes of violence surrounding the civil rights movement in the southern United States during the 1950s and 60s.

**After 2008 the stakes increased as democratic participation for Muslims in Rakhine state implied also creating a large voting block which would oppose “Rakhine” Buddhist control over Rakhine state politics** – and bring a powerful grouping with long-term historical animosities to the “Rakhine” ethnic identity into the power equation in the state. It also provided an opportunity for government to counter “Rakhine” nationalist support for the opposition National League for Democracy. These actions almost certainly created the context in which radical action to prevent the Muslim population in Rakhine achieving citizenship could be contemplated.

**Violence in 2012 has created a new and disturbing reality for Muslims in Rakhine and Myanmar/Burma**, which has driven the majority of the Muslim population out of the cities and into rural areas where they remain dependent upon government and international community assistance. Popular support for an anti-Muslim position was expressed throughout society, including among other marginalized ethnic groups, suggesting that the racial stereotyping implicit in ethnopolitics is accepted throughout Myanmar/Burma.

**So far the winners and losers have been:**

**Winners: government and military**

- Gained a new constituency among the “Rakhine” majority
- Re-imposed popular military rule
- Improved standing vis-à-vis Pro-democracy movement
- Gained land and resources through allowing expulsions to ruralize the “Rohingya” population
- Generally perceived by international community to have acted correctly in suspending violence

**Losers: pro-democracy movement**

- While refusing to play ethnopolitics by supporting one group over another is correct, it is also an unpopular position with the Buddhist majority in Myanmar/Burma.
- Failing to speak out against ethnic violence and expulsions also compromises the integrity of the movement; and,
- “Rakhine” and “Rohingya” – both have both lost political rights and freedoms – some to the point of death or expulsion from homes and country.





## 5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE WIDER INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

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### 5.1 STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES

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The central finding of this conflict analysis is that the “rules of the game” in Myanmar/Burma conflicts – ethnopolitics – are not fit for purpose in a democratic settlement, and only an evolution away from ethnopolitics towards a more level playing field – where citizenship is not determined by ethnicity – can help representative democracy evolve into a useful forum for political competition. Ethnopolitics encourage people to seek representation not as equal citizens within a national political dispensation but as members of an ethnically defined hierarchy of states-within-the-state. As such it is very difficult for members of these ethnically defined subdivisions to peacefully or cooperatively co-exist so long as they continue to believe that their lives and fortunes have little co-dependence.

The evidence from the 1948-62 post-colonial attempt at democracy is that ethnic conflict was not replaced by representative politics, as people were unwilling to vote beyond their ethnicity and population numbers as revealed by censuses rather than plebiscites became the real currency of power. The solutions to such a politics were inevitably violent and it proved beyond the state’s ability to prevent ethnic conflict, which was only brought under control (and never completely ended), by a re-imposition of the colonial model of coercive rule by a military hierarchy dominated by the largest ethnic group.

The Muslim and south Asian populations are the most vulnerable to forcible exclusion because the racial discourse in Myanmar/Burma, evolved through colonial precedent and historical actions to clear Muslims and south Asians from more central regions, has placed them literally (in Northern Rakhine state) and figuratively at the very edge of society – at the point where they can easily be allowed to disappear from view. Yet other ethnicities are also close to the edge and their turn may well come in the future.

To escape its ethnopolitical past will be a difficult task for Myanmar/Burma, one which can only begin by placing new emphasis on providing access to the universal benefits of the state. An emphasis on state provision for all citizens will also require action to de-emphasize the political importance of ethnicity. A focus on citizen benefits such as social insurance provision – perhaps learning from models elsewhere in Southeast Asia – and equality before the law may be good places to begin. In the meantime work to resolve ethnic disputes could be remodeled as negotiations for previously described “ethnic peoples” to reintegrate into society as full citizens, an idea that is developed in the recommendations. In this task, work could focus on bringing together the myriad peace processes between different ethnic groups into a single process of nation-building, in which the terms of citizenship are redefined along universal but non-ethnic lines. Pyoe Pin can be used as a vehicle to promote any of the initiatives set out above. Other approaches that may be of interest to the programme and DFID:

1. Diluting ethnopolitics will be a long term transition; the best bet is in the short term is to ensure that interventions do not reinforce it.



2. The narrative needs to shift away from the ethnopolitics of territory and demography, to improved state-citizen relationships - NGOs and UN have unwittingly fallen into the ethnopolitical trap in Northern Rakhine – and certainly contribute to the problem.
3. Negotiating state wide multi-donor umbrella programmes to ensure that all groups appear to get equal treatment.
4. Assuring that donor, UN and NGO employment (the key benefit of international aid to the educated classes) is not determined by ethnicity (however pragmatic the justifications may be).
5. Rule of law and terms of trade with Bangladesh may provide entry points – dialogue on border and immigration controls and enforcement, for example.

## 5.2 HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

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Key points arising from the ethnopolitical perspective include:

- There remains a critical requirement to not have current expulsions appear a fait accompli. OCHA/UNHCR plans to sustain the camps through the provision of longer-term support will take away the problem (most “Rohingya” in Sittwe are only displaced a few kilometres from their homes) – and thus the rationale for dialogue to solve it. While there is only a slim chance of a return in the short-term, keeping the door open by problematizing expulsions will sustain the longer term potential for resolution. It is important to note here that pragmatic tactic acceptance of “ethnic cleansing” by the international community in Bosnia has led to a long term inability to reconstruct a plural national politics, and a continuing requirement for custodianship and oversight by the international community. Humanitarian assistance should only be provided if it is for life saving purposes. Longer term assistance should only be provided at displacement camps conditional upon government entering into negotiations on the eventual return of expelled populations to their former places of residence.
- If internally displaced status remains problematic with the international community it can become the vehicle to encourage dialogue over Muslim rights and reintegration.
- Donors should not support the provision of livelihoods or education services in situ where people have been ethnically cleansed– rather work to enable people to return to their schools and workplaces in the future, such as bus services and the reconstruction of city schools. Preventing the permanent ruralisation and creation of dependent communities is key to de-legitimizing ethnopolitical solutions.
- It is also important to prevent this issue setting an ‘expulsions’ precedent for resolving other ethnopolitical disputes as reform continues. We do not want another Yugoslavia. For this reason ensuring that humanitarian assistance does not legitimise expulsions is critical, and sustaining dialogue with government over the requirement for returns – even if uncomfortable – is essential. There are useful precedents from communal violence in 1971 and 1979, when UNHCR backed by the international community insisted that Myanmar/Burma accept the repatriation of Muslim refugees from Bangladesh.

### 5.3 CITIZEN AND NATION-BUILDING

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Regarding nation building:

- **A focus on new nation and/or state-wide programmes** that provide support to citizenship and nation building. Areas of key focus could be:
  - **Universal healthcare, education and social security provision** – ensuring that access is universal for all citizens – i.e. members of all ethnic groups some of which are discussed in section 5
  - **Rule of law** – especially a process to ensure that all citizens are given universal rights and responsibilities. ***Immigration law and enforcement might be a good place to begin*** – both working on effective controls and at the same time ensuring that citizenship is extended to all members of society.
  - **Employment and livelihoods** – especially equality of access to livelihoods opportunities – this is a key area for Pyaw Pin.
- Work to construct a **single peace-process to replace the myriad ethnicized processes**. This single process could **focus on nation-building by constructing a new vision of citizenship in Myanmar/Burma**, and eventually lead to discussions on incorporating this into a new non-ethnic constitutional dispensation.
- High quality employment is one of the greatest benefits of international aid, and also provides a key opportunity to recruit and work with a multi-ethnic cadre of the country's future leaders. **Ensuring that donors and partner agencies recruit widely from across all ethnic groups, and beyond ethnic areas to create a multi-ethnic cadre of development professions working on citizenship issues across Myanmar/Burma**. For example, a central recruitment policy for a multi-donor group might include an agreement that all donor programmes will select from this group of trainees first. A training package for all these workers might be jointly funded and include specific courses to explore the dangers of ethnic politics and how nation building may be promoted to counter the threat to democracy.

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