Discourses of Exclusion: The Societal Securitization of Burma's Rohingya (2012–2018)

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Abstract

The contemporary persecution of Burma's Rohingya has rapidly evolved from isolated episodes of communal violence into a global humanitarian crisis. The article analyses the evolution of the recent violence in Rakhine State from 2012 to the present. Specifically, I argue that Buddhist nationalist monks, including members of the '969' Movement and Ma Ba Tha, in concert with the Burmese government, have acted as authoritative voices in society, depicting the Rohingya ethno-religious group as an existential threat to the country's majority Buddhist population. As such, hate-filled rhetoric has provided a politically unstable Burmese regime with an ideological justification for human rights abuses committed in Rakhine State. This phenomenon is analysed through Barry Buzan and Ole Waever's securitization thesis as a means of better understanding the discursive relationship among Buddhist nationalist monks, the Burmese government and the Burmese Buddhists. Ontologically, this article focuses on anti-Rohingya discourse and major episodes of violence in western Burma's Rakhine State from 2012 to 2018. As a discursive process, securitization has not merely amplified Islamophobia within Burma, but significantly endangers future generations of Rohingya civilians.

Keywords

Burma, Myanmar, Rohingya, securitization, ethnic conflict

Introduction

The contemporary plight of the Rohingya, well documented by human rights observers and experts in the field, has only recently gained widespread attention

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from the international community. While periodic surges in Rohingya-targeted violence have been an enduring feature of Burma state/society relations since the 1970s, the recent persecution represents the state's most systematic effort to remove the Rohingya from the state. Thus, episodes of extreme violence, post-2012, should not be understood merely as the logical culmination of exclusionary government policies over time. Rather, a surge in virulent rhetoric expressed by certain members of nationalist monastic organizations and high-ranking officials in the Burmese government, now represent a systematized attempt to delegitimize the Rohingya's physical presence in Burma.

Burmese military regimes, past and present, have systematically refused to address widespread human rights violations committed against the Rohingya population. Briefly recognized as 'legitimate' ethnic minorities during Burma's parliamentary democracy period (1948–1962), Rohingya civil rights gradually eroded under Dictator Ne Win's military regime (1962–1988). In 1974, under Win's new socialist constitution, the Rohingya were labelled as foreign citizens and mandated to carry registration cards to distinguish them from native Burmans (Ibrahim, 2016, p. 50). This was a crucial step in discrediting the Rohingya as an ethnic group, perpetuating the dangerous myth that the Rohingya are merely Bengalis living in Burma.

Rhetorically, Ne Win's attitude towards the Rohingya was expressed through his belief that non-Burmans were not to be trusted. As a 'mixed blood' race, the Rohingya along with other ethnic minorities were viewed as sowers of division (Wade, 2017, p. 55). Military operations in 1978 initiated under the guise of deporting illegals, led to the exodus of over 200,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh. The military junta's relocation schemes in 1991 and 1997 severely restricted the movement of the Rohingya within Rakhine State, charging locals hefty fees to move from one village to the next (ibid., p. 93).

More recently, as explained in later sections, recent waves of anti-Rohingya violence have been met with complicity at the least, or active participation from Burmese security forces (*Tatmadaw*). During President Obama's meeting with former Burmese President Thein Sein in 2012, Sein enunciated 11 principles for reform, one of which was addressing humanitarian needs in Rakhine State (Sullivan, 2014). Since that meeting, living conditions for Rohingya have deteriorated exponentially. Under the guise of a new 'democratic opening', State Councillor Aung San Suu Kyi and leading members of her National League for Democracy (NLD) party have refused to substantively address the plight of the Rohingya.

As large numbers of ethnic Rohingya continue to live in deplorable conditions in displacement camps, a spokesman for *United to End Genocide* (2016) writes, 'The only decisive action the government has taken in Rakhine has been decidedly negative'. Currently, many Rohingya subsist in concentration camp-like conditions with a host of restrictions placed on their freedom of movement. Since 2012, large numbers of Rohingya have fled to neighbouring Bangladesh, Malaysia and Thailand. Those who survived the journey have typically found few prospects for integration into broader society. Recent *Tatmadaw* operations in Rakhine have led to the mass exodus of Rohingya civilians, culminating in the United Nations'

declaration that 'ethnic cleansing' is currently taking place within Rakhine State (Cumming-Bruce, 2017). To date, United Nations' estimates show that over 600,000 Rohingya have been forced to flee Rakhine since 25 August 2017. Approximately 800,000 refugees are currently living in squalid conditions in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh (United Nations, 2017).

Government-sponsored persecution against the Rohingya has not always been a feature of Burmese politics. While targeted violence against migrants was present during the colonial era, these riots were fuelled more by economic resentment than ethno-religious nationalism (Ibrahim, 2016, p. 50). During the brief parliamentary period (1948–1962), Rohingya political parties were a visible force in the capital (Wade, 2017, p. 65). Additionally, in the early years of military rule, the government had officially recognized the Rohingya as legitimate residents of Rakhine State (ibid., p. 66). In the interest of promoting its 'Burmese way to socialism' during the 1960s, the Ne Win regime initially downplayed the importance of ethnicity and religion, preferring to focus on national economic development instead (Aung-Thwin & Myint-U, 1992, pp. 72–73).

Bamar ethno-nationalism[1] surged during the 1970s in large parts due to the abject failure of the military regime's ambitious economic programme. Through the 1974 constitution and the 1982 citizenship laws, respectively, Rohingya were tasked with the burden of proving that they were not Bengali migrants. In practice, most Rohingya were disqualified from citizenship as few could provide documentation indicating that their families had lived in Burma prior to 1823 (Ibrahim, 2016, p. 51). Therefore, the social construction of Rohingya as potential enemies of the state has been a gradual process, serving the needs of a regime which has frequently relied on scapegoats to weather domestic political crises. More recently, the military's rhetorical cover for human rights violations in Rakhine State has shifted from an apparent concern over immigration and border security, to a broader counter-terrorism narrative. This, coupled with virulent language expressed by radical nationalist monks, now places the existential security of the Rohingya population under unprecedented threat.

In this vein, this research is motivated by a core research puzzle, namely the complex and interactive relationship between anti-Rohingya discourse and episodes of extreme violence. In other words, if the regime's rhetorical marginalization of Rohingya in Burma reaches back into the 1970s, what then explains intensified violence in recent years? In short, I argue that three major socio-political developments have shaped contemporary anti-Rohingya discourse. First, military crackdowns, culminating in Burma's Saffron Revolution (2007), have led to a crisis in regime legitimacy. As a means of retaining control, the military decided to embark on a path of disciplined political and economic liberalization. In the absence of a clear rationale for governance, the contemporary military regime has sought to 'protect' the ethnic Bamar population from the encroachment of 'foreign' Rohingya.[2] Secondly, the military regime has deliberately cultivated support from hard-line Buddhist nationalist monks as a means of generating symbolic legitimacy. This Faustian bargain has bolstered the regime's acceptability among ethno-nationalists but has also inadvertently created an

alternative locus of power for charismatic radical monks. In either case, the regime's cooperation with Buddhist hardliners has created a platform for anti-Rohingya and anti-Muslim discourse to spread across the country.

Finally, while domestic variables are of primary importance in this study, shifting international responses to the Rohingya crisis have, at least in part, shaped the regime's policies in Rakhine State. Apart from rhetorical condemnation and token sanctions, the international community has done little to hold the Burmese regime accountable for its actions. In the context of a more isolationist United States' foreign policy, the Burmese military junta has pursued its policies in Rakhine State with relative impunity.

The following analysis focuses attention on anti-Rohingya discourse and corresponding episodes of violence in Rakhine State from 2012 to the present. I have deliberately selected this time frame for the study, as it represents a fascinating confluence of events, namely a spike in Buddhist nationalism negotiated through an uncertain political transition from military to quasi-civilian rule. It also marks an upsurge in Rohingya-targeted violence, commencing with communal rioting in 2012, leading directly to the mass exodus of Rohingya from Burma. While ethno-religious tensions in Burma pre-date to 2012, by deliberately narrowing the temporal scope of inquiry, I am better able to infer how a specific political and social *milieu* created an atmosphere conducive to the renewal of ethno-religious violence in Rakhine State.

Historical Background

Burma is incredibly diverse, as over 130 distinct ethnic groups are thought to live within the state. Chizom Ekeh and Martin Smith write, 'Over 2,000 years of cross-border migration and intermixing between cultures has led to the development of diverse ethnic settlements and communities residing both in mountainous frontier zones and lowland plains areas of the country' (Ekeh & Smith, 2007). Since the British-colonial period, religion has played a dominant role in reinforcing communal divisions. While over two-thirds of Burma's population is Buddhist, significant numbers of Christians live in the eastern states, while a growing number of Muslims (roughly 4%) live mainly in the West.[3] For both administrative and political purposes, the Burmese government officially recognizes only seven ethnic minority groups. The Muslim Rohingya[4] are presently not legally recognized as a legitimate ethnic group and are largely disqualified from citizenship as consequence of the country's 1982 nationality law.[5] The social and political implications of this dynamic will be more closely scrutinized in later sections.

Ethno-religious violence, at both the communal and state levels, has plagued the country since its independence in 1948. Following a brief experiment with parliamentary democracy from 1948 to 1962, power-sharing institutions eventually broke down, with the military stepping in to restore law and order. Since the 1962 coup, ethno-religious conflict has manifested as a product of historical memory. During the colonial period, ethnic minority groups tended to align closely with the British, supporting the latter's military efforts during the

Second World War. At the outset of the Japanese invasion, the majority Bamar[6] ethnic group initially allied themselves with Japan, with independence leader and nationalist hero, General Aung San having received his own military training from the Japanese. The alliances forged during this war were not forgotten in the collective consciousness. Since 1962, successive military regimes have initiated battles against ethnic *militias* and ordinary citizens alike in the interest of state preservation. Of Burma, Michael Gravers observes, 'Differences in ethnicity and religion had been so deeply ingrained into nationalism that every political action had to be placed in relation to past stereotypes and violent events' (Gravers, 1993, p. 49). Regime animosity towards ethnic minorities culminated in the infamous 'four cuts' policy, whereby the military regime sought to punish civilians for real or perceived support for ethnic *militias* (Callahan, 2003).

The Burmese military (*Tatmadaw*) holds a unique place in the country's history. As the consolidators of the independence movement, they have consistently aimed to cultivate respect among the majority Bamar population. Perversely, through decades of ethnic warfare, they have enhanced their prestige as the sole institution capable of protecting the state's territorial integrity. Apart from arms taken up against ethnic minority groups, the military relies upon a certain discourse of threat to mobilize support in an otherwise underperforming state. In terms of government effectiveness, Burma continually ranks lower than its neighbours, indicating the regime's inability or unwillingness to deliver goods and services to its citizens. According to United Nations Development Programme, over 20 per cent of Burma's citizens still live under the poverty line (United Nations, 2017). In response to persistent economic underdevelopment, it is unsurprising that the military tries to convince the population that ethnic threats are salient and in need of emergency response. Following the 2007 Saffron Revolution, and the corresponding atmosphere of uncertainty surrounding the military's future role in Burma, its need to exert authority has taken on new urgency. Thus, I argue that the newly intensified marginalization of the Rohingya serves the military's need to remain relevant, in part through consolidating a loyal base of support among the Buddhist nationalists.

Securitization Theory

The current marginalization and persecution of the Rohingya serves as an example of societal securitization at work. What follows is a brief overview of securitization theory, and its utility in explaining the contemporary conflict in Rakhine State.

The security studies literature is both expansive and contentious. Prior to the 1980s, security was typically conceptualized in narrow terms. For many decades in mainstream international relations scholarship, the referent object for security has been the state. According to this perspective, threats to states either came internally, through domestic revolutions or civil wars, or externally, through the possibility of interstate war. In the traditional scholarship, there was a near consensus that any theoretical analysis of security must be parsimonious enough to permit meaningful generalizations. As states, in the realist tradition, were

thought to be functionally alike with similar security interests, objective and dispassionate research was deemed both possible and desirable.

As early as the 1960s, certain scholars thought it proper to expand the notion of security to better capture the complexity of the subject matter itself. Arnold Wolfers famously defined security as 'the absence of threat to acquired values' (Baldwin, 1997, p. 13). While his definition is deliberately broad, it moves scholars closer to understanding security as featuring both objective and subjective elements. Here, security is imagined as something inherently more complex than physical threats to the state apparatus. Wolfers and his disciples argue that traditionalists have reified the state, ignoring the complex and subtle processes that constitute and reconstitute authority within a given territory. Those who broadened the concept built a foundation for the emerging human security literature; a tradition that identifies the individual as the referent object for security analysis.

For Barry Buzan and members of the Copenhagen School, the term 'security' is value-laden and inter-subjective. In other words, since there is no singular satisfactory definition for security, the term itself becomes inherently contestable. Buzan and his colleagues can be properly labelled as security 'wideners' since their idea is not to simply endorse the traditional view of security through the exclusive ontology of the state. In *People, States and Fear*, Buzan writes, 'the domination of the concept by the idea of national security, and the militarized interpretation of security, to which this approach easily, though not necessarily gave rise, was criticized by several authors as excessively narrow and hollow' (Buzan, 1991, p. 28). Despite their advocacy for a broader notion of security, Buzan and his colleagues still do rely upon the state as an important referent object, a point that serves as a matter of contention among contemporary critical security theorists.

In Buzan and Waever's *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, the authors argue that securitization is a phenomenon which occurs outside the bounds of normal politics. They write, 'Security is the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or above politics' (Buzan, Waever, & de Wilde, 1998, p. 23). Existential threats are what motivate securitization, though what connotes an existential threat is inherently contestable. In Barry Buzan and Lene Hansen's *The Evolution of International Security Studies*, the authors remark, 'Subjective approaches to security emphasize the importance of history and norms, of the psychologies of fear and (mis)perception and of the relational contexts (friends, rivals, neutrals, enemies), within which threats are framed' (Buzan & Hansen, 2009, p. 33).

In Buzan and Waever's account, the discursive security process moves through three stages. In the first step, an authoritative voice(s) within a given society identifies an existential threat that requires extra-political action. This message is targeted at the referent object, or a specific discursive audience. In the second case, emergency action is proposed and taken. The third step traces the effects of speech on the referent objects themselves (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 26). The last part of this process is critical in determining the success of a securitization narrative, as the intended audiences' acceptance of the rhetoric is what truly matters. In this sense,

an existential threat cannot be made real until the targeted population accepts its authenticity.

While Buzan et al.'s ontology remains state-centred, they also argue that securitization can be conceived in societal terms. They remark, 'the abilities to maintain and reproduce a language, a set of behavioral customs, or a concept of ethnic purity can all be cast in terms of survival' (ibid., p. 23). In addition, long-term patterns of societal hostility can effectively institutionalize security threats, making them appear natural and thus difficult to challenge. In such a scenario, the need to use dramatic language decreases as the message becomes accepted and normalized. In this environment, popular stereotypes can drive the process of politicization and securitization. In the societal securitization rhetorical process, there is always a need to construct and define what one's own identity or ethnicity means in context. In an ever changing political and economic *milieu*, one may emphasize a specific identity at certain times while downplaying it at others. Thus, as a fluid process, ethnic identity is subject to reinterpretation, fuelled through the work of ethnic chauvinists, or an individual/group possessing an authoritative voice. Rita Taureck writes, 'In practice, securitization is thus far from being open to all units and their respective subjective threats. Rather, it is largely based on power and capability and the means to socially and politically construct a threat' (Taureck, 2006, p. 55).

Overall, within the critical security studies literature, the notion of societal securitization has become increasingly relevant. Ole Waever defines the concept as 'the defense of an identity against a perceived threat, or more precisely the defense of a community against a perceived threat to its identity' (Wæver, 2008, p. 581). The shape or scope of the relevant community under threat varies according to context, as does the substance of the threat itself.

Most commonly, societal threats are cast in ethnic, religious or national terms and may be targeted at either majority or minority groups. A deeper and more thorough analysis of this process accepts that securitization can also be performed by non-state actors, particularly in contexts where traditional ascriptive groups hold legitimacy. In such locales, the discursive interaction between state and non-state actors is an important phenomenon to study. In which ways do these actors collaborate, either intentionally or unintentionally in the securitization process? In territories with a history of ethnic conflict, the relationship between the state, ethno-religious chauvinists and referent securitization objects is certainly deserving of further scrutiny.

Shifting from theory to application, the following sections trace and explicate the process of societal securitization in contemporary Burma through an analysis of both government and Buddhist nationalist monastic discourse. Specifically, I will explore how certain speech acts were linked, both temporally and geographically to corresponding episodes of violence in Rakhine State. The purpose of this analysis is neither to argue that the targets of securitization narratives are merely passive actors, nor that this process works on all individuals similarly. In fact, the move from hateful rhetoric to physical violence is part and parcel of highly complex psycho-social processes, well beyond the scope of this article. Despite the limitations inherent to making direct casual claims, the article argues

violence in Rakhine State did not occur in a vacuum but was incited by the inflam-matory rhetoric of both government elites and radical nationalist monks.

Methodology

The following analysis endeavours to understand conflict in western Burma through a 'constitutive theoretical' exercise as typified by Alexander Wendt (Wendt, 1998, p. 105). In this tradition, the purpose is not to demonstrate a strict–causal relationship between discourse and violence, but rather to explain how variables are correlated through a thorough examination of useful concepts (see also Regilme, 2018). In this respect, securitization theory provides a lens for exploring how non-material variables have contributed to certain material outcomes in western Burma. Building upon newer analytical contributions on the securitization of religion (Croft, 2012; Karyotis & Patrikios, 2010; Vuori, 2008), this article explores an understudied topic in the security studies literature. Ontologically, securitization theory has been most commonly used to explain the construction of security threats in the European context. Yet, more recent contributions have shifted focus to the global south to better understand the discursive drivers of conflict in these areas (for a thorough exploration of the most recent securitization literature, see Balzacq, Leonard, & Ruzicka, 2016). Additionally, as an exercise in applied theory, this article moves away from the 'problematization' of securitization to a more thorough understanding of this phenomenon in practice.

While securitization theorists largely focus their attention on links between language and violence, this does not mean that material factors are entirely insignificant. Indeed, the most daunting challenge facing securitization theorists is in weighing the effects of discourse against other explanatory variables. In other words, as scholars how can we be sure that the given audience has accepted the validity of elite securitizing discourse? As actor motivations are often mixed, the context surrounding individual events takes on greater importance for understanding linkages between language and violence. In the Rohingya case, first-person accounts (as documented by human rights organization) strongly suggest that ethnic-rioting coincided with fiery speeches delivered by prominent nationalist monks around the same time. Over the longer term, the repeated conflation of Rohingya with international terrorists through state-run news outlets has actively shaped the Burmese military's rationale for occupying Rakhine State from 2012 to the present. While other explanatory factors should not be discounted, namely the possibility that the military also sees opportunities for land-grabs in ethnic minority areas, it still holds that elite discourse is a necessary condition for rallying local Buddhists to their cause.

Discourse is always situated in and shaped by political and socio-economic realities. Thus, while securitization theory provides a compelling angle of vision, it is most useful when supplemented by contextualized material explana-tions. In this case, I argue that recent violence against the Rohingya in Burma is driven primarily by a deliberate attempt on the part of the military regime and Buddhist nationalists to enhance their power in a time of great political

uncertainty. In the chaos of an incipient transition from military to civilian rule, the former's attempt to maintain its privileged place in Burmese society lends itself to the magnification of a familiar scapegoat, the Rohingya. Rather than positing a unidirectional relationship between elite rhetoric and anti-Rohingya violence, it is more useful to imagine a feedback loop, whereby nationalist rhetoric and local violence are reciprocal in nature. The following sections examine this phenomenon in more concrete terms.

Finally, this article applies an analytically useful theory to an understudied case in the security studies literature. Therefore, the primary audience for this article is academic, though the contours of the Burma case also speak to the human rights policy community, who may gain a richer understanding of how elite discourse in Burma endangers future generations of Rohingya.

Targeted Violence Against the Rohingya

In the month of October 2012, a series of mob attacks directed against Rohingya civilians erupted in western Burma's Rakhine State. The violent outbreaks were documented in detail by *Human Rights Watch*. Eyewitnesses noted the following, 'The October (2012) attacks were against Rohingya and Kaman Muslim communities and were organized, incited, and committed by local Arakanese [7] political party operatives, the Buddhist monkhood, and ordinary Arakanese, at times directly supported by the state security forces' (Human Rights Watch, 2013, p. 4). The attacks themselves left dozens of Rohingya dead and were accompanied by the razing of two villages. The violent episode was triggered by the rape of an Arakanese woman at the hands of a Rohingya man in June of the same year, which led to an upsurge in tension among the two ethnic groups. *Human Rights Watch* writes

> On October 18, just days before the renewed violence in the state, the All-Arakanese Monks' Solidarity Conference was held in Sittwe. The monks, who hold very high moral authority among the Arakanese Buddhist population, issued a virulently anti-Rohingya statement that urged townships to band together to 'help solve' the 'problem'. (ibid., p. 45)

As securitizing actors, the monks, though casting their rhetoric in vague terms, worked to mobilize a receptive population into taking extra-legal action against perceived enemies.

According to local witnesses, the 23 October attacks appeared to involve many Arakanese who were not from the immediate area (ibid., p. 46). As such, this account is suggestive of a premeditated plan of action, rather than a spontaneous outbreak of mob violence. *Human Rights Watch* also reported, 'In many areas, the groups targeted the local mosque first, and then nearby homes, easily flammable structures of bamboo and wood. The burning of entire villages to the ground was a signature tactic of these attacks' (ibid., p. 47). Such an event would have been impossible without the complicity of the *Tatmadaw*, who maintain a real presence in Rakhine State. During the October massacre, an Arakanese

eyewitness reported, 'I didn't see any police or army. I didn't see any soldiers when the violence started.' Another Arakanese woman added, 'On that day the police or military were not stopping the violence' (ibid., p. 52).

The 2012 attacks were not as spontaneous as they may appear to the casual observer. As alluded to earlier, a meeting of nationalist monks in Rakhine State shortly before the onset of the October attacks fuelled simmering anger among Arakanese Buddhists. More telling is the large number of outsiders who participated in the violence against the Rohingya. Arriving in busses from communities across Rakhine State, angry mobs did not know their victims, but instead appeared to be motivated by ethno-religious hatred (Wade, 2017, p. 107).

The confluence of local grievances with a broader campaign to discredit the presence of the Rohingya in Burma underscores the complex motivations of violent actors. As Stathis Kalyvas correctly asserts, creating binaries between actions motivated by personal grievances versus those based upon organizational allegiance limits our understanding of civil conflict more generally (Kalyvas, 2003, p. 475). In the 2012 riots, combatants appear to have been motivated by a desire to exact personal revenge while simultaneously punishing a historically marginalized group for its complicity in the perpetration of alleged sexual violence. As the conflict escalated, the lines between personal and political grievances likely became blurred.

For its part, the Burmese government response to the Rohingya massacres has been uneven. In some instances, they provided token security, at other times they stood by idly as Rohingya were killed, and on other occasions they actively supported Arakanese mobs. In a military that relies on a decentralized command structure, it is difficult to tell whether this is a result of conflicting orders on behalf of the military's top generals, or a product of decisions made further down the chain of command. In either case, regime responses to communal violence in Rakhine State have been consistent in their defence of the local Buddhist population.

Recently, violence against the Rohingya has been justified in terms of combating religious extremism, despite the historical absence of Islamic-based terrorism in the state. *Human Rights Watch* reports, 'Although Burma has a long and continuing history of ethnic armed movements, no insurgent group has made much progress in the Muslim community' (Human Rights Watch, 2013, p. 18). Non-state armed groups such as the Rohingya Solidarity Organization and the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front were established in northern Arakan State in 1982 and 1987, respectively. More recently, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army has engaged in anti-government attacks within Rakhine State. These armed groups are best described as *ad hoc militia* and have no proven links to global terror networks. Despite evidence to the contrary, the anti-terrorism narrative is gaining ground across the country, in part, through propaganda distributed by the government and ultra-nationalist monks alike. Anti-terrorism scripts, apart from serving military interests, are couched in the more harmful global stereotype that Muslim men are inherently dangerous and violence-prone.

In 2012, a pro-military magazine *Piccima Ratwan,* counting both monks and government officials on its editorial board, labelled Rohingya as Islamic terrorists,

arguing that they posed an immediate threat to Burma's security (Wade, 2017, p. 111). Following violent episodes, state-run newspaper, *New Global Light of Myanmar* has routinely identified Rohingya as terrorists. In the aftermath of Rohingya militant attacks on Burmese security forces in November 2016, the newspaper claimed that the attackers had 'connections with overseas organizations' (Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2017, pp. 2–4). The same outlet has also claimed the existence of terrorist training camps in Rakhine State, providing justification for *Tatmadaw* clearing operations (ibid., pp. 1–3). While it is undeniable that certain Rohingya militants have engaged in anti-government operations and are also culpable in attacks on Arakanese Buddhist villages, it is disingenuous to argue that these actions have the markings of international jihadi terrorism.

The preceding rhetoric, despite its flawed logic, is indicative of a strategy which closely approximates Salvador Regilme's analysis of 'strategic localization' in neighbouring Thailand during the early 2000s (Regilme, 2018). In a post-9/11 world, global terror threats are often framed locally to serve a given regime's domestic political agenda. As former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin's appeals to the United States for military aid were based in his tenuous linkage between Thai drug smugglers and international terror networks, so too is the Burmese regime's use of anti-terrorism rhetoric mobilized as an indication of its ostensible commitment to defeating alleged jihadists in Western Myanmar. While this has not yet led to sizable increase in foreign aid to Burma, it does partially explain the increased deployment of the nation's military personnel to Rakhine State (Child, 2018).

Following the massacres of 2012, the government in its own press statements maintained its conviction that the Rohingya are foreigners in need of expulsion. A month after the June violence, on 12 July, President Thein Sein called for 'illegal' Rohingya to be sent to 'third countries' (Marshall, 2013). Azeem Ibrahim argues that a triangular relationship exists between the military, religious extremists and certain members of the government. He writes, 'Attacking the Rohingya has become to some, a public way to emphasize one's commitment to Buddhism' (Ibrahim, 2016, p. 64). This is the sort of perception that securitizing agents in Burmese society deliberately encourage, as the regime's quest for religious legitimacy attempts to compensate for the otherwise poor performance of the state.

Linking isolated episodes of Rohingya anti-government violence with international jihadist networks has provided an ideological justification for the military's continued infiltration into Rakhine State, and serves as a highly effective securitization manoeuvre. In this case, state-sponsored anti-Rohingya propaganda serves two main purposes. First, it widens the intended audience to Burmese citizens living beyond Rakhine State. Anti-Muslim, though not anti-Rohingya, violence has been reported in other parts of the country as well. Alex Bookbinder, a correspondent for the *Atlantic* magazine writes, 'The violence is spreading, and non-Rohingya Muslims elsewhere in Burma are being targeted. In the central town of Meiktila, home to the country's largest air force base, attacks on Muslims starting on March 19 claimed some 40 lives' (Bookbinder, 2013). In 2014, radical monk U. Wirathu posted a report on social media stating that two Muslim men had raped their Buddhist maid. Word of the incident and corresponding rumour mongering

spread quickly, resulting in mob attacks on Muslim neighbourhoods (Justice Trust, 2015, p. 19). In 2017, Wirathu also praised the assassination of NLD legal advisor Ko Ni, who also happened to be a Muslim (Fink, 2018, p. 159).

In making the threat of Rohingya terror salient to the public at-large, it provides the *Tatmadaw* with a more legitimate justification for launching security operations in Rakhine State. Secondly, it elevates the *Tatmadaw* to the role of protector, further amplifying the myth that it alone can protect the Burmese people from all internal and external enemies. The strategy has seemed to work in the short term, as the military has experienced a recent surge in its domestic popularity. Richard C. Paddock of the *New York Times* reports that the current campaign against the Rohingya has 'created an atmosphere of crisis that has galvanized support both within the ranks and among the country's Buddhist majority' (Paddock, 2017). In support of this agenda, media savvy General Min Aung Hlaing, who features over one million social media followers, has also taken to Facebook decrying the 'Bengali' invasion, while simultaneously dismissing charges of human rights abuses in Rakhine (ibid.).

The '969', Ma Ba Tha and Rohingya Marginalization

Through the lens of a societal securitization theoretical framework, I argue that certain members of the Burmese government and military have acted in concert with Buddhist nationalist monks in spreading anti-Muslim rhetoric among the Burmese population. Specifically, I draw on statements made by government officials, as well as those in print and visual media from the '969' Movement and Ma Ba Tha, two prominent nationalist Buddhist monastic organizations. It is a key premise of this article that anti-Rohingya narratives cast in existential terms do have the power to incite violence. While this discourse cannot be demonstrated as solely instrumental, the mob episodes themselves are likely linked to the inflammatory language used by respected voices. According to the US based human rights group *Justice Trust*, '969' speaking tours have often occurred just before the onset of violent episodes (Justice Trust, 2015). In September 2012, shortly before the outbreak of violence in Rakhine State, '969' held a rally in Mandalay where leader U Wirathu labelled the Rohingya as a 'threat to the Burmese motherland' (Walton & Hayward, 2014, p. 13). The sequencing of events indicates some intent on the part of radical monks to incite violence among the broader population.

While much has been already discussed concerning the Burmese state's role in politicizing the Rohingya citizenship question, the historical role of nationalist monks as provocative actors in western Burma must also be taken seriously. The '969', an explicit Islamophobic organization devoted to halting the spread of Islam across Burma, was superseded in 2013 by Ma Ba Tha. The latter constitutes a larger group of politically minded monks who hold a position of high respect among certain Buddhists within Burma. The organization, dedicated to the defence of Buddhism, has broad imperatives ranging from education to social services provision. Yet, within the group, there are several outspoken monks who are dedicated to preserving Burmese 'race and religion' (Wade, 2017, p. 88). In 2017,

facing government censure, Ma Ba Tha has reorganized under the name the Buddha Dhamma Paramita Foundation (Fink, 2018, p. 159). Broader patterns of government coercion and accommodation via hardline monks appear to signal a broader 'cat and mouse' game whereby the former attempts to selectively use monks to serve its agenda while placing limits on the latter's ability to cultivate an independent base of power.

In the Burmese Buddhist tradition, monks are not only viewed as moral guardians for society but are in some cases also believed to possess certain mystical powers. Monks themselves hold contrasting opinions on the merits of political activism. This is further complicated by the historical fusion of religion and politics in Burma. For nationalist monks, there is often no effective difference between defending religion and the state, as the two are practically intertwined (see Walton, 2015; also see Jerryson, 2011). Correspondingly, the Burmese military regime, though not formally identifying Buddhism as the state religion, operates from the assumption that Burma is a state created by and for Buddhists. While Christian, Animist and Muslim ethno-minorities combined make up a sizable subset of the population, they have been consistently underrepresented in state institutions since the 1962 military coup.

Azeem Ibrahim argues that the monkhood's views certainly influence Buddhist opinion within Myanmar, particularly since the former has gained greater control over the state's educational system (Ibrahim, 2016, p. 68). The unofficial spokesperson for the radical nationalist movement, Wirathu, a monk affiliated with both '969' and Ma Ba Tha has taken centre-stage in Burma. According to Kate Hodal, reporter for *The Guardian,*

> It would be easy to disregard Wirathu as a misinformed monk with militant views, were it not for his popularity. Presiding over some 2,500 monks at this respected monastery, Wirathu has thousands of followers on Facebook and his YouTube videos have been watched tens of thousands of times. (Hodal, 2013)

His message builds upon both local and international stereotypes regarding Muslims. For Wirathu and his followers, mosques are imagined as hotbeds of Islamic terrorism.

Within certain nationalist circles, there is a real concern that Muslims will demographically replace Buddhists as the largest group religious group in Burma. This fear-mongering appears to have the greatest appeal in Rakhine State, where a history of episodic communal violence dates to the colonial era. The popular anxiety about Muslim birthrates is the same echoed by members of far-right movements in the West. Though Wirathu has been recently banned from public preaching, he has shown a remarkable ability to remain relevant in Burma. Another prominent '969' monk, Wimala Biwuntha, has compared Muslims 'to a tiger who enters an ill-defended house to snatch away its occupants' (Marshall, 2013). He says, 'Without discipline, we'll lose our religion and our race. We might even lose our country' (ibid.).

Unfortunately, there are glaring similarities between the government's rhetoric and that of the nationalist monks. This is documented through the former's own

ambivalent behaviour towards nationalist religious groups. As recently as 2013, *Atlantic* reporter Andrew Marshall remarked, 'The '969' movement now enjoys support from senior government officials, establishment monks and even some members of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD)'. Former President Sein has said that Wirathu is a 'son of Lord Buddha' (ibid.). In the aftermath of the 2012 violence in Rakhine State, Sein had reportedly told the UN High Commissioner for Refugees that repatriating 800,000 Rohingya to a third country would be an ideal solution (Democratic Voice of Burma, 2012).

In this case, it seems evident that the '969' group provided the Sein regime with the moral justification to continue exclusionary policies towards the Rohingya. Radical Buddhist monks affiliated with '969' were also instrumental in the government's approval of the highly inflammatory 'race and religion protection laws', under which inter-faith marriages are restricted, and freedom of movement is curtailed for Rohingya Muslims (Carroll, 2015). The reciprocal relationship between radical monks and the Burmese military regime is indicative of a broader securitization process whereby both religious and government elites magnify social threats as a means of persecuting internal opponents (Theiler, 2009, p. 110). In short, the government and radical monks have been in rhetorical lock-step when it comes to marginalizing the Rohingya.

The ongoing relationship between successive Burmese regimes and radical nationalist monks is far from uniform and is likely an expression of the changing strategic imperatives of the former. Under the Ne Win regime (1962–1988), ethnoreligious diversity was recognized, at least initially, and is prominently expressed in the junta's founding documents. Stemming from the nominally socialist regime's incipient commitment towards economic justice, ethnic and religious differences were strategically downplayed, though never actually resolved. Though over time, as a direct consequence of the military regime's failed governance, and likely linked to Ne Win's own paranoia, the scope of 'disloyal' citizens to the state grew. Walton and Hayward argue that during the period of formal military rule, Non-Buddhist 'others' were constituted as a threat, or mere lackeys of foreign powers looking to overthrow the regime (Walton & Hayward, 2014, p. 6).

Ne Win's successors, particularly Thein Sein, have been particularly forthright in their support for Buddhism. Sein's willingness to cultivate support among Buddhist nationalists was not only a natural extension of his own ideological commitments, but also an attempt to garner some form of regime legitimacy in a country shaken deeply by the 2007 Saffron Revolution. Ultimately, Thein Sein's last-ditch attempts at mobilizing support along ethno-religious lines failed, as the NLD received overwhelming support from virtually all sectors of society in the 2015 elections.

Thein Sein's rhetorical attacks against the Rohingya fit a traditional account of the securitization process, whereby the state acts as the primary securitizing voice. Yet, as alluded to earlier, there is a healthy debate among critical security scholars as to whether state elites act alone as a securitizing voice (for an important theoretical discussion of relevant securitization actors, see Ilgit & Klotz, 2014). The preceding analysis suggests a reciprocal relationship between state and non-state actors in the Burma context. This discursive dynamic, whether fully intentional or

not, creates an important vertical link between state and society. In short, anti-Rohingya speech proffered by members of the government and the '969' movement served to further legitimize a largely mythical narrative present in Rakhine State and elsewhere in the country.

In this respect, the intended targets of the speech (Burmese Buddhists), likely do not care that a lack of material evidence exists to justify hateful speech aimed at the Rohingya. Instead, the radical monks' version of events fed into a constructed 'us versus them' narrative almost certainly present in the minds of certain citizens. This builds upon one of the key insights of the societal securitization approach, by recognizing that threats, however constructed, must already have some salience with the targeted audience to be effective. Of securitizing agents, Tobias Theiler observes '*Saying* "X threatens Y" *makes it so* provided the audience accepts the statement as true and provided the threat and the security referent are part of social reality' (Theiler, 2009, p. 107). In this respect, societal securitization narratives must contain both objective and subjective dimensions.

This social reality is based not only upon elite discourse, but also the subjective experiences of everyday individuals. Schissler, Walton, and Thi (2017) make a convincing claim that Muslims in Burma have in fact been constructed as a threat to 'race and religion'. Based upon interviews with non-Muslims conducted across several regions in Burma, respondents repeatedly discussed the threat of Muslims 'swallowing up' the country, while also labelling Muslims as inherently prone to terrorism (ibid., pp. 381–382). Furthermore, negative personal experiences with Muslims seemed to reinforce preexisting beliefs. The apparent fusion between regime and Buddhist nationalist rhetoric on the one hand, and stereotypes expressed by ordinary citizens, on the other, portends a troubling future for ethno-religious relations in Burma.[8]

The preceding analysis is indicative of how societal securitization unfolds through a series of discursive events. In the case of the 2012 communal riots, radical monks affiliated with the '969' movement served as the primary securitizing voice. Fiery speeches and meetings at the All Arakanese Monks Solidarity Conference and corresponding '969' rhetoric stoked the flames of anti-Islamic sentiment among a receptive audience. In this scenario, a triggering event, the alleged rape of an Arakanese woman, was all that was required to initiate the violence. Members of the government, including Thein Sein, cannot be definitively proven to have any direct causal influence on the October 2012 riots. However, Sein's own rhetorical support for U Wirathu, coupled with anti-Rohingya speech, created a permissive atmosphere for anti-Rohingya violence to take place. Violent anti-Muslim episodes in other parts of the country can also be tied to Wirathu's hate speech, testifying to his power as an authoritative voice among Buddhist nationalists.

The recent upsurge in anti-Rohingya violence has magnified a crisis initiated in 2012. Perhaps the biggest impact of the ongoing persecution has been the mass exodus of Rohingya in 2015 by sea, and in 2017 by land. While some of these 88,000 estimated refugees eventually found sanctuary in Thailand, Bangladesh and Malaysia, not all who arrived in these countries did so freely. Sadly, large numbers of refugees found themselves at the mercy of human traffickers, who eventually sold them into slavery (Ibrahim, 2016, p. 91). The initial refusal on the part of the

neighbouring countries to take in the Rohingya refugees, indicates how the group is not merely marginalized in their own country, but in the broader region as well. Ongoing military operations in 2016 and 2017, sparked by Rohingya *militia* attacks on Burmese security outposts have led to the displacement of additional Rohingya, further magnifying the refugee crisis (Barron, 2017).

Recent actions taken by Burmese security forces, which have included documented cases of rape, extrajudicial killing and village burning, have been executed on the pretext that Rakhine State must be cleared of terrorists (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Rhetorically, the government has maintained that Rakhine Buddhists are the true victims of the conflict in western Burma, despite the United Nations insistence that Burmese security forces are engaged in the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya (Fink, 2018, p. 161).

It is important to note that societal securitization relies a general political and social atmosphere conducive to its success. In areas where ethnic minorities are well integrated into society, it is unlikely that rhetoric designed to cast such a group(s) as an existential threat would be particularly persuasive. Instead, such a group must already be marginalized from society to the extent that their mere presence constitutes a perceived menace to the in-group. Accordingly, the broader process of exclusion does not unfold overnight, but is the outcome of decades, even centuries, of ethnically based politics. In the Burma case, anti-Rohingya sentiment did not begin in 2012, but was the product of a longer historical process, whereby the Rohingya gradually came to be labelled as 'foreigners' and 'others' by the national political elite. In the most recent case, monastic demonstrations fused with government propaganda were published in the nation's largest daily newspaper. The repeated identification of Rohingya as terrorists provided the rhetorical cover for large-scale human rights violations committed in Rakhine State.

The preceding analysis explains how the dynamic relationship between the Burmese government, radical monks and Burmese citizens has effectively worked to construct the Rohingya as an existential security threat. Viewed as perpetual foreigners, the Rohingya are accused of 'invading' the country to establish Islam as the dominant religious tradition. By capitalizing on harmful global stereotypes of Muslims in general, namely their association with extremist violence, high birthrates and missionary zeal, securitizing agents effectively created a localized environment of fear. The extra step is taken once either the government, or radical monks argued that the Rohingya pose an existential threat to the majority Buddhist 'homeland'. In an atmosphere of manufactured crisis, a simple triggering event is all that is needed to mobilize a receptive population to violence. Despite widespread international condemnation, both the government and nationalist monks maintained a hardline position on the Rohingya, by refusing to deal with the 'Bengali' problem.

Conclusion

In broader terms, the partial democratic opening in Burma may eventually bode well for majority of citizens. However, it is unclear that the Rohingya will fare any better in a new Burma. The major opposition party, the NLD has not shown a

particularly sympathetic view towards the plight of the Rohingya. In repeated interviews, Aung San Suu Kyi has dodged the Rohingya question, arguing that ethnic reconciliation is a long and complex process. Even more troubling, Suu Kyi refuses to use the term Rohingya, when discussing the politically charged issue, and has advised both the United Nations and the United States to do the same (Paddock, 2016). Most recently, Suu Kyi has denied a UN request to investigate human rights abuses in Rakhine State (Farand, 2017). To the outside observer, this is very much reminiscent of former president Thein Sein's repeated claims that no Rohingya live within Burma.

In the most recent parliamentary elections, the NLD failed to field a single Muslim candidate. In fact, some of the same stereotypes about the Rohingya are prevalent among members of the NLD. According to Andrew C. Marshall, certain NLD members have been implicated in the distribution of extremist materials (Marshall, 2013). Institutionally, movement on this issue is also likely to be slow as the Burmese military retains a permanent 25 per cent of seats in the parliament, permitting an effective veto on any reform legislation. Another important implication of the recent elections pertains to the continuing influence of the Arakan National Party (ANP), an organization devoted to promoting Buddhist interests in Rakhine State. The ANP is now the third largest party in Burma's lower house and has gained three seats since the last parliamentary election. In Rakhine State, the election results show that the ANP garnered more support than either the NLD or the military's USDP party in the national legislature (International Crisis Group, 2015). In part, the election outcome shows the growing appeal of ethno-nationalism across Rakhine State, a troubling development for the marginalized Rohingya population and ethno-religious relations in western Burma.

International pressure on the Rohingya crisis has been growing on both the state and NGO level. Former President Obama's visit to the country in 2013 revealed his commitment towards moving this issue forward. Importantly, he used the term Rohingya in his speech which was perceived as an affront to the previous regime. At the same time, The US Department of State has insisted on a gradualist approach to Burma. While pushing for democratic opening, they have also argued that Burmese civil society is not sufficiently developed for widespread democratization to take place (US Department of State, 2014). There is a real fear that sudden reforms might destabilize the country, and in turn re-establish the military's exclusive claim to law and order. Finally, NGOs have had limited access to Rohingya refugee camps since the events of 2012 have transpired. With restrictions on Rohingya freedom of movement, many find themselves living in villages with poor sanitation and few economic opportunities. For those Rohingya that have been forced out of the country, they have not encountered a welcoming atmosphere in Bangladesh. Many Rohingya who were displaced in 2012 are now in the process of being repatriated to Burma where they face an uncertain future.

In late 2017, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson visited Burma, pushing Burmese authorities to investigate human rights abuses in Rakhine State. Tillerson also labelled the current situation as 'ethnic cleansing', in concert with the United Nations' own estimates of the crisis. The Trump administration has also discussed the reinstatement of targeted sanctions against the Burmese government. In

response, both commanders of the Burmese armed forces, General Min Aung Hlaing and Aung San Suu Kyi, have appeared to pursue a closer relationship with neighbouring China. To date, the international community's response to the crisis has been underwhelming.

As discussed earlier, there is a persistent paranoia emanating from Buddhist nationalists that they will lose their country to ethnic minority groups. However, since the 1990s ethnic minorities have stopped making independence claims. The only real possibility, and a remote one at that, is that the government decides to grant greater autonomy to ethnic groups within the current governing structure. From the state perspective, long-wave patterns of inter-ethnic violence have had an obvious destabilizing effect on the country and ethnic reconciliation is likely to be a lengthy and uneven process. At this time, the country may not be ready for formal inter-ethnic politics, though there is always the fear that the persistence of ethnic parties may be an obstacle to reconciliation, as both violent and non-violent conflict is constantly couched in terms of ethnic grievances.

As per its engagement with the international human rights regime and the West, it is unclear whether Burma's new democratic leadership is genuinely committed to the issues or are making token reforms to attract greater investment from wealthier states. Burma's transition from formal military rule to civilian rule is best understood as type of 'disciplined democracy'. Marco Bunte writes,

> The generals' transition ensured a return to civilian rule without relinquishing *de facto* military control of the government. The military remains the arbiter of power in the country, though it has created new political institutions that might develop some autonomy of their own in the future. Currently, the military dominates all important state institutions. (Bunte, 2011, p. 17)

While the military retains both institutional and psychological control over the country, 'disciplined democracy' represents a challenging balancing act for the government. How many reforms can the regime institute, before pressure starts to build on the societal level? Furthermore, in the coming years, if the Burmese economy continues to grow, will an emerging middle class begin to push for more government accountability?

There is also a real threat of the military ramping up its activities in ethnic minority areas should it perceive that democratization is moving too quickly. The military's recent ventures into Rakhine State, Karen State in eastern Burma and the intensification of its operations in Shan State may point to an institution fearful of losing its authority. Through instigating conflict on the periphery, the military may be engaging in a last-ditch effort aimed at convincing the Burmese population of its utility. How the NLD orchestrates the military's exit from political affairs may very well determine whether the recent political liberalization gains real traction in the coming years.

Perhaps the most important task for both international NGOs and citizens of Burma alike is in finding ways to change the dominant anti-Muslim discourse within the country. Specifically, it is important to identify how and where Islamophobia in Burma originates, and why it is so salient given the historical

absence of Islamic extremism in the state itself. Reshaping the conversation in Burma is an incredibly challenging, but an important task nonetheless. The new government should create institutional opportunities for inter-religious dialogue to take place, assuming of course that the political space opens sufficiently for this type of interaction to occur. Secondly, the new government must come to the recognition that despite long-held anti-citizenship claims, the Rohingya population has deep roots in Burma. While politically convenient in the near term, continued persecution of minority ethnic groups, apart from the grievous human costs, will present obstacles to development in the region and may eventually once again result in Burma's isolation from the international community.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. More forceful appeals to ethno-nationalism are indicative of Ne Win's move away from state socialism.
2. Characterized as a 'durable, but unstable' regime by Dan Slater, Burma's military junta has displayed a remarkable ability to weather political crisis through elite military cohesion (see Slater, 2010).
3. This is not intended to discount the presence of non-Rohingya Muslims living in Yangon and surrounding areas.
4. At the outset, it is important to clarify that not all Muslims in Burma are in fact Rohingya. As such, Islamophobia in Burma stretches further than fear of the Rohingya. The Rohingya do, however, constitute the largest Muslim group within Burma, and have been a frequent target of Buddhist religious nationalists.
5. For further information on the 1982 citizenship law, see Burma Campaign UK (2013).
6. The terms Bamar and Burman are often used interchangeably to describe Burma's largest ethnic group. Not all residents of Burma are comfortable with identifying themselves as 'Burmese'.
7. The Arakanese are the largest Buddhist ethno-religious group in Rakhine State. Though ethnically distinct from the Bamar, they share a common religious bond but also have a complex political relationship with the Burmese state.
8. While many participants in Schissler et al.'s study, harboured negative stereotypes about Muslims in general, some respondents were able to weigh those views against historical memories of more peaceful ethno-religious relations (Schissler et al., 2017, pp. 387–388).

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