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A long way to peace: identities, genocide, and state preservation in Burma, 1948–2018

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ABSTRACT

Following independence in 1948, successive Burmese regimes have fought continuous wars against ethno-religious minorities living on the periphery. The following article analyzes these conflicts through the lens of prospect theory. According to this perspective, regimes are highly sensitive to relative losses and may employ genocidal policies as a means of state-preservation. Our framework applies this theory to three sub-national cases of genocide perpetrated against the Karen, Kachin, and Rohingya ethno-religious groups. Through qualitative case analysis, we unpack multifaceted processes of violence perpetrated against civilians and non-combatants in Burma. Based on our findings, we argue that the *Tatmadaw* (Burmese military) engaged in genocidal policies, including forced displacement and labor, slash-and-burn tactics, ethno-religious co-optation, and political killings as an instrumental means of preserving the state. Notably, while the military engaged in extreme violence against all three groups, their interest in state preservation varied. Genocidal violence employed against Karen and Kachin, long recognized by the military as “legitimate” groups, was perpetrated to assimilate “hill tribes” into the state. Conversely, violence against the Rohingya evolved with the goal of pushing a perceived “foreign” group out. This study contributes to the growing body of literature within Genocide Studies, linking macro-level theory to sub-national case studies.

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Introduction

On the morning of 23 October 2012, thousands of Arakanese ad-hoc “militia” men wielding small arms and homemade Molotov cocktails, launched a coordinated attack on Muslim communities across Arakan State (Human Rights Watch 2013, 7). For nearly 11 hours, these mobs, supported by local police and army personnel, disarmed Rohingya Muslims, looted and burned houses, beat and macheted entire families, and proceeded to enact vigilante “justice” throughout the province (10). These acts, though instigated by local political entrepreneurs, are but a piece of the Burmese state’s genocidal policies directed toward sub-national ethno-religious groups like the Rohingya, who are perceived as an existential threat to both Burmese culture and the *Tatmadaw*’s (Burmese Armed Forces) power.

Genocide and genocidal policies in Burma are not the product of a “master plan” developed in the corridors of power decades ago. They have been contingent upon the variable strength of domestic opposition. Over the years, several prominent ethno-religious minorities have exerted varying degrees of civil and militaristic resistance against Burma’s military junta. In response, the *Tatmadaw* has engaged in a campaign of genocidal policies that stiffens or weakens, depending on the threat posed by oppositional forces at a given moment. In this sense, Burma’s genocides have emerged as a function of its politics and not from intentionalist actions designed to suppress, coerce, and subdue rival forces. Thus, eliminationist killings and corollary political violence are instrumental in preserving the Burmese state and the regime’s control over its subjects. Such hegemonic geno-/politicides are but one tool by which the *Tatmadaw* maintains its tenuous grip on power.

Within the interdisciplinary field of Genocide Studies, initially, few scholars focused on peripheral cases. For most of the 1950s–1980s, theoretical explanations for understanding why and how genocide occurs, originated from studies of the Holocaust, Armenian and Rwandan genocides (Hinton, La Pointe, and Irvin-Erickson 2014, 6). This triad represents, by far, the most “popular” cases and has been the breeding ground of theory-building for decades. All three genocides feature extreme violence, large body counts, totalitarian or authoritarian regimes, widespread social support for killing, ideological motivations, and involve the state as primary perpetrator. Within the past two decades there has been a well-deserved effort to explain peripheral cases of genocide or widespread group destruction. While studies on Myanmar (Burma) are still emerging there has been a wealth of studies addressing previously marginalized episodes.¹

The novelty of our study resides in an application of theories developed to explain the Holocaust, Armenian and Rwandan genocides to lesser-known cases on the periphery of academic scholarship (e.g. Burma). We offer two methodological and investigative reasons for this case selection. First, using Burma allows us to qualitatively examine macro-level theories of genocide, developed to explain large-scale, systematic campaigns of mass slaughter in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, and apply them to Southeast Asia. Can these theories stand the test of time and geographic substitution? Second, by exploring genocidal violence against three sub-national populations – the Karen, Kachin, and Rohingya – this study unpacks domestic, country-level variables to observe variation in genocidal acts perpetrated by the government and its agents. By transcending country-level analysis, we find distinct variation in how the *Tatmadaw*’s threat perceptions differ by group, which in turn shapes the severity of genocidal policies enacted. Together, these two features allow us to develop a more nuanced approach to the study of genocide, which can further refine our theoretical insights at a macro-level.

What follows next is a discussion of genocide writ large, and some problems with our political and legal understandings of this crime. Section three reviews the logic of genocide with an analysis of precipitating factors, including the application of prospect theory. In section four, we unveil our theory of state preservation as the driving force behind genocidal onset and magnitude in Burma, which is followed by the case studies of the Karen, Kachin, and Rohingya populations. Our final section provides the reader with concluding remarks on the conflict process, the role of the state in implementing genocidal violence in Burma, and a reflection on the implications of this study for future theory-building exercises.

Genocide: a conceptual problem

This study is primarily concerned with a distinct kind of autocratic governance: genocide as public policy. Drafted in the aftermath of the Holocaust, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (hereafter, referred to as, Genocide Convention) was adopted by the United Nations in 1948. The Convention sets forth, in our view, a minimalist understanding of this crime, which reflects the era of its conception.

Significantly, however, Article 2 of the Genocide Convention bestows protection against this crime upon four groups: ethnic, racial, religious, and national groups who confront the following:

- (1) Killing members of the group;
- (2) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (3) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (4) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (5) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

The Genocide Convention's single greatest achievement was the codification of such crimes in international law and the recognition that the international community, at least in spirit, if not substance, would work to *prevent* and *punish* systematic attempts to exterminate a population based solely on communal characteristics. Despite this substantial advance, significant limitations to the convention remain.² There is a strong consensus that the Genocide Convention is a political document that excludes most forms of group violence from falling under the legal category of genocide. Based upon this consideration, we find Isidor Wallimann and Michael Dobkowski's conceptualization of genocide most persuasive. Wallimann and Dobkowski (1987, x) argue that, "Genocide is the deliberate, organized destruction, in whole or in large part, of racial or ethnic groups by a government or its agents. It can involve not only mass murder but also forced deportation (ethnic cleansing), systematic rape, and economic and biological subjugation."

There is, as always exists with this category of mass violence, a hurdle in connecting perpetrator intentions with violence enacted on a population. In this regard, how do we address the issue of perpetrator "intent"? This question has plagued the field for decades. Kimura (2003, 408) argues, individuals fixed on implementing policies of mass destruction are likely to keep their thoughts private and not disclose criminal aspirations. Therefore, "obtaining actual proof, beyond a reasonable doubt, that the perpetrator's intention was to destroy the group, in whole or in part" is a high bar to reach (Goldsmith 2009, 22). In lieu of this constraining point, we examine *Tatmadaw* policies from the stand point of a rational observer. Would a rational observer conclude these policies, strategies, and methods of repression led to violence enacted upon the Karen, Kachin, and Rohingya populations? As will become evident in the case studies, we argue that the answer to this question is in the affirmative.

A brief review of prospect theory

In this article, we investigate three cases of state-led genocide or genocidal policies enacted against sub-national groups in Burma. Our framework draws on prospect theory to form

the basis of our theoretical approach. One impediment to understanding genocidal behavior has been the failure of many within our field to explain individual psychological dispositions that filter emotional and material resources into a coherent decision-making process as displayed by *génocidaires*. Our inability to comprehend the malevolence of perpetrator psychology and their decision-making processes has limited theory-building. We argue that prospect theory provides one avenue to grapple with such enigmatic phenomena.

Originally developed (in 1979) and later amended (in 1992) by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, prospect theory is principally a probabilistic model of individual decision-making under conditions of risk and uncertainty (Kahneman and Tversky 1979, 1992). Initially developed in a laboratory setting to explain why people “systematically violate the predictions of expected utility theory,” it was subsequently adapted to explain individual decision-making processes in a variety of disciplines (Barberis 2013, 173). For decades, expected utility theory has been the analytical backbone of empirical research in social science. As Bueno de Mesquita (1985) writes, expected utility theory argues that actors are rational and weigh available options according to the following calculation:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Expected Utility} = & (\text{Probability of Success} * \text{Utility of Success}) \\ & - (\text{Probability of Failure} * \text{Utility of Failure}). \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

In contrast, one of prospect theory’s main findings is that individuals are more sensitive to losses than gains (Levy 1996). When operating from a loss perspective, individuals do not behave as expected utility theory predicts. Instead, their actions are mitigated by the prospects of *relative* gains and losses. There are four principal aspects to prospect theory: reference dependence, loss aversion, diminishing sensitivity, and probability weighting (Butts 2007).

These characteristics can be summarized as follows. *Reference dependence* argues that individuals respond to relative changes rather than absolute values. Here, all decisions are evaluated based upon the changes toward or away from an individual’s reference point. By applying this idea to societies imbued with ethnic or identity conflicts, we may witness, for example, intense fighting breakout between dominant and subordinate populations over the latter’s calls for greater local autonomy, representation in national government, or any change from the status quo. Second, *loss aversion* captures the hypothesis that people tend to be more sensitive to relative losses (even if they are minute) than relative gains. Similarly, if we apply this notion to conflict states we would likely see intense negotiations and conflict over changes to the status quo that result in any loss to the national government, as this would trigger fears based upon state preservation.

The third aspect of prospect theory is the idea of *diminishing sensitivity*, meaning that individuals are

risk averse over moderate probability gains ... prefer[ing] a certain gain of \$500 to a 50 percent change of \$1,000 ... [and, individuals] tend to be risk seeking over losses, [meaning] they prefer a 50 percent chance of losing \$1,000 to losing \$500 for sure. (Barberis 2013, 175)

Finally, in *probability weighting*, individuals tend to overvalue extreme (positive or negative) outcomes instead of prioritizing their limited probability. Through cognitive filtering, individuals often discard relevant information as frivolous. Loss aversion and probability

weighting are closely connected. Taken together, these four components summarize the core ideas prospect theory offers. It is worth noting that perhaps the most important element in this decision-making cascade is a person's reference point. Kahneman and Tversky revealed in their analysis (and others have agreed that actual gains may be discarded as negligible to an individual, particularly a leader operating from a loss mindset as their reference point is either impractical or unrealistic given contextual factors).

If prospect theory yields better analytical insights than traditional approaches to conflict, why haven't more studies relied upon it? There are four broad limitations we face in applying prospect theory to real-world events. As discussed, the central tenet in prospect theory is individual sensitivity to relative gains and losses as calculated from a subjective reference point. One dilemma social scientists face is in reliably estimating a person's reference point and measuring gains and losses from it. Empirical (qualitative and quantitative) analysis requires researchers to estimate their level of error and adhere to falsification criteria. No author, including Kahneman and Tversky, has offered substantive guidance on how to overcome this hurdle to "objectively" evaluate an individual's reference point.

Second, there is a general lack of theorizing on how individuals frame and "make important decisions" (McDermott 2004, 304). Foreign policy analysts and collective action theorists alike advance arguments for how decisions are formulated in crisis situations. Nevertheless, there is no universal theory social scientists can use to explain how people frame choices and make their decisions. There may be certain heuristics people follow in given socio-political contexts, but we have yet to scientifically uncover these mechanisms to devise generalizable rules. Third, prospect theory was designed to explain individual decision-making calculations under risk and uncertainty. It was not constructed with group behavior in mind (McDermott 2004, 304). This has yet to be fully explored and presents real challenges in terms of testing and replication.

Finally, there has been an explosion of literature addressing the political psychology of decision-making. How do emotional factors inhibit, exacerbate or interrupt the process? Does an individual's anger or fear drive them to act differently than would be expected under prospect theory? How might individual feelings of empathy, anxiety and depression affect the formula? In the international relations context, Johnson and Tierney (2011) argue that once leaders decide to enter armed conflict their mental frame switches from a deliberative to an implemental mindset. This mental switch biases leader receptivity to incoming information and increases the likelihood of hostile behavior on the part of military planners and political elites. It is possible similar effects may occur in elites contemplating genocidal behavior. In any case, this will be considered in the analysis below.

Prospect theory and genocide studies

While prospect theory begins with the individual decision-making process, many of its most important contributions lie in connecting the individual decision-maker with his/her surrounding socio-political environment (McDermott 2004, 290). Thus, compared to other rational choice models, prospect theory "places a crucial emphasis on the role of the political environment in helping to determine choice and action, whereas alternative models of psychological decision-making place undue emphasis on the individual and fail to incorporate a sufficient appreciation of such political pressures," (McDermott 2004, 290).

Thus, we need to treat equally “the role of psychological factors in individual decision-making and intergroup relations (Goldgeier 1997, 137).” Existing instrumental theories of mass violence (e.g., Valentino 2004; Valentino et al. 2004; and to some extent Midlarsky 2005) place undue emphasis on the role of senior political and military elites without sufficiently addressing the socio-political context of their decision-making process (Valentino 2004a, 2004b; Midlarsky 2005). Here, prospect theory is most useful in connecting the strategies of elites to their environment. For this reason, we argue that prospect theory is better situated to assess state-directed violence than current rational choice theories.

In his 2005 seminal work, Manus Midlarsky applied prospect theory to almost 20 cases and sub-cases of geno/-politicide in the twentieth century. Midlarsky argues that genocide occurs when leaders are faced with a “significant loss.” Midlarsky operationalizes loss as “... the experience of either (1) transfer of territory, population, authority, or some combination thereof to another political entity, or (2) military defeat or significant casualties in political violence (e.g., war) ... (Midlarsky 2004, 83).” He then makes the distinction between the threat of loss and actual loss; however, we argue that actual territorial loss does not have to take place – and in the case of Burma has not taken place vis-à-vis the Rohingya – for genocidal policies to be developed and acted upon. It is our belief that more research should focus on the threat of loss rather than actual loss moving forward – as the latter’s impact on propagating genocide has been thoroughly established in the literature.

Finally, there are many interesting advantages conferred from incorporating prospect theory into Political Science and Genocide Studies research. We conclude our case by briefly highlighting five such advantages. First, prospect theory provides researchers with an alternative model to existing rational choice theories of mass violence; one that is fundamentally rooted in empirical data and not simply suppositions (McDermott 2004, 290–292). Originally developed in laboratory settings four decades ago, prospect theory has since developed a strong track record of empirical research that supports its utility.³ The second advantage is that prospect theory allows researchers to explain “dynamic change” within the model itself (292–293). Mainstream political science theories (e.g. neorealism) have difficulty adequately explaining change overtime. This is not the case for prospect theory. In fact, the main task in applying prospect theory is to assess an individual decision-maker’s likelihood of change within a specific socio-political environment. This is especially clear when an individual’s mindset “shifts from one of gains to one of losses, prospect theory would predict that individual risk propensity would become more risk-taking (292).” Third, prospect theory investigates different kinds of behavioral puzzles. Many, if not most models, concentrate on structural factors like regime type, but prospect theory assesses individuals within the structure. One great advantage here is that prospect theory does not operate like “a traditional personality theory;” researchers do not need to know much about the mental health, character, personal history, etc. of a decision-maker “in order to explain or predict [his/her] behavior ... Rather [we need only known] the impact of an environment on a person (292).”

The fourth advantage of prospect theory focuses on the socio-political context that surrounds an individual decision-maker. Here the analysis begins with the individual and extends outward to his/her environment for explanatory interest. A prime example here is that leaders experiencing gains on the battle field, for instance, are likely to be cautious or risk adverse. However, leaders thrust into situations where they have experienced loss

are more likely to operate from a risk-oriented mindset to regain lost ground. The benefit here is that prospect theory accounts for dynamic change within a leader's decision-making process and his/her environment. The fifth benefit to this model is that it encourages analysts to emphasize the importance of "value" and how it changes over time (McDermott 2004, 302–304). McDermott (2004) argues that this might be the most influential contribution of prospect theory to political science. Specifically, she raises three fundamental questions: how do people decide what to value in the first place? What is the value and how do we assess it? And, how does time affect the notion of value? McDermott argues, and we concur, that one value of prospect theory is that it enables scholars to explore these fundamental questions with intellectual rigor and empirical support.

Theory and method

Our theoretical framework begins with the most likely perpetrators of genocide and genocidal policies, namely, senior political and military elites in control of government. This framework explains why states implement policies of mass destruction against civilian populations under their supervision. This framework is not directly applicable to episodes of extreme violence which emerge from below (e.g. sub-state or non-state armed groups) but uses the state as the primary referent. In other words, we aim to explain state-led genocides, but not organically developed, grassroots campaigns of mass murder.

Our theory begins with *regime dominance*, a subjective interpretation of elites' control over governmental actions, territory, and society. Regimes may experience threats to their dominance from domestic and international audiences. Domestic opposition may manifest itself in traditional ways, through the mobilization of ethno-religious groups based in kinship, ideology, or in the form of shared anger aimed at the central government. The second dimension of elite perceptions of regime dominance is concerned with the potential role of international actors in challenging their sovereignty. International organizations (like the UN) or unilateral states wielding substantial political power (e.g., the United States) can apply pressure from above and test the durability of the regime. This group may also include influential transnational advocacy networks embedded in the international regime (Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999, 5).

We assume senior political and military leaders place preservation of self and state above all else. Therefore, we argue, if the subjective assessment of one's regime dominance

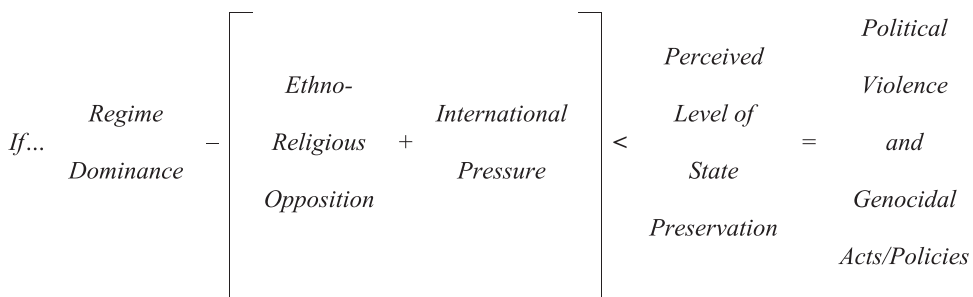


Figure 1. Elite decision-making process for implementing genocidal policies.

minus both domestic and international pressures is perceived to be less than a sustainable level of state preservation, elites will implement genocidal policies to counter such threats.

In our framework, regime violence is instrumental, and not the inevitable result of some primordial feeling toward an out-group. The regime (referring to its most senior decision-making leaders) does not need to obtain or possess complete control over every segment of society, territory, nor require unequivocal obedience from its residents. However, the regime must maintain its place as the dominant domestic player. When state integrity is threatened, either materially or psychologically, we can reasonably expect regime elites to implement violent policies against their challengers.

To qualitatively assess our framework, we employ a single country case study, Burma (Myanmar), and unpack variations in genocidal policies directed at the Karen, Rohingya, and Kachin populations respectively. By using three sub-national case studies, we assess, at the meso-level of analysis, the multifaceted nature of the *Tatmadaw's* genocidal policies toward these rival groups.

Case studies

Ethno-religious violence in Burma is inextricably linked to a divide-and-conquer strategy deliberately applied by the British against the indigenous population. For much of the nineteenth and twentieth century, the colonial administration favored ethnic minority groups in the northern and eastern regions of Burma. These groups, composed of the Kachin, Karen, and smaller hill tribes like the Karenni, received disproportionate educational and employment opportunities in the colonial bureaucracy at the expense of the substantially larger Bamar⁴ population; the latter was concentrated mostly in Burma's geographic center. Strategically, the British intended to empower small, disproportionately Christian groups as leverage against threats of a nascent Bamar independence movement (see Smith 1991 for more information). Ultimately, the British policy was thwarted by the onset of World War II, culminating in Japan's invasion of Burma. Forced by necessity to arm select Bamar militias, the Allied forces successfully drove Japan out, but at the price of empowering those groups that would eventually play a large role in the independence movement (see Callahan 2003 for a particularly insightful history of Burma's armed insurgencies).

In 1948, Britain, financially hamstrung by the war effort, relinquished Burma and instead focused its attention on neighboring India. Almost immediately after the British departed, it became clear that many ethnic groups, once historically independent from Bamar rule, would come under the authority of a new government. Anticipating difficulties arising from this new arrangement, Burma's new parliamentary democracy sponsored an ethnic reconciliation conference in the Shan State's city of Panglong. Here, competing claims between government and ethnic minority representatives were never fully resolved. While the Karen refused to participate directly, others were more willing to work within a tighter federal framework. Specifically, the Kachin had agreed to join the union of Burma under the stipulation that they would be able to vote on full independence within ten years (Walton 2008, 900). The failure of these negotiations in part explain the legacy of conflict between Burma's center and periphery.

The resulting political instability of the 1950s amplified inter-group distrust, ultimately leading to a decisive military coup in 1962. Under military rule, most citizens, Bamar

included, suffered terrible political and economic hardships. For the purposes of this research, a more thorough exploration of Karen, Kachin, and Rohingya human rights violations shows how the military regime specifically targeted these groups in the interest of state preservation. As a historically weak state, Burma has not been able to successfully assimilate its minorities. Sensing threats emanating from outlying regions, the military regime has pursued a bloody, yet so far unsuccessful, set of strategies intended to break the spirit of ethnic minority groups.

The Karen

Eastern Burma's Karen population developed its distinct cultural and political identity during the British colonial era. During the eighteenth century, American Baptist missionaries were successful in converting large numbers of Karen from Animism to Christianity. Foreign educators also helped the Karen develop their own written language, further solidifying their unique ethnic identity. While the Karen remain a majority Buddhist group, their historically close relationship with the West continues to shape their identity in important ways. During World War II, the Karen fought alongside British and American troops, successfully repelling the Japanese invasion. The British were also instrumental in helping the Karen to develop their own national political organization, the Karen National Union (KNU).

Conflict between the Karen and Burma's central government began shortly after independence. As the failure of the Panglong Agreement became evident to all concerned parties, high-ranking Karen officials began to exit the military and state bureaucracy, forming the KNDO (Karen National Defense Organization). The KNDO, a military organization fully independent from the state, was instituted with the sole intention of promoting and defending Karen interests. Violence between the KNDO and the central government increased in 1948, culminating in massacres committed against Karen civilians in December of that year. Hundreds of Karen were killed by government and irregular forces in the waning months of 1948. By 1949, Karen forces had advanced on Rangoon, only to be repelled four miles from the city center (Callahan 2003, 133–137). The KNDO were ultimately forced back into Karen state, but not before significant military and civilian casualties were inflicted on both sides.

During the chaotic parliamentary period (1948–1962), sporadic conflict between the Karen and the Burmese government was accompanied by a protracted war by the regime against internal and external rivals. Following the death of independence hero Aung San, communists and other leftist splinter groups fought for control of the government. Simultaneously, an invasion by China's retreating Kuomintang army tested the viability of newly independent Burma. Skirmishes between the Karen and the Burmese military intensified over time, as the fragile Burmese government continued to perceive Karen armed forces as an existential threat to the state.

This period in Burma was also characterized by factional conflicts between the central government and smaller national armies. Coinciding with the new mobilization of ethnic minority armies in the north and east were challenges to authority from within Burma, as splinter groups who broke away from the initial independence movement asserted themselves. In 1958, the civilian government requested that the military step in to serve as a temporary caretaker government. General Ne Win, a prominent army officer during the

independence movement, eventually returned power to the civilian government, though this arrangement proved to be short-lived. In 1962, Ne Win and his army launched a successful coup, taking a hardline approach toward all dissidents. Following the coup, the new regime instituted the “Burmese Way to Socialism”, a program intended to emphasize economic justice over ethnic divisions (Taylor 2009, 304). In truth, the regime’s effort to create a unifying national identity failed spectacularly. The promotion of Burmese language education in the minority states, accompanied by state-sponsored missionary activities designed to convert Christians and Animists to Buddhism, intensified local anger. During the 1960s and 1970s, Burmese troops launched additional military offensives, resulting in long periods of *Tatmadaw* occupation. Ne Win’s reign was infamous for its institution of the “Four Cuts” policy, ostensibly designed to halt food, supplies, intelligence, and recruits to Karen forces. In practice, civilians often bore the brunt of this policy, as the Burmese armed forces suspected all Karen of collaborating with combatants.

During Ne Win’s reign, there are numerous corroborated reports of *Tatmadaw* burning Karen villages, forcing civilians to engage in slave labor, and murdering non-combatant village leaders. One of the more harrowing elements of the “Four Cuts” has been the implementation of the “living off the land” policy, whereby Karen civilians were forcibly relocated to military-controlled areas, so *Tatmadaw* soldiers could take advantage of free labor, food, and other basic supplies (Burma Link 2017). Additionally, human rights activists have documented cases of Burmese troops using Karen civilians to clear minefields. Mines have also been used to destroy villagers’ crops (Human Rights Watch 2017a; 2017b). The conflict in Karen state from 1962-1988 was characterized by patterns of low-level violence, disrupted by intense periods of fighting (Harff 2003, 60). While this dynamic has kept the casualty count relatively low, it has resulted in mass civilian displacement. According to the Border Consortium, a non-profit operating on the Burma/Thai border, roughly 110,000 Karen civilians are living in refugee camps, with thousands more internally displaced in Burma (Burma Link 2018).

Atrocities committed against the Karen population intensified during the 1990s as intermittent ceasefires were violated by the *Tatmadaw* and Karen defense forces. In 1995, the Burmese army launched a major offensive in Karen state, leading to the fall of Manerplaw, the KNU headquarters. The operation resulted in hundreds of civilian casualties, leading to the immediate exodus of 9000 Karen refugees into neighboring Thailand (Human Rights Watch 2017c). The Karen journey across the Salween River has historically been perilous due to government forces deliberately laying mines to prevent further migration across the Thai border (Human Rights Watch 2006).

During the 2000s, the Burmese military and the KNU continued to clash. While formal military operations slowed after a 2004 ceasefire, sporadic yet intense violence has persisted. In 2006 alone, 200 villages were reportedly destroyed by government forces (Project Ploughshares 2009). In recent years, active conflicts in Shan and Kachin states have led the Burmese army to allocate more of its limited resources to fighting these groups. Most recently, Karen state has been the target of government-sponsored land grabs. According to Human Rights Watch, government and military officials have used tactics of “intimidation and coercion” to displace landowners along the Burmese/Thai border without providing appropriate compensation (Human Rights Watch 2017d). Local farmers typically lack the resources or legal aid necessary to combat powerful

business interests targeting Karen land for extraction. The recent construction of the Hatgyi Dam and the Asian Highway have been particularly contentious development projects (Nyein 2018).

The overwhelming 2015 electoral victory of the pro-democracy National League for Democracy spawned a great deal of optimism within Karen state. Aung San Suu Kyi's message of inclusion and political reform was intended to offer a fresh start to a country worn out by nearly 60 years of war. Unfortunately, the recent transfer of power has not resulted in substantive policy changes toward the ethnic minority groups. As the military still retains a tremendous amount of formal and informal power within Burma, it now appears as though it is pursuing its own prerogatives in Karen state. Central to this equation is the number of large business interests controlled by the military, and the abundant natural resources available for extraction on the state's geographic periphery.

The Kachin

Kachin State, though sparsely populated, is home to Burma's largest Christian population. Prior to British colonization, the Kachin operated on land traditionally claimed by Burmese kings. During the post-colonial era, The Kachin were concerned not only with territorial control, but also with the protection of their Christian identity. During the parliamentary period, Prime Minister U Nu's very public endorsement of Buddhist religion and culture posed a symbolic threat to members of the Kachin community. U Nu's declaration of Buddhism as the official state religion in 1961 appeared to heighten these concerns among Kachin leaders (Minority Rights Group International 2017). After the 1962 coup, all prospects for ethnic self-determination were effectively extinguished, as the Kachin joined other minority groups in open rebellion.

Conflict with the Kachin group is historically linked to the Burmese military regime's desire to incorporate ethnic border regions into the state. Like the Karen to the south, the Kachin fought alongside the British during World War II. In 1962, responding to Ne Win's coup, the Kachin formed their own defense forces, known as the Kachin Independence Army. In recent years, the KIA has splintered, making ceasefires difficult to enforce, while also limiting the long-term prospects for conflict resolution (Buchanan 2017).

Military operations against the Kachin have persisted throughout the post-independence era. The stakes of this battle are heightened through competition over key natural resources. Kachin state is rich in minerals, containing Burma's most valuable stock of jade. The state also sits squarely in southeast Asia's "golden triangle," serving as a global hub for opium cultivation and trafficking. Conflict over both legal and illegal goods has led to the displacement of many Kachin civilians. Specifically, illegal timber and mining operations have forced Kachin villagers from their land, while exposing them to dangerous air and water pollution. The refugee crisis stemming from unsustainable rural development and ongoing military conflict has led large numbers of Kachin to seek refuge in neighboring China.

Human rights violations committed against the Kachin bear a strong resemblance to those endured by their Karen counterparts to the southeast. Throughout the course of this conflict, the burning of villages and churches has been reported. There is further documentation suggesting that the Kachin are being targeted specifically for their Christian

beliefs, including by forced conversions and intermarriage (Minority Rights Group International 2017). While the Kachin conflict has traditionally been marked by low-level conflict, periodically interrupted by intense fighting, violence over the past few years shows no sign of abating. KWAT, a local Kachin advocacy organization, documents crimes committed against civilians at the hands of *Tatmadaw* troops. Recently, the organization has reported, “Burma Army troops have deliberately set fire to villagers’ houses and property, and shot indiscriminately into civilian areas, causing death and injury”. Another recent event is recorded as follows: “On October 1, 2016, Burmese troops from LIB 217 fired six shells into the village of Puwang, Muse township, killing a two-year-old girl and badly injuring two young boys aged three and four (Kachin Women’s Association 2017).”

As suggested by these reports, 2016 was a particularly dangerous year for Kachin civilians. Frequent aerial bombing raids undertaken by the *Tatmadaw* have resulted in more casualties (Pwint and Nom 2017). The conflict has been accompanied by a pattern of threats aimed directly at Kachin Christian identity. The recent disappearance of two Kachin pastors remains unsolved, despite pressure from international human rights observers (Amnesty International 2017).

The Rohingya

The Rohingya form Burma’s largest Muslim ethnic group and have endured a long history of discrimination (Hart 2017). While there is much controversy surrounding Rohingya settlement in Rakhine State, most historians argue that their presence in western Burma predates the colonial era. Race riots in the 1930s erupted under the assumption that Muslims in general were part of a broader British-sponsored Indian mission to control Burma (see Taylor 2009, 146–148). In response, Rohingya ethno-nationalism grew in the early part of the twentieth century, culminating in the Rohingya Mujahideen rebellion (1948–1961), a failed secessionist campaign (Coates 2014).

During World War II, communal violence between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya resulted in the death of roughly 100,000 Rohingya and the displacement of nearly 80,000 (Ibrahim 2016, 27). In 1977, responding to the military government’s attempt to identify and expel illegal immigrants, some 200,000 Rohingya sought refuge in Bangladesh. During the 1970s and 1980s episodes of communal violence erupted between the Buddhist Arakanese and the Rohingya, with civilian casualties reported on both sides. In 1981–1982 there was another exodus as the Burmese government implemented a new citizenship law requiring residents to prove that their ancestors had resided in the country before 1824. Since few Rohingya had citizenship records dating back to the colonial era, the new policy effectively disenfranchised an entire ethnic group (50–51). During the 1990s, Rohingya migration to Bangladesh accelerated. It is estimated that over 250,000 Rohingya were living in refugee camps before Bangladesh repatriated large numbers back to Burma (52).

More recently, communal violence broke out across Rakhine state in 2012 and 2016. In the former case, the alleged rape of an Arakanese woman at the hands of Rohingya men led to the formation of angry mobs, who committed direct violence against Rohingya citizens and willfully destroyed villages (Human Rights Watch 2013). In 2016, violence erupted at a police checkpoint between Rohingya militants and border guards, resulting

in dozens of casualties (“Myanmar violence” 2017). The subsequent military operation saw over a thousand homes burnt to the ground, as well as allegations of rape perpetrated by Burmese forces against Rohingya civilians (“Myanmar says army ends operation” 2017).

The persecution of the Rohingya is inextricably tied to the politics of ethno-religious identity (Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide 2017). In the early years of Burmese independence, though they were temporarily recognized as a legitimate group, the Rohingya were not formally included in ethnic reconciliation efforts. During the years of the Ne Win regime, the Rohingya were subjected not just to physical violence, but also to revocation of all citizenship rights. In 1974, the government initiated the Emergency Immigration Act, whereby all residents of Burma were provided with ethnic identity cards. While other minority groups were given Burmese citizenship cards, the Rohingya were only entitled to foreign registration cards (Ibrahim 2016, 50).

As alluded to earlier, the claim that the Rohingya were a foreign element, repeated frequently by the military regime, is more indicative of propaganda than historical fact. Much of the violence in Rakhine State has also been fueled by extremist rhetoric emanating from ultra-nationalist monks, who have called for the removal of the Rohingya from Burmese territory. “969”, and its successor groups *Ma Ba Tha* and the *Buddha Dhamma Parahita* Foundation, the former led by the infamous monk Wirathu, have compared Burmese Muslims to animals and published online propaganda linking Burmese Muslims to radical jihadist groups abroad. While the monks have not been directly linked to violence committed against Rohingya, their rhetoric serves to stir up animosity against a traditionally persecuted group. “969” was successful in pressuring outgoing President Thein Sein to sign the Race and Religious Protection laws, which among other things, prohibit polygamy, restrict marriage between Buddhist women and non-Buddhist men, and require women in certain regions to leave 36 months between childbirths (“Burma” 2017). The passage of these laws has its most direct impact on Burmese Muslims, the majority of whom are Rohingya.

While Burma’s standard of living remains one of the lowest in the world, conditions are particularly harrowing for members of the Rohingya community. As large numbers of Rohingya have attempted to escape the country on rickety boats, or across the Bangladeshi border crossing, the Rohingya remaining in Burma face severe restrictions on their freedom of movement. In refugee camps, only recently accessible to international aid organizations, large numbers contend with disease and starvation. Many international human rights organizations have labeled the situation as an emerging genocide, with the United Nations identifying the Rohingya as the “most persecuted minority in the world” in 2013 (Economist 2015).

Societal discrimination against Muslims in Burma is widespread, and negative stereotypes about the Muslim community are dispersed across society (Schissler, Walton, and Thi 2017). While the military regime was particularly brutal in its treatment of the Rohingya, the NLD has not been much more accommodating. NLD leader and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi has shied away from addressing the Rohingya question publicly. In 2012, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum awarded Aung San Suu Kyi its prestigious Elie Wiesel Award that is “reserved for those prominent individuals whose actions advance the Museum’s vision of a world where people confront hatred, prevent genocide, and promote human dignity (USHMM 2012).” In 2018, the Museum rescinded this

prestigious human rights award stating, “As the military’s attacks against the Rohingya unfolded in 2016 and 2017, we had hoped that you – as someone we and many others have celebrated for your commitment to human dignity and universal human rights – would have done something to condemn and stop the military’s brutal campaign and to express solidarity with the targeted Rohingya population ... As a living memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, the Museum stands in solidarity with victims of genocide and atrocity crimes and attempts to do for victims today what was not done for the Jews of Europe. As Elie Wiesel said, “Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented (USHMM 2018a, 2018b).” Moreover, in the latest parliamentary elections, neither the NLD or the pro-military party fielded a single Muslim candidate for office. Elite-sponsored Islamophobia is yet another obstacle to national unity in Burma, making conditions for the Rohingya increasingly perilous.

Summary of findings

The Karen and Kachin case studies illustrate a deliberate assimilation strategy undertaken by the Burmese government. The government’s attempt to coerce ethnic minority groups into cooperating has only increased ethno-religious polarization. Lacking the military might and bureaucratic tools needed to effectively assimilate minority groups, the outcome has been protracted conflict resulting in large numbers of military and civilian casualties since 1948. In the current political arrangement, the military is guaranteed 25% of all seats in the national legislature, thus making constitutional change without military approval all but impossible. There is presently no civilian oversight of military affairs, thus limiting the military’s accountability to the new popularly elected government.

The military’s outsized governance role likely means that radical policy changes vis-à-vis ethnic minority groups remains highly unlikely. Since independence, most state resources have been allocated to constructing and modernizing the military. As of today, it is the only viable institution in Burma, and by far the largest consumer of state funds. Despite the military’s size, over 400,000 troops, it is hampered by corruption and low troop morale (Selth 1996).

The regime’s treatment of the Rohingya population has been substantially different than that of the Karen and Kachin peoples. Different strategies are indicative of the way the government understands and classifies identities. While the Burmese government has formally recognized the Karen and Kachin as legitimate ethnic groups, the Rohingya have not formally shared in this distinction since 1974. Substantively, this means different objectives on the part of the military regime. In one sense, strategies geared toward the Karen and Kachin groups are based on assimilation, or fear of losing sovereignty however tenuous, over these groups. Conversely, policies directed against the Rohingya have been executed in the spirit of exclusion. By making life intolerable for the Rohingya, the government aims to push them out of the country, while taking accompanying measures to restrain population growth in the short-term. This disparity in governmental strategies geared on one hand toward the Karen and Kachin and the other hand toward the Rohingya, further exacerbates the severity of genocidal violence between the groups. While the Burmese military has had little interest in conducting widespread military operations

throughout Rakhine state, it has also been reluctant to stop communal violence against Rohingya. As Human Rights Watch reports, local police and military have been complicit in episodes of communal violence, standing by while Rohingya civilians were attacked, and villages burned (Human Rights Watch 2013).

The preceding case study analyses strongly suggests that genocidal violence has been perpetrated against the Karen and Kachin ethnic groups. State preservation as a motivator for genocide and extreme violence seems to matter most when the targeted groups pose a perceived immediate and existential threat to regime dominance as explained in Figure 1. Since the Karen and Kachin opposition have been actively engaged in military struggle since 1948, threats to Burmese state preservation are both material and symbolic in nature. In the first case, the Tatmadaw has engaged in a series of bloody battles with these ethnic militias resulting in significant losses in military personnel and equipment. Symbolically, the notion of two nationally recognized ethnic groups leaving the state directly contradicts the military regime's historical commitment to a safe and functional multi-ethnic state.

Conversely, as opposition to the Rohingya, unlike the Karen and Kachin has been cast in Islamophobic terms, alternative theories of genocide may have greater explanatory power in this case.⁵ In this respect, our framework treats the Rohingya case differently for two important reasons. First, as the Rohingya ethno-religious opposition have historically lacked organized militia groups, there has never been a substantive military threat to the regime. Secondly, as the Rohingya are already excluded as lawful residents of the state, successive military regimes are more concerned about the long-term effects of ethnic-Rohingya population growth on the state's national ethnic composition. Since the regime already controls Rakhine State, their policy is not based upon securing territory, but rather expelling a "foreign" group. In this case, regime dominance is high and the perceived threat to state preservation is low as compared with ethno-religious conflict in Kachin and Karen States where the opposite holds true.

Based upon these subtle, but nonetheless important differences, Ideological or Xenophobic genocide may better explain why Burma persecutes the Rohingya population based solely on its ethno-religious characteristics, while a Developmental genocide account suggests that the military intends to reconquer what it perceives as lost territory (see Fein 1984).⁶ The specific applicability of these theories to the Rohingya case is beyond the scope of this project but should be a fascinating avenue for future research.

Finally, while we argue that domestic factors are the largest determinant of genocidal policies, the international context appears to shape the types of strategies regimes take toward ethno-religious minorities (see Mylonas 2012). In the Burmese case, while the international community has condemned the persecution of ethnic minorities, there have been no alterations to the military's overall strategy against these groups. This specific issue was discussed in detail during meetings between former Presidents Thein Sein and Barack Obama in 2012. In this summit, Sein agreed to meet certain democratic benchmarks in exchange for the U.S. lifting regime sanctions. While Sein made token reforms, releasing certain political prisoners, and removing some press restrictions, the overall treatment of ethnic minorities was unchanged. The plight of Burma's Rohingya is well documented by international human rights groups, with a proposed U.N. investigation recently blocked by the Burmese government (Lawi 2016). In the meantime, it

appears that the military-dominated government can detect the important difference between rhetoric and action and has responded accordingly.

Conclusion: using meso-level case studies to revise macro-level theorizing

All three episodes of genocide against the Karen, Kachin and Rohingya populations are informed by elite perceptions of state preservation. Common to all three cases is the government's willingness to embark upon public policies designed to subdue, cleanse, or destroy domestic ethno-religious and political rivalries when the status quo is no longer palatable to the regime. It is the tactics employed in the execution of such policies that differ, not the objectives themselves. We conclude that the state preservation model of genocide best explains variations in regime tactics against the Karen and Kachin, if not Rohingya Muslims. We are not the first to argue that genocide originates from a strategy of state power, within the context of ethnic or identity conflicts. Within this overarching domain, we draw on three distinct strains of research. First, studies that consider genocide within the context of strategic conflict escalation (Valentino 2004; Mann 2005; Straus 2006). The second stream relies on studies that consider genocide within the context of conflict escalation processes that are not strategic, but rather are interactionist (Bloxham 2005; Midlarsky 2005; Hamilton 2011; Straus 2012). Finally, we draw on research that considers genocide within the context of social processes (Hinton 2005; Fujii 2009; Klusemann 2012; Rosenberg 2012). Together these three research agendas construct a useful toolkit for understanding genocide in Burma. To our knowledge, we are the first authors to argue that this strategy of governance employed by the same government thrice over varies based on the perceived ability of victim populations to assimilate into mainstream Burmese society.

Implications for theory building

From the analysis above, we draw four conclusions, which have a direct impact on theory construction and testing in Genocide Studies. First, state preservation is a prime motivator for genocidal violence, when the victim population is *perceived* to pose an immediate existential threat to the regime's dominance and control over its territory. There are two central aspects worth noting. The threat perception of elites does not need to reflect actual, empirical competition to their power for violence to ensue. Rather, all that is required is the belief that an ethno-religious-national population poses a threat to governmental control. Coupled with this belief is the perception that the regime's ability to sustain itself teeters on the brink. These challenges to regime dominance often come from organized movements, possibly centering on secession, as is the case with Karen or Kachin militia groups. Any organized sub-national movement with high levels of political and military cohesion can potentially rise to the level of threatening state preservation.

Second, we suspect this type of genocidal violence is more common in weak states, because regimes have yet to establish a monopoly on the use of force within their territory. We argue that states undergoing regime consolidation in the developing world are more likely to resort to intrinsic political violence when threatened as compared to established governments in strong states.

Third, when the victim population poses a long-term socio-cultural threat to the regime's vision of statehood, it is not state preservation that matters, but ideology, xenophobia, and territorial acquisition that drive mass violence. These factors are likely the main drivers of violence against the Rohingya. In this case, the *Tatmadaw* does not appear to fear a Rohingya secessionist movement or rebellion in the near term.

This leads to the important question, what is causing the violence? We conclude, the violence is motivated by three factors: an implicit ideology that Burma is reserved solely for certain groups (loosely defined, to include ethnic groups historically located within the territory, which would also encompass the Karen and Kachin). Closely connected to this utopian vision are xenophobic ideations extending decades into the past, intimating that "foreigners" have come to take resources and jobs from locals. Finally, there is a belief that while Rohingya Muslims occupy territory within Burma, Arakanese Buddhists and other "legitimate" ethnic groups cannot adequately control their land and territory. Therefore, *Tatmadaw* policies have been specifically designed to drive the Rohingya out. This aspect of genocidal violence is not unique to Burma. We would argue that the National Socialist movement in Germany with its targeting of Jews, the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, United States policies against Native Americans, and possibly the Guatemala genocide against indigenous populations were all, in part, motivated by ideology, xenophobia, and territorial conquest in lieu of threats to state preservation. In these cases, it is not realpolitik that matters, but these three intervening factors that determine the onset of mass violence spurred by state elites.

Finally, our findings suggest that domestic level variables are predominant indicators of violence against ethno-religious groups, though we must stress the importance of international actors in shaping elite beliefs towards such populations. Revisiting [Figure 1](#), it is the threat from domestic oppositional groups, coupled with direct and indirect external support that shapes the regime's perception of threats to its sustainability. In the case of the Kachin, the Chinese government has funneled weapons across the northern border in support of this population. This action, viewed by the *Tatmadaw* as a legitimate threat, influenced state policies directed at the Kachin. This scenario can be juxtaposed with the United States' merely rhetorical support for Rohingya Muslims. While the United States offered formal press releases and the threat of token sanctions based on the treatment of Burma's Rohingya population, it failed to follow through with clear material support. This type of limited international involvement elicited comparably token changes by the *Tatmadaw*. By contrast, the United States and Thailand (particularly the Karen diaspora in both states) have delivered both material support and sanctuary to Karen refugees, thus heightening the threat perception for the *Tatmadaw* leadership.

The conclusions generated by this analysis allow scholars within Genocide Studies to incorporate meso-level perpetrator actions into wider theories of mass violence. This study permits us to provide summary findings on the violence against three sub-national populations in Burma, while retaining a limited capacity to generalize with comparable case studies outside the region. To date, genocidal violence perpetrated against the Rohingya has received more attention within the Genocide Studies canon of cases. However, based upon the preceding analysis, we argue that the Karen and Kachin cases should be given equal weight. In our view, future work within Comparative Genocide Studies should focus on incorporating peripheral case studies from the outset, in the hope of creating more comprehensive and analytically rich explanations for genocide.

Notes

1. Since the early 2000s there has been a great deal of literature addressing the following “peripheral” cases across Southeast Asia, South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and beyond. Some of the cases explored in recent years include: Algeria (1954–1962); Angola (1975–2002); Bangladesh (1971); Bosnia (1992–1995); Burundi (1972–1973); Burundi (1993–2005); Burundi (2016–present); Cambodia (1970–1978); China (1946–1950); Colombia (1948–1960); Darfur, Sudan (2003–2005); Eritrea (1998–2000); Greece (1945–1949); Guatemala (1966–1996); India (1946–1948); Indonesia (1965–1966); Iran (1980–1988); Mozambique (1981–1992); Nigeria (1966–1970); North Korea (1950–1953); Sudan (1956–1972); Sudan (1983–2002); Syria (2011–present); Uganda (1971–1978); Uganda (1981–1986); Ukraine (1932–1933); and Zaire (1960–1965). This is not by any means an exhaustive list but a useful sampling of the extant case studies.
2. For more on the Genocide Convention and its limitations see the following: Boghossian (2010), Weitz (2010), Travis (2012), Goldsmith (2010), Horowitz (1976), Kuper (1977), Kuper (1981), Chalk and Jonassohn (1990), Staub (1989), Glanville (2009), and Beardsley (2006).
3. Prospect theory has been applied to a variety of disciplines. The following works are just a sampling: Argyle (1999), Levy (1994), and Whyte (1993).
4. As Burma’s largest ethnic group, the Bamar compose roughly 68% of the population. This estimate is subject to debate, as problems of self-identification complicate the classification of ethnic groups. For a more thorough discussion see Smith (1991).
5. For example, there has been much socio-political research into the role of “scapegoating” in causing genocide and mass violence. See Staub (1989), Charny (1982), Mazian (1990), Girard (1986), Allport (1979), and Totten and Bartrop (2009).
6. Some authors, like Helen Fein, have disaggregated genocide conceptualization into subparts. Fein argues that there are four types of genocides: developmental, despotic, retributive, and ideological genocides. Each kind of genocide correspond to an ideal type. For instance, according to Fein, developmental genocides occur where the victims are most likely tribal groups who are not welcomed into modern society. Therefore, the process of development (i.e. economic, social, or political development) leads to intergroup violence and genocide (see Fein 1984).

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