

MYANMAR CONFLICT ASSESSMENT

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Abstract:

Myanmar has been one of the most secluded nations on earth in the past two to three decades. It was only recently that the military junta which ruled the nation with an iron fist decided to not only hold free and fair elections but also to open up its borders. As more interactions happen between the outside world and Myanmar, the rest of us get to understand the intricacies of Myanmar. Myanmar has been plagued by internal conflicts ever since independence. The conflicts not only take place between the government forces and certain sections of the population, but also between different ethnic and religious groups. Ever since 2011, the clashes between Rohingya Muslims on one side and the Arakan Buddhists and the government forces on the other have created international headlines.

Introduction:

Rohingya Muslims are an ethnic group who are a minority group in the Rakhine state, which borders neighbouring Bangladesh, in Western Myanmar.

Myanmar has had its share of international conflict assessment teams visit them for an in-depth analysis of the series of internal conflicts that are plaguing the nation. Will Carter led a three-member team to Myanmar to complete a Strategic Conflict Assessment and Conflict Sensitivity Study (Carter, 2012) but it collected data and studied only from two conflict-affected areas in the country – Kachin state and Mon state. Lauren Durand has conducted an extensive pan-national study on the nature of conflicts across Myanmar (Durand). Sana Saeed too has written extensively on the oppression meted out to Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar focusing on the structural root causes of the problem (Saeed, 2014).

This article will confine itself to the conflict in the state of Rakhine in western Myanmar and primarily between the Rohingya Muslims on the one hand and the Tatmadaw (Myanmar military) and the Rakhine people (who themselves are a minority mainly following Theravada Buddhism) on the other. This article will use the collected data from various sources and apply the first task in the ICAF framework – Conflict Diagnosis - to assess the conflict.

Step One: Evaluate the Context of the Conflict

Myanmar is a multi-ethnic state in Southeast Asia which achieved its independence from the British in 1948. A controversial law was enacted by the government – referred to as the 1982 Citizenship Law – intended to define and categorize the many ethnic communities and the general population into three different citizenship layers (Burma Citizenship Law, 1982). However, the law was so enacted to leave out Rohingya Muslims found in the Rakhine state. Surprisingly, the Arakan Buddhists found in the same state were included in the law. The Myanmar government was of the opinion that the Rohingyas came from Bangladesh and should return back, whereas Bangladesh would not take them back. The Rohingyas were suddenly stateless in their own land where they had lived for many generations. In May 2012, a young Arakan Buddhist lady was raped and murdered by three Rohingya Muslim men. Arakan villagers retaliated by killing Muslims and this led to Rohingyas killing an unknown number of Arakan people

and also targeting Arakan property. What has resulted has been an inhuman destruction to life and property on both sides (HRW, 2012). Rohingya Muslims, on the account of being stateless have been accused of usurping the land which belonged to the rightful settlers of the land – the Arakan. With the government troops also persecuting the Rohingyas, they have their backs against the wall. Many Rohingyas have fled to neighbouring Bangladesh, while a few others have fled to Thailand, India, Japan, and United Kingdom. Most other Rohingyas are living in settlement camps in various parts of Rakhine state.

Step Two: Understand Core Grievances and Social/Institutional Resilience

Grievances:

All the ethnic communities of Myanmar, the government and the Buddhist monks are united in their belief that the Rohingyas are not Burmese people but actually “Bengali” people from neighbouring Bangladesh. As a result, the President of Myanmar Mr. Thein Sein wants the entire Rohingya population to be deported out of Myanmar. As much as Myanmar wants them out, no other state is willing to accept them in thus rendering them stateless (Economist, 2012).

Heart of the problem is the issue of citizenship of the Rohingya Muslims – how they are treated as stateless people in their own land, one where many of them have lived for many generations. Due to the constant tensions in the affected areas, both communities – Rohingyas and Arakans – live in settlement camps. Rakhine state alone has about 140,000 Internally Displaced People and the capital town Sittwe has about 75,000 of them. In addition, there are many more who have fled out of Myanmar. There have been reports that the settlement camps housing the Arakan Buddhists have more facilities than the ones housing Rohingyas (Galache, 2014).

There has been an acute mistrust between the two communities in Rakhine state. Both the communities have taken up violence to feel protected against the other community and hence, it has become difficult to force any one community to give up violence as they will then feel unable to defend themselves from the other. Western Myanmar, including the state of Rakhine, is prone to natural weather disasters like Cyclone Nargis which hit Myanmar in 2008. Ever since this conflict shaped up, there have been many more cyclones affecting the region, Cyclone Mahasen in 2013 being the most noteworthy (Shaunik, 2013). All government efforts to move the people out of the settlement camps, away from the fury of the cyclone, have been met with serious suspicion, believing that they government would either deport them or would exterminate them altogether.

Rohingya Muslims now have no access to education, running water or electricity in the settlement camps in serious violation of basic human rights. The United Nations has claimed that the Rohingyas are “one of the most persecuted minorities” in the world (ABC, 2012). The humanitarian groups which were providing aid in Rakhine have now been asked to return back amid allegations from ethnic Rakhine groups of bias towards the Rohingya (Hume, October 2014). The Buddhist monk community, which wields considerable influence on the population has not only called for a ban on interfaith marriages (Hume, June 2014) but also asked for a complete deportation of all the Rohingyas. However, to make

matters worse, they have actively campaigned against the Organization of Islamic Countries setting up a monitoring centre in Myanmar to verify first-hand the quality of life led by the Rohingya (Japan Times, 2013).

In addition to these problems, the nation of Myanmar is transitioning from a military rule to a democracy with free and fair multiparty elections expected in 2015. With most of Myanmar's population being anti-Rohingya, it is a political minefield which none of the mainstream political parties and the government want to handle. So, the Rohingyas not only find themselves unable to vote in the upcoming path-breaking democratic elections but also none of the mainstream political parties or the government want to take up their cause in their political agenda or election manifestos (Hume, February 2015)..

Pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who is tipped to win the upcoming elections, upon being asked about the plight of the Rohingyas, has shied away from deploring the genocide and pogroms and has only called for a stopping of the violence and resolution of all problems peacefully across the discussion table. This, many critics believe, has only added to the plight of the Rohingya as a powerful critique of the state policy by Suu Kyi would have hastened their inclusion into the mainstream (Stoakes, 2013).

The conflict has now stretched beyond the boundaries of Myanmar. The displaced Rohingya have become a serious humanitarian problem in neighbouring Bangladesh. The Bangladesh government wants to return the Rohingya back to Myanmar (Irin, 2014). The Rohingya has also become targets of human trafficking across the border in Thailand (Reuters, 2015). Amidst all this, the Rohingya seem to be getting support of Muslims elsewhere. Investigations into the bomb attacks in Bodh Gaya, one of the holiest places in Buddhism, in 2013 revealed it as a revenge for attacks against Rohingya Muslims (Bhalla, 2014).

[Sources of Social / Institutional Resilience:](#)

While the entire nation seems to be highly polarized against the Rohingya, there are a few social institutions who are advocating for the rights of the Rohingya and calling for their speedy repatriation. The Arakan Project is working toward a future in which all people from Rakhine/Arakan State attain human rights, justice and peace in a democratic Burma. To this end, they work together with local communities and project their voices internationally (Insight on Conflict). All organizations and institutions working towards resilience are facing immense threats while carrying out their duties (Crisis Group, 2014). Human Rights Watch has called for an immediate revocation of the two-child state policy that was imposed on the Rohingya (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Marta Tucci, a freelance documentary photographer and writer, has clicked a number of photographs and published them hoping that such a step will help in focusing the spotlight on the Rohingya women who are one of the most impacted in all this (Marta Tucci). Other individuals like Sujauddin Karimuddin work with refugee Rohingya population in Australia and also help the struggling population in Myanmar (Barry, 2009).

Amidst all this, there are many others who believe that a quick transition to democracy for Myanmar will help in a peaceful settlement of the Rohingya problem. A Burmese lady Zin Mar Aung is one such example who is relentlessly

striving for free and fair elections with no military intervention (Rohingya Welfare, 2013). Wai Wai Nu, a former political prisoner and the director of Women Peace Network Arakan, was awarded N-Peace Network's "Peace Generation – Young Women and Men Building Peace" award (DVB, 2014). In March 2013, Wai Wai Nu and a group of Rohingya women founded the Women Peace Network-Arakan (WPNA), a non-governmental organization that promotes women rights, peace, justice and equality in Arakan state and Burma as a whole (Proham).

Internationally too, there have been many institutions working as mitigators of the conflict. Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO) is one such organization based in London, the United Kingdom. It is a broad based Organisation of the Rohingya People that emerged in 1998 (Rohingya, 2011).

Step Three: Identify Drivers of Conflict and Mitigating Factors

Drivers of Conflict:

The primary actors in this conflict include the Rohingya Muslims who are the most persecuted, the Tatmadaw (the military government) which adopts discrimination as a state policy, the Buddhist monks who wield considerable influence on Myanmar population openly recommending deportation of Rohingya, Arakan Buddhists who were involved in bitter conflicts with the Rohingya. All these individuals and institutes mentioned above are directly related to the increased state of violence.

The secondary actors in this conflict include the mainstream political parties of Myanmar who do not wish to stand up for the rights of the Rohingya fearing a backlash by the monks, the military and the general population. Neighbouring countries like Bangladesh who are sending back the Rohingya are secondary actors too.

Drivers of Mitigation:

In addition to institutions mentioned above, there are a few domestic and international organizations working towards a reduction in tension. Human Rights Education Institute of Burma (HREIB) facilitates a broad range of human rights training and advocacy programs for grassroots organizations and community leaders. The Women's League of Burma (WLB) works to increase the participation of women in the struggle for democracy and human rights. The Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPCS) works towards strengthening a range of existing peacebuilding initiatives across Asia (Bainbridge).

Step Four: Describe Opportunities for Increasing or Decreasing Conflict

Windows of Vulnerability:

The Western coast of Myanmar is prone to cyclones (equivalent to hurricanes in the Atlantic Ocean and typhoons in the Pacific Ocean) originating in the Indian Ocean. With each arriving cyclonic disturbance, there is an inherent danger of widespread destruction of lives, property, and infrastructure in Myanmar. In particular danger will be the Rohingya whose settlement camps are under a constant threat of flooding during the monsoon season. Such a widespread destruction might lead to a deliberate attempt by the state authorities to place the Rohingya in harm's way hoping for widespread casualties.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) advised the Myanmar government in conducting a census across the nation in 2014 – a first in over three decades - hoping that such a process would be a step towards “quiet diplomacy”. However, the census exercise got embroiled in a lot of controversies and the chair of UNFPA accused some human rights groups of pursuing their own hidden agenda. There have been accusations on the government of using the census as a pretext to deploy military force and displace the Rohingya thereby ensuring they won't be enlisted in the exercise. The census although complete is far from perfect and any steps taken by the government based on these census figures might result in an explosion of resentment and anger from the minorities including the Rohingya. Similarly any decision to re-conduct the census exercise might not be well received by the majority Myanmar population (UN expert).

The military junta has announced that it will relinquish power to a democratically elected government in 2015. However, under such circumstances, the military might not be willing to control any riots. Such an eruption in violence can be used as a pretext by the military to cling onto power. With the military back in power, the people might be encouraged to further persecute the Rohingya. In the event of the elections passing off peacefully and a new democratic government taking charge, such a new government may only act upon the majoritarian sentiment of the people and increase the efforts to deport the Rohingya.

Pro-democracy activist and popular politician Aung San Suu Kyi has never openly supported the cause of the Rohingya. In the event of Suu Kyi becoming the President in the future, there is an inherent danger of people in her government using the situation to their advantage to permanently resolve the conflict in their favour.

With the Western world slowly but steadily lifting sanctions and Myanmar progressing on the path towards economic recovery, the gap between the haves and the have-nots might increase. This might result in an acute economic gap between the majority population and the Rohingya, only alienating the two communities further.

With the expected opening of the Myanmar economy and borders to the outside world, the nation might see a boom in telecommunication capabilities, thereby resulting in a large section of the population making use of social media. The inherent danger in such a fractured society of social media is that there can be blatant misuse of social media to methodically and systemically persecute the Rohingya (Holland, 2014).

[Windows of Opportunity:](#)

The Western nations might actually use this opportunity to actively take up the cause of the Rohingya Muslims and portray to the Muslim world at large that their hatred of the Western world is unfounded and that the West is eager to help distraught Muslims across the world to lead a respectable life.

The United Nations, United States, ASEAN member states and other nations interested in helping build Myanmar economically can use the opportunity to impose certain restrictions on the Myanmar government to correct the mistakes

of the past, by providing citizenship to Rohingya, allowing them to vote in a fearless manner.

The new government, as and when elected in 2015, will have to use the opportunity to frame a new constitution to ensure that the multitude of ethnic groups across the state are well represented politically in the government at both the provincial and the federal levels. A constitution which creates a legislature having proportionate representation for all groups of the society will go a long way in addressing the root causes of the conflict. On the contrary, a legislature based on majority system will only exacerbate the problem and may only result in further alienation (RFA, 2014).

Conclusion:

The ethnic conflict in Myanmar has exploded into a grave humanitarian crisis, not only in Myanmar, but also in neighbouring states. The issue of citizenship, the replacement of displaced people, creation of a respectable livelihood with ample opportunities for education, propagation of culture and religion, are some of the major demands that need to be resolved quickly. Any attempt at conflict solution will need to be carried out in a time-bound manner with enough assurances by the Myanmar government of safeguarding the basic human rights of all communities involved (Joint Statement). The elections planned to be conducted in 2015 offers a unique opportunity to Myanmar military, ethnic majority Myanmar population, Buddhist monks and the Rohingya to settle their differences peacefully rather than resorting to violence. The world looks at Myanmar expectantly.

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