

Locating the Rohingya in time and space

On the Rohingya, history, identity and belonging



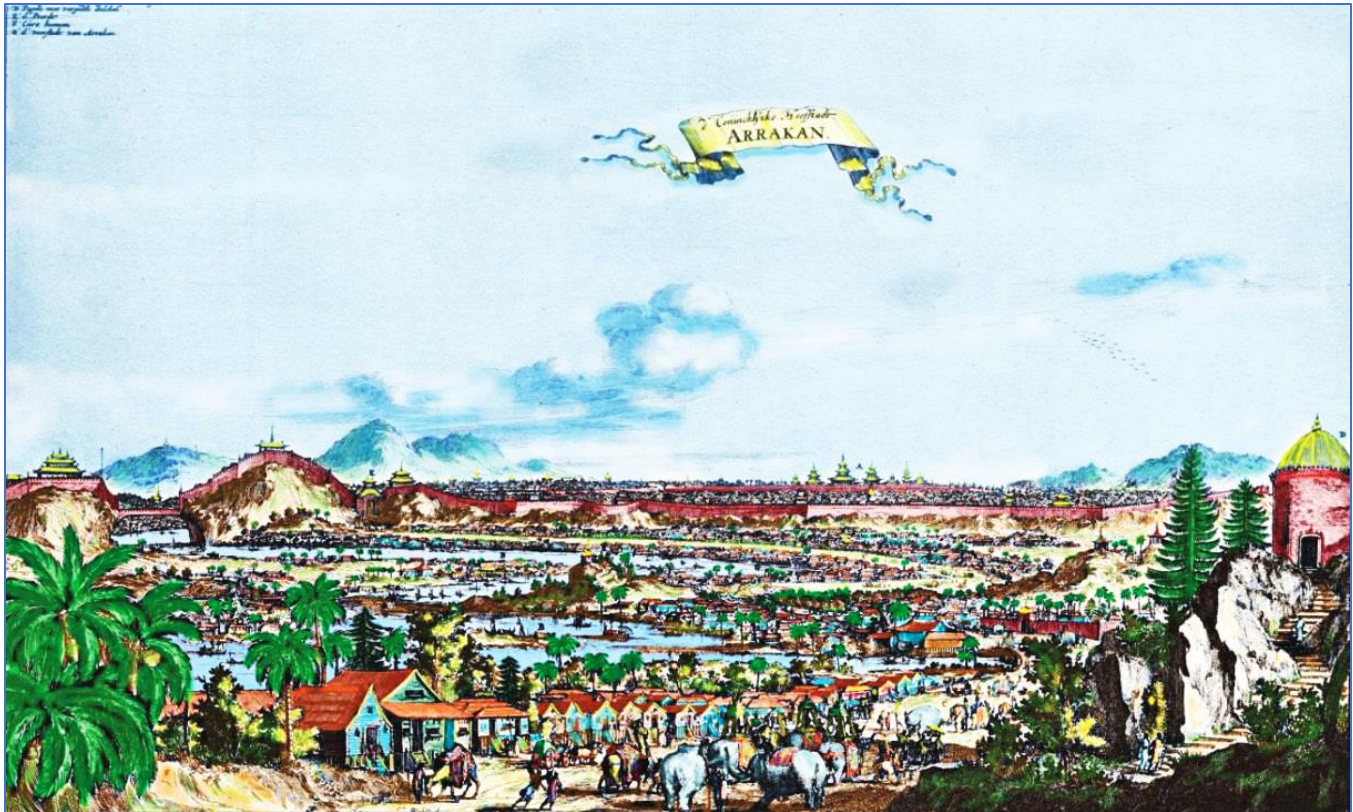
Photo: Star File

By *Iftekhhar Iqbal*

Clarifying on its nomenclature, the Annan Commission Report on the Rakhine (Arakan) State ([pdf](#)), notes that "In line with the request of the State Counsellor [Aung San Suu Kyi], the Commission uses neither the term 'Bengali' nor 'Rohingya', who are referred to as 'Muslims' or 'the Muslim community in Rakhine'".

This left the Commission with the only option of referring to the crisis in Rakhine from the vantage point of universal human rights, rather than the question of historical antecedents. Yet the request from Suu Kyi and the Commission's compliance to not mention the terms "Bengali" or "Rohingya" will stand against future measures to implement the Commission's recommendations for restoring citizenship to the Rohingyas.

This is because the question of the Rohingya is not merely connected to human rights issues, but also to the issue of civil rights including the right to self-identification. The bone of contention for the Myanmar military and the country's State Council is that the Rohingyas are "Bengalis" from Bangladesh who speak the Bangla language. How may we respond to this claim to bring stakeholders from Bangladesh, Myanmar and the international community closer for a durable solution to the crisis? Answers to this question abound in different phases of the region's history.



Set against the backdrop of the Arakan Mountains, Mrauk U was home to a multiethnic population. Painting by Wouter Schouten

Rakhine before decolonisation: From a cosmopolitan society to national space

The history of Rakhine is rich and greatly connected to the Arab-Persian cultural world since at least the early 8th century and with the Bengal/Bangladesh region from much earlier times. Muslim Sufis and traders had interactions with the coastal regions of what is today's Bangladesh and Rakhine and all the way to the Indian Ocean rim of wider Southeast Asia. Conversion to Islam took place in areas that fall within the current borders of both Myanmar and Bangladesh. In 1406, the Rakhine king Nara Meikhlā was dethroned by an invading Bamar/Burmese force and was driven to Bengal. He was later able to regain his throne with the help of 30,000 soldiers sent by the Bengal Sultan, Jalal al Din. Rakhine kings used to send tribute to Bengal Muslim Sultans for a considerable period of time. However, during the transition period between the decline of independent Muslim rulers of Bengal and the arrival of the Mughals from northern India, Bangladesh's port city Chittagong came under the Rakhine rulers for some time.

"There is no instance in the world where after decades of experience of citizenship and of exercising the rights to electing their representative to parliament an entire population becomes stateless without security to life, property and honour, except of course in Nazi Germany. It's an irony that Suu Kyi's ascendancy to Myanmar statecraft coincides with the collateral destruction of her erstwhile political allies.

Despite these political changes, Rakhine developed a cosmopolitan culture that retained Buddhist as well as Muslim and Hindu pedigree. Rakhine kings issued coins that contained the imprint of the Buddha and the Kalema, the fundamental article of faith in Islam, until the early seventeenth century. Medieval forms of Bengali literature were patronised in this cosmopolitan atmosphere where Pali, Arabic and Persian were also in vogue. Poet Alaol from today's Bangladesh, who was kidnapped by Portuguese pirates and sold in Rakhine as a slave, ended up being a court poet in the capital of Rakhine, where he was patronised by many Muslim ministers of Buddhist kings. Alaol in his poems written in the mid-seventeenth century introduced Rosango, a variant of the term Rohango (Rohingya), as the capital city of Rakhine.

Meanwhile, the Bamar kept knocking at the borders of Rakhine and finally captured its throne in 1784, leaving the Rakhine people, of both Buddhist and Muslim origin, to face unprecedented persecution in their ancestral land. Most of them fled to the Chittagong region across the Naf river. While some of them returned to Rakhine, some stayed behind, who are still known

as Rakhine Buddhists, currently numbering more than 100,000. They are now Bangladeshi citizens and Bangladesh has never suggested they be ousted because of their ancestry in Myanmar.

It needs mentioning that despite initial persecution of local Rakhine people by the Bamar forces, there was also the gradual realisation of the need of the support and engagement of local people, including the Muslims. One example was that before the British took over Burma in the early nineteenth century, the Burmese king had given charge of the Port of Rangoon (Yangon) to a Muslim merchant.

The British period saw a different kind of mobility across today's Bangladesh-Myanmar border, which was more of a planned mobilisation of people from all over India, Bengalis from Chittagong, who were involved in professional, commercial and agricultural activities, being the majority. By the 1930s however, the Bengalis, as well as other Indian diasporic communities, came into conflict with local inhabitants. The coming of the Japanese during the Second World War sealed the fate of the Indians in Burma, most of whom had to return to India and Bengal under strenuous conditions. The few who stayed behind were clearly distinguished from the local Rohingya people.

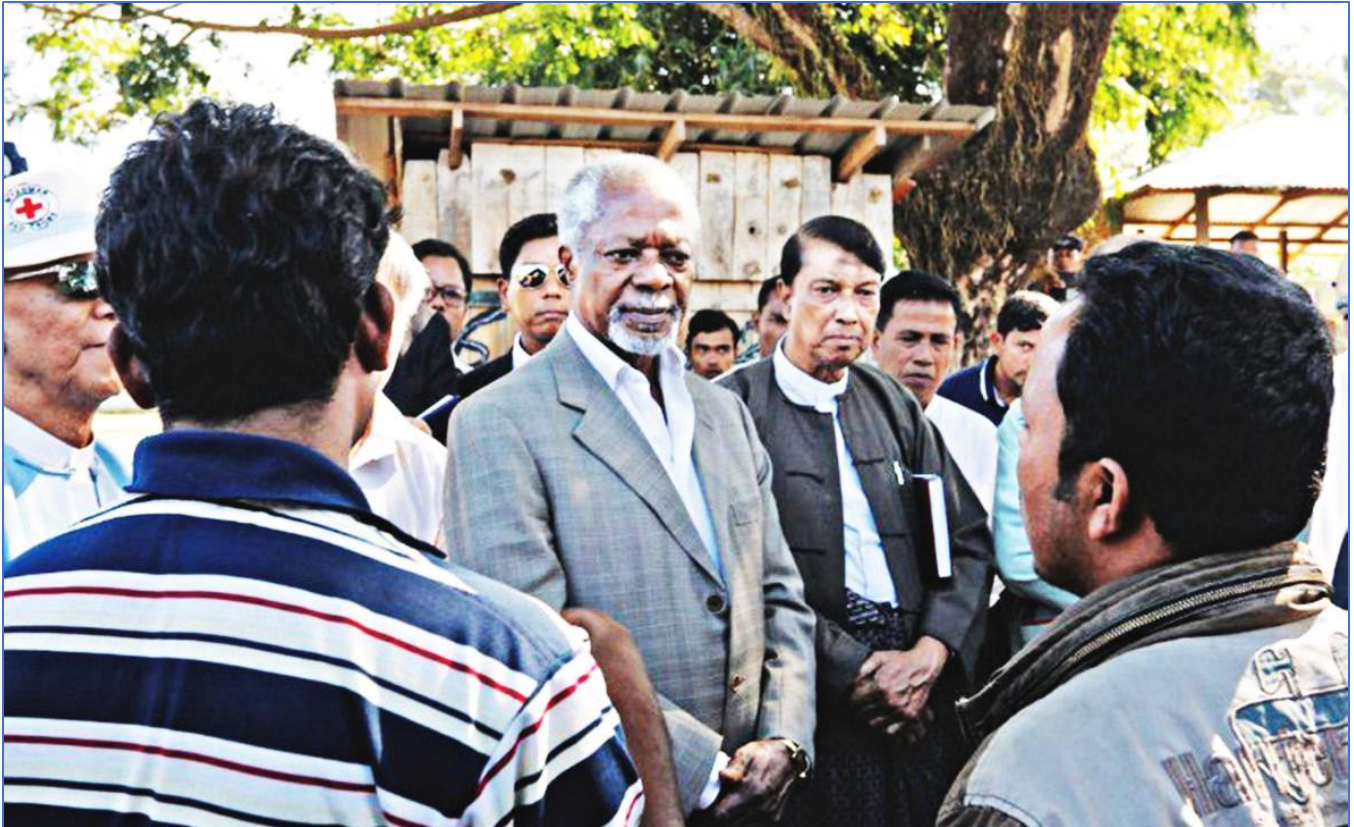
Postcolonial period: From citizen to stateless

The early postcolonial policy of the Burmese government towards the Rohingya was consistent with the pluralistic cultural and religious heritage of Myanmar and inclusive national vision of Aung San, Suu Kyi's illustrious father.

The Muslims of Rakhine including the Rohingyas were no longer living in the rich political and social heritage of precolonial times, but there was no question about their place in Burma's mainstream public life. In the two general elections of 1951 and 1956, at least 11 Rohingyas, including women, returned to Burmese Parliament as MPs.



During the 1990 general election that followed the anti-military resistance led by Suu Kyi, Rohingyas were her political allies and won four seats for her National Democratic League for Human Rights. But in the next stage of the unfinished journey to democracy in Myanmar, the paths of Suu Kyi and her erstwhile Rohingya allies diverged tragically. As of 2017, no Rohingyas could vote and there is no Rohingya MPs left in Myanmar. There is no instance in the world where after decades of experience of citizenship and of exercising the rights to electing their representative to parliament an entire population becomes stateless without security to life, property and honour, except of course in Nazi Germany. It's an irony that Suu Kyi's ascendancy to Myanmar statecraft coincides with the collateral destruction of her erstwhile political allies.



Former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, centre, and commissioner Aye Lwin, right, of the multi-sector advisory commission meet with the Muslim community in Kyatyoepeyin village in Maungdaw, located in Rakhine State near the Bangladesh border. Photo: AFP

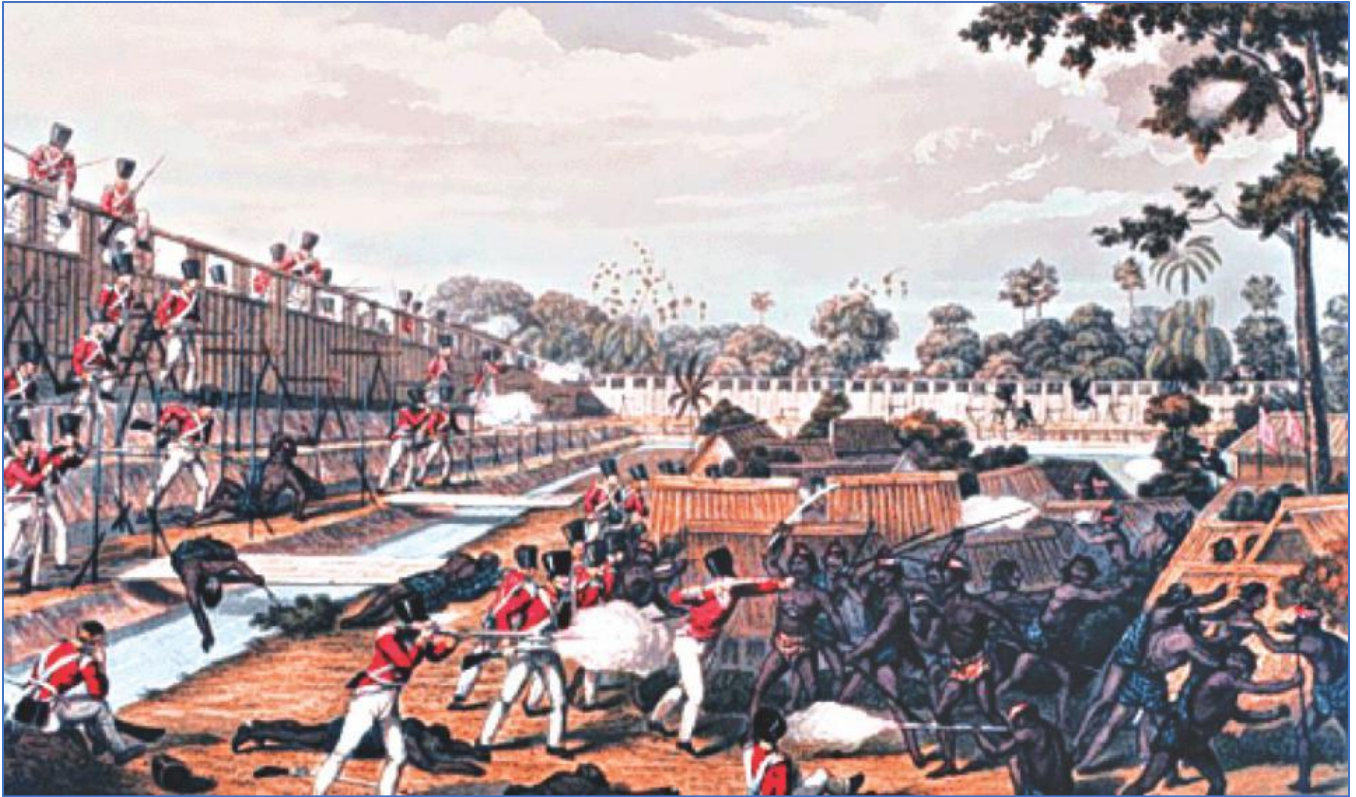
The current problem of the Rohingyas, resulting in occasional "genocidal" atrocities on them, is traced back to the 1982 "Burma Citizenship Law" that enabled the revocation of citizenship of the Rohingyas, excluding them from the pool of 135 recognised ethnic groups across Myanmar. But the law came as an utter shock and surprise, given the positive developments in the preceding years. In the middle of a renewed spell of the flow of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, heads of states of the two countries had exchanged state visits before the signing of a historic "Repatriation Agreement" in Dhaka on July 9, 1978. In the agreement, the Burmese government promised the "repatriation at the earliest of the lawful residents of Burma" and also to repatriate those who were "able to furnish evidences of their residence in Burma, such as addresses or any other particulars".

Under this agreement the Burmese government launched the Hintha project which oversaw the repatriation of more than 29,000 families comprising 177,000 refugees from Bangladesh to their former places of residence. The current practice of burning the habitat and homestead of the Rohingyas by the Burmese security forces seems to aim at pre-emptively forestalling any chance of return of the Rohingyas as Myanmar citizens in light of the agreement of 1978.

What's next?

The Annan Commission was formed at the request of Aung San Suu Kyi and the Bangladesh government agreed with most of its recommendations. This initial consensus must build on the recognition of the Rohingya identity—because seen either in historical, political, legislative or diplomatic antecedents, the Rohingyas cannot be considered as anything but citizens of Myanmar. True, as many commentators suggest, there are other powerful agents that complicate the situation. The idea of liberal democratic practice drawing on cosmopolitan and pluralistic world views may not find an easy place in this quagmire where geo-strategy, trade routes and pipelines call the shots.

But taking away one's honour is not going to solve the existential threat posed to the Rohingyas. What it all takes is the pressing of the softer button of goodwill, empathy and justice. Who has the hand on this button is not clear to those outside Myanmar, but there are two clear paths of other kinds for Suu Kyi which can set a positive tone in the current situation and taking up one of them can secure her rightful place in history?



"British attack in Burma, 1824, "The Storming of one of the principle stockades on the 8th of July 1824"

Both Gautama Buddha and Emperor Ashoka were tormented by the existential sufferings, bloodshed and death in society. Buddha renounced all earthly ambition because he found no path higher than the path of ending these sufferings of humanity through annihilation of desire. On the other hand, the great Ashoka, who spread Buddhism in Myanmar among other places, consolidated and used his power in order to spread the word and practice of non-violence. Suu Kyi may wish to let the world know, sooner than later, about her own pathfinder: Gautama Buddha or Ashoka? Anything shorter than that would be equal to an aggression on the very core of Buddhism itself.














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Major ethnic groups in Myanmar

Myanmar officially recognises 135 ethnic groups but Rohingya have been rendered stateless and stripped of their citizenship.

Ethnic Groups

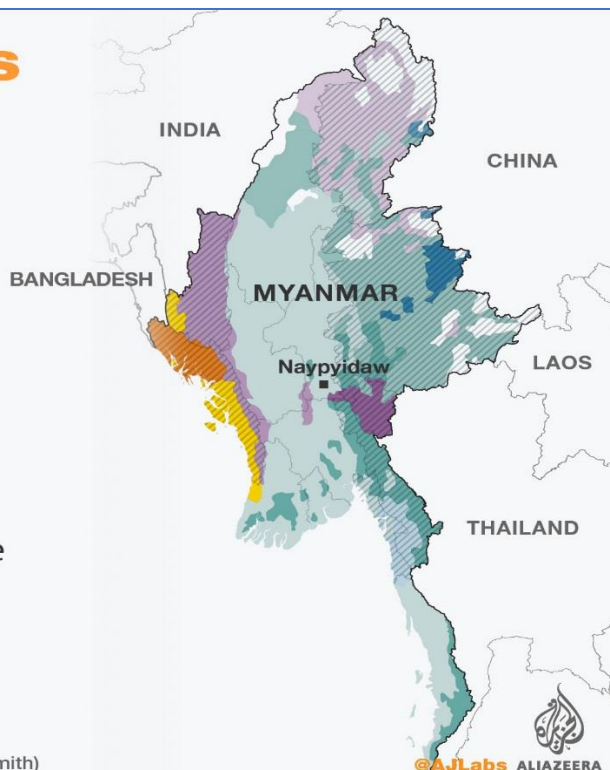
 Bamar	 Kachin
 Shan	 Chin
 Karen	 Karenni
 Rakhine*	 Mon
 Rohingya	 Wa
	 Kokang Chinese

 Ethnic minority states

* Includes other Rakhine Muslim minorities



Sources: Al Jazeera, agencies, Free Burma Rangers, Burma - Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity (Martin Smith)



Iftekhar Iqbal is a historian at the University of Dhaka. His research interests include connected histories of South and Southeast Asia. The article was originally published in [Al Jazeera](#). Reprinted with permission

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Genocide by any other name...

As some five lakh people fleeing Myanmar pour into Bangladesh, questions are being raised about why it shouldn't be tried for genocide

By Prakash Bhandari

Even as the Supreme Court of India is hearing the pleas of Rohingyas in the country, Bangladesh is facing a crisis of gigantic proportions. Some five lakh Rohingya refugees who fled Myanmar's western Rakhine state, have sought refuge there, plunging the country into a humanitarian nightmare. UN Secretary-General António Guterres said: "The situation has spiraled into the world's fastest developing refugee emergency and a humanitarian and human rights nightmare."

The plight of these refugees has gripped the world and Burmese leader Aung San Suu Kyi was condemned worldwide for not doing enough for them. Even the honour of the Freedom of Oxford given to her was withdrawn recently and Hugh's College, Oxford, removed her portrait from display. Suu Kyi has not responded to suggestions of the UN to visit Rohingyas in Rakhine and in Bangladesh.



Photo: Star File

SC of India hears Rohingya case

On October 3, the Supreme Court of India heard arguments from the government and two Rohingya Muslims who had challenged the government's decision to deport them. While on the one hand, the counsels for the Rohingyas claimed that it was a case of religious discrimination and an attempt to arouse an anti-Muslim feeling, Additional Solicitor General Tushar Mehta argued that they would cause a security threat to the nation and give rise to a decrease in wages.

The bench, headed by Chief Justice Dipak Misra, observed that it would hear all aspects in detail, including the centre's plea that the matter is not maintainable and is in the executive domain. The bench, which also included Justices AM Khanwilkar and DY Chandrachud, asked the petitioners as well as the respondents to file a compilation of all relevant documents which will be required in assisting the Court. The matter is listed for October 13.

Tribunal indictment

And adding to the stern condemnation of this Nobel Prize winner was the Permanent People's Tribunal (PPT), an internationally recognised tribunal, which accused Myanmar of committing genocide on the poor. The seven-member panel said: "The state of Myanmar is guilty of the crime of genocide against the Rohingya group. The casualty of the genocide could be even larger in future if nothing is done to stop it." The PPT was established in 1979 and since its inception, has had an international network of experts, activists and scholars. It has given a clarion call to the UN and other international bodies to act to bring the Myanmar authorities to book for "committing the genocide".

Tureen Afroz, a Dhaka-based prosecutor with the International Crimes Tribunal of Bangladesh (ICTB), told India Legal: "This is the first time that the PPT delivered a verdict of such a big dimension accusing a government having a link with a Nobel laureate, Aung San Sun Kyi. She is now facing growing criticism over the Rohingyas. It's clear that Myanmar is committing genocide against the Rohingyas. The verdict has helped their cause and it is drawing the world's attention."

Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir, Secretary-General of the opposition Bangladesh National Party, has questioned Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's demand that "safe zones" be established under UN supervision in Myanmar for the protection of people irrespective of their religion. "Sheikh Hasina's demand in the UN General Assembly for a safe zone would mean creating another Palestine. The BNP opposes this demand. Myanmar will have to take back Rohingyas ensuring their dignity, respect and right. If the Rohingyas are kept isolated in the so-called safe zones, repressions on them will continue. The fact remains that Myanmar had launched aggression against Bangladesh by forcibly pushing its citizens into our country," he said.



Photo: Reuters

Rape victims

In Cox's Bazar here, doctors in makeshift clinics have reported rape and horrific sexual abuse of Rohingya women who fled from Rakhine. Doctors at a clinic run by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) treated many women with injuries from violent sexual assaults. In clinics run by the Bangladesh government, 19 cases of rapes were reported. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Filippo Grandi, who visited Rohingya camps in Bangladesh, described their exodus as the “most urgent refugee emergency in the world. People have fled unspeakable violence and their needs are enormous”. Grandi was thankful to the Bangladesh government which kept its borders open to facilitate the arrival of the suffering Rohingyas.



Photo: AFP

"In a world that is hostile to refugees, Bangladesh has shown exemplary character. Just like the causes of the influx are in Myanmar, clearly the solution is in Myanmar as well. The Rohingyas need a permanent solution to ease their immediate suffering. Though the UNHCR and the World Food Programme have their presence in Rakhine, our movements are restricted," admitted Grandi.

He said the solution to the crisis lay in the refugees returning voluntarily to Myanmar from Bangladesh. "In order for this to happen, conditions have to be changed in Rakhine state. The issues are citizenship, violence, discrimination and poverty. Myanmar should do the registration of all such people who fled it and went to Bangladesh. The international community should come out with multiple aids as Bangladesh alone cannot cope with the situation," he added. Intellectuals in Bangladesh have demanded invoking Responsibility to Protect (R2P) against Myanmar. R2P is a global commitment endorsed by all.

UN member states to prevent genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. Mir Aftabuddin Ahmed, a scholar at international relations at the University of Toronto, said: "The Bangladesh government has recognised the Rohingya crisis as being under the category of ethnic cleansing. As a norm, it demands that national governments essentially do not take sovereignty for granted. R2P is based on the principle that sovereignty requires a responsibility to protect all population from mass crimes and human rights violations. The Myanmar government's failure to protect the Rohingyas makes a strong case for an intervention by the international community, either through taking measures stated in the R2P framework or by involving regional powers like China and India." That is easier said than done.



Prakash Bhandari is a veteran Indian journalist, formerly with The Times of India.

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When religion is used by the military to justify their aims



Photo: AFP

By Saskia Sassen

Religious persecution is the overwhelming fact in the violence that the Rohingya have experienced on and off in Myanmar across the centuries.

But this does not preclude that the military, long in charge of what they call “economic development”, can today push those persecutions to a whole new level. And this is what they did in the current phase of a long history of Rohingya persecution.

By burning Rohingya villages to the ground and eliminating all traces of those villages, the military contributed to transform persecution into radical expulsions of whole villages. And, as one Myanmar minister put it: “According to the law, burnt land becomes government-managed land” (Minister for Social Development, Relief and Resettlement Win Myat Aye, at a meeting in the Rakhine state capital of Sittwe as reported by the Global New Light of Myanmar).

In my reading, this also contributes to explain the extraordinary (literally) effort the military deployed to eliminate traces of Rohingya villages and reduce it all to “burnt land.” No returning Rohingya can easily make a claim that it was their land: now it is just burnt land.

And indeed, the national government announced a few days ago that it was taking over the “development of the Rakhine state”, and specifically the burnt land in Rohingya land. That seals the deal.

But there is more to the current situation.

China's projects in rakhine state

There is a parallel history developing in the Rakhine state that has not been mentioned—except most recently. It is the fact that China has entered contractual agreements with the government of Myanmar to develop a massive port in the Rakhine state and a large industrial zone. These are not in the area where the current burning of villages happened. But clearly such massive developments will have an enormous shadow effect over a very large part of Rakhine, going well beyond the area of the port and the industrial zone.

China's Beijing based CITIC investment group will be building a deep-sea port and economic zone in Kyaukpyu worth USD 7.3 billion. A three billion dollar economic development zone is [also in the works](#).

"The escalating displacement of millions of smallholders (mostly Buddhists) from the land was a major change as to who was to manage the land. Smallholders became refugees of a new economic ordering. Myanmar is not unique in this.

China has already invested significantly in the Rakhine state with a USD 2.45 billion pipeline from Rakhine to China's Yunnan province. The planned port will give China access to the Indian Ocean and to the Middle East—and to Middle Eastern crude oil. Most of China's investments in Myanmar have been outside the Rakhine state—thus the current investments are new. China had invested USD 15 billion mostly in mining, dams, and timber in other parts of Myanmar—in fact, one third of the vast forest in Myanmar is now barren land due to the timber extraction.

A question I have been pursuing is how this might impact the Rakhine state area where the Rohingya villages were burnt down. I have a hard time not thinking that religion was used by the military to make burnt land and thereby take possession.

What does religion have to do with it?

It is worth noting that the international media has almost exclusively focused on the religion aspect. Human Rights Watch described the anti-Rohingya violence as amounting to [crimes against humanity] carried out as part of a campaign of ethnic cleansing. Malaysia's foreign minister described the Myanmar government's actions as ethnic cleansing and called on them to stop the practice, leading in turn to a strong response from Myanmar's government. John McKissick, head of the UN refugee agency, said the Myanmar government was carrying out ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya people.

All of this is true, and a horrible part of the story.

But my research leads me to argue that religion and ethnicity might be only part of what explains this forced displacement, larger than many earlier expulsions of the Rohingya. The past two decades have seen a massive worldwide rise of corporate acquisitions of land for mining, timber, agriculture, and water.

In the case of Myanmar, the military have been grabbing vast stretches of land from small holders since the 1990s—without compensation, but with threats if they should fight back. This land grabbing has continued across the decades. At the time of the 2012 attacks, the land allocated to large projects had increased by 170 percent between 2010 and 2013. By 2012 the law governing land was changed to favour large corporate acquisitions.

The escalating displacement of millions of smallholders (mostly Buddhists) from the land was a major change as to who was to manage the land. Smallholders became refugees of a new economic ordering. Myanmar is not unique in this. Similar brutal expulsions of smallholders have been happening across the world as large corporations take over because they “establish” that the smallholders have no contracts showing the land is theirs, no matter how long they and their ancestors worked that land. What is different in Myanmar is the almost absolute control the military have long had over much of the country's land, and hence their key role in the [expulsion of smallholders](#) (pdf).

Today there are whole new economies—mining, timber, geothermal projects—where before there were smallholders. Economic development may require this: but it should also work for the millions of displaced and never [compensated smallholders](#). Foreign direct investment is now concentrated in extractive sectors and power generation. Not much of the new investment has gone to sectors such as manufacturing that can generate a strong working class and a [modest middle class](#). For example, Myanmar's [Yadana pipeline project](#), “required investment of over \$1bn (£0.8bn), yet employs only 800 workers”.

Furthermore, the 2012 law empowered foreign investors. It offered government loans—but no help for the smallholders who lost their land. Land properties can range from 2,000 hectares up to 20,000 hectares (5,000 acres to 50,000 acres) for an initial period of 30 years. The extent of land grabs is such that Myanmar is losing [more than a million acres of forest a year](#) (pdf).



Burmese small holders protesting land grabbing. Photo: AFP

These facts are never invoked in the discussion about the persecution of the Rohingyas. And Aung San Suu Kyi has been similarly silent on the matter. (Generally, see my earlier piece in the [Guardian on these developments](#): “Is Rohingya persecution caused by business interests rather than religion?” published on January 4, 2017).

In short, expelling Rohingyas from their land might well be good for future business. Indeed, quite recently the government allocated millions of hectares in Rakhine for corporate development. To some extent the international focus on the religion of the Rohingya has overshadowed the vast land grabs that have affected millions, including the Rohingya.



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Her latest book is *Expulsions: Complexity and Brutality in the Global Economy* (Harvard University Press).

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A better political economy of the Rohingya crisis

By [Lee Jones](#)

In the last few weeks, over 400,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled a bloody pogrom in Myanmar's Rakhine state, crossing into Bangladesh. Among the horrified and largely moralistic reactions in the West, some have pointed to economic factors supposedly behind these events. They are right to highlight the importance of political economy drivers of conflict, but their analysis is disappointingly superficial and crude. This post critiques their approaches and briefly outlines a better one.



Photo: AFP

Vulgar Marxism 101: land grabs and the Rohingya crisis

The most prominent commentator suggesting economic drivers behind the Rohingya crisis is the renowned geographer Saskia Sassen—whose published work I generally admire greatly. Sassen penned an extremely [speculative piece](#) for *The Guardian* in January 2017, and [another](#) for the *Huffington Post* in September 2017, linking the conflict to land grabs. In her lengthy January essay, Sassen suggests that the conflict is “generated by military-economic interests, rather than by mostly religious/ethnic issues”. However, she offered no evidence for this proposition except that the government had designated 1.27m hectares of land in Rakhine for agricultural development. “Expelling them from their land is a way of freeing up land and water”, she asserted. Many Myanmar scholars reacted with some scorn on social media.

Undeterred, she rehearses these claims in her latest article, again with precious little evidence supplied—though now she also cites the Chinese port and special economic zone (SEZ) being constructed at Kyaukphyu. She speculates: “the land freed by the radical expulsion of the Rohingya might have become of interest to the military... Religion may be functioning as a veil that military leaders can use to minimize attention on the land-grabbing aspect of this economic development part of their agenda.” Some other scholars penned a [similar piece](#) for *The Conversation*, again offering little concrete evidence but pointing to the oil and gas pipeline connecting Kyaukphyu (though they mistakenly suggest it runs from Sittwe) to western China, and an Indian port development in Sittwe. They conclude: “The government of Myanmar therefore has vested interests in clearing land to prepare for further development”.

One does not need to be a particularly brilliant political economist to recognise that these claims are extraordinarily sloppy. One can simply look at a few maps. Firstly, note the map of Rakhine (Map 1), showing the Rohingya population concentrated heavily in a few townships bordering Bangladesh. Then note the second map, showing the latest forced displacement and burning of Rohingya villages, which have been concentrated entirely in these townships. Almost all of the far north of Rakhine has been depopulated of Rohingya, but the centre and south have been relatively unaffected this time around.

Now consider the location of the developments that are supposedly driving this forced displacement. Kyaukphyu is in central Rakhine state, about 120 km south of the present crisis. How can a desire to clear land in Kyaukphyu possibly explain the ethnic cleansing of townships located so far away? Sittwe is also about 40km from the nearest violence.

It would be far more plausible to link the present crisis to the shocking [announcement](#), just days into the pogrom, of the state's intention to establish an SEZ in Maungdaw, at the centre of the recent violence. This certainly deserves investigation, though it is missed entirely in these recent commentaries.

However, this is not just a question of shifting the explanatory weight from one land grab to another. Ultimately, the vulgar Marxism of these accounts does a disservice to political economy analysis more broadly. Attributing complex events like this to “business interests” is crude and reductionist, and can actually explain relatively little. Yes, land grabs have happened across Myanmar to facilitate megaprojects like mines, dams, SEZs, ports and agribusiness plantations, and this has certainly fuelled ethnic conflict. This is well documented by the indefatigable Kevin Woods, whose years of painstaking fieldwork and brilliant scholarship nonetheless goes unacknowledged by these authors. And land grabs, including for the projects cited in these articles, have undoubtedly produced forced displacement in Rakhine state, causing resentment among both Rohingyas and the Buddhist Rakhine, the state's dominant ethnic group.

But development-induced land grabs simply do not require vast ethnic cleansing displacing 40 percent of a given population. Nor, crucially, can “business interests” explain why this ethnic cleansing is greeted with indifference or even enthusiasm by the vast majority of Myanmar's population—even by groups, like the Rakhine, that have themselves been victims of previous land grabs. Nor, crucially, can it explain very similar pogroms in 1977 and 1992, both of which occurred decades before any megaprojects and their associated land grabs.

Towards a better political economy analysis

The only benefit of such crude accounts is that they do prompt us to think about the relationship of socio-political conflict to economic factors. This is better than simplistically attributing conflict to “communalism” or “religious intolerance”, as if the problem were solely ideological, lacking any material underpinning—which is never true in reality. But rather than suggesting that the “real” cause is land-grabbing and religion is only a “veil”, it is important to situate socio-political conflict within a historically evolving political economy context, [in a way](#) that takes social and ideological formations seriously. I can only

gesture here at the main lines of analysis one might undertake, but this is still an improvement over the commentary just described.



It is important to situate socio-political conflict within a historically evolving political economy context. Photo: Mohammad Ponir Hossain/Reuters

Buddhist-Muslim conflict over land and resources in what is now Rakhine state is not new. From the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries there were struggles between Muslim empires expanding from the west and the Buddhist Arakan kingdom of [Mrauk U](#), ending only when the area was conquered by the kingdom of Burma in 1785. However, it was British colonialism (1824–1948) that arguably sowed the most important seeds for the contemporary crisis.

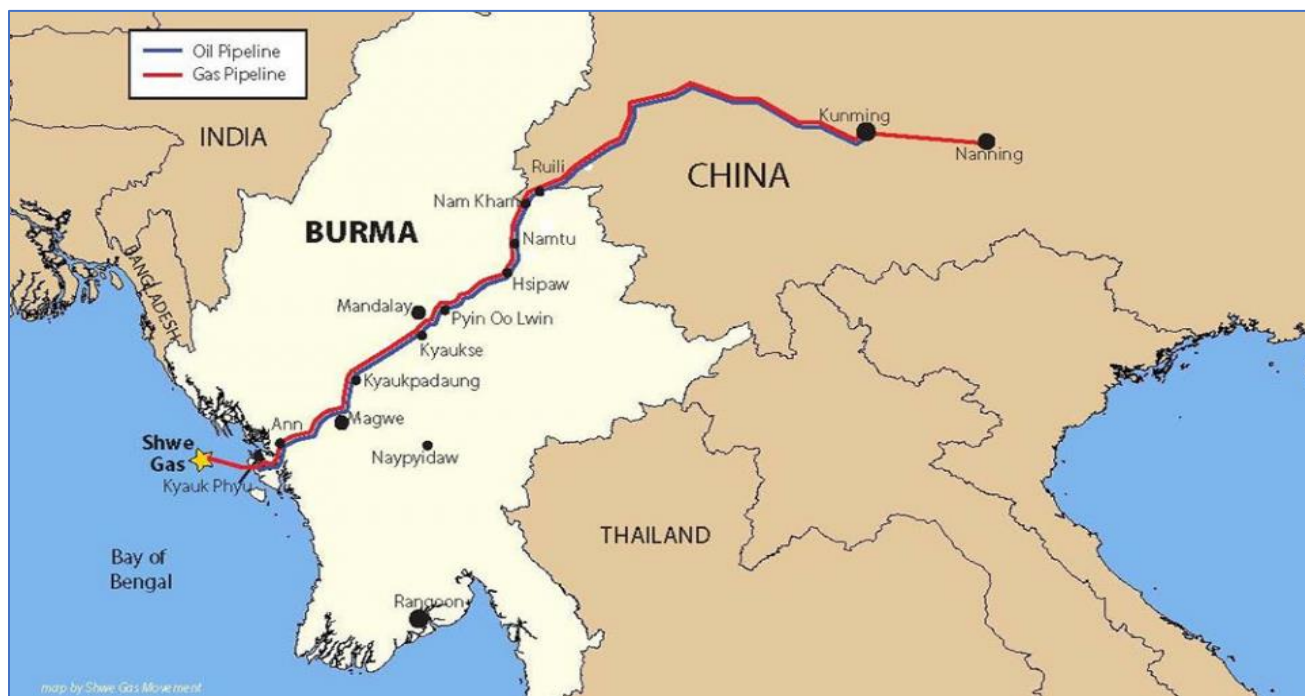
"Burma was founded with no real meaningful consensus among its population groups over the nature of the state or nation, or the extent of power and resource sharing. Bamar-Buddhist chauvinists, unprepared to make the concessions needed to secure others' consensual participation in nation-building, have instead sought to impose their vision by force, leading to brutality across the borderlands. However, the Rohingya have suffered particularly harshly because their claim to ethnic-minority status is not even recognised.

Burma was ruled as part of the British Raj, enabling vast inward migration from the Indian subcontinent. The British particularly encouraged Bengalis to migrate to address labour shortages on agricultural plantations. In Akyab district, for instance (present-day Sittwe), from 1871–1911, the Muslim population more than tripled, while the Rakhine population grew by barely a fifth. Understandably, then, the Rakhine have long cultural memories of being “swamped” by “Muslim immigrants”. More broadly, immigration to Burma [peaked](#) at 480,000 in 1927, out of a total population of 13 million. By then, ethnic Indians had acquired prominent positions across the Burmese economy, not just as agrarian coolies but also as skilled professionals, merchants and financiers. In the 1930s economic crisis, many farmers indebted to Indian moneylenders defaulted, leading Indians also to become major landlords.

The reaction to this rapid influx was a racially inflected form of economic nationalism which still persists today. This is not entirely dissimilar to the xenophobic nationalism that has sometimes accompanied mass immigration in straitened economic circumstances in many Western countries. [There were](#) anti-Indian riots in 1930–31 and specifically anti-Muslim riots in [1926](#) and 1938. These were led by the majority ethnic Bamar and did not spread into Rakhine itself. It was not until Britain's defeat by invading Japanese forces in 1942 that communal violence erupted there, with Rakhine militias exploiting the war to wreak bloody vengeance on their Muslim rivals, prompting tens of thousands to flee into India.

To make matters worse, the British then armed Rohingya volunteer forces, ostensibly to attack the occupying Japanese, but instead these groups often raided Rakhine settlements and Buddhist monasteries and pagodas. These forces also

accompanied Britain's reconquest of Rakhine, after which armed Rakhine groups were forcibly suppressed. Understandably, some of the returning Muslims feared being incorporated into the postcolonial Burmese state, launching a “Mujahit” rebellion to press for the incorporation of northern Rakhine into East Pakistan, prompting counterinsurgency operations by the Burmese army through the 1950s.



An important legacy of this WWII-induced displacement, and the subsequent unrest, is that Muslims gradually returning to Rakhine were thereafter often depicted as “illegal Bengali immigrants”. This complex, unhappy history is what lies behind the subsequent rejection of the Rohingyas—a term used commonly only after Burma's independence—as one of Myanmar's 135 official “national races”, and their designation instead as “Bengalis”.

Given the experiences under British colonialism, it is not surprising that, from the outset, popular Burmese nationalism has had a strongly racist flavour, directed in part against those branded *kalar*—dark-skinned “interlopers” from the Indian subcontinent. The central objective of Burma's post-independence government was the Burmanisation of the foreign-dominated economy. Recalling the trauma of the 1930s, land was nationalised in 1953, and private lending to farmers banned (a situation that largely persists today), eviscerating the remaining Indian landlord class. Burmanisation culminated in the nationalisation of 15,000 businesses after the 1962 military coup, prompting 125,000 to 300,000 ethnic Indians to [flee](#) the country. They followed the more than 400,000 Indians, British and Anglo-Burmese who had already left following decolonization. The post-2011 “[969 movement](#)”, which encouraged Buddhists to boycott Muslim businesses, is arguably just the latest instantiation of this form of xenophobic economic nationalism.

Colonisation also left a legacy of deep religious [trauma](#). On top of the loss of indigenous sovereignty and the influx of Muslims, the British refused to perform the usual duties of Buddhist kingship, such as appointing abbots, and permitted growing Christian missionary activity, provoking a deep sense of cultural crisis among Buddhists. The restoration of Buddhism became central to Bamar nationalism, and steadily this religion, and Bamar culture, became [hegemonic elements](#) of postcolonial nation building efforts, with ethnic and religious minorities being [increasingly “othered”](#).

Today, many ordinary Myanmar Buddhists genuinely believe that—like in colonial times—their religion and culture is under threat from a Muslim demographic “tidal wave”. They often point to countries like Indonesia, formerly home to Buddhist and Hindu empires, as examples of what Myanmar will become without vigorous countermeasures. This has virtually no objective basis: only about 3 percent of Myanmar's population is Muslim, while around 89 percent are Buddhist.

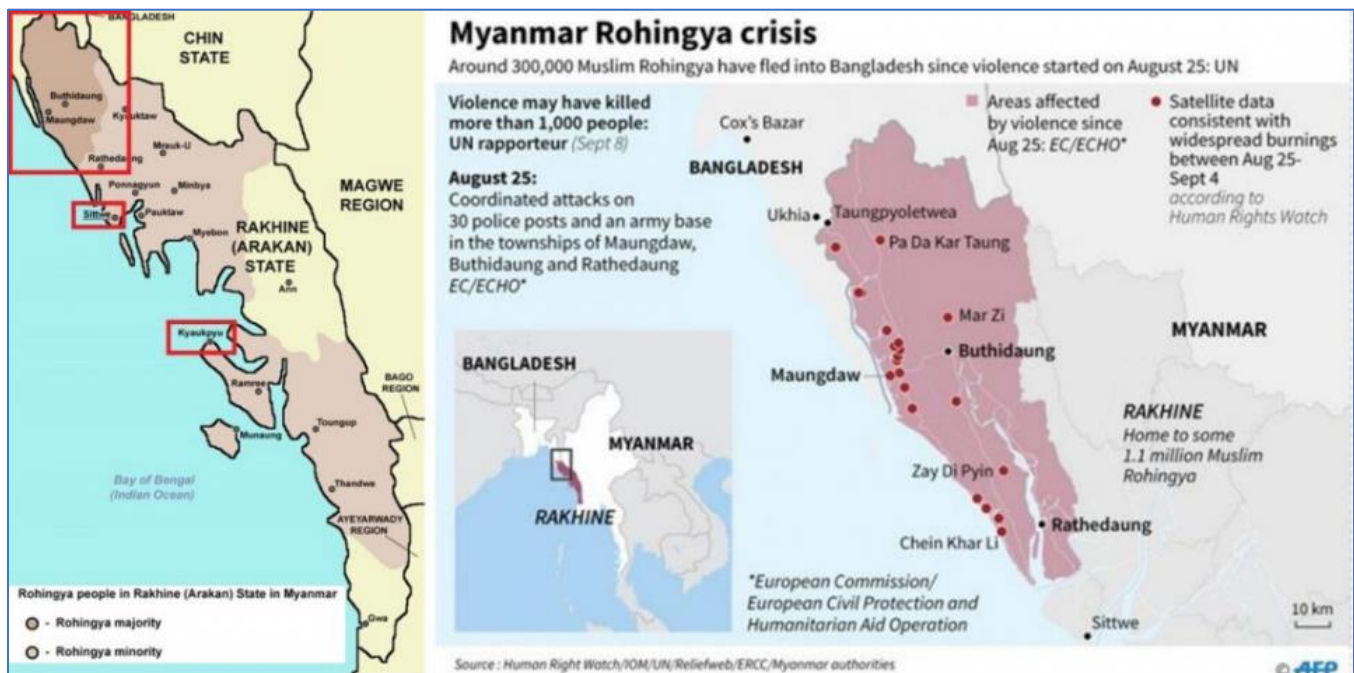
But this fact is irrelevant, since most people nevertheless believe it, following decades of government propaganda, atrocious educational provision, and widespread deference to Buddhist monks, some—though far from all—of whom have promoted virulent Islamophobia. Nor is this fear of being culturally overwhelmed new, or somehow a product of the post-2010

“democratic” transition. Anti-Muslim riots occurred under the previous military regime, in 1997 and 2001, and the notorious Buddhist nationalist monk, Ashin Wirathu, the figurehead of Ma Ba Tha, the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion, was jailed for incitement in 2003.

This history explains why there is widespread support today for Ma Ba Tha, for the Protection of Race and Religion Laws (which discriminate against Muslims) and for the ethnic cleansing currently being perpetrated by the Myanmar military. It also explains why, politically, Aung San Suu Kyi has such limited room for manoeuvre—though it must be stressed that she has done virtually nothing to challenge these dangerous myths or to foster intercommunal harmony. Indeed, 'her own offices use of the term “Bengali”, her past remarks about “global Muslim power”, and her [purging](#) of Muslims from the ranks of NLD parliamentary candidates in 2015, all suggest that she may even personally share anti-Muslim prejudices.

It is the intersection of these material and ideological dynamics that explain the recurrent persecution of the Rohingya and anti-Muslim attacks more generally, rather than a simplistic, short term land-grabbing agenda. Many Muslims were viewed with inherent suspicion due to their association with colonialism and the Mujahid rebellion. After decolonisation, although the term “Rohingya” was used in official circles, they were never formally accepted as one of Burma's official ethnic groups. Initially, they were allowed to vote, and several were elected to parliament, with one even serving as a junior minister. However, as Bamar Buddhist nationalism intensified, and struggles by ethnic minorities resisting forced homogenisation mounted—prompting the onset of the world's longest running civil wars—the state became increasingly hostile towards its Muslim population.

In 1962, the army expelled Muslims from its ranks. In 1977, the belief that many “Bengalis” had exploited the state's weak border controls to cross from East Pakistan/ Bangladesh into Rakhine led the military-backed regime to launch clearance operations ahead of a national census, displacing 200,000 Muslims into Bangladesh. Thereafter, under the new 1982 Citizenship Act, the Rohingyas were gradually stripped of their rights, often finding themselves unable to prove their families' long-term residency in Burma—thanks in part to the destruction of records in previous rounds of conflict and forced displacement. When, after 1988, the Rohingyas participated prominently in the pro-democracy movement, hoping to recover their rights, they again faced violent suppression, prompting another exodus in 1992, with 250,000 fleeing to Bangladesh.



The position of the Buddhist Rakhine needs special mention here. From their perspective, they have been doubly “victimised”, by a growing “illegal Bengali immigrant” population (even if the Rakhine still outnumber them two to one), and by the Bamar-dominated central government. Rakhine state is Myanmar's second poorest, and what little development has occurred there has involved either a tiny handful of megaprojects— which create virtually no local employment and whose benefits are monopolised by the regime and foreign investors—or the development of a highly exploitative fisheries industry, with Thai trawlers using quasi-slave labour.

Conditions in Rakhine villages are sometimes scarcely better than those in Rohingya internally-displaced person camps. In conditions of extreme scarcity and economic competition, they profoundly resent the Western focus on the Rohingya, seeing donors as deeply “biased”, which explains violent attacks on [aid convoys](#) and protests against donor offices perceived to have slighted Buddhism. The Rakhines have seized the opportunity offered by the post-2010 transition to organise politically, dominating the state assembly. Many have also supported heavy handed military and police action as a long awaited form of redress against their local rivals, and have exploited periods of unrest to seize land used by Rohingyas. However, [some](#) have even joined the Rohingyas in exile, reflecting a shared sense of desperation and impoverishment.

It is hardly surprising that these extraordinarily grim conditions have spawned violence among both communities. Rakhine militias organised to attack Muslims during the 1940s, and today three are active, all of which promote “self-determination” in Rakhine but reject the Rohingyas as “Bengalis”. The Rohingyas have also taken up arms periodically, and the only mystery is why the latest armed group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), has taken quite so long to form in the face of such harsh persecution and misery. ARSA's attacks on police and army outposts—the most recent of which, in late August, triggered the army offensive behind the present refugee crisis—smack heavily of desperation, as men often armed only with catapults and wooden “guns” launch themselves at the security forces.

In short, while simple pecuniary motives can never be entirely discounted, particularly in Myanmar's borderlands, the political economy underpinning the current Rohingya crisis is far more complicated than is suggested in articles making a few sloppy references to megaprojects and land grabs. Ultimately, like Myanmar's other ethnic conflicts, it reflects the crisis-ridden nature of the Burmese state since its inception.

Burma was founded with no real meaningful consensus among its population groups over the nature of the state or nation, or the extent of power and resource sharing. Bamar-Buddhist chauvinists, unprepared to make the concessions needed to secure others' consensual participation in nation-building, have instead sought to impose their vision by force, leading to brutality across the borderlands. However, the Rohingya have suffered particularly harshly because their claim to ethnic-minority status is not even recognised. While the Bamar state seeks to coercively incorporate recognised ethnic minority groups into the Union, it seeks to coercively exclude the unrecognised Rohingya. That is, ultimately, traceable to British colonialism and its legacy.



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<https://www.thedailystar.net/star-weekend/the-shadow-violence/voice-the-host-community-1475143>

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LOST IN CONVERSATION

Voice of the host community

By [C R Abrar](#) -- C R Abrar teaches International Relations at the University of Dhaka. This piece is based on his experience gained from recent his visit to Ukhia and Teknaf this week.

In the final week of August 2017 the pristine Ukhia–Teknaf region of the southeast tip of Bangladesh, adjoining the Arakan state of Burma, had a rude awakening. The locals experienced an influx of refugees. Within weeks, parts of the long stretch of the Cox's Bazar–Teknaf road were bursting at the seams with the incoming Rohingya refugees, mostly women and children. They were pouring in “like the gush of a broken dam”, as one resident of Gundhum put it. Most of the uninvited guests were wandering around the area under the scorching summer sun or drenched in the pouring monsoon rain without any cover, not knowing what to do next—where to go, where to find water and food for their thirsty and starving children, a shed for a mother who just gave birth, and medical attention for an elderly who desperately needed it.



Photo: Anisur Rahman

The residents of Teknaf–Ukhia were faced with this unforeseen development at a time the state authorities based in Dhaka officially declared the Rohingyas as “infiltrators” and ordered the border guards to deport any “illegal Myanmar nationals”. Reportedly, as a senior official of the security force was reiterating the directive to his subordinates, he was interrupted by the blare of helicopter gunships firing on Rohingyas just across the border.

Faced with the enormity of the refugee inflow and the burgeoning public opinion in favour of providing them asylum, both at home and abroad, the state authorities in Bangladesh had to come to terms with the futility of non-admission and push-back initiatives. They had little choice but to alter their course in dealing with the crisis. By then, tens of thousands of Rohingyas had fallen victim to unscrupulous fixers and boatmen, who extorted vast sums of money and other assets from the fleeing refugees to facilitate border crossing and find them safe passage. Press reports at the time inform that there was a 6,000 percent hike in river crossing tolls; refugees were paid 1/16th of the official rate of exchange rate while converting money and forced to sell gold at 1/8th of the prevailing market rate; and the fees to smuggle them to other parts of the country varied between USD 1,200 to USD 6,200.

By the time the state authorities acknowledged the reality and decided to admit the Rohingyas, the Eid holidays set in, nearly paralysing the civil administration for days. Despite the best of intentions, it took several days, if not weeks, to shore up the official relief effort. In the mean time it was the ordinary folks of Ukhia and Teknaf, of all creeds and classes, who shared their own meals; provided shelter in their homes, yards and land; allowed them to use their kitchens and toilets; helped them in nourishing their starving children and caring for the elderly; and patiently listened to the harrowing tales of losing loved ones that eased the pain of their uninvited guests.

In their effort to help the refugees, the locals were joined by hordes of fellow Bangladeshis, young and old, coming from even far-flung districts of Kurigram, Satkhira and Sylhet, and mobilising resources of various types and volumes from their own families, schools, mosques and communities to ameliorate the sufferings of the refugees. Very soon they were joined by specialised agencies such as Ganoshastho Kendra, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Action Against hunger (ACF), Ad-Din, and Zakat Foundations and BRAC.



It was the ordinary folks of Ukhia and Teknaf, of all creeds and classes, who shared their own meals; provided shelter in their homes, yards and land; allowed them to use their kitchens and toilets; helped them in nourishing their starving children and caring for the elderly. Photo: Anisur Rahman

In order to provide space for building shelters to other incoming refugees, many local households endured severe losses as matured trees were felled in the land that were taken as lease from the government. Fields full of crop were damaged by spontaneous human movement. Fishing folks searching for fish fries were suddenly faced with a huge number of new competitors. With the sharp increase of new entrants in the local market desperately looking for work, the wage of local workers, including those in the construction, deep sea fishing, and vehicle plying sectors, registered a drop. People of all walks of life were faced with a steep rise of price of essentials, with BDT 80 being the lowest price of any vegetable, at least double the price in pre-August 25. Fares of all transportation, including rickshaws, registered an increase by 100 to 200 percent. The arrival of consultants, aid workers, and relief activities has shored up the rental cost of vans and heavy vehicles, as well as that of flats and houses, by many times. Thus, while the people of Bangladesh in other regions empathise with the hapless Rohingyas, and among them the compassionate and active try their best to raise funds for Rohingya relief, it is the people of Ukhia and Teknaf who are bearing the brunt of the refugee flow.

Ukhia-Teknaf is one of the most economically depressed regions of the country. Roughly, these two unions cover an area of 651 square kilometres and is home to about 500,000 inhabitants. Post-August 25, this region now hosts an almost equal number of refugees. This is not the first time the area is hosting refugees. In 1978 and 1991-92, it hosted 280,000 and 250,000 Rohingyas respectively. Prior to the recent influx in post-August, it hosted around 300,000 of what the government preferred to term as “undocumented Myanmar nationals” (UMN).

News reports inform that a mega-camp fitting 800,000 has been planned around the vicinity in the existing Kutupalong camp. The government plans to bring all Rohingyas including the UMN in the planned camp and has allocated 2000 acres of land. Construction of 150,000 sheds has been planned; of this, more than 75,000 sheds have so far been constructed to accommodate Rohingya refugees. The entire camp will be divided into 20 blocks with each block having an administrative unit to facilitate all kinds of services. The construction of a nine-kilometre-long electricity line is underway. Sources inform that a road will be built by the army to connect the facility with the main road.

"The people of Ukhia and Teknaf have demonstrated their courage and fortitude in facing a challenge of mammoth magnitude. Despite severe resource constraints, they have remained resolute in upholding the dignity of the refugees, sacrificing their own interests."

There is palpable disgruntlement in the local community about the way the refugee situation is being addressed. Local leaders, elected functionaries, civil society activists, and intelligentsia appear to be in unison that authorities in Dhaka have not provided them with any meaningful space and opportunity to voice their concerns and offer their suggestions to what may turn out to be a protracted refugee situation. The holding of a long session on October 4 of a minister, local MP, secretary, DG NGO Affairs Bureau and district high officials with local leaders and activists is no substitute to a sustained engagement for formulating a well-thought-out strategy for a crisis that has captured the world's attention and will have an immense impact on the lives and livelihood of half a million people of Ukhia and Teknaf.

There is a near consensus of the local people on several matters.

Firstly, they are at a loss as to why what for decades they understood to be a refugee problem was being labelled as a problem of "infiltrators" initially, and now as "destitute Myanmar nationals". In this regard, the representative of a local development organisation views that such a shift in labelling will undermine the role of the Rohingya Refugee Repatriation Commissioner, the line agency under the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, with whose office they had developed working modalities on refugees for decades. Some felt putting another agency not guided by the UN normative framework as the lead international counterpart actor instead of UNHCR would be an exercise in re-inventing the wheel. "This may result in immense sufferings to the refugees", an activist with years of experience on refugee management on the ground observes.



Professor CR Abrar of Dhaka University Speak at Cosmos dialogue titled Domestic, Regional and International Dimensions of the Rohingya Issue: Dealing with a Man-made Crisis to highlight the issue and offer some solutions to the crisis at Hotel Amari in Dhaka on October 14, 2017. Photo: Fahad Kaizer

Secondly, locals are apprehensive about the feasibility of the proposed a mega-camp. They pondered why the simple logic of rendering services to separate camps of 20,000 residents each would be more inefficient than rendering services to a single camp of 800,000. They felt that the concentration of such a massive number of traumatised people in a confined space would jeopardise their own security, as the mobilisation of a fraction of that number, say of 10,000, for a right or wrong cause based on fact or fiction, may have disastrous law and order implications.



UNB News

Moreover, an epidemic of any sort may also take a huge toll. Inadequate and improper water treatment and sewer facilities will be a breeding ground for such outbreaks. The locals also feel that sinking of thousands shallow tube wells and hundreds of deep tube wells for extracting ground water in a region that is known to be water scarce, in all likelihood will lead to further subsidence of the groundwater table, with adverse impacts not only on drinking water but also on water for irrigation purposes.

Thirdly, after the initial phase of emergency response, any strategy to deal with the refugee population has to factor in the needs of the local population. For a region that straddles in the red zone of the poverty map, the huge burden of the extra population has to be compensated by developing a mechanism that addresses the insecurity of the locals and covers “health, education, gender development, infrastructure, environment preservation and other support”. They insist that this provision be incorporated into the Rohingya strategy and also in the forms of the NGO Affairs Bureau.

Fourthly, the locals feel that aid efforts are being seriously impaired by the endless visits of local and foreign dignitaries. State protocol demands that the Deputy Commissioner and the Superintendent of Police greet in person some of the VVIPs and they be escorted with contingents of armed police to ensure safe movements. “Can we afford such luxuries at a time when the nation is in emergency mode”, some ask. Visits, speeches, and photo sessions of ministers, MPs, and sundry in the refugee camps only reflect how insensitive they are of the urgency of the situation. Perhaps time has come to remind the VIPs during their incoming flight to Cox's Bazar the adage that acts of genuine charity demand that the left hand does not get to know what the right hand gives!

And finally, local NGOs feel they have been marginalised. The obsession of UN agencies and bilateral donors to assign responsibility of distribution of certain provisions to a mega-NGO, which thus far had very limited engagement and experience in refugee management, is deeply resented. Contesting the “total and single handle approach” in taking care of food supply and education, they demand allowing local Civil Society Organisations (CSO) a role for “ensuring innovation and diversification”. In a note to the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator and Under Secretary General to Office of the Humanitarian

Affairs who visited Cox's Bazar in early October they observed such an approach is contrary to the principle of “equitable and dignified partnership for an accountable and sustainable growth of CSOs in Bangladesh”.



This is not the first time the area [Ukhia-Teknaf] is hosting refugees. In 1978 and 1991–92, it hosted 280,000 and 250,000 Rohingyas respectively. Prior to the recent influx in post-August, it hosted around 300,000 of what the government preferred to term as “undocumented Myanmar nationals” (UMN). Photo: Anisur Rahman

The local organisations were unequivocal in demanding that they should not be seen as “local implementers/partners” but as “decision making partners”. Their list of demands includes hiring local consultants, staff members and vendors for supplying goods and services; non-poaching of local staff members by mega-NGOs and international agencies; and publication of project and aid data along the lines of International Aid Transparency Initiative principles.

The above narrative adequately establishes the point that refugee management is a complex and multi-faceted challenge. The best way to meet this challenge is through making decisions with a participatory process. The people of Ukhia and Teknaf have demonstrated their courage and fortitude in facing a challenge of mammoth magnitude. Despite severe resource constraints, they have remained resolute in upholding the dignity of the refugees, sacrificing their own interests. It's time that those at the helm of the state acknowledge their contribution and ensure their voices are heeded in planning and implementing the refugee management strategy.



C R Abrar teaches International Relations at the University of Dhaka. This piece is based on his experience gained from recent his visit to Ukhia and Teknaf this week.

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AFTERMATH OF ICJ RULING

Redrawing Rohingya Strategy

By **C R Abrar** --- *C R Abrar teaches International Relations at the University of Dhaka.*



Rohingya refugees stretch their hands to receive aid distributed by local organisations at Balukhali makeshift refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, on September 14, 2017. FILE PHOTO: REUTERS/DANISH SIDDIQUI

Within a week of the ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) that provisionally recognised the group identity of the Rohingya and the unremitting persecution that the community has endured over decades, Bangladesh government announced that it will grant access to education to the Rohingya children. The decision has been enthusiastically welcomed by the refugee community as well as rights groups at home and abroad. Under the scheme, Rohingya refugee children up to the age of 14 will receive education following the Burmese curriculum, and children above that age will get skills training. Announcing the plan, the newly appointed foreign secretary of Bangladesh noted that “the government has felt the need to keep Rohingya children's hope for the future alive with extending education and skills training to them.”

Long before the August 2017 influx, the government had for years stood by its decision to not allow refugee children access to education, presumably on grounds that it would create opportunities for the refugees to permanently settle in Bangladesh and may also work as an incentive for those still living in Arakan to cross the border. The recent decision is of major significance for the lives of tens of thousands of refugee children. Access to education will not only help them realise their innate potential, it will also empower them to make a distinction between right and wrong and thereby protect them from the machinations of promoters of violent extremism (something that the government and the international community are pretty concerned about) and human trafficking. Education will help the refugees to pursue livelihood opportunities upon their eventual return to Burma and also in cases of third-country settlement. The policy change is also in sync with the government's obligation under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that affirms that every child has a right to education.

There is little doubt that effective implementation of the policy will entail, among others, mobilisation of a huge amount of resources, developing comprehensive curricula and infrastructure, identifying and securing the services of qualified teachers, and careful balancing of the educational needs of the children of the host community with those of the refugee children. No less important will be maintaining the quality of education and having the curricula accredited by the appropriate authority. This bold decision of the Bangladesh government demands an active engagement of the international community in sharing the responsibility of educating all children in the affected areas.

In an otherwise hostile global environment for the refugees, Bangladesh's granting of sanctuary to the persecuted Rohingya and rendering various kinds of assistance to them, albeit with international support, have earned it a towering moral standing. The ICJ ruling vindicated the correctness of Bangladesh's position. It is now incumbent on the world community, particularly the powerful states, to live up to their obligations and shore up efforts to bring about an end to the genocidal practices of the Burmese state against the Rohingya and help create an enabling environment in Arakan for them to return with safety and dignity as bonafide citizens of Burma. It is also the time for Rohingya strategists in Bangladesh to reflect on policies that need to be amended or framed in light of the emergent reality.

One of the first issues to address is recognise the group as "refugees". By all calculations, the Rohingya in Bangladesh fulfil the criteria to be termed refugees. They fled their country of origin (Burma) due to well-founded fears of persecution, are unable to get the protection of that country, and owing to fears, are unwilling to return. By all counts, like their preceding cohorts of 1978 and 1991-92 who came to Bangladesh and were granted refugee status, this group also qualifies as refugees. But so far, for reasons not explained, the concerned authorities of Bangladesh chose not to grant the same status to this group that endured severe conditions fleeing mass atrocity crimes including killing, rape, maiming and arson. For reasons still unknown, Bangladesh government preferred to call them "forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals", a slightly improved version from the initial tag of "illegal intruders".

The term "forcibly displaced" undermines the gravity of the crimes that this group has been subjected to. Refugees are people who flee persecution or war. They are seeking asylum somewhere outside of their home country because returning home is too dangerous. Quite unlike the "forcibly displaced", refugees enjoy specific protections under international law, including that they should not be sent back to their home country. Under the principle of burden sharing, the international community is obligated to ensure protection of the refugees. Surely, all members of the Rohingya community meet the above conditions and thus are eligible to be recognised as such. If the decision not to term the Rohingya "refugees" was taken to placate the Burmese authorities with the underlying hope that Naypyidaw would soon create conditions for their return, then time has come to revise the decision, acknowledge the sufferings of these people (which received due recognition at the highest court of the world) and term them "refugees".

No one disputes that dealing with neighbours, particularly recalcitrant ones, is a difficult task. Over decades, on the vexing Rohingya issue, Bangladesh has been extremely tolerant and flexible in engaging with its eastern neighbour. It tried to address the return of a "residual caseload" of 25,000-35,000 registered refugees from the 1991-92 influx through bilateral discussions with little progress. Out of deference to the Burmese, it did not alert the international community to the steady inflow of refugees in small bands or large groups fleeing persecution and violence in Arakan state since 1992 until August 24, 2017 (that eventually numbered about 300,000)—considering that it would complicate the ongoing repatriation talks over the "residual caseload" and cast negatively on bilateral trade and connectivity initiatives. Respecting the Burmese desire for years (quite erroneously, one would argue), Bangladesh even refrained from terming the community "Rohingya", denying the group its rightful claim to identity (which was unequivocally reaffirmed in the ICJ ruling), and till this day continues to brand the refugees as "forcibly displaced" people. Even after experiencing the huge flow of refugees after August 25, 2017, instead of viewing the Burmese policy in Arakan as genocide—the mother of all crimes (as the ICJ has provisionally deemed)—Bangladesh appeared to have been on board with the Burmese who presented the Rohingya issue "essentially as a border, law and order and human mobility question."

Notwithstanding all the above efforts of Bangladesh, instead of positively responding to the good neighbourly gestures, the Burmese state deemed those as weaknesses and persisted with its genocidal agenda, discreetly banishing the Rohingya from Arakan, freeing up the land for a plethora of mega-development projects, being aided and abetted by its international partners including those who sit and aspire to sit as permanent members in the Security Council. In the final week of August 2017, the regime went for the "final solution" by unleashing a reign of terror on unarmed Rohingyas. The scale of barbarity of the operation and the subsequent hypocrisy of the Burmese state in stalling the bilateral repatriation plan over the last two years are well-known.

Such a backdrop provides the rationale for Bangladesh to review its Rohingya strategy. The Burmese reaction to the ICJ ruling gives an indication that the country is yet to acknowledge the crimes it has committed against the Rohingya and is in no disposition to create an enabling condition for the refugees to return. The hope that has been raised by the ICJ ruling, and the opportunity it has created for ensuring justice and making the Burmese state accountable, should be harnessed to its fullest extent. The condition demands that Bangladesh takes a firm stand against its rogue neighbour and actively engages with the

ICJ process. Whether the country should file a separate case in the ICJ or be a party or act as intervener in the existing case is a matter of further debate and consideration.

In the current world of brazen realpolitik, The Gambia, a small nation in a far-away land, totally unaffected by the Rohingya genocide, has played a formidable role for ensuring justice for the voiceless Rohingya victims and survivors. However, jurist John Packer has directed our attention to a major weakness of the case—that it entirely rests on that small, weak country, which may shy away from its current stance under unforeseen circumstances (such as a change in government). The situation demands that others (of the 150-odd countries that are party to the Genocide Convention) file either separate cases or become parties to the existing case to bolster the process of justice and accountability. The ICJ ruling should induce at least a few more states, particularly those who champion world peace and human rights, and also those who advocate the cause of Islamic Umma, to live up to their commitment and uphold the lofty principles. Here again, Bangladesh, as the most injured third party, can play a decisive role in banding together a coalition of the willing.

On the Rohingya question, so far Bangladesh has been unable to secure any tangible support from the much-celebrated friendly states. Time has come for the political leaders of Bangladesh to convey its people's extreme disappointment and displeasure to the concerned states for backing the wrong side on this critical issue. Bangladesh's expectation that henceforth those states would pursue an objective and balanced Rohingya policy vis-à-vis Bangladesh and Burma should be clearly communicated.

At a time when hopes for justice and accountability for the Rohingya were fading and frustration was creeping in among those who cherish right over wrong, fairness over injustice, the ICJ ruling has opened up a new vista of optimism. It has created a big opportunity for Bangladesh, a country that has garnered a colossal moral capital. Time has come to make a wise investment of that capital and play a proactive role in addressing the Rohingya genocide. Rohingya strategists in Bangladesh may also be well-advised to refrain from taking any step internally that may undermine this elevated standing.



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