

NO PLACE TO CALL HOME: HISTORICAL CONTEXT, STATELESSNESS AND CONTEMPORARY SECURITY CHALLENGES OF ROHINGYA REFUGEE CRISIS

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Abstract

The Rohingya refugee issue is one of the pressing problems in the world. It has been one of the world's most significant refugee crises. This paper seeks to explore the key historical issues of the world. The paper would tap into these two important discourses to understand the whole Rohingya issue in the context of history and contemporary politics of Myanmar. The paper would explore the key issues related to the marginalization of Rohingyas from a historical point of view. It would analyze the role of legal frameworks within Myanmar behind Rohingya statelessness and positions of various actors in Myanmar in maintaining the status quo on the Rohingya question. Finally, it would shed light on the security issues in Bangladesh because of the presence of Rohingya refugees. The paper would adopt a qualitative and descriptive approach to explore the major issues pertinent to the issue.

Keywords: Rohingya, Refugee Crisis, Ethnic Cleansing, Statelessness

Introduction

The Rohingya refugee issue is a long-standing unresolved protracted refugee situation. It is a tale of marginalization, persecution, and statelessness of over two million people who call the Rakhine State of Myanmar as their home. The persecution of Rohingyas has made them live in inhuman conditions without basic rights and protection of the state, while being subjected to continuous violence which led to expulsion from their lands to neighbouring states like Bangladesh. The most recent violence occurred in August 2017 after Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked the security forces in Myanmar. In retaliation, the Myanmar military launched a devastating operation in the north of the province which has caused a new refugee influx into Bangladesh. The international community, by and large, has condemned the military actions of Myanmar, the United Nations Human Rights Commission even termed the atrocities committed by the Security forces of Myanmar as the "Textbook example of ethnic cleansing". But the global condemnation failed to stop Myanmar from

pursuing its policy of “extermination” of the Rohingya population, mostly because of the political support it received from regional and global powers. The Rohingyas were, in many ways, victims of the domestic political equations in Myanmar and geo-political rivalries among the global powers.

Bangladesh has been at the receiving end of the crisis. Despite its resource scarcity, it has been forced to accommodate close to a million Rohingya refugees. The Rohingya refugee population has also put an additional burden on Bangladesh’s national budget.¹ The presence of the refugees has created a number of socio-political problems in the country. Though the Rohingyas have been residing in the country for a long period of time, they have limited rights in the country, as successive governments of Bangladesh have imposed a series of restrictions on their movement and employment opportunities. The foreign aid sanctioned by the international community is not sufficient to uplift the community and provide a better quality of life.

To comprehensively understand the Rohingya issue, it is necessary to highlight two important aspects: Firstly, the debate on the historical presence of the Rohingyas in the Rakhine state. The Myanmar government has made repeated claims that the Rohingyas are not indigenous to the Arakan or the Rakhine region and are recent immigrants from the Bengal region, currently part of Bangladesh. In order to protect the ‘indigenous’ population of the Rakhine region, Myanmar has instituted a regime of the political and abusive socio-economic system on Rohingyas, that can only be compared to South African apartheid. The Myanmar government has enacted the 1982 citizenship law that rendered Rohingyas stateless. The second question is the contemporary marginalization of the Rohingya population. What factors are responsible for it? The exodus and sufferings of the Rohingyas are directly related to the internal political dynamics of the Rakhine state. The nexus between the religious establishment and the Military Junta has been a prime factor blocking any reconciliation and integration of Rohingya people into the national fabric of Myanmar.

The paper would tap into these two important issues to understand the whole Rohingya issue in the context of history and contemporary politics of Myanmar. The paper will explore the key issues related to the marginalization of Rohingyas from a historical point of view. It would analyze the role of legal frameworks within Myanmar behind Rohingya statelessness and positions of

¹ Jobair Alam, “The Rohingya of Myanmar: theoretical significance of the minority status”, *Asian Ethnicity*, vol 19, no. 2, 2018, p. 180-210, DOI: 10.1080/14631369.2017.1407236.

various actors in Myanmar in maintaining the status quo on the Rohingya question. Finally, it would shed light on the security issues in Bangladesh because of the presence of Rohingya refugees. The paper would adopt a qualitative approach to explore the major issues pertinent to the issue. The paper would take qualitative literature into account to formulate the arguments and describe the findings qualitatively.

Rohingya Issue in Context of Ethnicity and Nationalism

The historical context is the first step to understanding and deciphering the underlying issues of the Rohingya refugee crisis. The government of Myanmar claims that there is no such ethnic group called “Rohingya” exists in the country and most of the Muslims of Rakhine state, in reality are illegal immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh. It uses a special term called “Taingyintha” to denote the so called 135 “National races” of the country who are according to Myanmar Government are indigenous to Myanmar. The concept of “Taingyintha” was embedded in the 1974 constitution of the state which calls for the promotion “mutual respect and unity” among the national races of the country.² As a result, the concept of “national race” became the central discourse of nation-building in Myanmar and at the same time gradually shaped the political project of marginalizing the Rohingya population.

The origin of the Rohingya people is an issue of controversial debate in academia. There are two major theories regarding the history of the Rohingya People. First theory suggests that Rohingyas are “*Descendants of Moorish, Arab and Persian traders, including Moghul, Turk, Pathan and Bengali soldiers and migrants, who arrived between 9th and 15th centuries, married local women, and settled in the region. Rohingya are, therefore, a mixed group of people with many ethnic and racial connections*”.³

However, Myanmar's government sanctioned historical narrative suggests that the “Rohingyas” are only Bengali immigrants who came along with the British imperialists after the Burmese defeat in the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1824. As a result, Myanmar considers all people who settled in the country after 1823 as “foreigners” and “illegal immigrants”. Thus Myanmar has repeatedly rejected the

² Nick Cheesman, "How in Myanmar “national races” came to surpass citizenship and exclude Rohingya", *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol 47, no. 3, 2017, p. 461-483.

³ Imtiaz Ahmed, "The Rohingyas: From stateless to refugee", Dhaka, Bangladesh: University of Dhaka, 2009, p. 285-301.

term “Rohingya” which it believes, will give an impression that Rohingyas are a separate ethnic group. The historians generally agree on the Muslim presence in Myanmar long before the arrival of the British, for example, the Muslim groups such as Kamans, Pashu and Panthays have official status in the country and the state recognizes them as citizens. Moreover, historical accounts show that in the dynastic periods, successive Burmese kings had patronized the Muslim communities living in the country and promoted them to higher positions in the state administration. King Mindon of the Konbaung dynasty even built accommodation facilities for Burmese Muslims taking pilgrimage in Mecca.⁴ But the “Rohingya Muslim identity” has become a matter of controversy in the country. Since 1970’s, different organizations and scholars have been using terms other than “Rohingya” such as “Burmese Muslims” or “Arakanese Muslims” to describe the Muslims of Rakhine state.

There is contested historical evidence to determine the origins of the “Rohingya” people. The ties between Bengal and the Arakan are ancient. Before the Burmese conquest of the Arakan in 1784, the kingdom had extensive ties with Bengal. After the Burmese conquest, these ties were broken. The Muslim influence is also notable in the Arakanese court who adopted Arabic and Persian names in addition to their own. It is noted that, “the Arakanese kings, though Buddhist in religion, became somewhat Mahomedanised in their ideas”.⁵ The Arakanese brought many slaves from Bengal who later settled in the region and served as soldiers, scholars and court administrators. The word Rohingya first appeared in western literature in a book written by Dr. Francis Hamilton Buchanan in 1799, long before the conquest of the British Empire. He mentioned that a “Muslim group” called “Rooinga” were living in Arakan along with the Buddhist Rakhines.⁶ A protestant missionary named, J.C Fink who travelled Arakan and Chittagong hill tracts for missionary purposes described native Arakanese Muslims as descendants of slaves brought by the Mughls from Bengal. In his accounts, the Muslims of Arakan preserved the religion and language of their forefathers and were living in harmony with the rest of the population. Mohammad A. Tahir Ba Tha in his book the “Rohingyas and Kamans of Burma” (1963) argued that Rohingya historical identity is rooted in ancient Hindu-Buddhist culture that existed in Arakan before

⁴ Saito Ayako, "The formation of the concept of Myanmar Muslims as indigenous citizens: Their history and current situation", *The Journal of Sophia Asian Studies*, vol 32, 2014, p. 25-40.

⁵ Swapna Bhattacharya, "Islam in Arakan: An interpretation from the Indian perspective: History and the Present", *Rohingya League for Democracy (Burma) RLDB*, vol 1, 2012.

⁶ Azeem Ibrahim, “The Rohingyas: inside Myanmar's genocide”, Oxford University Press, 2018.

the arrival of the Rakhines in the region.⁷ Moshe Yegar (1972), another prolific historian, argued in his book “Muslims of Burma” that Rohingyas have been present in Arakan since the 8th century as Arab and Persian sailors dominated the seaborne trade in the Indian Ocean during the medieval era.⁸

Though several evidences suggest a high “Muslim” immigration from the British India to upper Burma, for example, in the census of 1869, the Muslims make up merely 5% of the total population in Arakan, which increased up to 30% in 1912.⁹ It has been evident that Indians migrated to Myanmar as traders and bureaucrats to Burma under British colonial rule. The economic and administrative domination of Indians in Burma, was one of the earliest catalyst of anti-Indian and later anti-Muslim sentiments among Burmese nationalists.¹⁰ However, the presence of Muslims in Myanmar cannot be put solely on the onus of British colonialism. The present borders among the former colonies of the empire are mostly colonial impositions, cartographically curved out without consultation with local population or taking the demographic composition into account. Even in the pre-colonial era, the borders between kingdoms and empires were fluid and unmarked, the migration, thus, was a common phenomenon. There is a large Rakhine population in the South-West of Bangladesh, therefore, terming the Muslims of the Rakhine as Bangladeshi immigrants is historically flawed,¹¹ and especially given the Rohingya community has been living in Rakhine before the creation of Bangladesh or even the Myanmar state itself.

The firm opposition of Buddhist monks towards Muslims in general and “Rohingyas” in particular have also shaped the general perception towards Muslims in the country. In the colonial period, the Buddhist monks formed “Young

⁷ Nasreen Chowdhory and Biswajit Mohanty, "Contextualizing Citizenship, Nationalism and Refugeehood of Rohingya: An Introduction", In *Citizenship, Nationalism and Refugee hood of Rohingyas in Southern Asia*, Springer, Singapore, 2020, p. 1-30.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Jacques Leider, "Rohingya: The history of a Muslim identity in Myanmar", In *Oxford research encyclopedia of Asian history*, 2018.

¹⁰ Kunal Mukherjee, "The ethnic minority question and rohingya crisis in contemporary Myanmar", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol 39, no. 1, 2019, p. 26-43.

¹¹ Rubiat Saimum, "ASEAN's Rohingya Dilemma: Limits of Regional Co-operation", In *Charting a Sustainable Future of ASEAN in Business and Social Sciences*, Springer, Singapore, 2020, p. 339-348.

Men Buddhist Association” to fight British rule in the country. As a result, the Muslims, especially the Muslim lenders and businessmen, were portrayed as agents of colonialism who exploit the local people. Even after the independence, the Buddhist Sanghas continued to hold enormous influence over the country which neither the military nor the democratic opposition could challenge.¹² Thus even Aung Sun Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy maintained utter silence when the Monks instigated riots against Rohingya minorities.

Year	Event
1948	Independence and foundation of the Union of Myanmar.
1948	Union citizenship Act was enacted.
1962	The first military coup and General Ne Win took power.
1974	Emergency Immigration Act was instituted to curtail alleged migration into Myanmar.
1978	Operation Nagamin was carried out by Burmese government and close to 200,000-250,000 Rohingyas were displaced.
1982	Citizenship law was enacted and Rohingyas were denied citizenship rights.
1991	Second Rohingya exodus took place with 300,000 Rohingyas fleeing to Bangladesh.
1992	Bangladesh-Myanmar repatriation agreement and 230,000 Rohingyas returned to Myanmar.
2012	Anti-Rohingya riots in Rakhine state and up to 100,000 people, mostly Rohingyas, were displaced.
2015	The Rohingya Boat crisis ensued and almost 50,000 people were forced to migrate to South-East Asia through boat.
2017	Myanmar military carried out an anti-insurgency operation which caused a refugee exodus. 700,000 Rohingyas arrived in Bangladesh.

Table 1: Timeline of Rohingya Refugee Crisis

The Question of Citizenship and Systemic Marginalization

The complex citizenship law of Myanmar is one of the major impediments towards the full integration of the Rohingya community into the national fabric. Unlike other states, Myanmar grants citizenship based on “Historical ancestry”, even if some groups are residing in the country for centuries. The section 11 of the 1947 constitution guaranteed citizenship to the ‘indigenous races’ within Myanmar. However, it also kept options for people who were already living in Myanmar when the country became independent. The 1948 citizenship Act was formulated on the basis of the 1947 constitution. But the 1948 act was replaced by the 1982 citizenship law which established a stratified system of three types of citizenship, namely: Full citizens, the descendants of people who were residing in Burma prior to 1823. Associate citizens, those who acquired citizenship under 1948 act and Naturalised citizens, those who have acquired citizenship after 1982.

¹² Ian Holliday, "Ethnicity and democratization in Myanmar", *Asian Journal of Political Science*, vol 18, no. 2, 2010, p. 111-128.

The ruling Military regime in Myanmar denied the Rohingyas citizenship as they failed to fulfil the criteria of ancestry.¹³ The entire Rohingya population thus became stateless without electoral, political, and civil rights.

The provisions of 1982 citizenship law put the burden to prove their citizenship on the shoulders of the Rohingya people which made the process even more complex. Given the fact that most Rohingyas are uneducated and have limited legal resources, it became impossible for the community to prove their indigenous identity against the state, which seeks to disenfranchise them. Historically, Asian countries, in general, have been very poor in documentation and registration of population. Besides, the concept of census and population registration is comparatively new to Asia. The first modern scientific census in the history of Myanmar was carried out by the British in 1872. The 1872 census found that Muslims were 'settled in the Rakhine province for many generations' and 'have little to distinguish them from the Arakanese except their religion'.¹⁴ The same census suggested that Muslims made up 20% of the total population of Northern Rakhine during that period. These reports in fact, prove the Muslim presence in the region as early as 18th century, contrary to Myanmar's claim that Muslims are recent immigrants from Bangladesh.

However, the 1982 citizenship law could not be alone blamed for the statelessness of the Rohingyas. Kyaw (2017) argued that despite discriminatory provisions of the 1982 law, the real causes of the statelessness are more de-facto than de-jure. The successive Myanmar governments have declined to recognize the Rohingya minority groups and even to implement the 1982 law. In the 1970's the Rohingyas were given the National Registration Cards (NRCs) which sufficiently proves their citizenship.¹⁵ Despite the legal complexities due to the 1982 law, Rohingyas held white cards since 1995 and were allowed to vote in the 1990 general election, 2008 constitutional referendum and the 2010 general election. It was not until 2013, when Myanmar authorities began to suppress the political rights of the Rohingyas on a large scale under the pressure of Buddhist nationalist groups.¹⁶ As a result, these cards were revoked in 2015 to limit their

¹³ Cheeseman, 2017.

¹⁴ Burmese census, 1872.

¹⁵ Nyi Nyi Kyaw, "Unpacking the presumed statelessness of Rohingyas", *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, vol 15, no. 3, 2017, p. 269-286.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

presence in the political space, putting them in a legal limbo.¹⁷ Because Rohingyas can no longer serve in the national parliament, they cannot channel their grievances at the national scale. It also removed the possibility of reconciliation with other ethnicities in the country. These limitations in civic and political rights have stalled the solution of the Rohingya crisis. At the same time, this political oppression has strengthened the hardliners within Myanmar's society who seek to marginalize the Rohingya minority in the country. Myanmar's authority has destroyed numerous mosques, Islamic schools and other religious monuments in the northern Rakhine state. Myanmar has long accused the Rohingyas of conspiracy to increase population in order to create an Islamic state in the Rakhine state. In a draconian measure, the government has imposed an arbitrary two child policy on the Rohingya people. In a draconian measure, the government has imposed an arbitrary two-child policy on the Rohingya people.¹⁸

Those couples who fail to comply with the policy are sometimes forced to go through painful and unhygienic abortion procedures that took a toll on women health. If the women chose to give birth, they may face the threat of being blacklisted by the authorities. In such cases, the children may face legal consequences such as deprivation of legal status, inheritance and exclusion from education and employment opportunities. In order to obtain marriage licences, the Rohingyas have to seek permission from the government.¹⁹ The Rohingya women faces great sexual and physical violence in the hand of Myanmar's security forces. The Human rights watch had documented a series of testimonies by Rohingya women facing violence at the hand of Myanmar security forces. The Myanmar security forces have carried out sexual crimes at massive scales against the Rohingya women. There are several instances of 'mass rape' against the Rohingya women during the 2017 crisis.²⁰ These crimes were also perpetuated against ethnic and religious minorities in the Bosnian war in the 1990s and Bangladesh's war of

¹⁷ A. K. M Ahsan Ullah, "Rohingya crisis in Myanmar: Seeking justice for the "stateless"", *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, vol 32, no. 3, 2016, p. 285-301.

¹⁸ Parveen K Parmar, Rowen O. Jin, Meredith Walsh and Jennifer Scott, "Mortality in Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh: historical, social, and political context", *Sexual and reproductive health matters*, vol 27, no. 2, 2019, p. 39-49.

¹⁹ Syed S Mahmood, Emily Wroe, Arlan Fuller and Jennifer Leaning, "The Rohingya people of Myanmar: health, human rights, and identity", *The Lancet*, vol 389, no. 10081, 2017, p. 1841-1850.

²⁰ Human Rights Watch, "All of my body was pain-Sexual violence against Rohingya women and girls in Burma", Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/11/16/all-my-body-was-pain/sexual-violence-against-rohingya-women-and-girls-burma>.

liberation in 1971. These actions clearly constitute war crimes against non-combatants. This principle is recognized in the international legal framework as ‘crime against humanity’ and ‘war crime’. United Nations Security Council resolution 1820 recognized this issue in its text:

*“Rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity, or a constitutive act with respect to genocide.”*²¹

The Myanmar government has used ‘ethnic cleansing’ and ‘genocide’ to advance their goal of ‘Burmanization’ of the entire country. The ethnic conflict is not new in the country. There are numerous groups in the country fighting against the government, however, Myanmar has selectively targeted the Rohingyas because of their race and religion. In Myanmar’s view, nation-building has been an incomplete process. The only way the nation can be united, is through assimilating non-Burmans and non-Buddhist ethnicities with the wider Burmese society, even with force if necessary. The Military regime in Myanmar has used the Anti-Rohingya and Anti-Islamic sentiments prevailing among the general population to strengthen its national building project. The solidarity among the “National races” and “Buddhism” became the two main pillars of the nation building process in Myanmar thus Rohingyas were removed from the national fabric as their ethnic and religious identity are incompatible with the broader Burmese identity.

History of Rohingya Militancy

Throughout history, the Rohingya people have made many attempts to secure their freedom of ‘self-determination’. However, the inter-communal ties between the Buddhist and the Rohingya muslim community have not been very well during the colonial era. During the Second World War, the relations between the two communities began to deteriorate when the British authority armed and backed the Rohingyas against the Japanese invading army, while Burmese nationalists allied themselves with Japan who promised them self-rule and independence.²² The Rohingyas distrusted the Burmese Nationalists and feared that in case of an independent Myanmar, they might lose their autonomy and civil rights within a Buddhist majority society.

²¹ Kerry K Paterson, “When rape became a war crime (hint: It’s not when you think)”, Available at: <https://womensmediacenter.com/women-under-siege/when-rape-became-a-war-crime-hint-its-not-when-you-think1>.

²² Mahburur Rahman and Haradhan Kumar Mohajan, "Rohingya-The Stateless Community Becoming the Lost Generation", Journal of Economic Development, Environment and People, vol 8, no. 2, 2019, p. 24.

The Rohingyas had sought to be a part of the newly independent Pakistan. A Rohingya delegation met with Pakistan's founding father Muhammad Ali Jinnah and proposed that he annex the Muslim majority Northern Rakhine region to the East Pakistan, present-day Bangladesh. However, the initiative did not materialize after the death of Jinnah. Many Burmese nationalists saw these attempts as evidence of Rohingya people's 'separatist tendencies'.²³ After the independence of Myanmar in 1948, numerous groups were formed to secure the Rohingya self-determination goal. The Rohingya Independence Front (RIF), an 'ethno nationalist' group was formed in 1962 to protect the rights of the minority group. The Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF) emerged from the RIF to establish an autonomous zone in the Northern Rakhine, although it was largely eliminated after the operation Nagamin in 1978.²⁴ There was another well-known group known as Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) formed in 1982, with an agenda to secure Rohingya rights within the Myanmar Union. The Group established their presence among the Rohingya refugee population in Bangladesh to carry out operations inside Myanmar. However, Bangladeshi security forces carried out counter-insurgency operations against RSO in 2001, which severely decimated the organization's operational capabilities.²⁵ There has been other militant groups that Myanmar government has claimed maintained ties with International terrorist groups. After 2001, Myanmar government had shared intelligence with United States which indicated that militants from the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO) have taken training with international terrorist organizations abroad. Despite these claims, the Rakhine have remained relatively calm without any trace of international terrorism.²⁶ The rise of ARSA as the face of Rohingya resistance in the post-2017 exodus has brought scrutiny towards the militant group. Based on the group's founder's alleged ties with Pakistani terrorist entity Lashker-e-Taiba (LeT). However, most of these reports are based on mere speculations and un-verifiable 'intelligence sources'.²⁷ None of these reports or speculations have provided any concrete evidences to support such claims.

²³ Harrison Akins, "The two faces of democratization in Myanmar: A case study of the Rohingya and Burmese nationalism", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol 38, no. 2, 2018, p. 229-245.

²⁴ Jasmininder Singh and M. H. Bin Jani, "Myanmar's Rohingya Conflict: Foreign Jihadi Brewing", *RSIS Commentary*, vol 18, 2016.

²⁵ Elliot Brennan and Christopher O'Hara, "The Rohingya and Islamic extremism: A convenient myth", *The Diplomat*, vol 29, 2015.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ C. Christine Fair, "Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army: Not the Jihadis You Might Expect", *Lawfare*, 9 December 2018.

Moreover, ARSA has repeatedly denied ties with Jihadists groups and refrained from endorsing any Sharia based governance system. Politically, ARSA has nothing to gain from siding with Islamist elements.²⁸

Post 9/11, there has been numerous attempts by the Myanmar government to designate the Rohingya groups as terrorist on basis of their alleged connections with international Jihadists. Despite the lack of evidences to directly draw such links, Myanmar authorities have continuously used the ‘international Jihad’ argument to delegitimize the political aspirations of the Rohingyas. Interestingly, numerous militarily strong separatist insurgent groups are active in other parts of Myanmar. However, Myanmar government have been refrained from designating these groups as terrorists. The Myanmar government even signed 16 ceasefire agreements with different militant outfits by 1995, which led to the creation of so-called ‘special regions’, which are de-facto administered by the ethnic armed factions within a framework of autonomy. By 2008, 17 more agreements were signed between the government and the militant groups, legitimizing the agenda of these insurgent movements. These insurgent groups have also formed a Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) to negotiate a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) with the government. However, the 16 organization umbrella group NCCT has no Rohingya representation. This shows that Myanmar government has arbitrarily designated the Rohingya groups as ‘terrorist’ while defined other militant groups as simply ‘Ethnic Insurgents’.

Rohingyas and the Internal Political Dynamics of Myanmar

The domestic politics of Myanmar is also a factor behind the persecution of the Rohingya people. Myanmar’s political arena is dominated by mainly three different power centres: The military, The Buddhist Sangha and the National League for democracy. There has been constant competition between these groups to assert political power and gain state support. The Buddhist monks generally have gained state support since the pre-colonial era. However, their power and influence began to diminish considerably after the British colonization of Myanmar. In the post-independence era, the Sangha tried to play an important role in Myanmar’s national politics. Especially, during the early stages, it vigorously tried to defend the Buddhist nature of the country against the increasing secularization of the state and society. The Sangha though nominally independent of the state, has great influence on the latter, given its role as the interlocutor between the state and the society. Though the Theravada traditions strongly

²⁸ C. Christine Fair, "Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army: Not the Jihadis You Might Expect".

discourage the monks from the participating in politics, the monks view the relations between the state and the Sangha symbiotically, where the Sangha has the duty to intervene whenever the state fails to protect the 'faith'.²⁹

In their defence of state, race and religion, the Sangha has always been suspicious of the Rohingyas whom they see as an agent of 'Islamization'. They have constantly raised unfound conspiracy theories about the possibility of Rohingyas being aligned with International Muslim groups to transform Myanmar into an Islamic state. The state and Sangha have cooperated against the Rohingya Muslims with a view to subjugate them. The Buddhist monks have instigated and directly supported violence and riot against the Muslim minority groups and routinely provided religious justifications of violence against Rohingya at the hand of the security forces.³⁰ The Buddhist associations such as 969 movement and Ma Ba Tha have long presented Muslims as 'Cancer within'. These groups regularly point out that the 'Western gate' of the country in the Rakhine state is particularly susceptible to an imagined 'Islamic threat'. If Rohingyas are not contained, there is a possibility that the country's Buddhist majority would be overwhelmed by the Muslims from Bengal. To confront this so-called Islamic threat, groups like Ma Ba Tha have forayed into party politics. In 2015 general election, the group offered its support to the Junta led Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), accusing the pro-democracy NLD as 'Pro-Muslim'. While the USDP suffered a major defeat in the election, this was not necessarily a referendum on the popularity of the Buddhist nationalists, who according to many analysts remained a central force in Myanmar's society.³¹

The Rohingya issue has also complicated the stances of the National League for democracy. The NLD is walking on the thin water on the Rohingya issue. The constitution of Myanmar allocated 25% of seats to military officials who have maintained considerable power in the country.³² For Suu Kyi and NLD, standing with the Rohingyas meant alienating her core base of Bamar Buddhists, from which the party received its popular support and legitimacy. It also entails confronting the powerful Sangha, who could potentially tip the balance of power

²⁹ International Crisis Group, "Buddhism and state power in Myanmar", Crisis Group Asia Report no. 290, 2017.

³⁰ Francis Wade, "Myanmar's enemy within: Buddhist violence and the making of a Muslim 'other'", Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019.

³¹ International Crisis Group, 2017.

³² Sean Turnell, "Myanmar in 2011: confounding expectations", Asian Survey, vol 52, no. 1, 2012, p. 157-164.

in the favour of the military. Sensing the political danger, Suu Kyi has essentially parroted the Military's talking point of accusing the Rohingyas behind the 2017 ethnic cleansing. She defended the military's brutal assaults and accused the 'terrorists' behind the 'iceberg of misinformation'.³³ However, there is a ray of hope in this crisis: the military takeover of power on February 1, has prompted a wide-spread protest against the Military Junta's unlawful takeover of power. Many Myanmar protesters have supported the plight of the Rohingya people. It seems that the public opinion regarding the Rohingya people have shifted considerably. There is a possibility that the majority population could accept the Rohingya minority in a future democratic Myanmar.

Rohingya Refugee Crisis and Contemporary Security Challenges

The presence of more than a million Rohingyas in Bangladesh has been regarded as a multi-dimensional security issue for the country. Myanmar's refusal to consider the Rohingyas as citizens of Myanmar and the lack of initiative to repatriate the Rohingyas have been major obstacles to peacefully resolve the problem. On paper, Myanmar agrees to the principle of repatriating the Rohingyas back to Rakhine state. However, Naypyidaw has not provided any guarantees to the Rohingya population regarding their protection and citizenship. A large majority of the Rohingya population has rejected attempts of repatriation without any such guarantees from Myanmar.³⁴ The presence of refugees has exacerbated the security situation in the Southern part of the country. The issue of drug trafficking has become the core security issue for Bangladesh. The Rohingya refugees are being exploited by militant outfits in Myanmar to traffic synthetic drug methamphetamine (locally known as Yaba) to Bangladesh. The Arakan army uses Rohingya carriers to traffic these drugs sourced from the Shan state of Myanmar. Multiple militant groups use wealth accumulated from the drug trade to fund their activities and operations. The Rohingya play a significant role in functioning the drug-weapons cartel and the drug trafficking route that extends from Shan state of Myanmar to Bangladesh's capital Dhaka.³⁵ The issue of drug trafficking via Rohingya carriers thus has become a regional security issue because of the involvement of transnational groups in the process.

³³ Harrison Akins, "The two faces of democratization in Myanmar: A case study of the Rohingya and Burmese nationalism", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol 38, no. 2, 2018, p. 229-245.

³⁴ R Paul, "Bangladesh, Myanmar agree to begin Rohingya repatriation", Reuters, 2018, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya/bangladesh-myanmar-agree-to-begin-rohingya-repatriation-by-mid-november-idUSKCN1N414Q>.

³⁵ V. M Ginke, "Rohingya Refugees Smuggle Drugs for Insurgents in Myanmar", *New Security Beat*, 2020.

The Rohingya refugee issue has also altered the social fabric of the Cox's Bazar region of Bangladesh. The locals surrounding the Rohingya refugee camps, have some latent fear that they could become minorities in their own land, given the demographic ratio of 1:3 favours the Rohingyas in those parts of Cox's Bazar. Moreover, the influx of Rohingyas into Bangladesh has negatively affected the local economy. For example, the Rohingya day laborers charge half of the money charged by local Bangladeshis, which has made the locals insecure of the presence of Rohingya refugees. The presence of the Rohingya community has also affected the environment of the Ukhia and Teknaf region of Bangladesh. 793 ha of 1502 ha of the forested areas have been encroached by the Rohingya community. Moreover 3000-4000 acres of land has been cleared of green vegetation.³⁶ The locals thus have a feeling of uneasiness towards the Rohingya population. If a clear path towards resolving the crisis could not be found, it is possible that the existing social tension could turn into conflict.

The Rohingya camps have also become a hot-spot of crimes. At least 10 criminal gangs active in Rohingya Refugee camps, who regularly carry out murder, rape, and drug trafficking in the camps. According to local security officials, 70% of the drugs are stored in the refugee camps before being transported to elsewhere. These gangs play a significant role in the entire process. Apart from criminal outfits, ARSA is also active in the camps. Though their ties with terrorism is disputed, their criminal affiliation can not be ignored. The group has been accused of terrorizing local ordinary Rohingyas and also murdering prominent Rohingya leader Mohibullah.³⁷ The presence of ARSA in Rohingya camps is further confirmed by the arrest of the brother of ARSA chief from the Rohingya camp. The activities of a wide range of criminal and militant groups in the Rohingya camps have affected the security of locals and ordinary Rohingyas alike. The proximity of Rohingya camps to the border and sheer number of people has made it difficult for Bangladeshi security forces to provide security to these camps. This is the major reason for Bangladesh to shift refugees from mainland Bangladesh to Bhasanchar, where the safety and security of the Rohingyas can be ensured and the criminal networks could be kept at bay.

³⁶ Lailufar Yasmin and Sayeda Akther, "The locals and the Rohingyas: Trapped with an uncertain future", *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, vol 5, no. 2, 2020, p. 104-120.

³⁷ MD Rashid, "How Cross-Border Crime Ensnarers and Endangers Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh", *The Diplomat*, 2021.

Concluding Remarks

The Rohingya issue has proven to be the greatest crisis Bangladesh has faced since the 1971 war. To manage a million refugees and threats associated with it have proven to be difficult for Bangladesh. However, the issue could not be resolved due to the lack of actions from the International community. In many ways, the international association of the Junta and strategic goods Myanmar provides to many powerful actors have allowed the country to avoid the burnt of international laws. The western sanctions were also comparatively mild which were mostly symbolic in nature. Though actively engaged in regular rhetoric, the Western powers failed to take comprehensive actions due to fears that it would push Myanmar completely into Beijing's orbit. Countries like India and China also have vested interest in the Country. Beijing is constructing the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor which would connect the country to Bay of Bengal, an essential strategic objective for the country. New Delhi has similar ambitions through the Kaladan project which seeks to connect North-East India with the Bay of Bengal. The Rohingyas are thus trapped in between the geopolitical game, that is prolonging the marginalization, sufferings, and statelessness.

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