

Root Causes behind the Persecution against Rohingya Muslims

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Introduction

In 2017, the world has witnessed countless stories of horrific atrocities and brutalities from the fleeing Rohingyas, brave journalists and through the satellite images in Myanmar. The United Nations has already referred to this cruelty as a 'textbook case of ethnic cleansing'.

This is not the first time Rohingya people have been the victims of collective punishment at the hands of the Myanmar state. If we look back in history, Rohingyas were also expunged in the 1940s, 1978, the early 1990s and 2012. Some political, historical, economic, and strategic factors have played a great role in shaping the whole systematic violence against the Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine state. This article will explain the deep rooted causes that are solely responsible for persecutions against the Rohingya minority.

Political Factor: The ethnic dilemma and continuation of the colonial legacy

Historically the Rakhine Muslims or the Rohingya people are an integral part of the Rakhine community. From the Eighth century onwards, merchants from the Middle-East developed trade relationships with the old Arakan kingdom. A number of merchant ships used to seek shelter to Burmese ports because of turbulent weather, high wind and tidal waves. Many of the sailors stayed much longer than planned and got married to Burmese women. With the passage of time, such long stays and

settlements contributed to the increase in the Muslim population in the Arakan state of Myanmar. After the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824 -1826), the British Indian Army had captured Arakan State from the Burmese Kingdom and annexed it with the 'Bengal Presidency'. To facilitate grain production, mass migration of peasants and coolies from different parts of British India was encouraged. Such migration also took place all around the British Empire and many of those people even carried their families with them. The British also promised the Rohingya a separate land called "Muslim National Area" in exchange for supporting them during the Second World War. That is why, the Rohingya sided with the British while Myanmar's nationalists supported the Japanese. During the war, the British rewarded the Rohingya with prestigious government posts but they were not given an autonomous state.

Following independence, anti-Rohingya sentiment grew among Burmese nationalists who formed the new government. This was reflected in the new constitution drafted in 1947. Rohingyas were placed into a special category compared to other ethnic minorities. The Myanmar government did not recognize the Rohingyas as a core ethnic group of Burma. As the border between Arakan state and Bangladesh was porous, the government claimed the Rohingyas as illegal labor migrants from ethnic Bengalis. Hence, the 1947 constitution stipulated that citizenship could only be granted to the Rohingyas depending on their length of residency in the Arakan state.

The situation for Rohingyas slowly worsened under the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) regime as they were incrementally denied citizenship and were treated as foreigners at that period. In 1974, the Emergency Immigration Act imposed ethnic-

identity cards for all ethnic nationalities, except for Rohingyas. They were only eligible for Foreign Registration Cards. In 1982, the Burmese Citizenship Law created four categories of citizens that were assigned to ethnic groups based on their residency status in Burma before 1824. The categories are citizens, associate citizens, naturalized citizens, and foreigners. The Rohingyas were deemed to be foreigners as their residency in Burma before the 19th century was not recognized. This denial of citizenship led to restrictions of their legal rights, freedom of movement, land ownership, employment, and access to health services and education.

From 1978, the operation NagaMin or 'Dragon King' began to take action against the people whom the government considered to be illegal immigrants. As the Rohingyas were considered to be foreigners rather than an ethnic minority of Myanmar, they were a primary target of the military campaign. The combination of an increased restriction of Rohingya's citizenship rights and the Tatmadaw campaign against those they deemed to be illegal migrants led to the creation of the Rohingya Patriotic Front armed group, which became the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) in 1982, the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF) in 1986 and the Arakan Rohingya National Organization in 1998. Nonetheless, the Rohingya armed groups have not been as active as other ethnic minority armed groups, conducting only occasional small military attacks on the Burmese army from bases in Bangladesh.

The 2008 Constitution, which was supposed to mark the Burmese transition towards democracy, strengthened the denial of citizenship for Rohingyas. Similarly, in the months leading to the 2015 elections, the parliament amended the electoral laws to

remove the Rohingyas' voting rights and ban them completely from being represented in parliament.

The Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP) was founded in 2010 by Rakhine nationalists and is dominant in the Rakhine state parliament. The RNDP has contributed in several instances towards distributing statements and pamphlets denying the existence of the Rohingya ethnicity and calling to socially and economically isolate them. In the lead up to the 2015 elections, Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD did not take a strong stand on the Rohingyas' plight for civil rights. Therefore, local politics have been marked by a growth of anti-Rohingya sentiment.

Economic Factor: Development of Myanmar State at the Cost of Rakhine Muslims

Myanmar has a total of 135 officially recognized ethnic groups where the Rohingyas were only taken out of this group in 1989. But is it safe to say that religion and ethnicity of Rohingyas are the only reason that the Myanmar government has been targeting them?

A deeper look into the matter unveils an even more complicated reason behind the recent attacks on Rohingyas. A fight for resources and development of Myanmar seems to also be making matters worse for the Rohingyas. Rakhine state is one of the poorest of Myanmar's states despite being natural resources rich. Myanmar's zeal for economic development also came in the forefront when the new government came to power. It is stuck between two very competitive rising economic powers, China and India who are both in need of natural resources to expand their economies. Both countries have decided to invest in Rakhine province.

In response to the new trading networks and alliances, both China and India have become interested in building mega projects despite being rivals. Both countries proposed a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Rakhine State. The Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in the Rakhine State was proposed by both countries. The town of Kyaukphyu was chosen by China, while India picked Sittwe. Land grabbing has taken place to draw foreign countries or investors into the SEZ, leading to the eviction of small landholders who depend on subsistence livelihoods.

The forced relocation of Rohingya seems to be intended in order to improve economic development in Myanmar. It is considered as a mechanism to create trading networks with China and India.

Strategic Factor: Appeasement vs. Ineffectiveness of the Great Powers

In addition to economic reasons, the province of Rakhine holds a very important position in Myanmar and has a strategic perspective for both China and India. China has invested extensively in Myanmar over the last few decades, as a sign of a stable relationship between China and Myanmar, in order to control regional politics and facilitate the expansion of trading networks.

Moreover, Myanmar is located between South Asia and Southeast Asia from a strategic viewpoint, the coastal belts of Rakhine are access points to the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal for China - an opportunity to strengthen trade networks and military ties with Pakistan, United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.

It seems that China has implicit desires to strengthen defense ties with Myanmar by using the Bay of Bengal - and only the coastal belts of Rakhine State provide such

opportunities. India's policy, on the other hand, is not only to improve regional economic cooperation as an emerging superpower in Asia, but also to establish surveillance systems for the Mizoram, Tripura, Manipur, Arunachal, Assam, and Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Sikkim provinces of northeastern India. These provinces are poorly related to the Indian mainland, and several separatist movements or insurgencies have taken place, as well as sharing borders with Bhutan, China, Bangladesh, and Myanmar.

Thus, both countries consider Rakhine to be the "geopolitical headquarters" in order to materialize diverse political aspirations and implement future mercantile strategies. The eviction of Rohingyas from Rakhine province was a state-sponsored crime. To accomplish this mission, the civilian-led administration established fresh strategic relations with Delhi and Beijing; this new alliance aims to reinforce military support to the Myanmar government. Despite the horrendous situation in Rakhine State, China and India still stand beside Myanmar.

Rising Islamophobia: A Product of Buddhist Extremism

Global criticism has been evoked by the plight of the Rohingya, but less attention has been paid to the Islamophobia behind their exodus. Rising Islamophobia also gave the Buddhist fundamentalists a reason to further the agenda of how the Rohingyas were a threat to the predominantly Buddhist culture of the country. Buddhists believe that the number of Muslims has increased rapidly as a demographic factor. These factors made the monks feel insecure because they thought that their Buddhist society would be replaced by Muslims.

Observers claim that when it comes to religious extremism, there is a perception divide, with Muslims being frequently falsely cast as terrorists, while Buddhists are commonly represented and understood to be pacifists. Buddhist nationalism has become increasingly prominent in Myanmar since the country began opening up in 2011, with growing tensions sparking roiling communal violence in Rakhine state. Melissa Crouch, a senior lecturer in law and religion at the University of New South Wales said that Muslims were the scapegoats about Buddhist anxieties over the political transition in Myanmar. In order to raise tensions between Buddhists and Muslims, the military has also been accused of using social media, reportedly instigating a widespread anti-Muslim Facebook campaign prior to violence.

Dr Crouch said that the military junta, which has ruled the country for nearly five decades, had reinforced the idea that Burman Buddhists were "superior". She said that the military itself is known to be a primarily Burman Buddhist organization. This is one reason among many that different ethnic and religious groups distrust the military. And Myanmar is not threatened by the emergence of Buddhist extremism at the expense of Muslims. Thapa from Human Rights Watch argued that what makes this new wave of anti-Rohingya attacks worse than in previous years is how coordinated they are. According to her, it felt like a program designed to drive out everyone finally.

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