

Stateless Rohingyas: From Crosshair to Crossroads

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Abstract

The distressing ethno-demographic conflict in Myanmar is a sordid reality of recent human history. The two ethnic groups; Buddhists and Rohingyas (mainly Muslims) living in North Westerly state (Rakhine State) are at daggers drawn with each other since last many decades. History of this intra-state conflict dates back to British colonization of Burma in 1824. The widespread state sponsored persecution of Rohingya community after Myanmar's independence in 1948 has created waves of ethnic and political instability one after the other. Few contributory causes of the conflict include; systematic denial of citizenship rights, restrictions on freedom of movement, absence of healthcare facilities and deprivation of education for Rohingya community. The most serious of all is denial of citizen rights which has rendered the community stateless. The prolonged sufferings at the hands of majority population (Buddhists) have forced this stateless community to contemplate carving out a separate autonomous state by seceding from Myanmar. This resulted in creating gulf of distrust between both the parties triggering a major intrastate conflict in South Asia. The conflict lifecycle has witnessed many rounds of violence resulting in huge destruction of life and property. This article examines regional repercussions of recent cycle of violence and suggests few conflict resolution strategies.

Keywords: Demographic Conflict, Rohingyas, Myanmar, State Policy, Secession

Conflict History

The protracted ethno-demographic conflict in North Western state (Rakhine State) of Myanmar extends to pre-colonization era of erstwhile Burma by British in 1824. However, post-independence widespread persecution since 1948 multiplied sufferings of Rohingya community. Out of all other adversities, non-granting of citizenship rights remained an ultimate tribulation for the Rohingyas. When British started decolonization of India in 1947 onwards, like many other ethnic communities of Myanmar, Rohingyas also made an unsuccessful attempt to carve out a separate state by seceding from Myanmar sowing seeds of conflict. The initial attempt by Rohingya political activists perceived unification with a contemporary decolonized country of Pakistan but state level bilateral agreement between Burma and Pakistan prevented realization of this aspiration (Yegar, 2002). Subsequently from 1947 to 1953, moderate Rohingya groups adopted softer approach of dialogue with Burmese government whereas the extremist half chose armed struggle for freedom. In 1954, Burmese government started security operation code name '*Operation Monsoon*' for cleansing the rebel groups from Rakhine State and to establish the writ of the

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government in the area. The armed struggling groups were factionalized with prominent leaders either killed or caged and their followers imprisoned for ever (Tan, 2007). During negotiation with government in 1961, moderate Rohingya leadership agreed to the Prime Minister's proposed arrangement of shared regional governance known as Mayu Frontier Administration (MFA) (Yegar, 2002). This very delicate arrangement stipulated that MFA was to govern townships of northern Rakhine State and a separate administrative division was to be created and controlled by Rohingya Muslims within the overall ambit of Buddhist Rakhine administration. This political arrangement was put in place which started functioning well as per the aspirations of both parties.

However, the military coup on 2 March 1962 dashed all hopes of self-determination for Rohingya Muslims. This coup d'état marked the beginning of totalitarian rule and supremacy by Burmese army for next 26 years. The military ascendancy to power resulted in severing all engagements with different political groups. Soon after usurping power, army junta started *Burmanization* program. The program had serious flaws as it legalised social and economic mobility for only those Rohingyas who had integrated themselves fully into the Burmese culture which was mainly Buddhist. This resulted in loss of the success which few minority ethnic leaders, including Rohingya had achieved through dialogue process with the previous political government (Steinberg, 2001). Another innovative step taken by military regime was issuance of Foreign Registration Cards (FRC) to all aliens living in Burma including Rohingyas who were living in Burma for generations which resulted in the loss of citizenry rights.

In 1978, military regime started *Operation Nagamin* (Dragon King) which was mainly intended to identify foreigners illegally living inside the country. During this operation Rohingyas were declared foreigners illegally living in Burma. This declaration further limited Rohingyas citizenship rights. Furthermore through 1982 Citizenship Act Rohingyas were formally declared illegal foreigners (Zawacki, 2013) rendering them stateless within a state where they have lived for generations. The discriminatory Citizenship Act put severe social, economic and political restrictions on Rohingya community supplanting civil liberties and social rights (Zawacki, 2013). The citizenship denial resulted in exclusion of Rohingyas from the official list of 135 ethnic groups exposing them to free movement restrictions, access to health care and forced labor (HRW Report, 2017).

In 1991, tatmadaw (Burmese Armed Forces) launched another operation, code name *Operation Pyi Thaya* (Operation Clean and Beautify Nation) for culling violence in Rakhine state (Constantine, 2012) being supported by Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO). Sporadic demonstrations for restoration of stripped citizenship rights by Rohingya Muslims and few other ethnic groups were taking place since enactment of 1982 Citizenship Act. This operation culminated in 1992 with large scale detentions and flushing out of Rohingya militants from Rakhine state to

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neighbouring Bangladesh boarder region. The overall impact of both the operations through ubiquitous persecution was mass migration of Rohingya to overpopulated neighbouring Bangladesh which was economically constrained to absorb and sustain such a large number of refugees. Though Rohingya refugees moved to few other regional countries but Bangladesh bore the major brunt of hosting these uninvited guests.

The preliminary analysis of this bleeding ethno-demographic conflict reveals that there are two major drivers of this conflict; ethnicity and demography. Political scientists have developed models for assessing possibility of emergence of ethno-demographic conflicts. Three global trends; intensification of migratory flows, higher population growth rates of minorities comparative to majority ethnic groups and the legacy of colonialism intensify the threat of emergence of ethnic conflicts (Fuller, 2000). All these three elements are present in this conflict and are playing their contributory role. Demography encompasses the study of population with respect to size, density, fertility, mortality, growth, age distribution and spatial or temporal changes in them in response to birth, migration and ageing (Barclay, 2018). Demographic factor influences political identity, social stability, conflict initiation and change of human population over the years. Thorough knowledge and interpretation of the extrapolated trends of these fundamentals helps to understand economic growth potentials (Urdal, 2012). The Demographic Security Dilemma (DSD) theory posited by Christian Leuprecht is impeccably applicable to this conflict as minority Rohingyas are multiplying at much faster rate than the majority Buddhist group (Leuprecht, 2010).

Who are Rohingyas?

There is no simple answer to this central question as whole conflict revolves around the origin and identity of Rohingya people. Myanmar has a population of 54 million, officially recognizes 135 ethnic groups except Rohingyas despite their living in Rakhine state for last 200 years (Smith, 1995). The estimated population of Rohingyas is around 2.5 million and they constitute the world's largest stateless population (Barany, 2018). The two communities; Rohingya and Buddhists peacefully co-existed in North Western Myanmar till beginning of WWII in 1939. During WW II, largely Muslim minority Rohingyas community sided with British being colonial masters whereas the majority Buddhist group joined hands with Japanese invading forces. Rohingya and Buddhist have contrasting perspectives on the issue of Rohingyas being an indigenous ethnic group of Myanmar. Rohingyas claim they have been living in Rakhine state for centuries even before the arrival of Islam in the region by the end of 8th century. Secondly, Rohingya language and culture remained dominant in Western Myanmar from 15th to 18th century during Maruk dynasty which was Muslim. Thirdly, Rakhine state has been an independent Muslim majority state till 1785 when it was annexed by Burma (Al-Mahmood, 2016). Fourthly, Rohingyas lived in Rakhine state till its colonization by British in 1826 and lastly Rohingyas fought alongside the

British against Japanese in guerrilla war during WWII. Rohingyas maintain that British promised them of an independent state after the war but failed to deliver (Nemoto, 1991). However, Buddhist narrative on the issue is quite opposite. They contend that Maruk dynasty was Buddhist not Muslim in its overall character. Secondly, Rohingyas have never been the natives of Rakhine state as they are Bengali migrants who came to Rakhine in 1826 after British colonization. Thirdly, the small community of Muslims living in Rakhine state before British conquest are not ancestors of the existing Rohingyas population and lastly Rohingyas exploited British colonization and WWII both for consolidating their strength in the state. It is virtually impossible to establish veracity of the opposing claims as both sides have convincing arguments based on historic literature and practices.

Conflict's Cycles of Violence

Over the past few decades, many social scientists predicted the possibility of Rohingya genocide in Myanmar, citing perilous combination of ethnic & religious tensions, deprivation of basic rights, restricted access to food and medicine, hate speeches and large numbers fleeing the country (Southwick, 2015). Their statelessness and dearth of social acceptance by majority Buddhists is major reason of their woeful plight. Perception of majority that Rohingyas are alien community to this land of golden pagodas has been used as a rationale for their marginalization and social rights' denial.

Rohingyas have suffered systematic campaigns of violence at the hands of Burmese security forces and radical Buddhists alike. Most notable spells of violence at the hands of security forces occurred between 1977-1978, 1991-1992 and 2017. Ethnicity based inter-community violence between radical Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims flared up in 2012 and again in 2013 resulting in over 200 deaths (BBC News, 2014) and displacement of about 125000 people (HR Watch Report, 2018.)

1st Violence Cycle

First cycle of violence in Rakhine state occurred in 1977 as an aftermath of *Operation Nagamin*. The stated objective of the operation was to register citizens and screen out foreigners prior to the forthcoming national census (Elahi, 1987). By May 1978, over 200000 Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh due the widespread brutality, rape and murder by Burmese security forces (Smith, 1991). The influx of so many refugees overwhelmed Bangladesh government which sought UN help to handle the crisis. UN helped in establishing 13 camps along the border. The Bangladesh government initiated talks with Myanmar government for repatriation of the refugees citing reasons of over stretching of its resources and additional strain on its economy. UN also sided with Bangladeshi standpoint and insisted repatriation of Rohingya refugees in return of uninterrupted flow of much wanted international economic aid. The Burmese government agreed with the proposal. The agony and anguish faced by refugees during the exodus turmoil could convince few thousand only to return

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voluntarily but the process gradually picked up momentum as conditions in the Bangladeshi camps further deteriorated.

2nd Violence Cycle

Another wave of unrest gripped Rakhine state in 1991-92 when Burmese authorities imposed forced labor practices, social discrimination and religious persecution of Rohingyas. This again triggered *en-mass* exodus of over 250000 Rohingyas across the border into Bangladesh (HR Watch Report, 2017). Through the help of relief agencies (UNHCR and few other NGOs), the refugees were sheltered in 19 camps in South Eastern border region (Cox's Bazar) of Bangladesh. Bangladeshi government being a non-signatory of 1951 UN convention on status of refugees decided not to countenance any social integration of these people in the Bangladeshi society thus these refugees were to be repatriated to Myanmar. The process of repatriation started in September 1992 but it became soon clear that Bangladeshi government backed agencies and NGOs were coercing refugees for a forced deportation. As a consequent, UN withdrew its support in December 1992 and process remained stalled till formal signing of MoU for safe and volunteer return of refugees in May 1993. UN survey showed willingness of about 30% refugees to return back to Myanmar however Bangladeshi government forced return all refugees by the end of 1994 even before the expiry of MoU (Lambrecht, 1995). By and large Bangladeshi government managed to push almost 230000 refugees back to Arakan state by 1997 (HRW Report, 2017).

3rd Violence Cycle (Latest)

Third cycle of violence was sparked by the terrorist act of a Rohingya militant group known as Arkan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on 25 August 2017. This group undertook bombing of 30 police stations and an army base in the Rakhine state. Military response to these bombings was vicious, killings 77 ARSA fighters in reaction to the death of 12 police officers killed by bombings. Security forces burned down scores of Rohingya villages, murdered thousands of civilians, and launched a campaign of rape against Rohingya women and girls (Barnay, 2018). Thousands of Rohingyas men, women and children were forced to flee gain to neighbouring Bangladesh. UN estimates of the *en-mass* Rohingya migration to Bangladesh is about 400,000 people (UN OHCA Report, 2017). Rohingya majority settlements were burned and looted. Over 284 villages suffered arson and demolition. This obliteration was not only undertaken by military forces but few vigilante groups (mainly Buddhists) also joined hands with security forces for undertaking the grisly massacre. As per Human Rights Watch report, interviewed victims divulged that Myanmar security forces descended on villages in dark night after night and carried out attacks on villages inflicting bullet injuries and burning down of their houses. They used small arms, motors and even gunship helicopters. The gruesome killing of innocent men, women, children and elderly people who had nothing to do with ARSA was stark reminder of the level of animosity between the two competing ethnic groups. Security forces and military used rape and other acts of sexual violence as a

subjugation tool against women and young girls. Many disturbing sex related reports have come to light indicating security force's involvement in this heinous crime (Tribune Express, 2017). In November 2017, Myanmar government signed a tentative repatriation agreement for Rohingyas through Chinese brokered deal with Bangladeshi government. As per agreement Myanmar government was obliged to reconstruct the torched villages and other destroyed infrastructure even before the repatriation starts. This plan was ambitious. A serious flaw which hindered implementation was verification requirement for each Rohingya individual whether he was living in Myanmar or not before the recent migration. But these stateless people possessed no legal documents to prove residency anywhere in Myanmar and more importantly only few intended going back to a country which has persecuted them for generations. Physical destruction of Rohingya villages during latest round of violence is as shown in the diagram.



Source: HRW report 2017

State Role in the Conflict

Role of Myanmar government in the conflict has been contributory rather than resolution. The heavy handed approach adopted by the military junta in handling the Rohingya issue has entrenched deep seeded acrimony and dislike between Rohingya and Buddhist communities. Though an uneasy calm prevailed in Burma since its independence but subsequent security operations added fuel to the simmering fire of distrust and suspicion. A purely political issue which could have been resolved through conciliatory approach was left to the iron fisted generals who preferred power over prudence. A closer look of the state policies amply reveals that Rohingya plight

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will continue to worsen in future. They face increasingly desperate situation not only in Myanmar but in other hosting countries like Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Thailand and Malaysia as well.

Identity issue for Rohingya people is the major predicament out of many others. Myanmar government has never recognised them as an independent Burmese ethnic group and referred them as “illegal Bengali migrants” being an economic migrants (labourers) from India during British colonial period (Smith, 1995). Tensions between Rohingyas and local Buddhist communities are rooted in Rohingya support for British in WW II against Burma’s independence movement. The acrimonious relation witnessed another low when Rohingyas demanded independence from Burmese government in early 1950s period (Smith, 1995). Over the years, state has devised such policies which have precluded social integration of Rohingya with local population. Their confinement to special camps with almost zero medical and education facilities had long lasting social impact on this ethnic group. Wee hour raids by security forces on concocted premises resulting into abduction for forced labour, sexual molestation, pillage and plunder of valuables are few examples of difficulties being faced on daily basis by Rohingyas. Unbridled freedom with boundless prosecution powers enforced by state as policy instruments are one of the major causes of the conflict. Law Enforcement agencies have been authorized to haul up any person other than Buddhist for unlimited time and crime. The picked up person may never be seen again as forced farm labour is very common phenomenon. Situation is equally grave for crimes against women where rape is used as subjugating tool. This can be supported with the argument that not a single security person has been ever convicted for any of these heinous crimes since 1977. During latest crisis in 2017, it was made clear by the government that current military action against Rohingya is unfinished business of WWII for being in opposite camp. Rohingyas’ demand for recognition as an ethnic group remains unacceptable as they have never been an ethnic group of Myanmar (Hookway, 2017). Role of Ms Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel laureate for Human Rights security and being a champion of democracy remained very dubious throughout the crisis. During a media interaction Ms Suu Kyi commented that Buddhist are worried about their shrinking population in Rakhine state but she emphasised on improvement of relations between both communities. The government has constituted committee to investigate causes of violence in Rakhine state but found no evidence of genocide against Rohingyas (BBC News, 2017). This approach of denial amply confirm that persecution of Rohingya has always been state sponsored and government role in the conflict was rather escalatory than conciliatory.

International Response to the Crisis

When the latest crisis erupted in August 2017, international community at large and Muslim countries in particular responded by condemning Burmese government actions. United Kingdom was the first European country to denounce military persecution and thereafter many other European countries joined the

bandwagon. British media raised the red flag and brought to light the tale of horror and magnitude of atrocities committed by government backed military forces of Myanmar. A British MP, Roberta B Woods described her visit to one of the camps as a harrowing experience (Woods, 2017) even after one year of the forced migration. UK's media especially BBC played a pivotal role in highlighting poor living conditions in hurriedly established initial camps. It produced few eye-opening documentaries showing the horrible conditions for Rohingyas in many concentration camps along the Bangladesh border. Though UNHCR (UN High Commissioner for Refugees) was the first to respond in terms of cash and kind, however, their limited capacity to handle such a large-scale migration remained a major hurdle. The UNHCR, few international NGOs and volunteers from many parts of the world did a commendable job, especially in providing food and medical help to sick and deprived human beings.

US lifted trade and monetary sanctions from Myanmar in December 2016 with credence that Myanmar had made good strides in improving human rights situation in the country. However, a year later, sanctions were re-imposed because of the emergence of the Rohingya crisis, which was a major political and economic blow for the Myanmar government. During the 2018 ASEAN annual summit, US Vice President Mr. Pence ramped up political pressure on Ms. Suu Kyi, stating that "violence and persecution" toward the Rohingyas were intolerable. Other ASEAN members have mostly followed the policy of silence on the plight of the Rohingyas.

China and India both gave a cold shoulder to the crisis because of their own vested interests. China even blocked UN Human Rights Council resolutions tabled for addressing the poor treatment of Rohingyas being meted out by the Myanmar government. She used veto power in exchange of having stronger diplomatic ties for furthering her economic interests in the maritime sector of Myanmar. Concurrently, India announced the deportation of around 50,000 Rohingyas who had fled to India for asylum. Similarly, Bangladesh, which has been hosting about 0.4 million Rohingyas since long, has been pushing them back in clear violation of international law (Ismail & Elliot, 2017).

However, few European and Scandinavian countries increased their presence in the conflict area for human relief efforts in terms of sending doctors, medics, and medicine for the ailing refugees and containment of disease in the camps.

Muslim Community Response

On the outbreak of the crisis, protesters in Pakistan, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Bangladesh sporadically gathered after Friday congregations to condemn the killing of Rohingyas. In September 2017, the foreign minister of Bangladesh described Rakhine violence as typical genocide. Indonesia and Malaysia launched formal protests and called for halting operations against Rohingyas but to no avail. However, the overall response of the Muslim world to the crisis was limited to lip service only. Few Muslim countries passed resolutions in their parliaments for putting diplomatic pressure with almost trivial results. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) issued condemnation

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with no practical steps to rescue Rohingyas. Turkey was the first Muslim country which took the issue to United Nations few days after the eruption of crisis. Visit of Turkish First lady on 8 September 2017 of Rohingya refugee camp in Ukhaia Upazila in Bangladesh was first high level visit by any Muslim dignitary to show solidarity with these displaced people. Role of rich Gulf state and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia remained restricted to financial help for resettlement of migrants. A pledging conference for Rohingya refugee crisis co-hosted by European Union and government of Kuwait, co-organized by UNHCR (UN High Commissioner for Refugees), IOM (International Organization for Migration) and OCHA (UN office for Co-ordination of Human Affairs) was held at Geneva on 23 Oct 2017 (Pledging Conference, 2017). Thirty six countries and organizations pledged US\$ 360 million in cash. Several donors announced in-kind assistance worth more than \$50M. Out of 50 Muslim countries, only 6 countries pledged about US \$67.289 million in the conference and remaining \$300 million were committed by rest of the world. UK was the highest contributor pledging about US\$ 67.289 million alone. Pledging details by the Muslim world are as shown in the Table below.

COUNTRY	PLEDGED (US \$ in Millions)
Saudi Arabia	20
Kuwait	15
UAE	7
Qatar	15
Indonesia	2.9
Malaysia	0.189
King Abdullah Foundation (KSA)	7.2
Total	67.289

Source: <https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/Pledge>

The above table shows the sorry state of contribution by Muslim states. Larger Muslim states took no tangible step to pressurize Myanmar government for diffusing the crisis. Local welfare organizations stepped forward and collected country wide donations for Rohingya Muslims but that was peanut as compared to the requirement.

Latest Situation

In October 2018, due to mounting international pressure, Myanmar finally agreed to repatriate the few thousand Rohingyas with few string attached especially on the selection criteria for those who could be taken back. Moreover, those selected for repatriation were in fact not volunteers to go back. As Myanmar did not have any guarantee for full citizen rights and freedom of movement, the process stalled from

the beginning. The selected individuals sped away from the camps and repatriation remained a dream for both Myanmar and Bangladesh.

What can be done – Way Forward

Horrifying state sponsored discrimination and persecution including human rights violations have been committed by Myanmar government targeting Rohingyas since August 2017. An intersecting collection of discriminatory laws, regulations, policies form central part of oppression. The crimes against humanity committed by Myanmar security forces on the Rohingya civilian population in August 2017; murder, torture, rape, forcible displacement or transfer of population, persecution, enforced disappearance and other inhuman acts were additional manifestations of the crime against humanity of apartheid (Amnesty International Report, 2017). Few recommendations are made to avoid any such occurrence in future.

Government of Myanmar needs to chalk out comprehensive plan for combating discrimination and segregation with coordination of Buddhist majority of Rakhine state. It must ensure respect for Human rights and review all existing laws, regulations, policies and practices which are discriminatory on the bases of race, ethnicity and religious ground. International organizations like UN and OIC need to be more proactive and must act quickly rather than delaying till the damage is done. It must consider granting nationality with full citizen rights to all Rohingya Muslims living within the political boundary of Myanmar. It needs to immediately grant right of freedom of movement without any discrimination. Government needs to provide medical treatment facilities in these far flung camps to save lives on humanitarian grounds and establish education facilities like school and colleges. All those who committed violence including security forces need to be brought to justice. These few broad suggestions if implemented by Myanmar government can bring sea change in the lives of the battered community.

Conclusion

Rohingya face umpteen challenges in their daily life. Their mass migration to other regional countries like Bangladesh, Thailand, India or even Pakistan has not decreased their woes as these states also treat them like aliens and burden on their economies. The issue will only be resolved once they are granted permanent citizenship rights by Myanmar government. International community needs to put extra political and diplomatic pressure on Myanmar government for implementations of social reforms which must encompass uniform rights and opportunities for all living within the state bounds. Muslim world needs to exhibit unity in their stance against any such happening anywhere in the world. They have to show more generosity in pledging monetary support especially oil rich Saudi Arabia and Gulf states. Muslims living in free countries must value freedom and safeguard it with ultimate conviction and confidence.

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