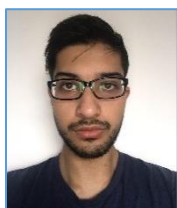


The Rohingya Crisis

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The origins of the Rohingya Crisis

The Rohingya people are the world's largest stateless group, numbering between one and two million people.¹ They are overwhelmingly concentrated in the Arakan region of Myanmar, with significant refugee settlements in Bangladesh and other parts of South and Southeast Asia. Their status in Myanmar has been one of deep controversy and even the term 'Rohingya' itself, meaning 'people of Arakan' in the Rohingya language, is disputed by the Myanmar government who prefer the designation 'Muslim' or 'Bengali'.²



Rohingya refugees wait to receive aid at Cox's Bazar on September 24, 2017. Source: The Atlantic Monthly, September 25, 2017

The origins of significant Bengali settlement in Arakan date back to the Kingdom of Mrauk U. The 15th century B'urmes kingdom had close ties to the Bengal Sultanate and a number of soldiers and other settlers developed settlements throughout Arakan during this period.¹ The Rohingya share this claimed history with the Kamein people, another Indo-Aryan group in Rakhine state. However, the Kamein people are far fewer in number than the Rohingya and are fully recognised as an indigenous Myanmar people with full citizenship rights. Despite the

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Ambassador Hemant Krishan Singh
Director General

majority of Rohingya claiming they are descended from 15th century settlers, most scholars agree that unlike the Kamein people, most of the Rohingya have descended from settlers who arrived in the region during British colonial rule.

The British colonial period in Burma resulted in a rapid change in the country's demographics. In order to more effectively exploit the country's resources, the British initiated a policy of large-scale settlement of the sparsely populated country by South Asians. Settlers from British India quickly came to dominate coastal areas of Burma, earning the ire of the Burmese people who resented both their fall in living standards and the demographic changes to their country.

This resentment quickly developed and resulted in nativist policies being adopted following the Second World War, culminating in a forced expulsion of Indians in 1962 by General Ne Win. However, it was later, in 1982, that the Myanmar Citizenship Law, rendering most Rohingya stateless, was introduced. Whilst the group had been widely discriminated against before this point, it was after they were rendered stateless that ethnic conflict rapidly escalated and Buddhist nationalist groups and the military increasingly targeted the Rohingya.

The current recurrence of the crisis, which has been in a state of ebb and flow for decades, began in October 2016. On the 9 October 2016, The Rohingya Militant group, The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), claimed responsibility for the attacks, which left 9 Myanmar border police dead.⁴

What are the roles of the different actors?

The Rohingya Militants

The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), a Rohingya nationalist organisation, is by far the largest Rohingya militant group and the main target of the Myanmar government's offensive. According to the International Crisis Group, ARSA was formed following the 2012 Rakhine State riots that led to 88, mostly Rohingya, deaths and the expulsion of the Rohingya from Rakhine state's capital, Sittwe.⁵ A significant contributing factor to the organisation's growth has been attributed to the cutting off of migrant routes to countries such as Malaysia and Thailand, which acted as a pressure valve for unemployed young Rohingya men in Rakhine state.⁶ Moreover, travel restrictions placed on the Rohingya by the Myanmar army after the 2012 riots have further contributed to the concentration of unemployed Rohingya youth in northern Rakhine state by not allowing them to move to cities such as Mandalay and Yangon to work. Due to the lack of reliable reports coming from Rakhine

state, the group's size is unknown. However, according to most international reports, the militant group is small and membership is not currently widespread amongst Rohingya.⁷ Nevertheless, the group appears to be far better organised than Rohingya militant groups in the past.⁸



Rohingya Militants. Source: AP

Defining the nature of the group is difficult due to the complexity of the ethno religious elements of the conflict. The ARSA leader Attaullah Abu Ummar Jununi was born in Karachi and spent a number of years in Saudi Arabia, the source of most of ARSA's funds. This would suggest that it is an Islamist organisation.⁹ In addition, international fatwas have been sought to give legitimacy to the group's campaign against the Myanmar state.¹⁰ However, the group itself has repeatedly refuted these claims and states its only aims are the recognition of Rohingya rights and the granting of citizenship to the Rohingya people. Moreover, the group has no history of transnational attacks and overwhelmingly targets Myanmar security infrastructure. The poor standard of weaponry used in these attacks, often described as sticks and machetes, would also suggest the organisation is largely localised and does not have access to more sophisticated weaponry that would suggest large scale foreign funding and support.¹¹ In this way, the group has far more in common with other ethnic militant groups than with the global jihadist movement.

However, as the current crisis becomes more prolonged and brutal, it is likely that the group would seek funds from countries such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. If ties to Saudi and Pakistani donors and state organisations such as the ISI are strengthened, it is expected that a condition of support would be for ARSA to place itself more firmly within the global jihadist movement. If this were to occur, the group would evolve from a threat to Myanmar's stability and instead become a threat to regional stability, with transnational attacks more likely.

The Myanmar Military

Since the 1962 coup d'état by the military, the status and conditions of the Rohingya in Myanmar have rapidly deteriorated. Since the 1970s the Myanmar military has been responsible for the systematic removal of rights and freedoms from the Rohingya people, alongside restricting travel and ghettoising urban Rohingya.¹²



Smoke from fires in Myanmar's Rakhine state is seen across the Naf River in a photo taken from Teknaf, Bangladesh, Aug. 31, 2017.

Source: BenarNews

The Myanmar military's response to the most recent attacks by ARSA has been widespread and as a result of military 'clearance operations' 400,000 Rohingya, approximately a third of the population, have fled to Bangladesh since the beginning of the current crisis in 2016.¹³ Whilst there have been several verified attacks by ARSA against the military, most independent observers agree the Myanmar military's response has been disproportionate. This includes a repeated targeting of civilians, a pattern that aligns with past military operations, which used militant attacks as a pretext to reduce the Rohingya population of Rakhine State. Reports have been verified of widespread burning of villages alongside as other terror tactics to compel Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh.¹⁴ This campaign has been overwhelmingly concentrated in the North of Rakhine state, where the Rohingya are in the majority. Whilst the military denies accusations of ethnic cleansing, the systematic burning of villages and past refusal to allow the return of Rohingya refugees suggests otherwise. In any case, even if ethnic cleansing is not the aim of the military, the collective punishment tactics being used against the Rohingya population is a gross violation of international law.

The Myanmar military have carried out campaigns against ethnic groups in other parts of Myanmar, such as the Shan people, which saw similar levels of brutality.¹⁵ However, the critical difference between these other ethnic minority groups and the Rohingya is that, unlike the Rohingya, they are recognized as Myanmar citizens and the ethnic cleansing

dimension of the aforementioned conflicts was not nearly as prominent.

Is it ethnic cleansing or a religious issue?

The Rohingya are an overwhelmingly Muslim, Indo-Aryan people living in overwhelmingly Buddhist Myanmar. Small numbers of Buddhist and Hindu Rohingya are also reported to exist. However, given the complexity of ethnic designations in Rakhine state, it is unknown whether these groups classify themselves as Rohingya or are simply other groups of Bengali descent in Rakhine state, such as the Buddhist Barua people.¹⁶ The presence of both ethnic and religious differences between the Rohingya and the rest of Myanmar creates difficulties in defining whether the conflict is based primarily along ethnic or religious lines.

The origins of discrimination against the Rohingya date back to the colonial period as part of wider discrimination against South Asian arrivals more generally. The core of the conflict has centered around the refusal of successive Myanmar governments to designate the Rohingya as one of the country's 135 official ethnic groups recognised as indigenous to Myanmar. This refusal to recognise the Rohingya as Myanmar citizens is used to support the government narrative that the group are recent illegal Bangladeshi immigrants. From the perspective of the Rakhine people and the wider Myanmar population, their discrimination against the Rohingya stems mainly from demographic fears alongside racial prejudice. Due to a higher birth rate than Myanmar Buddhists, the Rohingya population as a proportion of Rakhine state has increased rapidly in recent decades. By some measures, if the refugee population outside Myanmar were included, the Rohingya would make up the majority in the entire Rakhine state, having long been the majority in the north of the state.¹⁷ In order to prevent this the Myanmar government implemented a largely unheeded limit of 2 children per Rohingya family, alongside efforts to force those residing in border regions to flee the country. These policies would suggest the conflict has for much of its history been an ethnic one.

However, the rise in the Buddhist nationalism from 2012 onwards has quickly transformed what was initially a localised ethnic conflict, into a nationwide religious conflict.¹⁸ The synonymy of the Rohingya and Islam in Myanmar has led to long entrenched anti-Rohingya sentiment in the country evolving more recently into a wider anti-Muslim sentiment. This has led to increasing

discrimination and even violence against historically well-integrated Muslim groups in other parts of the country such as the Panthays, a group of Chinese descent, who have been increasingly targeted in cities such as Mandalay, far from Rakhine state.¹⁹ The continuing popularity of and support for Buddhist nationalist groups in Myanmar and their leaders, such as Ashwin Wirathu, suggests that the religious dimension of this conflict will only grow in the future.²⁰

The Rohingya themselves, unlike many marginalised Muslim communities around the world, have never had a notable history of radicalisation or Islamic extremism.²¹ With the exception of the short lived Rohingya Mujahedeen movement, which sought to merge Northern Rakhine state with East Pakistan, most Rohingya militant groups have restricted their aspirations to citizenship and equality within Myanmar.²² However, if the conflict was to become more protracted and worsen going forward, these relatively modest aspirations could well change in the near future.

The adoption of the cause by the international Islamic community, such as statements of condemnation by the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation, has also played a role in escalating the conflict from an ethnic issue into a wider religious issue, which could lead to reprisals against Muslims and Buddhists in states across Asia.²³ The recent protests in Dhaka demonstrate how quickly the religious element of this crisis has been escalating, with the Islamist Hefazat group calling for jihad against Myanmar.²⁴ The presence of the largely moderate Muslim Rohingya refugees in countries with a large Islamist presence such as Bangladesh leaves previously un-radicalised Rohingya youth vulnerable to jihadist ideology. It is likely should significant refugee populations become a longer-term presence in Bangladesh that Islamist groups will target them and Rohingya refugees could become a significant threat to stability in the region if the conflict is not resolved in the near future.

What has been the evolution of India, Bangladesh and Myanmar government policy on the Rohingya issue?

India

Indian policy towards the Rohingya has shifted over the years to reflect the complex security and geo-political concerns that the Rohingya issue is riven with. There are estimated to be approximately 40,000 Rohingya refugees in India currently; of these only 16,500 are UNHCR refugees, with the remainder in the country illegally.²⁵ Recently, apprehensions have been highlighted regarding the security concerns of housing the Rohingya refugee population in India.



Union home minister Rajnath Singh indicated that some action will be taken with regard to deportation of Rohingyas, who are considered to be illegal migrants and a security threat to Jammu and Kashmir. Source: Deccan Chronicle, September 13, 2017

The Government of India recently responded to a petition in the Supreme Court filed by two Rohingya refugees opposing their deportation from India with evidence that the Rohingya are a security threat and have ties to Pakistan based terrorist groups.²⁶ The details of the evidence of these links have not yet been made public, however, even if the case that ties Rohingyas to Islamist terrorist groups does not currently exist, it is possible that vulnerable Rohingya in India and Bangladesh will rapidly become prime targets for radicalisation by terrorist organisations. Whilst the actual deportation of refugees is unlikely to occur in the near future due to the need for the cooperation of the Myanmar government, it is likely that going forward a far greater emphasis will be placed on tracking those refugees, who are not registered with the Indian government, with the ultimate aim of returning them to Myanmar.

However, arguably an even greater threat to India's security than the refugees themselves would be a souring of ties with Myanmar. Myanmar is located in a pivotal position in South East Asia bordering both China's southern provinces and India's politically fragile North East. Moreover, Myanmar's littoral along the Bay of Bengal is of great strategic importance to China as a possible gateway to international markets for the country's poor and isolated Yunnan province. China has repeatedly targeted South East Asian states with the aim of creating satellite states subordinate to China's will. This process has been seen in poverty-stricken Laos, where vast Chinese investment and political pressure has left the country heavily indebted to Beijing.²⁷ Influence over Myanmar would be a strategic jewel for the Chinese government; with Sino-Myanmar pipelines

already planned enabling China to both exploit Rakhine state's hydrocarbon resources as well as help in preventing the Malacca straits from becoming a chokepoint for China's oil supply.²⁸ From India's perspective, Chinese influence in Myanmar would present significant concerns for peace and stability along the porous India-Myanmar border.

For these reasons, it is vital for India's security needs to maintain strong and amicable relations with Myanmar to prevent India from being encircled by China and Chinese allies, as is already the case on its Northern and Western frontiers. As such, Indian condemnation of Myanmar actions regarding the Rohingya could potentially draw Myanmar closer to China.

Myanmar

Myanmar's policy towards the Rohingya has been remarkably consistent over the past 50 years, despite changes in government. It has largely been one of maintaining that the Rohingya are illegal Bangladeshi immigrants and as such denying them citizenship. However, after the 2015 General Election, which Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party (NLD) won in a landslide, a change in the status and conditions of the Rohingya was widely expected, both internationally and within the community itself. In fact, a change in policy failed to materialise and under the tenure of the current government the present Rohingya crisis, which is the most significant in Myanmar's recent history, has taken place.



Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi has denied security forces carried out ethnic cleansing of the country's Rohingya Muslims, despite the UN and human rights groups saying a crackdown by the army may amount to crimes against humanity. Source: Al Jazeera

The overwhelming majority of international censure over the recent accusations of genocide has been directed at Suu Kyi, as opposed to the military. The de facto Myanmar leader's history as a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and international symbol of democracy has garnered her particular criticism that she should be doing more to avert the current ethnic cleansing being

carried out by the Military.²⁹ This criticism has come from both national governments as well as other Nobel Prize winners and has resulted in a gradual rescission of her current honors and awards.³⁰

However, much of the characterisation of her silence on the Rohingya issue, let alone her lack of action, ignores her recent transition from activist to politician. Myanmar's nascent democracy is still incredibly fragile and the civilian government has no control over the actions of the still politically dominant military. Events such as the assassination of prominent lawyer, U Ko Ni, who espoused constitutional change, was widely attributed to the military and demonstrates how quickly condemnatory comments by Suu Kyi could lead to a return to military rule.³¹

Moreover, whilst the civilian government has issued no public condemnation of the military's actions in Rakhine state and has repeatedly denied all accusations of human rights abuses through the domestic media, many of the government's actions are in fact in line with international calls. The recent Rakhine Commission initiated by the Myanmar government and headed by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has come out with a balanced and meaningful report that suggests the Myanmar government implement many of the policies the international community has been calling for.³² This is encouraging given that Suu Kyi has in the past suggested that she would accept the commission's conclusions.³³

Further signs of a shift in Myanmar policy were displayed in Suu Kyi's recent public address, which was designed for the international audience. Whilst the speech did not condemn any particular group, it did open a path for the Rohingya to return and offered guarantees for their rights and safety upon their return.³⁴ The condemnation surrounding Suu Kyi's refusal to use the term 'Rohingya' was responded to in an interview with the ANI, where she expressed that she chose the neutral term 'Muslims' as opposed to the more divisive terms 'Rohingya' or 'Bengali' which could further inflame tensions.³⁵ Given the current public climate of anti-Rohingya sentiment, the government's course of action to publicly support the Military's actions whilst taking steps to resolve the issue through diplomatic means such as the Rakhine commission may well be the most effective way to resolve the crisis without a domestic popular or military backlash.

Nevertheless, it is still important to realise that despite positive words from Suu Kyi and the recommendations of the Rakhine Commission, a significant change in Myanmar policy towards the Rohingya is unlikely in the near future. The Military's actions are widely popular among the Myanmar people due to widespread hostility towards the Rohingya across the country. Suu Kyi herself has never openly displayed sympathy with the plight of the Rohingya, even in the past as an activist when she was able to speak more freely.³⁶ As such, it is highly unlikely that the Myanmar government would support any policies towards the Rohingya that could endanger their support base. Instead, it is probable the Myanmar government will take back a token number of Rohingya from Bangladesh, as has been done in the past, with few changes to their rights or status and with the bulk of the refugees remaining in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh's policy towards the Rohingyas is balanced between domestic political concerns, alongside economic and social concerns regarding the rapidly growing Rohingya refugee population in the Cox's Bazar district, now approaching one million people.³⁷



Bangladesh has called on Myanmar to end violence against Rohingyas as Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visits refugee camps in the southeastern part of the country. Source: bdnews24.com

Over 400,000 Rohingya refugees have fled into Bangladesh since just 2016, adding to the already substantial refugee population in the country.³⁸ This has placed considerable economic pressure on the poverty-stricken country and is increasingly creating conflict with the existing Bangladeshi population in the area. From this perspective, the Bangladeshi government's policy has been to attempt to arrive at an agreement with the Myanmar government for the return of the refugees as soon as possible. In the meanwhile, plans for the containment of the refugee population are being made to ensure they do not become a permanent fixture in the country. Initial plans for the removal of the Rohingya population to the

Thengar Char, an isolated, flood-prone island, have been abandoned due to international pressure and instead new refugee camps are being constructed along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border to cope with the rising numbers of Rohingya, with funds from the UN and other international organisations and countries.³⁹

Furthermore, there are fears that the sudden arrival of a large number of poor, traumatised refugees could lead to widespread radicalisation of the refugee population.⁴⁰ This would worsen the already perilous security situation in Bangladesh involving Islamist terrorist groups and is part of the reason why the Bangladeshi government seeks to keep the refugees in the border regions.

However, the Bangladeshi government also faces mounting domestic pressure to do more to help the refugees and condemn the Myanmar government. There have been widespread protests in Dhaka, many led by Islamist parties such as Hefazat, calling for retaliation against Myanmar, with fears growing that there could be retaliatory attacks against Bangladesh's Buddhist minority.^{41 42} Further to this, the opposition leader Khaleda Zia and the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation both condemned Myanmar's government more openly than the sitting government.⁴³ The political risks emerging from the Bangladeshi government's unwillingness to sour relations with Myanmar over the Rohingya issue could lead to a change in this policy should the crisis continue.

Whilst Suu Kyi's recent speech suggests that Myanmar is willing to take some refugees back, the probability is that most refugees will be unwilling to return unless they receive security guarantees from the Myanmar military which are unlikely to be forthcoming. This means that the current situation is likely to remain for the foreseeable future and the potential for a dramatic deterioration in Bangladesh-Myanmar relations is likely to grow.

Conclusions

The Rohingya crisis is the largest political and security risk facing the India-Bangladesh-Myanmar border region, alongside being one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world at the moment. Together with the security and humanitarian concerns, geo-political concerns are heavily intertwined with the refugee issue. These include the potential for the refugees to be used by hostile state forces such as the ISI, which the Indian

government has reported is already in its nascent stages. Further to this, all interaction with the Myanmar government must be balanced with the potential consequence of a deterioration in relations with India that might push both the civilian government and the military of Myanmar closer to Beijing, with the consequent strategic concerns that would emerge from the development.

If a rapid and meaningful rapprochement is made between the Rohingya militants and the Myanmar military and the rehabilitation of Rohingya refugees is begun, it is possible for some of the larger geopolitical effects such as the radicalisation of Rohingya refugees to be averted. However, despite tentative support for this in Suu Kyi's recent address to the nation, the Military's approval is unlikely to be forthcoming. Instead, a more realistic solution to the security threat must be for all three of the most effected nations to cooperate on intelligence sharing and contain the threat that could develop from the radicalisation of the Rohingya people by external Islamist forces.

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