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The Rohingya Conflict: Beyond Ethnic And Religious Narratives

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Abstract

Myanmar's 2017 crackdown on the Rohingyas triggered a mass exodus across South Asia, intensifying a seven-decade trajectory of marginalisation. Existing scholarship largely attributes this crisis to entrenched ethnic nationalism and Buddhist-Muslim tensions. This paper challenges that narrow framing and argues that while identity-based hostility remains a factor, it does not sufficiently explain the scale, timing, and systematic nature of the recent expulsions. The article contends that the depopulation of northern Rakhine coincides with Myanmar's post-2011 economic opening, expanding land acquisition, and the military's growing commercial interests. By examining emerging development corridors, resource extraction, and geopolitical competition particularly involving India and China, the paper foregrounds the political economy embedded in the violence. It concludes that understanding the Rohingya crisis requires moving beyond ethnic and religious narratives to recognise the structural economic and geo-strategic drivers shaping state action.

Keywords: Rohingya, marginalization, economic, geopolitical, India, China

Introduction

Rohingya, a stateless community in South Asia, is also one of the most persecuted communities of the world. The persistent nature of discrimination at the hands of the Myanmar's government since 1980s led their way towards non-citizenship and eventually routed them out of their homeland. Violence against them increased over the years and in August, 2017, the country witnessed the worst form of humanitarian crisis that led to the displacement of approximately 7,00,000 Rohingyas to the neighbouring countries of Bangladesh and India (Daily Star 2018). The crisis witnessed one of the fastest growing exoduses and "the most concentrated refugee movement in Asia since 1971" (The Wire 2017). Their displacement was a result of state-sponsored violence and brutal campaign by both the extremists Buddhist locals and the military against them. What are the reasons behind the Rohingyas targeting? What role does political economy has to play in the recent crackdown against the Rohingyas? While focusing on this aspect, this article addresses the primary focused factors behind the conflict both at the societal level and the political level. It further draws out the attention on how the systematic killing of the community in a sense that the persecution appears to be a "methodical massacre", as mentioned by the Human Rights Watch, might not be caused just because of the ethno-nationalism prevalent in the country. But there ought to be some other aspects to this conflict which in our consideration are mainly economic in nature.

Before going to investigate the economic drivers of the conflict it is pertinent to understand what all factors have other scholarly literature considered. Azeem Ibrahim argues in his book, *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide*, that the roots to the conflict lie in historical trajectories dating back to the colonial times. The narrative has been created over decades by the military junta that Rohingya Muslims don't belong to their country and that they are 'Bengalis'. The successful politics of 'labelling' and 'framing' them as 'Bengalis' by the military junta over the decades have led to their

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exclusion from mainstream population. Other researchers (Anthony Ware & Costas Laoutides) state that the conflict is not a new phenomenon and the solution to this can't be found by harmonizing the recent trouble and grievances when the unresolved historical injustices have continued to torment the population for decades now. They have addressed the ethno-nationalist view of the conflict as 'reductionist, flattening and ignoring other dimensions of the conflict' (Ware & Laoutides 2019). Adding to this, the nature of conflict has been described as much more than a mere struggle for citizenship. It is a struggle for basic human and political rights to ensure their cultural survival. While Martin Smith contends the norm of "Buddhist Rakhine" versus "Muslim Rohingya" in the struggle for political rights and ethnic identity as misleading and just a partial discourse in greater understanding of the issue (2019: 8). Another aspect which Jason Miklian highlights is that the economic opening of the country triggered the brutal authoritarian action displacing more than half a million of Rohingya community (Miklian, 2019). It is noteworthy that the international responses to the crisis have remained varied in spirit and none of the business houses in the country have stalled or even voiced against the atrocities by the government.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section focuses on analyzing the conflict drivers in the general public domain i.e., social disharmony and military wrongdoings. The second section focusses on the economic drivers of the crisis. The third section focusses on the involvement of regional powers India and China in the state of Burma. Finally, the paper focusses on the conclusion part.

The Domestic Conflict Drivers

Andrew Selth said that "the anti-Muslim riots are not a new phenomenon, rather this religious tension has been a feature of the Myanmar political landscape". The 1948 Citizenship Law of Myanmar began the political discrimination against the Rohingyas and the later military rule that began in 1962 further caused the marginalization of the community by stripping them off from access to citizenship, thus, reducing them to the status of temporary citizens. Gradually their political rights and basic human rights like right to education, freedom of movement, employment etc. were snatched and in 2015 elections, with no Muslim parliamentary candidate being elected, the signs of not so liberal democratic transition were apparent.

Presence of social cleavages

Both the military and Buddhists have a record of hostility towards the Rohingya community. But an important question arises here that what pushed the religion of peace to one of the worst humanitarian crises the world has witnessed? In December 2017, Doctors without Borders reported that over 6,700 Rohingyas had been killed in the most recent act of violence and since then, nearly 70,000 have fled from Myanmar to the neighboring countries of Bangladesh and India. It is believed that the Theravada Buddhists in Myanmar have a strong sense of "moral

superiority" of their religion and the need to shield and propagate the same becomes their utmost duty (Strathern, 2013). This is well illustrated in how the Islamist hardliners and Christian Crusaders, in distinct time and space, have justified the use of violence in the name of religion. Here, the Burmese military, locals and monks are no different. While we have already discussed the discriminatory policies of the military, talking about the ethnic tensions at the societal level, the British colonialism was largely responsible for the legacies of the ethnic conflict and set the politics along ethnic lines in Myanmar (Hein 2018). The British as part of their 'divide and rule policy' favoured Muslims and other minorities against the Buddhists. The Muslims and the Christians were in much more advantage than the majority Buddhists of the state under the British rule. Against this backdrop, Buddhism led the way towards the Burmese nationalist movement to throw off the yoke of the British rule. Since the Muslims had joined the Britishers during the colonial period, a feeling of antipathy persisted from there onwards. The Burmese officials repeatedly claim and label the Rohingyas to be Bengali migrants who inhabited the Burmese land during the time of British rule. It is to be noted that "what started primarily as a scapegoating exercise by the military regime has unfortunately been absorbed by the Myanmar public" (Ibrahim, 2016).

The presence of the social cleavages in Myanmar can thus be attributed to two factors. The first is the rising ethno-nationalism among the Burmese Buddhist community and the second is the rising apprehensions of Islamic besiegement of the Burmese land. Despite holding a majority of 90% of the population, the Buddhists have developed a narrative that Muslims are a threat to their identity.

Military rule and its ramifications

In the name of democracy, the military regime dominates the politics of Myanmar. Tatmadaw, Myanmar's military, is accused as the main actor in the genocidal campaign launched against the Rohingyas that lead to the mass displacement of their population from their homeland. The issues of atrocities have been numerous highlighted by the global media like BBC and The Guardian. Several reports have been published by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and United Nations to address the Rohingya crisis.

In order to understand the reasons behind the ruthless crimes against the Rohingyas by the military we must look into the political power structure existing in Myanmar. Since the post-Independence era, 'Myanmar has struggled with military rule, civil war, isolation from global affairs and widespread poverty' (Maizland, 2021). Tatmadaw has been directly ruling Myanmar since the 1962 military coup by General Ne Win and indirectly after 2011. It is to be noted that it is the sheer longevity of the Tatmadaw's rule, which has allowed it to penetrate all aspects of society, culture and even religious sphere (Barany, 2019). Since the beginning of the praetorian rule, the minorities were placed

under enormous threat of exclusion from the mainstream population and politics. Besides this, all the opposition parties were banned. This points out to the fact that discrimination has been entrenched in the military regime since a long time. For instance, the 1982 Citizenship Law was announced by the military junta that recognized only those ethnic groups as citizens who have lived in Myanmar before 1823, when the Burmese territories were first occupied by the British. As a result, many communities, Rohingyas among them, were rendered stateless. Gradually the country started witnessing the grievousness of the military's policies of isolation and economic privatization known as "The Burmese way to Socialism" and in 1988, an agitation for the democratization of Myanmar began (Meixler 2018). Subsequently, Aung San Suu Kyi emerged as the leader of the movement and her newly-formed party, National League for Democracy (NLD), emerged victorious in the following election in 1988. But the military junta refused to accept the legitimacy of the results and detained Aung San Suu Kyi for the next 18 years. In 2008, owing to the international pressure, the military drafted a new constitution which further paved way for perpetuation of the military rule by reserving 25% of all the seats in national and local parliaments for serving military officials (Balachandran, 2021).

It has been identified by Mary Callahan in her book *Making Enemies*, 'the leaders of Burmese military differ from any of the military juntas of the world in that they are not politicians in uniforms but war fighters' (Swan Ye Tun 2021). Besides being a military group, Tatmadaw can be viewed as a group of religious extremists whose sense of nationalism is based on the concept of "One Country, One Race". It is reported that during the second wave of violence, it was not only the Rohingyas but also Kaman Muslims from the coastal fishing villages in the southern Arakan who were forced to flee as their communities were attacked (Green 2013). This poses grave concerns over the Islamophobic agenda of the military and raises the question of protection of other Muslim communities in the long run. Practically speaking, at the national level, the Tatmadaw is manifested with unmatched powers and capabilities over the civilians, especially the threatened minorities. It has strong political and administrative backup within Myanmar. At international level, the military assumes that the Rohingya issue can hardly gain any substantive ground since it is neither a member of the United Nations nor it has signed the International Human Rights and Refugee law. Subsequently it has China's back to veto any issue concerning the Rohingyas in the UN Security Council. Very recently in February this year, amidst the military coup in Myanmar, China blocked a UN Security statement condemning the coup (BBC, 2021).

The military denies the allegations of genocidal intent of violence committed by its soldiers but calls it necessary war-crimes to counter the insurgencies in Rakhine. The International Court of Justice is yet to determine "whether violence in Myanmar's Rakhine state in 2016-2017

constitutes genocidal intent by Myanmar's authorities" (Souvannaseng, 2020). It is to be noted that 'uncovering abuses in Myanmar is not difficult, but obtaining hard evidence of troops being ordered to commit them is' (Selth 2018). Keeping aside whether particular directions were given or not to inflict violence, the gravity of the scale abuses should be realized by the international community and the Tatmadaw must be condemned to hold those guilty of such crimes against the Rohingya community.

Economic Drivers of the Conflict

Another consideration is whether the persecution is driven primarily by the military-economic interest or by sectarian issues. Religious and ethno-nationalism are widely considered to be the reasons for persecution. But given the fact that nearly 6,70,000 Rohingyas had to flee within months after the brutal attacks points out that this can't be alone due to the ethnic strife but there ought to be other factors underplay. Myanmar has come a long way in replacing the colonial business laws with modern legal framework to create a suitable environment for its future economic prospects. While the situation doesn't see any kind of improvement in the Northern Rakhine state, the region is witnessing a new "Great Game" where the regional powers, India and China, are involved in shaping the future political and economic prospects of the country.

Geopolitics of the Rakhine region

Lately, the Burmese government has been focusing on opening up its economy by introducing certain set of political and economic reforms from 2011 onwards. It is interesting to note that the beginning of the brutal attacks against the Rohingyas and the opening up of the economy coincide with each other. In the process of Myanmar's opening to the outside world, the importance of Rakhine comes into play. Despite having immense economic potential, rich untapped natural resources along with a strategic location at the mouth of the Bay of Bengal, Rakhine remains the poorest state in the country. Agriculture, fishing, tourism and industries remains underdeveloped in Rakhine. These factors are rational enough to have become the potential economic determinants behind the forced displacement of Rohingyas from Rakhine by the military and gain control over land for their economic liberalization agenda. Not only does Rakhine provide a gateway to the foreign investments in the country, but it is also of critical geo-strategic importance for other countries in the region like India and China. For China, engagement with Myanmar will not only provide an easy access to the Indian Ocean, but will also solve its "Malacca Dilemma". On the other hand, India's strategy is not just regional integration via its Act East policy but it aims to connect the landlocked states of its North-Eastern region with the Bay of Bengal. Clearly with increasing stakes in Myanmar, the forcible eviction to obtain land from the minorities seems as a well propounded plan of action.

Land as a motivator

The persecution by the military and some sector of the extremist Buddhist locals has sharply escalated in the last decade. A new level of violence against the Rohingyas has been witnessed where the forces enter their inhabited areas and shoot unarmed men and women. They are, thus, forced to cross borders to escape the mass killings. This pattern of eviction somewhere unveils the land clearance motives of the military which is majorly ignored as one of the causes of persecution. Saskia Sassen suggests that the conflict is generated by military-economic interests rather than religious or ethnic interests. In the last two decades the world has witnessed rise in the corporate land acquisition for developmental projects. In case of Myanmar, the military has been forcibly acquiring the lands from the smallholders in Rakhine without compensation for more than three decades now and this has scaled up after the June 2012 violence between Arakanese and Rohingyas. These rapid and extensive developments have provoked a rush of local grievances in Rakhine, who accuse the projects linked with these reforms to have increased the social problems like violence, land grabbing etc.

India has also financed the construction of the Sittwe Deep-Sea Port as part of the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project. This is evident from “the two land laws that were approved by the country’s parliament on 30 March, 2012—the Farmland Law and The Vacant, Fallow, and Virgin Land Management” (Hiebert, et.al 2012). These laws serve the purpose of establishing the legal framework for the country’s land reform that is necessary to attract foreign investments. The clear interests of forcible acquisition of land to prepare ground for further development and economic modernization has been justified by Sassen (2017) in her works whereby it is observed that the land allocated to large projects had increased by 170% between 2010 and 2013. Probably, ousting the Rohingyas from the strategic Rakhine land might be good for the future development of the province.

Stabilising Rakhine for economic growth

Projects are undergoing to develop the outskirts of Maungdaw township in the Northern Rakhine into an economic zone. But these attempts wouldn’t feed much results if the region remains disturbed with occurrence of frequent violence. The Burmese government has accused the Arakan Rohingyas Salvation Army (ARSA) of terrorizing the region. Amnesty International revealed in a detailed investigation how Rohingya armed groups have occasionally massacred the Hindus and their villages. Attacks have been launched against other ethnic and religious communities of the region. It has been argued that the Thein Sein government made a political blunder by underestimating the challenges emanating from the increasing militancy in the Rakhine. The government indulged in unconventional political dialogues with Arakan Liberation Party and came out with ceasefire agreement in 2015 as a solution to the instability in the region. But the political hopes soon got thrashed out when on 25 August, 2017, the Arakan Rohingyas Salvation Army (ARSA)

attacked police posts in Rakhine, “killing 12 people in its biggest attack so far” (BBC 2017). Further, the Tatmadaw claimed that the 2017 brutal campaign against the Rohingyas was an outcome of the attacks launched by the ARSA fighters on Myanmar’s security posts. It is to note that labelling Rohingyas as outsiders and insurgents, therefore, provide political opportunities and justify the military actions to eliminate the so-called “existential threat” to Burma and its population.

Martin Smith in his book writes that the quasi-civilian government “failed to recognize that the rise in militancy in Rakhine communities could not be simply put down to Buddhist-Muslim divisions or the grievances of nationalist die-hards” (Smith, 2019). Certainly, the issue of social unrest in one of the most pivotal territory of Myanmar has made the government anxious over time. While so much investments are underway in this region, the praetorian government can’t afford the insurgent activities by the ARSA to ruin its economic ventures. In open confrontations between the military and the armed groups, the oil pipeline projects of China could be targeted, leading to a negative investor sentiment. While it has been argued that the series of militant activities are a result of the non-accommodative stance of the military from the past four decades, the military itself has nurtured the present state of social unrest in the region which now finds the solution to this conflict by wiping out their population.

Neighbouring Countries as Development Engineers

Despite global criticism, why do Myanmar’s powerful neighbouring countries still support it? The answer to this lies in the strategic position that it holds. Myanmar is sandwiched between South Asia and Southeast Asia. It shares borders with Asian giants like India and China and allows other countries to have an easy strategic route to the global markets. Therefore, the relationship between these countries and Myanmar is driven by pragmatism. Both China and India are competing with each other to access the region’s untapped rich natural resources and enhance their sphere of influence in the country. It is to be noted that China and India may be standing at polarized ends on various issues but regarding the Myanmar’s Rohingya crisis, both the countries are on the same page. Both have resisted condemning Burma’s actions to the extreme.

China in Myanmar

“Driven by security concerns, economic interests, and a desire for political influence in a country with which it shares a 1,500-mile border, China is playing a key role in Myanmar’s internal security and peace process” (USIP Report, 2018). China’s relationship with Myanmar is pragmatic and economic in nature. Not only does Myanmar provide Beijing the much-needed access to the Indian Ocean but involvement with Myanmar is vital to secure stability along their shared border. For many years, the instability along the border due to conflict between the Tatmadaw and the ethnic armed groups have been a contentious issue between both the countries. However, relations have improved between both the countries since the advent of active conflict between the Tatmadaw and the ethnic groups since last decade. Among many of the development projects that started in Rakhine after 2012, an

important one was the Chinese transnational pipeline connecting Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine, to Kunming, China that began its operations in September 2013. China has also invested billions of dollars to develop a seaport, Kyaukpyu, on the western shores of Myanmar which will advance its Belt Road Initiative. Besides economic considerations, the shared policy stance of both the countries against their respective ethnic minorities is a crucial factor behind Chinese holding up to Burma. China has gradually indulged in influencing the internal dynamics of the country and plays the role of a facilitator in Burma's peace process. It provides the crucial support to the Burmese government against its right to encounter terrorism and insurgency in the state. At the same time, it has offered a resolution to settle the deadlock between Bangladesh and Myanmar. China, playing a constructive role in this discord, portrays its attempts in exerting regional influence and ensuring region's security to its maximum interests as against the increasing involvement of India and US in the region.

India in Myanmar

As an important neighbour of Myanmar, India seeks to reinforce ties with the country where lies its deep political and geo-economic interests. Besides being an important trade partner, Myanmar holds significance in India's plan to connect its North-Eastern region to the Bay of Bengal. In this respect, India has implemented various projects in Myanmar, for instance, it has financed the construction of the Sittwe Deep-Sea Port as part of the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project. India has developed stakes in Shew Gas Field across the Rakhine coastal region. It has anticipated a "tri-national pipeline that will link Sittwe to Chittagong in Bangladesh and Mizoram and Tripura in India" (The Telegraph, 2017). Both the countries are cooperating in tackling cross-border insurgency along their shared borders. India's muted response or so-called Quiet Diplomacy, can be said to have been motivated by the neo-liberal theory of complex interdependence whereby "trade, infrastructure, access to energy resources and development cooperation" takes priority over ideological principles (Gottschlich 2015). India has refrained from active condemning of the Myanmar's government actions due to its regional contestation vis-à-vis China. While on the other hand India seems to have adopted a "face-saving approach, Operation Insaniyat, providing material aid to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh" (Sahoo 2017). It is obvious that a country has to meet its national objectives and secure for itself economic advantages but a poor response from a country who sets to be an emerging power in the region i.e., India, tends to hollow its own democratic and humanitarian ideals that it has cherished throughout the history. At the end there has to be fine balance between ethics, values and business.

Conclusion

The article addressed the economic drivers of the catastrophic Rohingya crisis that remains largely ignored

from the scholarly works. The article discussed how the present phase of contestation in the Rakhine region is highly motivated by business motives. One can conclude that the community has been systematically persecuted for the last four decades and this has just been accelerated in the contemporary times. Keeping in mind the incidents of similar land-grabbing practices that occurred in 1977 and 1992 when no megaprojects had been established, one can say that ethnic security dilemma and identity issues may be the prime movers of the conflict. But given the track of increased persecution since the beginning of opening up of Myanmar's economy in 2011 to an extent that 60% of a given population got displaced, points towards the fact that complex realities and economic-military motivations seems to be a potential stimulus behind the causation of one of the most gruesome refugee crises. Thus, this issue needs to be analyzed taking into consideration all the relevant factors both in time and space.

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