

THE ROHINGYAS Bengali Muslims or Arakan Rohingyas?

In recent months, the Rohingyas have been making headlines again. Who are they?

It was reported¹ recently that Myanmar Foreign Minister U Nyan Win had told his ASEAN² counterparts in Hua Hin, Thailand, prior to the ASEAN Summit, that the SPDC is “willing to accept the return of refugees from Myanmar if they are listed as Bengali Muslim minorities but not if they are Rohingyas, because Rohingyas are not Myanmar citizens”. What does this signify? To the uninitiated, what difference does it make if they are Bengalis or Rohingyas? Are they not from Burma? In Burmese politics, however, it makes a world of difference.

To a Burmese, the name ‘Rohingya’ is highly controversial even though in international circles it is generally used to denote the Muslim community in the three townships of northern Arakan State – Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung – bordering Bangladesh. The Rohingyas are closely related in ethnicity, language and religion to the Bengalis in the Chittagong region across the border in Bangladesh. Today, they number about 800,000 in Arakan State and are classified by the SPDC government as a foreign Bengali Muslim community. In the past, some have estimated up to 2 million Muslims in Arakan State³. There are also large Rohingya refugee populations overseas. It is estimated that there are 500,000 Rohingyas living in Saudi Arabia, 200,000 in Pakistan, 200,000 in Bangladesh, 50,000 in the United Arab Emirates and 25,000 in Malaysia⁴. But it is generally accepted that Muslims now make up about one-third of the population of Arakan State.

Buddhist Rakhaings, who make up the majority, claim that the Bengali Muslims in Arakan State today came with the British Raj in the 19th and 20th centuries. They further claim that during the War of Independence in Bangladesh and after cyclones devastated Bangladesh in 1978 and 1991, many more migrated illegally into Burma. They say that the name “Rohingya” was coined by Bengali Muslims to confer on themselves the status of an indigenous ethnic nationality like the Shan, Karen and Kachin, etc. This would, they say, enable the Bengalis to claim parts of Arakan State as their indigenous homeland, and carve out a separate Muslim state. The Rakhaings back up their arguments by pointing to the communal massacres in 1942, and the Mujahedd movement in 1947 that demanded autonomy and, in some instances, even tried to annex parts of Arakan State to then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). For their part, some Muslim Rohingyas claim that, not only are the Rohingyas indigenous, but that Muslim kings also ruled Arakan in 1430 for over a hundred years⁵. This is, of course, hotly disputed by the Rakhaings who are extremely proud of their Buddhist heritage.

The Kingdom of Arakan (Din-nya-waddy) is said to have existed since around 146 AD⁶. Situated on the Bay of Bengal, the kingdom naturally had more ties with the Indian sub-continent than with the rest of Burma, from which it was separated by the Arakan Yoma mountain range. Arakan was influenced by Buddhist, Muslim and Hindu cultures. Depending on the fortunes of war, Arakan is said to have stretched north from present day Arakan State to Chittagong and even to Tripura in India. In 1404, King Naramaikhla (‘Min Saw Mun’ or ‘Man Saw Muan’ in Arakanese) was forced to seek refuge in Bengal after a Burman⁷ invasion. He was well received by the Sultan of Gaur who helped him to recover his throne in 1430. From that time onward, it

was common for Buddhist Arakan kings to adopt Muslim titles in addition to their own names. They even issued medallions bearing the Kalima, the Muslim confession of faith, in Persian script⁸. But by the 16th century, foreign (mostly Portugese) and Arakanese pirates laid waste the lands along the Bay of Bengal making much of it ungovernable. The slave trade, fuelled by French, English and Dutch buyers, fed the anarchy in Arakan and along the Bengal coast. In 1784, King Bowdawpaya of Ava (Burma) attacked and conquered Arakan at the invitation of Arakanese lords. Arakan became a province of the Burman kingdom, and after the first Anglo-Burman war in 1826, it was ceded to the British. After the Union of Burma gained independence from the British in 1948, Arakan monks and intellectuals, including the pre-Second World War Prime Minister under the British, Sir Paw Tun, began demanding the recognition of the historical independence of Arakan, and the formation of an autonomous Arakan State⁹. General Ne Win's 1974 Socialist constitution recognized Arakan as a constituent but not autonomous state.

Whatever the validity of the claims and counterclaims of the Rakhaings and Rohingyas, it cannot be denied that a large number of Muslims reside in Arakan State. The "Kaman" are descendents of Afghan, Persian and Mogul mercenaries in the service of Arakan kings from the 15th century and are recognized as citizens by the SPDC. The "Myay-du" are descendents of slaves from Bengal who were brought in the 16th century to work at the pagodas. In the 17th century, some escaped to Ava, were accepted as the Burman king's subjects and given their freedom. They returned to Arakan with King Bowdawpaya's army in 1784 and resettled in Arakan¹⁰. Unlike the Kaman, the Myay-Du are not in the SPDC's list of 135 national races. During the British occupation from 1826 onwards, South Asians were brought into Burma as labourers, traders and administrators, creating resentment against South Asians in general. Many South Asians – Hindus and Muslims – assimilated culturally. They spoke Burmese or Arakanese and adopted Burman or Arakanese names but retained their religion. The Kamans and the Myay-dus do not refer to themselves as 'Rohingya'. Arakanese refer in general to the Muslims in their midst as "Arakan Muslims". However, the Muslims in Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung, possibly because of their concentration, were not well received and did not or could not assimilate.

The issue of migration into Burma from Bengal after independence, and the citizenship of Arakan Muslims, was complicated by population pressures in Bengal, insurgency in Arakan, inadequate documentation and a porous border. In the 1950's, the name, 'Rohingya' began to be used by Arakan Muslims to denote Bengalis who had settled in Arakan before independence, in an effort to qualify for citizenship. As demands for an Arakan state grew, the Rohingyas also lobbied to be recognized not only as citizens but as an indigenous ethnic nationality. Prime Minister U Nu, Deputy Prime Minister U Ba Swe and Professor G C Luce also started using the term 'Rohingya' to describe the Bengali population in northern Arakan. In April 1960, U Nu authorized the Burma Broadcasting Service to broadcast in the Rohingya language. Rohingyas point to this fact as evidence that they are an indigenous ethnic nationality of Burma. But Rakhaings point out that the broadcast was made under the Foreign Languages Programme, not the National Languages Programme¹¹. To bolster the Rohingya argument of their indigenous status, it is alleged that the former President of Burma, Sao Shwe Thaik¹², as Speaker of the Constituent Assembly (sic), said, "Muslims of the Arakan certainly belong to one of the indigenous races of Burma. If they do not belong to the indigenous races, we also cannot be taken as indigenous races."¹³

To complicate matters, in 1978, General Ne Win launched 'Operation Naga Min' to expel illegal immigrants from Arakan State. The Burma Army was indiscriminate. A mass exodus took place and 250,000 to 300,000 refugees fled to Bangladesh. This included citizens and non-citizens. The process was repeated in 1991, when another 250,000 to 300,000 were expelled. Both times, the international community intervened. The majority were repatriated. The agreement did not acknowledge the returnees as Burmese citizens but as residents of Burma. Ironically, with these expulsions and the subsequent dispersal of the refugees, the 'Rohingya' name became well-known worldwide, while most people have never heard of Arakan. In addition to these expulsions, the Burmese military government in 1982 introduced a new Citizenship Law effectively denying citizenship rights to people of Chinese or South Asian origin. Citizens are defined on the basis of their ethnicity. They have to belong to an ethnic group that settled in Burma prior to 1823. Only those groups listed as the 135 'national races' or 'indigenous peoples' can claim citizenship. The law also stipulates that the person must speak one of the national languages. No other ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities are recognized.

It is ironic but, given their extreme fear of a Muslim invasion, Rakhaing nationalists and academics, even those who are staunchly anti-SPDC, tend to agree with the SPDC's position that Rohingyas do not exist, and that they are not Burmese citizens. Like the SPDC, they will only accept the existence of foreign Bengali Muslims in Arakan. This has influenced the Burmese democracy movement greatly. No 'Rohingya' political organization has been admitted into any of the numerous Burmese alliances. Rakhaing leaders have even been known to walk out of meetings where 'Rohingyas' are present. Some civil society organizations will work with Rohingya organizations but are reluctant to defend them or speak out on their behalf. Rakhaings who dare to use the name 'Rohingya' or work with 'Rohingya' organizations risk disciplinary action, expulsion or being ostracized by the Rakhaing community.

Until the 1982 Citizenship Law is changed, the status of Arakan Muslims in Burma will remain in limbo. It may require a national debate on citizenship and how minorities are treated before any progress can be made. However, the fact remains that today, a large number of people living in Burma have been deprived of their most basic rights as human beings. It is unconscionable that the democracy movement, which claims to be fighting for universal human rights, has ignored and continues to ignore their plight. It should not matter to the democracy movement whether or not the Arakan Muslims are called 'Bengalis' or 'Rohingyas', or are citizens, an indigenous population, an ethnic nationality, or a foreign religious minority. The fact is that they live in Burma. They were able to participate in the elections during the democracy period¹⁴, again in 1990, and are part of the Burmese democracy movement. A way must be found to engage them in Burma's nation-building process. Ignoring them or excluding them will not solve the problem. In fact, it will exacerbate and create additional problems as the recent 'boat people' incidents show. Similar to other Burmese exiles, there are many 'Rohingyas' or Arakan Muslims living overseas who have skills that can be used to contribute to the re-building of Burma.

Recommendations to the Burmese democracy movement:

1. Treat Arakan Muslims/Rohingyas, especially those in exile who are working for democracy, as human beings and as comrades-in-arms. Rakhaings have demanded that the name 'Rohingya' be dropped as a pre-condition for recognition or inclusion. While the concern

over the use of the name is understandable and must be taken into account, it remains a fact that in a free society, people can call themselves by any name they wish. However, even if the Rohingyas were to call themselves Arakan Muslims, they would still not qualify for Burmese citizenship under Burmese law. The historical authenticity of a name is also not an issue. New names are being coined all the time. The more the Arakan Muslims are excluded and marginalized in Arakan, the more likely they are to ask for a separate state. They will not ask for a state if they can co-exist as equals in Arakan State.

2. Condemn racism and intolerance. Arakan Muslims/Rohingyas should not be insulted because of their features, skin colour or religion¹⁵. Their rights as a minority – ethnic, cultural, religious – should be respected in the same way that the minority rights of all Arakanese should be respected within the context of the larger Union of Burma.
3. Initiate a dialogue with Arakan Muslims/Rohingyas without pre-conditions. Build on common ground. Most Arakan Muslim/Rohingya leaders and activists speak Burmese. They want democracy and federalism, and support the concept of an ‘indivisible’ Arakan State¹⁶.
4. Re-examine the meaning of terms such as ‘minority’, ‘ethnic’, ‘ethnic nationality’, ‘national races’ and ‘indigenous’ as they are used today in the international community and in UN circles. Many of the meanings have evolved over time and may not be the same as it is understood in Burma or translated into Burmese. Actually, the term ‘ethnic nationality’ does not exist in international circles. It was coined by the Burmese democracy movement in the 1990’s to replace ‘national races’ because the word ‘race’ has changed in meaning.
5. Initiate a dialogue within the movement on a vision for a future Burma. Who are ‘indigenous’ and what difference would it make to a citizen of Burma whether or not he or she is indigenous? What protection will the ‘ethnic nationalities’ and/or ‘minorities’ have in a future Burma? Who can become citizens, or will Burma remain a closed society?

Recommendations to the international community:

1. Work to improve the living conditions of Arakan Muslims/Rohingyas. The international community, especially the UNHCR, WFP, UNDP and other agencies, should work with the SPDC regime to improve conditions in the three northern Arakan townships, and with host countries like Bangladesh for refugee camps and with countries like Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia for refugee and migrant worker communities. Current conditions are not acceptable.
2. Initiate a dialogue with the SPDC and neighbouring countries on the SPDC’s treatment of ethnic and religious minorities in Burma. The international community, especially the UN, ASEAN, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference, should take the lead in these matters.

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- ¹ Bernama News. “Only Bengalis Accepted, Rohingyas Have To Wait, Says Myanmar”. 27 February 2009.
- ² ASEAN = Association of South East Asian Nations. The ten member nations are: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.
- ³ Martin Smith. “Burma – Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity”. Zed Books Ltd., London and New Jersey, 1991.
- ⁴ Chris Lewa. “A stateless minority in Myanmar: The case of the Rohingyas”. 6-7 December 2007 – unpublished.
- ⁵ Arakan Rohingya National Organization, “NCGUB pushing the Rohingya from the frying-pan into the fire”, 13 February 2009.
- ⁶ G.E. Harvey. “History of Burma”. Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., London, 1925 and 1967.
- ⁷ Burman = majority ethnic group in Burma. They make up about 60% of the present population. Burmese = citizens of the Union of Burma.
- ⁸ Harvey.
- ⁹ Smith.
- ¹⁰ Khin Maung Saw. “Response to the Press Release of the Rohingya”. Berlin. 2009.
- ¹¹ Khin Maung Saw.
- ¹² Sao Shwe Thaik was a Shan and the father of the Executive Director of the Euro-Burma Office.
- ¹³ Dr San Oo Aung. <http://sanooaung.wordpress.com>. 22 January 2008
- ¹⁴ 1948 to 1958 and from 1960 to 1962.
- ¹⁵ Ye Myint Aung, SPDC Consul-General in Hong Kong, in a letter to fellow diplomats said, “the Rohingyas are ugly as orgres” and that “their complexion is dark brown”, unlike the Burmese who are “fair” and “good looking”. Some Rakhaing academics have also been accused of calling the Rohingyas ‘viruses’.
- ¹⁶ Declaration of the Rohingya Consultation, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, 2005 and Declaration of the Arakan Rohingya Council, Chittagong, Bangladesh, 2008.