

# POLITICS

## TRACING THE EXCLUSION OF THE ROHINGYA I NOTES

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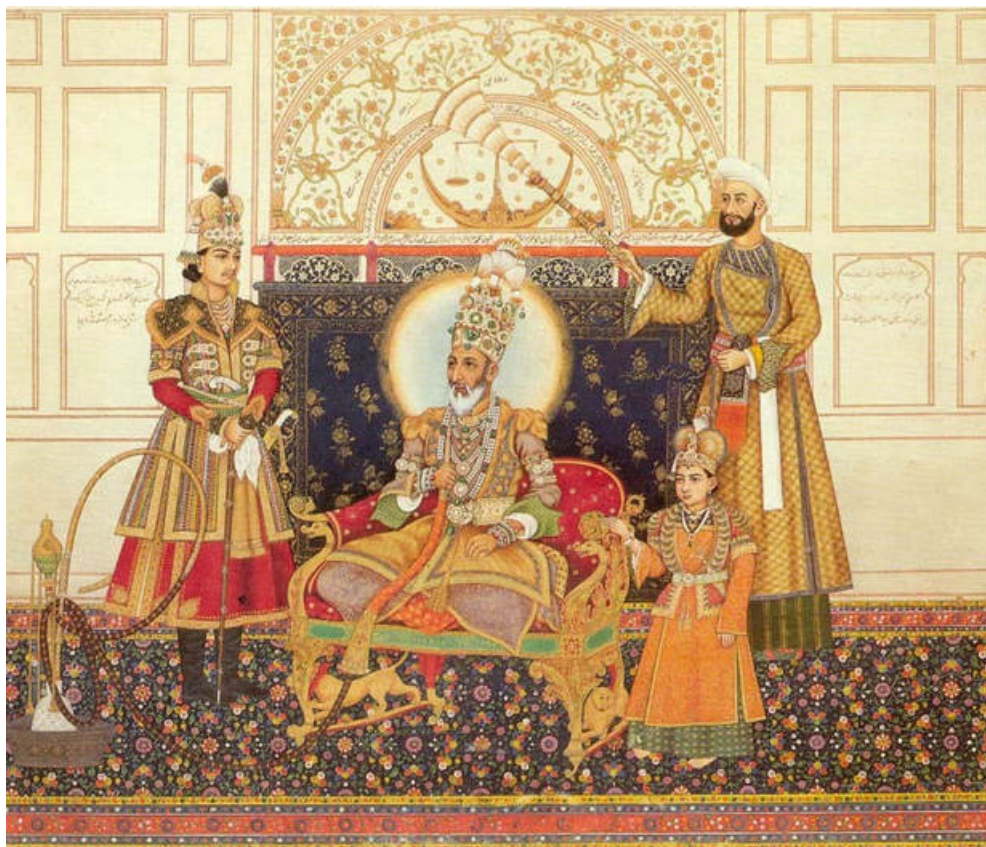
Myanmar is a non-secular Buddhist majority country. The majority of Myanmar peoples are Buddhist, including both ethnic Burmans and non-Burman ethnic minorities. Buddhists make up 89.8 percent of the population, Christians 6.3 percent and Muslims 2.3 percent. In the contemporary climate of Myanmar, Many Buddhists see Islam as a threat to Buddhism; they use Bangladesh, Indonesia and Afghanistan as examples of Islam's takeover of previously Buddhist majority locations.

Myanmar was born out of the ashes of the murder of its integrationist freedom fighter leader General Aung San, the father of Aung San Suu Kyi. He was assassinated on July 19, 1947, a few months before the independence of Burma on January 4, 1948. His legacy of seeking integration and the violence associated with his murder still alludes Myanmar today. These research notes will set forth the history of Muslims in Myanmar as an attempt to understand the contemporary exclusion of the Rohingya from the modern nation-state of Myanmar and to argue for the continued failure of Myanmar to become a multicultural society of ethno-religious equality and plurality.

### Defining the Muslim Community

The Burmese Muslim community is largely composed of traders and ulama who are economically well-off but have not worked the fields of education, science, engineering, medicine, technology and business management. There are also several prominent law specialists among them.

In its 69 years of existence, Myanmar has been dominated politically by the Bamar Buddhist majority which espouses a Bamar racist interpretation of Buddhism. The Bamar and the other 135 distinct ethnic groups are officially grouped into eight "major national ethnic races" viz., Bamar, Chin, Kachin, Kayin, Kayah, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan. These national, ethnic races are officially recognized as the original natives of the country of Myanmar. Others are classified as outsiders or illegal immigrants, as is the case for the Rohingya Muslims.



Muslims in Myanmar are divided into four groups:

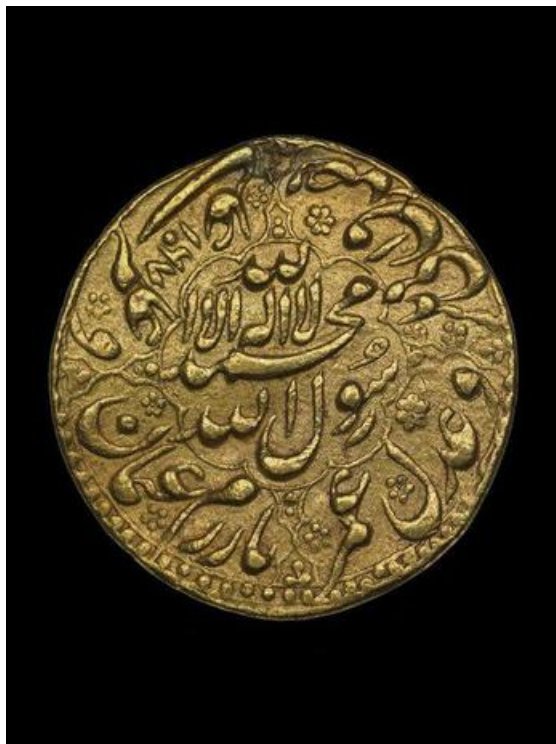
1) Indian Muslims known as Chulias, Kaka, and Pathans were brought by British colonizers to administer the colony. They resided largely in the colonial capital city of Yangon which at one time was 56 percent Indian. These Indian Muslims were economically successful as factory and dock workers, as well as gems traders, and business owners. Indian Muslims speak Urdu and follow the Indian Muslim religious traditions of the Barelwi, Deobandi, and Tabligh Jamaat. They often rely exclusively on the religious authority of the Maulvis and send their children to Indian styled Islamic schools, madrasa. Male graduates of these Indian madrasas typically take on the management of family businesses, and women become house wives.

Within the history of nation building of Burma, the Indian Muslim community has a very mixed past. In addition to the military coup in 1962 where General Ne Win expelled 300,000 Indians from Burma to India, Myanmar witnessed two anti-Indian riots in 1930 and 1938, the later being explicitly against Muslims.

The prominent Indian Muslims of Burma include the last Mughal king Bahadur Shah and Mr. U Rasak. Bahadur Shah was exiled by the British to Rangoon after the Indian Rebellion of 1857. His mausoleum is located at No. 6 Theatre Road in Yangon. It has become a Sufi shrine. Mr. U Razak (1898 – 1947) was a prominent secular Burmese politician of Tamil ancestry who deeply loved Burma and called for unity between Burmese Muslims and Buddhists. Being an educator, he learned Pali and Theravada Buddhism and founded the Mandalay College (now Mandalay University). He was the Minister of Education and on the National Planning in General Aung San's pre-independence interim government. He was also the chairman of the Burma Muslim Congress. U Razak was assassinated, along with Aung San on July 19, 1947.

2) Pathi or Zerbadee are the Burmese Muslim offspring from the intermarriage of Persian/Indian Muslim men and Burman/other women. They see themselves as different from other Muslim groups both racial and culturally and as closer to Buddhist Burmese, both ethnically and culturally. They distance themselves from Indian Muslims whose religious lives are influenced by the Indian theological schools of Barelwi and Deoband. The Zerbadee Muslims are caught between the Burmese Buddhists with whom they share the same racial and cultural identity but not a religious identity and Indian Muslims whom they share a religious identity but not a cultural identity. They are a minority of a minority in Myanmar.





3) Panthay or Hui Muslim of Chinese background are culturally Chinese engaging in business and trading occupations. They mostly migrated from the southwestern Chinese province of Yunnan during the 13th century and also during 1949 when fleeing Chinese communist persecution. They have mostly settled around the northern city of Mandalay.

4) Rohingya numbering around one million are natives of the Rakhine state which was formerly the Arakan Kingdom. The Rohingya are designated as illegal Bengali migrants from Bangladesh and are discriminately referred to as the “kalla” - dark skinned people. The Rohingya, also known as the Arakan Muslims, have a long historical presence in the modern nation-state of Burma. They have been in the area of Burma since the times of the ancient Arakan kingdom along with Arakan Buddhist. Their place in the history of Burma in relation to Arakan Buddhist has now been denied, and this has further weakened their claims as legitimate Myanmar citizens.

#### Rohingya History in the Myanmar Narrative

The historical presence of the Arakan Muslims in today's state of Myanmar is rooted in the past when state borders did not exist and there was free movement between Chittagong in Bengal. Politically, Arakan Muslims are connected to the time of Kingdom of Mrauk U which existed from 1430 until 1785 which ruled over much of present day Bangladesh and Burma. The Kingdom of Mrauk-U's founder and the last king was Naramikhla Min Saw Mon, a Buddhist also known as Suleiman Shah. He became king in 1404 but was driven out in 1406. He lived as an exile in Bengal for 24 years, regaining his throne in 1430 with the military support of Sultan Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah of the Sultanate of Bengal.

From 1430 to 1531 Mrauk U was a protectorate of the Bengal Sultanate, as a vassal state of the Buddhist kings of Arakan, the court officials and military leaders held Islamic titles. Islamic gold dinar coins from Bengal were legal tender within the kingdom. King Naramikhla minted coins with Burmese characters on one side and Persian characters on the other. In the 16th and 17th century, Mrauk U was an important maritime port which could be reached by large trading ships in the Bay of Bengal.

In 1784, the Bamar king Bodawpaya invaded and conquered the Arakan kingdom and incorporated into his kingdom. The British annexed Arakan in 1826 after the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26) the British colonial era was marked by a large influx of Indians into British Burma to assist in the administration as well as the business and labor sectors. Their descendants today are among the economic elites of Myanmar.

The Rohingya constitute approximately 1 million out of the 3 million people in the Rakhine state. 140,000 of whom live in refugee camps as internally displaced people since the eruption of ethnoreligious clashes in 2012. An additional 1.5 million Rohingya are living in exile in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, UAE, India, Malaysia, Thailand, UK, USA, and Australia.

In the 1940s during the period of independence and separation of India into two Pakistans, there was an insurgent group named Mujahids who desired to join East Pakistan and separate from Arakanese Buddhists and Burmans. They sought help from Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan. Jinnah discussed this matter with General Aung San who assured their protection in new Burma, Jinnah was not supportive of separation.



In June of 1989 as per the "Adaptation of Expressions Law" (Law 15/89) the name of the state of Arakan was changed to Rakhine state and came to be identified as an exclusively Rakhine Buddhist state.

Myanmar is a country of ethnic and religious minorities defined by a three-tiered system: 1) Full Citizen; 2) Associate Citizen; 3) Naturalized Citizen. As per the 1982 citizenship law, the second and the third types of citizenships are subject to revocation. The Rohingya are denied all three types of citizenship by law.

The delegitimization of the Rohingya began during the 1970s military regime of General Ne-Win. The promulgation of the 1974 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Myanmar and the 1974 Emergency Immigration Act laid the basis for ethnic citizenship. It invalidated The National Registration Certificates issued as per the 1947 legislation which was possessed by the Rohingya. The new laws began the process of delegitimization the citizenship state of the Rohingya; it culminated in the 1982 Burmese Citizenship Law which created four types of citizenship: citizen; associate citizen; naturalized citizen and foreigners, as per this law the Rohingya were declared as foreigners. The final stroke at making the Rohingya totally stateless happened in 2015, following the 2012-13 violence and under pressure from the 969 Burmese Buddhist nationalists, the Thein Sein government declared that the White Cards identity held by the Rohingya were null and void, the Rohingya were declared to be outsider "Bengalis." The Rohingya are the only stateless people in Southeast Asia.

In light of oppression and violent conflict between the Burmese army and the Rohingya since 2012, the democratically elected government led by state counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, in 2016 established an Advisory Commission on Rakhine State led the former UN secretary general, Kofi Annan with a mandate to examine the Rohingya issue and propose recommendations. The commission was "not mandated to investigate specific cases of alleged human rights violations." In its report released on August 24, 2017, the commission recommended the state of Myanmar to scrap restrictions on movement and citizenship of the persecuted Muslim Rohingya minority as a solution to avoid the conflict from spiraling into radicalization within both communities.



### The Contemporary Status of the Rohingya

In 1998, the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) and Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF) jointly founded the Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO) and the Rohingya National Army (RNA). The most recent Rohingya resistance group currently engaging with the Burmese army is the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA).

Apart from Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces), there are also several Arakan Buddhist nationalist groups of the Rakhine state who view the Rohingya as Bengali Muslims and a threat to their state because of their Muslim faith. These groups include the Arakan National Party (ANP); the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP) and its Arakan Liberation Army (ALA) and the United League of Arakan (ULA) and its armed wing the Arakan Army (AA). In the ongoing crisis facing immense pressure from Muslim and other countries, the Myanmar government has announced that it will take back refugees who have fled and can provide “valid proof” of citizenship which as per the 1982 Burmese Citizenship Law requires providing of evidence of a direct line to progenitors who lived in the country before 1823.[1]

Apart from the Rohingya issue, Myanmar has also witnessed the rise of a non-violent extremist nationalist movement of Buddhist nationalist monks called the Ma Ba Tha or 969 movement which is against anti-Muslim collectively. In 2015, it pressured the former military led regime of President Thein Sein to pass the “Protection of Race and Religion” targeting the country’s Muslim minority. The law imposes compulsory “birth spacing” for women; monogamy laws; marriage laws requiring Buddhist women to register their marriages in advance if marrying a non-Buddhist man; and a law regulating religious conversions. The 969 movement sees Muslims as dangerous people.





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## The Future of the Rohingya

Ashin Wirathu, the leader of the Ma Ba Tha or 969 movement began by protesting against and calling for the boycotting of Muslim businesses. The 969 movement used the 969 numerical symbol written in Burmese numerals in response to Muslim uses of 786, the Quranic verse "In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful." 969 refers to the 'Three Jewels' – the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha as a powerful cosmological symbol to combat the Indian Burmese Muslim use of the Arabic numbers of 786 often displayed at Muslim businesses and in transaction slips. Ashin Wirathu and others propose that the addition of the  $7+8+6=21$  is a symbol of a Muslim plot to conquer and convert Myanmar to Islam in the 21st century. He has remarked that Muslims are violent and they breed quickly like the African carp, hence the need to protect Buddhism.[2]

Recent months have seen an increase in anti-Muslim campaigns in Myanmar. During November 2015 in anticipation of the 2016 Myanmar election, the Ma Ba Tha nationalists issued a 12-point policy statement calling upon the voters to consider alleged threats to support the protection of race and religion when voting. The group has also called for a ban on wearing Islamic headscarves and the ritual slaughter of cows during the Eid al-Adha festival.

Since its independence in 1948 independence, Myanmar has failed to become a multicultural society of ethnoreligious equality and plurality.

In the current phase of conflict which has impacted the Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus in Myanmar, Myanmar Army commander Sr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing has remarked that it is now time to complete the "unfinished business" of "clearing the Rohingya," which dates back to the time of World War II.[3]

On the regional front, there are also media reports of the formation of a Buddhist-Hindu transnational anti-Muslim alliance comprised of the Ma Ba Tha of Myanmar, the Bodu Bala Sena BBS of Sri Lanka, and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The present Indian Prime Minister Modi is planning to expel 40,000 Rohingya "illegal immigrants" living in Jammu and Kashmir, Hyderabad, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi and Rajasthan from India. [4]

On top of this, there are reports from Russian sources that Rohingya issue has now become a part of competition for control over the Rakhine gas fields and oil hydrocarbons of the Arakan coastal zone between America and China, which if not attended to carefully will drastically impact the grassroots relations between Muslims and Buddhists.[5] Thereby opening a conduit for the advent

of Muslim-Buddhism extremism which could prove to be lethal.

In light of the geo-politics of global investors, the long history of the Rohingya-Burman conflict, growing Muslim-Buddhist fault lines in Southeast Asia, and the rise of vicious religious nationalisms, it is nearly impossible that the Rohingya will attain citizenship rights as we witness the rising trends of Asian Islamophobia.

[1] Su Myat Mon, "Only Refugees with 'Proof' of Citizenship Will Return: Govt," *Frontier Myanmar*, accessed September 7, 2017, <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/only-refugees-with-proof-of-citizenship-will-return-govt>.

[2] "Buddhist Monk Wirathu Leads Violent National Campaign against Myanmar's Muslims," *Public Radio International*, accessed September 7, 2017, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2013-06-21/buddhist-monk-wirathu-leads-violent-national-campaign-against-myanmars-muslims>.

[3] James Hookway, "Myanmar Says Clearing of Rohingya Is Unfinished Business From WWII," *Wall Street Journal*, September 3, 2017, sec. World, accessed September 7, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/myanmar-army-chief-defends-clearing-rohingya-villages-1504410530>.

[4] "India Plans to Deport Thousands of Rohingya Refugees," accessed September 7, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/08/india-plans-deport-thousands-rohingya-refugees-170814110027809.html>.

[5] Sputnik, "Soros and Hydrocarbons: What's Really Behind the Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar," accessed September 7, 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201709051057098493-myanmar-rohingya-energy-china-soros/>.

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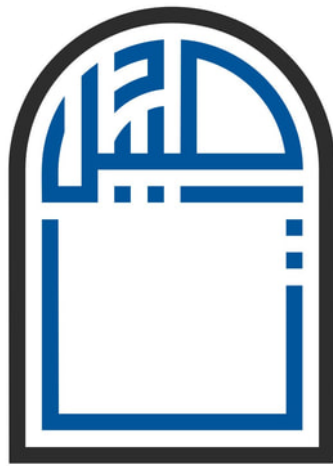
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