

# **Rohingya: The Identity Crisis**

*By Najeeb Washaly*

**Abstract:** Though Rohingya identity crisis has received an international concern, it is still unsettled. This article deals with Rohingya identity crisis from different perspectives. The author addresses the political, ideological, and cultural factors that have contributed to Rohingya identity crisis. Further, the author points out that colonialism has contributed to the statelessness of the Rohingya.

**Keywords:** citizenship, colonialism, crisis, identity, Myanmar, Rohingya.

## **Introduction**

The people who call themselves Rohingya are the Muslims of Mayu Frontier area, present-day Buthidaung and Maungdaw Townships of Arakan (Rakhine) State, an isolated province in the western part of Myanmar across Naaf River as boundary from Bangladesh (Chan, 2005). For the past three decades, the Rohingya have been seeking to restore their unrecognised ethnic identity, for any ethnic group has the right to identify itself or decide what name it should be called. Rohingya identity crisis began when they were divested from their cultural, national and ethnic identity in 1982, while Cheesman (2017) argues that 1982 citizenship law did not affect the Rohingya though he mentioned in the abstract that ‘people who reside in Myanmar but are collectively denied citizenship – like anyone identifying or identified as Rohingya – pursue claims to be taingyintha so as to rejoin the community.’

Recently, almost all news channels and agencies, social and human right activists, journalists etc. have addressed and tackled the Rohingya crisis. Much of the focus was on the ongoing violence and systematic ethnic cleansing committed by some fanatic Buddhists and military forces. Thus, this 21<sup>st</sup> century most outrageous tragedy has nearly prevailed all social media, depicting the worst discrimination and bloodiest atrocities ever.

The violence and ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya broke out in 1978, 1991–2, 2012, and two separate incidents in 2016–17. Since then, Myanmar government has been

justifying such persecution as the right to protect the country from terrorist attacks and foreign intruders. It addressed Muslim ethnic groups as terrorists especially after some police posts along the border with Bangladesh had been attacked by some militants allegedly said to belong to Rohingya. During and after the violent episodes, many Myanmar Buddhists raised issues of 'naing-ngan-tha' (citizenship) and 'taing-yin-tha' (indigenous or national identity) and questioned whether Muslims truly belong in Myanmar culture (Kyaw, 2015). Thus, the long-lasting crisis continued, and the violence against the Rohingya had increased.

While most of the media dealt with Rohingya crisis as the most persecuted minority in the world, there is still a major challenge, it is that of the unrecognised identity. Their statelessness is the pretext that most of the Rohingya were brought to Arakan (now Myanmar) during the British colonial period, in spite the fact that the Rohingya had settled in Arakan long ago before the arrival of the British. Thus, the crisis is addressed as an outcome of illegal migrations. Nevertheless, the Rohingya have been displaced to neighbouring countries, considered as illegal infiltrated refugees by Bangladesh government, and as illegal foreign immigrants by Indian authorities, while other South Asian countries show no interest in receiving any Rohingya refugees. Thus, the Rohingya refugees are threatened by perpetual statelessness. Most of these refugees are women and children. The Rohingya have no official evidence of citizenship, no passports, no education or official careers as well as many restrictions on their movements. This issue of Rohingya identity is so crucial since this ethnic minority will remain stateless forever. The dilemma of the Rohingya is either to stay in Myanmar and killed, or to escape to neighbouring countries and considered refugees.

There have been tense debates regarding history of the Rohingya. Charney (2005) has discussed the approaches which support and oppose the Rohingya history in Burma. To him, 'Western scholarship has sometimes followed these two approaches, thus compounding rather than resolving the problem.' (2) The Rohingya hope that such debates related to their ethnic identity may help resolve their crisis. Most discussions, however, revolve around the ethnicity and origin of Rohingya. This, in turn, distracts the readers from the core issue of identity. Jonathan Saha (2017) said, 'the discussion around the history of the Rohingya, at its worst, deflects attention away from the problem of defining citizenship through ethnic indigeneity.' This is true because if the argument about the ethnicity and origin of the Rohingya continues without the focus on the key problem of the identity crisis, then the Rohingya will remain stateless forever.

## ***Rohingya and colonialism: A review***

The controversial debates on the origin and ethnicity of Rohingya are due to the absence of primary researches and evidences. As a result, there is uncertainty that made the issue quite problematic. Charney argues that Rohingya is a controversial ethnonym because, as with Magh, it has taken on religious connotations, in this case referring to Muslim Rakhaing (Charney, 2005). According to Ullah (2017), the term Rohingya was derived from 'Rohang', which is the old name for Rakhine State. Anyhow, James Minahan (2002) mentioned that the Rohingya population trace their history to the period Arab traders have been in touch with Arakan since the 600s CE using the Bay of Bengal to arrive at Burma. He also said that 'the Rohingya are of mixed Arab, Bengali, and Burmese ancestry.' Whereas Moshe Yegar (1972) argued that Muslim sailors first reached Burma in the ninth century. Also, Colin Clarke et al (1990) state that the Rohingya belong to Arakanese Indians, who lived in Arakan since about the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and that the majority were Muslim while a minority were Hindu. Francis Buchanan (1801) found that the Rakhaing, whom he called the 'real natives of Arakan,' called both the Muslim and the Hindu Rohingya 'Kulaw Yakain, or stranger Yakain' (Charney, 2005). Additionally, the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation in December 2011 claims that 'Rohingya have been living in Arakan from time immemorial.' Some human rights and peace activists from the Rohingya like Wai Wai Nu (2016) said that the Rohingya lived in the Mrauk-U Kingdom in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and that there are still inscriptions in Rohingya language at ancient historic sites.

However, Anchalee Rüland (2017) argued that 'there is no historical evidence available, which will prove that Muslim settlements have existed in Rakhine since the 8<sup>th</sup> century.' Similarly, Derek Tonkin (2014) asserted that 'there was no such identity as 'Rohingya' known to the British Governments of either India until 1937 or Burma after the separation from India on 1 April of that year [...] that not a single reference to 'Rohingya' is to be found in any British official report or records.' He finally concluded that Rohingya is a designation used after the World War II and that it cannot be thoroughly excepted. Furthermore, Jaques P Leider (2013) mentioned that 'during the colonial period, most migrants came from Chittagong Division, so they were also called "Chittagonians".' According to Derek Tonkin (2014), 'Chittagonian' connotes linguistic and geographical designation rather than racial. In an interview with Jacques P. Leider

by The IRRRAWADDY on July 9, 2012, he said that the Rohingya is not an ethnic group but a 'political label' used after independence.

The Rohingya ensured their national identity right with the fact that they had come to today's Myanmar generations ago, and thus they are the indigenous Muslims of Arakan. According to some Rohingya activists, there is enough evidence to validate the claim of the Rohingya as the citizens of Myanmar. Nay San Lwin (2012) in his article *Making Rohingya Statelessness* mentions some statements in support of the Rohingya claim. First, the Burma's first elected President Sao Shwe Thaik said that Muslims of Arakan certainly belong to the indigenous races of Burma. He declares, 'Muslims of Arakan certainly belong to one of the indigenous races of Burma which you represent. In fact there is no pure indigenous race in Burma, and that if you do not belong to indigenous races of Burma, we also cannot be taken as indigenous races of Burma.'<sup>1</sup> Secondly, the Prime Minister U Nu on September 25, 1954 said that the people living in Buthidaung and Maungdaw Townships are Rohingya, ethnic of Burma. Thirdly, the Prime Minister and Minister of defence U Ba Swe at public gatherings in Buthidaung and Maungdaw Townships on 3 and 4 November 1959 said that the Rohingya has the equal status of nationality with Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Mon, Rakhine and Shan. Finally, the announcement of Frontiers Administration office under Prime Minister Office on 20 November 1961 included that the people living in Mayu Frontier is ethnic Rohingya. Hence, such evidences are sufficient to support the Rohingya citizenship right.

Bangladesh authorities, on the other hand, said they are natives of Burmese State, who have migrated and settled in Burma centuries ago. Kazi Fahmida Farzana (2017) mentioned that the Bangladeshi government had asserted that 'the Rohingya were not originally from Bangladesh.' As for the Bangladesh authorities, the Rohingya were formally unknown until 1977, after they had crossed the boundary from Myanmar in enormous numbers due to political upheaval in their land of origin.

Historically, what happened to this minority during the colonial period was a transformation from identity (Arakanese) to manifold ethnicity (Rohingya) after the Burmese King Bodawpaya had invaded Arakan region and brought it under the control of the kingdom of Ava in central Burma in 1785. At that time, many Arakanese fled to Bengal that was under the British rule. When the British occupied Burma in 1824, they

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.rvisiontv.com/the-Rohingya-are-indigenous-race-of-burma/>

brought Arakan under their control and, consequently, a large number of Arakanese had been brought in. So, there were an ethnic mix of Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists living together in Arakan. Imtiaz Ahmed (2009) says that there have been mainly two theories about the origin of the Rohingya. One theory suggests that the Rohingya are:

Descendants of Moorish, Arab and Persian traders, including Moghul, Turk, Pathan and Bengali soldiers and migrants, who arrived between 9<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, married local women, and settled in the region. Rohingya are, therefore, a mixed group of people with many ethnic and racial connections.p.2

The second theory, which is supported by a majority of the Buddhists and the government, is that the Rohingya are mostly Bengali migrants from 'the erstwhile East Pakistan and now Bangladesh, with some Indians coming during the British period' (Ahmed, 2009). However, according to Kazi Fahmida Farzana (2017) 'the theories and the state institutions practicing the theories have apparently failed to address the identity of the displaced Rohingya refugees.

Therefore, even if some of the Rohingya were brought in from today's India and Bangladesh during the British Colonial period (1824-1948), this should not mean that they are illegal migrants, because during the colonial period there were several distressed migrations all over the world in general and the Southeast Asian countries in particular. In the early 1950s, a few Bengali Muslim intellectuals of the Northwest part of Arakan began to use the term 'Rohingya' to call themselves (Chan, 2005). Hence, this Muslim minority constructed the name 'Rohingya' to be their ethnic identity, or as self-identification. But their ethnonym 'Rohingya' itself has not been accepted either (Kyaw, 2015). They have been calling for equality and acceptance of multiculturalism and heterogeneity. The Rohingya, after all, are humans and have the right to live peacefully like other people, and be given access to education, healthcare and other civic rights. The curse of colonialism must not chase them, as we live in postcolonial and globalisation era.

*Rohingya Identity Crisis and Exodus.* As we said earlier, the Myanmar government has not considered the Rohingya as citizens of Myanmar. The Rohingya have been denied citizenship since 1982 because of their ethnicity as well as their religion. Further, the regime denies that the conflict between Rohingya Muslim minority and Buddhist majority has religious backgrounds. The Myanmar government considered them illegal 'Bengali' immigrants and refused to consider them as people of ethnic identity along with the

officially recognised 135 ethnic groups. Besides, the Myanmar government is trying to stop people from using the word 'Rohingya' (Ferrie, 2013). The indexing of 135 groups was based on the belief that they, unlike others who were excluded, were composed of fixed bodies of people that had existed unbroken for centuries, or longer, and could be defined consistently across time (Wade, 2017). This was too hard for them, as they used to address the Muslim minority living in Rakhine state as Rohingya, because their identity was recognised as Rohingya in 1961 census. Nevertheless, in the 2014 census, the Rohingya were compelled to recognise themselves 'Bengali'. Subsequently, this has been the strategy in Myanmar to justify subordination or exclusion of the Rohingya minority from civic rights.

The Rohingya people used to have National Registration Cards (NRC) like everyone else in the country. Upon introduction of discriminatory policies on Rohingya by Ne Win in 1970s, the NRCs were taken away by various measures. Numerous checkpoints were set up to block Rohingya travel, and to confiscate their IDs (Lwin, 2012). The first exodus was in 1978, when the military began the Naga Min Operation or 'Dragon King' to find and take action against persons the military junta deemed to be illegal immigrants. This operation targeted Rohingya in Rakhine State; the government claimed that the Rohingya people were foreigners rather than an ethnic minority of Myanmar. During this operation, many Rohingya had their official documentation taken away by inter-agency teams of inspectors (Ullah, 2017). As a result, more than 200,000 Rohingya fled across the border into Bangladesh. In 1979, they were repatriated after a bilateral agreement between the authorities of Bangladesh and Myanmar. However, most of the Rohingya who returned were homeless and without any documentation. The mass exodus of Rohingya to Bangladesh was in 1992 after a failure in implementing the results of the 1990 election. Over 270,000 refugees fled to Bangladesh. In April 1992, the two governments again signed a bilateral Memorandum of Understanding for repatriation. Based on that agreement, 50,000 Rohingya refugees were repatriated, most of them forcibly and without UNHCR supervision. UNHCR had started providing assistance in the refugee camps but the agency withdrew in December 1992, in protest against the forcible return. In May 1993, Bangladesh agreed to UNHCR's involvement in the registration of volunteers for repatriation (Lewa, 2001).

The late mass exodus of Muslim Rohingya to Bangladesh began on August 25, 2017, after some Rohingya militants attacked about 30 police posts and an army camp. This was followed by a massive military counter-offensive by the security forces in

Myanmar. Moreover, from the time when the military crackdown broke out in August 2017, more one million Rohingya had fled Myanmar to neighbouring Bangladesh. The attacks on Rohingya villages in August 2017 were a systematic effort to drive them out and had been described as an ‘ethnic cleansing.’

Presently, there are about 1.1 million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.<sup>2</sup> According to the UNICEF, children make up nearly 60 percent of them. Besides, there are 40,000 refugees in India, 5,000 in Thailand, 150,000 in Malaysia, 1,000 in Indonesia, 350,000 in Pakistan, 10,000 in UAE, and 200,000 in Saudi Arabia according to a report by Al Jazeera Channel.<sup>3</sup> However, Myanmar strongly rejected international pleas for repatriation, and it has planted landmines along the border with Bangladesh to ensure that the fugitives do not return. So, the Rohingya exodus is definitely the largest exodus in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Rohingya distressed migration may remain for decades if the southern Asian countries, be it Myanmar, Bangladesh or India, take no serious steps to settle the Rohingya identity issue.

Besides, the Rohingya identity crisis has resulted in several crises; the forced migration crisis, the statelessness crisis, and humanitarian crisis (Kyaw, 2017). Many believe that the crisis of Rohingya identity has begun when the Myanmar's Citizenship Law was passed in 1982. This nationality law is the root cause of the Rohingya plight. It determined the ethnic groups that qualify for citizenship right. Besides, the Myanmar government posed conditions for those who wish to qualify for citizenship: they must prove a close familial connection to the country; there must be evidence for the person's family having lived in Myanmar before 1948, as well as fluency in one of the national languages. Unfortunately, many Rohingya lack such conditions, because they have been illiterate and have no documents. Therefore, the real problem primarily lies in a lack of implementation by successive Myanmar governments, and the Rohingya arbitrary deprivation of the right to nationality and citizenship documentation (Kyaw, 2017).

According to Alam Jobair (2017), the Rohingya identity, being a minority, has resulted in their persecution. To him, their minority identity has been (re)constructed over

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.foxnews.com/world/bangladesh-point-finger-at-myanmar-for-rohingya-genocide>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/08/rohingya-muslims-](https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/08/rohingya-muslims-170831065142812.html)

time. He states four factors that lead to the reconstruction of the Rohingya identity: (i) development of Burmese nationalism; (ii) politicisation of identity for Burmese majority; (iii) taking away of the citizenship of Rohingya; and (iv) ethnic divisions in Myanmar society have played significant roles in (re)constructing their identity as a minority (Jobair, 2017). However, what matters in the current identity crisis is not the history, origin, or ethnicity. What matters is how to find or arrive at a fair resolution that satisfy all concerned parties to end the present identity plight.

### *Political, Ideological, and Cultural Factors*

The Rohingya have been denied citizenship right owing to their multiple ethnicities along with some political, ideological and cultural reasons. The Rohingya were rendered stateless and left wondering helplessly about their identity. The problem with Rohingya identity is that it encompasses multi-ethnic roots. The answer to the question ‘why the Rohingya minority was not considered an ethnic group along with the recognised 135 ethnic groups in Myanmar’ has its political, ideological and cultural dimensions.

Politically, the notion of nationalism was recruited to legitimatising the exclusion of Rohingya from the political scene by Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD), and the Union Solidarity and Development Party created by the military in 2009. Nationalism becomes one of the most powerful forces in modern communities especially in Myanmar. It is, also, associated with concepts of self-identification and freedom, of identity and unity as well as ideas of suppression and force, of domination and exclusion. Hence, it became fundamental in identity formation and identity politics. Therefore, from a political viewpoint, the Burmese nationalists argue that the Rohingya are going to establish a separate state. This is because, before independence, in 1947 some Rohingya leaders approached President Jinnah of the newly created Pakistan and requested him to incorporate northern Arakan into East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). This step was definitely the root cause of the current governmental attitude towards the Rohingya (Lewa, 2001).

As soon as Burma became independent in 1948, M. A. Gaffar, a member of the Constituent Assembly of Burma, introduced a letter of petition to the Government of the Union of Burma, asking for the identification of the term ‘Rohingya’, as the official ethnic identity of Muslim Arakanese. Besides, Sultan Ahmed, a member of the Justice Sir Ba Oo Commission, was responsible with studying if Arakan should be granted



independence. Hence, the Burmese ultra-nationalists think that the Muslim minority can pose a threat to national security and unity. That is, if Rakhine became independent, this independence would be because of the formation of national entities and nationalist cultural constructions.

Therefore, the Rohingya have been systematically deprived of their political rights. Now, Myanmar is a Buddhist-majority country ruled by authoritarian military that controls everything in the state. Myanmar's leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who is now the State Counsellor and Head of the Government, remained silent and refused to speak out though she is a Nobel Peace laureate. Recently, she justified the violence against the Rohingya on the basis of national security, saying there must be a policy to differentiate between terrorists and innocent people.

With regards the terrorist pretext, every country and in every society, there are outlaws, extremists and terrorists. Hence, it would be unfair to displace and expel more than one million population just because a group of seven to ten militants or terrorists attacked police posts. There must have been other strategies to tackle the problem without resorting to violence or any type of conflict. The ultra-nationalism policy ought not to condemn the whole Rohingya population of the terrorist attack.

Apart from this, the notion of nationalism has become a hegemonic ideology. The ultra-nationalists believed they would return Myanmar to its supposed pre-colonial glory, when a Buddhist order thrived, uncontaminated by foreign influences, and all subjects of king enjoyed an abiding sense of national unity (Wade, 2017). They gave nationalist flavour to this with the slogan 'Burma for the Burmans' while Monks insistently repeating that 'to be Burman is to be Buddhist' (Ullah, 2017). To Bill Ashcroft et al (2007), nationalism became a national tradition and as a practice that will sustain the entity of dominant powers in communities. They said:

This myth of nationhood, masked by ideology, perpetuates nationalism, in which specific identifiers are employed to create exclusive and homogeneous conceptions of national traditions. Such signifiers of homogeneity always fail to represent the diversity of the actual 'national' community for which they purport to speak and, in practice, usually represent and consolidate the interests of the dominant power groups within any national formation.p.135

Bill Ashcroft et al (2007) further explained how nationalism is utilised to create new concepts of a nation-state. For them 'all the instrumentalities of state power (e.g. military and police agencies, judiciaries, religious hierarchies, educational systems and political assemblies or organizations) are subsumed and legitimized as the 'natural' expressions of

a unified national history and culture.’ For example, the Korean minority has been stigmatized and excluded from positions of power in the society in Japan. Usually, this is the case because one ethnicity is dominant or in the much greater majority (Ryan, 2010). Likewise, Barker (2004) noted:

The representation of identities is a ‘political’ question because they are intrinsically bound up with questions of power as a form of social regulation that is productive of the self and enables some kinds of identities to exist while denying it to others. P.95

Apparently, the issue of Rohingya identity turned to be more problematic that none of the Myanmar political figures spoke or commented on the current identity plight of the Rohingya in Rakhine State. Similarly, Imtiaz Ahmed, (2009) revealed that the word ‘Rohingya’ is taboo in the Capital City of Yangon. This is because the Burmese think that using the name ‘Rohingya’ will legitimise the Rohingya identity and existence in Myanmar. They also argue that ‘Rohingya’ is a political claim constructed by the invaders. This argument is supported by Jaques P. Leider (2013) when he defined the Rohingya as ‘a political and militant movement as its foremost aim was the creation of an autonomous Muslim zone.’

So, taking into account the previous facts, it becomes obvious that the present Myanmar politicians do not want Rohingya minority to have any political dominance, claiming that the term ‘Rohingya’ is a recent invention coined for political purposes to obtain nationality right. Kazi Fahmida Farzana (2017) argued, ‘the central problem of the Rohingya is the question of the group’s political identity, and hence its belonging.’ Conversely, during the past three decades, the Rohingya showed no interest to the political or ethnic identity. This is also vividly true because most of them have been living in Myanmar since 1982 without any official identity documents.

Ideologically, the identity plight has an Islamophobic background and, in some discourses, xenophobia. According to Ashin (1990), ‘There is a danger posed by the increasing Muslim population.’(177) The Buddhist monks are afraid that these Rohingya may restore the Arakan State or they may expand the Rakhine state in near future as they breed quite considerably. This fear began during the 1950s and 60s, when insurgent movements by Arakanese Muslims called for an autonomous state. They think the rapid growth in the Muslim population in Rakhine would ultimately threaten the very existence of Buddhism in the state. Hence, the Buddhist in Rakhine State threatened the government to boycott the census if Muslims were given self-identification right as ‘Rohingya’

(Tonkin, 2014). Consequently, jingoism is a significant factor in identity acquisition process, owing to the so-called Buddhist superiority over other ethnic minorities. Besides, the education system in Myanmar is exploited by the Ma Ba Tha to spread anti-Muslim prejudices.

Apart from these allegations, many Buddhists and Buddhist monks claim that 'Rohingya' is an invented religious identity. They said the Burmese history did not witness an ethnic group called Rohingya. The Buddhist Monk U Par Mount Kha in a TV interview with Al Jazeera alleged that the Rohingya never existed. He, also, argued that the Rohingya were working on farms and were porters and road builders, and that they did not go back. In the end, he declared, 'I do not accept that the Rohingya exist. They lied to the world that Maungdaw and Buthidaung are populated by Muslims to try to create a separate state.' He, also, said that they are not qualified to be citizens under our citizenship law and if they let them out, the terrorist attacks will increase in Myanmar.<sup>4</sup> Thus, this can be an evidence that some fanatic Buddhists want to establish an entirely Buddhist country void of any Muslim ethnicity, and dominated by jingoistic regime. This fact is observed by Azeem Ibrahim (2016) when he says 'for the first time since independence, the parliament in Myanmar has no Muslim members from any ethnic group.' There are other Muslim minorities qualified for citizenship rights but the candidates of these Muslim minorities were deleted from the list.

Undoubtedly, this Buddhists' attitude towards Rohingya reflects the followed ideological perspective that discriminates the Rohingya minority. Such discrimination is revealed by Ronan Lee, who is a political consultant and scholar in the Deakin University in Melbourne, when he said that even Muslims who were qualified to be citizens according to the citizenship law had confronted obstacles affirming their nationality rights. In addition, the head of the Seagull Foundation Harry Myo Lin declared that ethnicity and religion should not be on ID cards if there is going to be any reform. Azeem Ibrahim (2016) points out that those who 'subscribe to Theravada Buddhism [...] argue that for Buddhism to be safe all other religious beliefs must be eliminated.' There are systematic efforts to eliminate any references to the history and existence of Muslim

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/aljazeeraworld/2017/07/rohingya-silent-abuse-](https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/aljazeeraworld/2017/07/rohingya-silent-abuse-170730120336898.html)

community in Myanmar. Thus, Muslims in Myanmar became as an invisible minority (Crouch, 2016).

Nevertheless, in the case of the Rohingya minority, the issue of identity is related to and based on jingoistic policy that considers the minority groups as a source of threats and problems. This jingoistic perspective has been justifying and legitimising all sorts of exclusion and persecution. The hegemony of the ruling class determines that the oppressed minorities should be subordinated or marginalised. This is because if Rohingya were given citizenship right, they would be no longer marginalised. Instead, they would gain full access to all civic rights and social resources and there would be no restriction on their marriage or movements. Consequently, in a couple of years, the population of the Rohingya would be double, and their political stance could not be ignored.

Culturally, the problem with Rohingya identity is the somewhat complicated ethnic identity with varied roots. The multiple ethnicities formed the so-called multicultural Myanmar, which encompasses more than 136 ethnic groups. What matters here is language because without language the Rohingya identity would be unintelligible. Andrew Simpson (2007) states that the Rohingya speak Rohingya/Ruaingga language which is a particular variety of the Chittagonian dialect of Bengali distinguished from other languages spoken in Rakhine state and throughout Myanmar. Dr Francis Buchanan in 1799 wrote that 'Mohammedans' was one of the indigenous groups of Arakan, who have inhabited in Arakan for a long time, and who identify themselves as Rooinga, or natives of Arakan (Buchanan-Hamilton, Francis 1799). Also, Johann Severin Vater listed 'Ruinga' as an ethnic group with a distinct language in a compendium of languages published in German in 1815 (Ibrahim, 2016). In addition, James Minahan (2002) said that the Rohingya language belongs to the Bengali-Assamese branch of the Indo-Aryan languages. Notwithstanding, Derek Tonkin (2014) suggested that 'Rooinga' refers to 'Arakaner' which is 'a geographic locator rather than an ethnic designation.' On the contrary, the Burmese called the language spoken by Rohingya as Bengali though it is different. This very assumption made many Buddhists to deem Rohingya to be Bengali, owing to the previous influence of Bengali in Arakan.

On the other hand, the Rohingya insisted on the fact that they are original native inhabitants of Rakhine and not illegal immigrants or Bengali, and that they prefer to call themselves 'Rakhine Muslims' (Leider, 2013). James Minahan (2002) mentioned in his book that the Rohingya culture is related to Bengali but with influences from the Buddhist Arakanese. Hence, some Burmese citizens believe that the Rohingya do not look like

them or Burmese Hindu. They, also, claim that even the food culture of the Rohingya is the same as that of the Bangladeshi and Pakistani cultures. Besides, some fanatic Buddhists have called the Rohingya 'Kalar'. This pejorative term 'Kalar' has become a widespread cultural term in Myanmar, used by the ultra-nationalist Burmese while describing the Rohingya. However, though ethnicity is a major indicator of identity, the nationalists believe that members of each group were defined by innate characteristics that had remained unchanged for a millennia that established members of one as the natural ruler of the country, the master race, and all the others as secondary citizens, or worse( Wade, 2017). Thus, all these conditions have complicated the situation and made the identity issue even more sophisticated.

To summarise the above critical analysis, we can say that the Myanmar decision to deny citizenship to Rohingya as well as to oust them has political, ideological, and cultural reasons. Politically, the problem is about identity politics and nationalism. Burmese nationalists argued that the Rohingya would construct themselves politically if they were granted national identity. In this perspective, identity is linked to power. That is, acknowledging the Rohingya as an ethnic identity means accepting it as a political national identity as well. This is because Myanmar is governed by Buddhist-majority militia, and everything, including major ministries, is under its control. Ideologically, it is due to Islamophobia. The Buddhist monks fear that Islam may prevail and spread to the nearby states. They worry about the assumption that Rakhine state will become an independent Muslim state. Hence, the Buddhist monks seek to make Myanmar totally Buddhist, posing that the establishment of Islamic state in Myanmar may lead to partition as the case of the Indian partition, and will lead to the establishment of East Pakistan. Culturally, the language and culture of Rohingya are completely different from other languages and cultures in Myanmar, and that is why they have been called foreigners or invaders. The Buddhist monks claimed that Rohingya as an ethnic group never existed in the cultural history of Myanmar though there are references of the Rohingya ancient history in Myanmar.

### *What is the destiny of the Rohingya?*

Rohingya identity is still not recognised as a national identity or even an ethnicity by the Myanmar government, though it has been historically ethnic and cultural identity. The Rohingya are the only group whose citizenship in Myanmar is still unresolved and

contested by the Myanmar government and people. While we argue that the national and cultural ethnic identity of Rohingya should not be considered as entirely different from other ethnicities particularly the dominant ones, from the above discussions, it is conspicuous that the Rohingya identity crisis may continue for several reasons. First, it is legally unrecognised as the Myanmar citizenship law excepted the Rohingya to be a national ethnic identity amongst the 135 recognised ethnic groups. Secondly, the Myanmar government still refutes any repatriation operations of the displaced refugees who do not have any documentation though it is said that the Myanmar authorities have reached an agreement with the UN to start safe repatriation of the Rohingya.<sup>5</sup> Thirdly, most South Asian countries refused to accept them or grant them any citizenship right or asylum. Finally, the Myanmar government burnt the Rohingya villages, confiscated their properties, and built military bases in those villages to ensure that any return of the Rohingya is impossible.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the Rohingya have been deliberately excluded. For generations, they used to call themselves ‘Rohingya’, but now they are referred to as stateless refugees, as ‘floating people’ and as resident foreigners. They are not protected because they lack national identity.

Nowadays, ‘Rohingya’ is a universal term rather than an identity. The word ‘Rohingya’ becomes a historical name for the Muslim Arakanese (Ullah, 2017). It is regarded as a name used by the minority Muslims, who once used to inhabit the western littoral State of Rakhine in Myanmar. They have been living in Myanmar without citizenship for decades, endured decades of persecution, marginalization, and diaspora. In spite of all restrictions, they were somehow living peacefully without any recognised national identity. The Rohingya people have their own distinctive language, their own culture and religion, and yet they are denied national identity. They must be considered an ethnic group and declared as citizens of Myanmar.

Consequently, the destiny of the Rohingya is still unknown. They were displaced and enforced to leave their homes and villages. Besides, the South Asian countries’ stance from the Rohingya identity is vague. There are nearly two millions Rohingya refugees

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/31/world/asia/myanmar-rohingya-refugees-return.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/03/myanmar-military-land-grab-as-security-forces-build-bases-on-torched-rohingya-villages/>

living in Bangladesh, India, Thailand, Malaysia, UAE, and Saudi Arabia. Bangladesh, though being a Muslim majority, considers the displaced Rohingya who have crossed its borders and are living outside of camps as illegally infiltrated refugees from Myanmar. It offers two options: the first is to send Rohingya refugees to the remote uninhabitable island Thengar Char in the Bay of Bengal. The second is to send them back to Myanmar and requested the UN to assure safe zones in Rakhine state.

India, on the other hand, plans to deport the 40 k Rohingya refugees to Myanmar, but the case is pending in the Supreme Court with a decision to be made. The India authorities described them as illegal foreign migrants and claimed that they belong to Burmese origins in spite of the fact that there are historical evidences ensuring Rohingya ethnic roots go back to India as well. Other South Asian countries like Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia refused to receive any refugees either, and those who had already been in were given refugee cards, restricted their movement in internal refugee camps. In short, they are not welcome in any country. This act will definitely make the Rohingya face their unknown fate. They became homeless as well as hopeless. With unknown destiny, Bangladesh authorities planned to move the Rohingya refugees to a remote, isolated and inhabited island in the Bay of Bengal, where they are supposed to start a new life, perhaps a stone age-like life.

### *Conclusion*

This article investigated the issue of Rohingya identity crisis. The Rohingya are still stateless since their identity is unrecognised by the Myanmar successive governments. The article stated that the Rohingya crisis was a result of political, ideological, and cultural factors. The author also argued that colonialism had contributed to the Rohingya identity crisis. Such complex factors effectively rendered them stateless despite the fact that there are 135 legally recognised ethnic groups in Myanmar. The Myanmar authorities, due to ultra-nationalism and Islamophobia, said that Rohingya, as an identity, is a misnomer. Therefore, the 1982 citizenship law considered them as an alien group that did not belong to any national races. This citizenship law is the root cause of the Rohingya identity plight along with colonialism. Yet, the Rohingya have insisted on their identity, determined to identify themselves as national race that inhabited Myanmar for generations and that they must qualify for citizenship.

Debates over Rohingya identity remained unresolved, and their ethnicity, language and culture had been a controversial case. However, not all the debates, arguments and opinions about the origin, history and ethnicity of Rohingya served settling the issue of Rohingya identity. Such speculations put the blame on the migrations that took place during and after the British colonialism. Besides, the colonial impact of migration has made the issue of identity very complex for most South Asian countries in postcolonial contexts. This is because the migrations during colonial period resulted in mix ethnicities. Further, in depth investigations, constructive arguments and discussions concerning the history or ethnicity of Rohingya must be enhanced because such debates may help solve the problem of identity.

Thus, the long-standing crisis of the Rohingya was how to acquire national identity regardless of their religion, language or ethnicity, because a person, in a nation-state system, without national identity would become an alien. They have undergone several circumstances that affected and shaped their identity as Rohingya. The fears of current statelessness make them seek reconciliation with the Myanmar authorities as to understand their unique identity crisis, to recognise them with whatever term but illegal Bengali immigrants. They claim their distinctive place and argue for a tolerance and acceptance of cultural diversity.

At last, if there is going to be any solution for the Rohingya, it should start with the identity issue; the 1982 citizenship law has to be modified to include the Rohingya as an official national ethnic group that qualify for nationality right. Also, those who were brought to Myanmar or migrated to it during the British colonial must be considered citizens of Myanmar. The international community, particularly the UK as the main responsible of the Rohingya plight, and its allies have to exercise diplomatic pressures on the Myanmar authorities to convince them modify the citizenship law and grant the Rohingya nationality right. Furthermore, there must be guarantees from the Myanmar government for safe repatriation of refugees to their homes. This is the ultimate solution to end the crisis of the identity of the Rohingya.



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