BUDDHIST NATIONALISM
ROHINGYA CRISIS AND
CONTEMPORARY POLITICS

Edited by
Asif Bin Ali • Sabbir Ahmed
This book examines the role of Buddhist nationalism and economic interest in the Rohingya crisis. Moreover, it addresses the impact of violence over women and children. It contends that, the crisis is not new, but deeply rooted in the politics of ethno-religious nationalism which has started since the colonial era.

The book brings together incisive contribution from researchers living and working in Bangladesh, India, China and Netherlands to explore newer possibilities to deal with the crisis and looks at a range of critical themes in nationalism, violence and genocide. Rich in content critical and insightful, this book will be a valuable addition for scholars and researchers of Anthropology, Sociology, Political Science, International Relations, History and South Asian studies.

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Burmese Nationalism

Rohingya Crisis And Contemporary Politics

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Paradox Of Rohingya Crisis: A Legacy Of History

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Abstract:

This chapter deals with the contemporary issues and incidents of the Rohingya crisis with an aim to investigate the subject from the historical and political point of view where it will be engaged in discussing the historical paradox about Rohingya community along with shading light on the different arguments. It will also address the contemporary history of persecution against Rohingya community from a non-aligned approach.

Keywords: Rohingya, refugee, history, human rights, Bangladesh, Myanmar

Rohingyas are the inhabitants of historical Arakan (Rakhine State) of Myanmar. Arakan shares nearly 171 mile-long common border with Bangladesh. Its total area is 14,914 sq miles which contains approximately 3 million population according to
the census of 2014. Out of this, there are around one million
Rohingyas in Arakan (Farzana, 2017, p. 2). It is a piece of land
along the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal from the Naaf river on
the border of Chittagong to cape Negaris. Topographically, it is
separated from the mainland of Myanmar by Yoma range in one
side and widely connected to the Bay of Bengal in the other side.
That is why it is known as the ‘Gate Way to the Far East’ (Yunus,
1994, p. 7). Because of its geographical location, it started to atract
the seafarers from the very ancient period. It was one of the
maritime activities centre in the South Asia. With this Arakan grew
up with economic development and multi cultural environment.
However, because of the geographical condition, Arakan remained
as an independent entity from the very ancient period.

According to archaeological evidences, the earliest human
settlement in Myanmar dates back to 11,000 BC (Maw, 1995, pp.
213-220). In case of Arakan, antique relics have been found from
Indo-Aryan groups who arrived from the Ganges Valley to Arakan
as early as 3000 BC. And these people were basically from the
ancient India. Hence, the culture of Arakan was influenced by
India instead of mainland of Myanmar at least up to the 10th
century because of its easy access to the Gangetic land and the Bay
of Bengal instead of mountainous boundary on the other side. In
reference to H. H. Wilson (1817) and Pamela Gutman (2001),
Azeem Ibrahim (2016, p. 24) concluded that the culture of ancient Arakan is not possible to be understood without understanding its elementary assimilation with Indian and Bengali origin. Another important component was the openness of Arakan to the Bay of Bengal which brought it very close to the Arab, Mughal, Persian and other cultures (Tahir, 2007). This is how, Arakan culture was already deeply rooted here with its Bengali, Indian and Middle-Eastern elements before the arrival of Rakhine crossing the mountains of Arakan following the Burmese expansion in around 1000 AD (Hall, 1968, p. 389; Tucker, 2001, pp. 11-12). Till then, Arakan was ruled by Chandra dynasty which was a Hindu dynasty.
centring in Veisali. Despite a Hindu kingdom, Arakan had an integration of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam.

According to Myanmar and other sources, Islam reached the shores of Myanmar's Arakan (Rakhine State) as early as 712 AD, via seafarer merchants, and in the form of Sufism (Skidmore & Wilson, 2008, p. 177). Francis Wade also argued that Muslims landed in Arakan at least more than a millennium ago (Wade, 2017, p. 23). Even the name 'Arakan' was derived from Arabic word 'Rukn' meaning the pillar of Islam. Therefore, it is evident that the arrival of Muslims in Arakan happened as early as 8th century which was even before the Rakhine or Burmese arrival in Arakan. This is how, Arab assimilation created a strong foundation of Islam in Arakan which later worked as a precursor of Muslim rule there in 1430, and it continued up to the Burmese conquest in 1784. Burmese king Badaw Paya annexed Arakan in 1784, and ruled up to the 1825 British conquest (Erbert & White, 1923, pp. 104-105). During the reign of Badaw Paya, Arakanese people were brutally tortured and massive numbers of Arakani Muslims were driven out from Arakan to Bengal. However, Burma first came into contact with Europe in 1519 (The Imperial Guide to India: Including Kashmir, Burma and Ceylon, 1904). There was not any British penetration before that, but Muslims used to live there. So, the Burmese argument which implies that all Muslims and Bengali people were infiltrated during the colonial period is surely rhetoric.
Nevertheless, a good number of Bengali and Indian people were employed in Arakan during the colonial rule, and this back and forth migration happened more or less everywhere in the British colony, but nowhere this confusion occurred. Notwithstanding, the number of migrated Bengali people was not greater than early Muslim settlers. Therefore, the argument which was developed after the Independence of Myanmar saying ‘Arakani Muslims and Bengalese are not the original people of Arakan’ is intentional for not allowing citizenship to Rohingyas.

The legacy of denial

As the discussion in the previous part of this chapter has already proven the existence of Rohingya Muslim as one of the ethnic group in Arakan, they are undoubtedly eligible to be the citizen of Myanmar. But in the independent Burma, Rohingyas were betrayed after the death of the founder of Burmese independence Aung San on July 19, 1947 (Sarkisyanz, 1965, p. 187). Afterward, Burma never witnessed democratic practice rather always was ruled by the military rulers until it’s so called ‘democratic revolution. During this long period of autocratic rule in Burma, the destiny of Rohingyas experienced state sponsored persecution repeatedly under the ethnic cleansing strategy. United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra‘ad al-Hussein told
the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, “The situation seems a textbook example of ethnic cleansing” (OHCHR, 2017). The current persecution and exclusion of the Rohingyas reflect over forty years of state propaganda designed to ensure that most Burmese now regard them as foreigners and as a threat to Buddhist culture (Ibrahim, 2016, p. 24). We see the reflection of this during the rule of Ne Win (1962-88). In 1977, he launched Operation Nagamin or Dragon King which displaced more than 200,000 Rohingyas to Bangladesh. Most of them were repatriated later under the negotiation of UN, but the sufferings of Rohingyas had not ended. Finally, General Ne Win sealed all possibilities of Rohingyas to become a citizen of Myanmar by passing a Citizenship Act, and they became stateless in their motherland.

On 15 October 1982, the military passed the Citizenship Act, establishing a three-tiered system of citizenship. Only Burmese nationals, some selective indigenous ethnic groups and the people who could provide the evidence that they used to live in Burma even before the first Anglo-Burmese War in 1823 were considered as the full citizen or genuine citizen (Steinberg, 2010, p. 72). Section 2(b) of this Citizenship Act included the people from the flowing Burmese races only, viz. Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Burman, Mon, Arakanese and Shan (Razzaq & Haque, 1995, p. 28). According to the Citizenship Law of 1982, _135 Myanmar
races (subdivisions of 8 major ethnic groups) have the status as Tai Yin Tha, or 'original ethnic groups', i.e., those living in Burma before the first British conquest in 1824 are entitled to citizenship (Gravers, 2015). Thus, as a full citizen, they could be appointed as government official; they could vote or could be elected as representative or join in army, and were given National Registration Card (NRC). The other two categories of citizens are Associates citizens and Naturalized citizens. The people who entered into Burma during the colonial rule are Associate and Naturalized citizens. Those people who have been granted citizenship on submission of application under the Union Citizenship Act of 1948 (within 1948-50) were grouped as Associate citizens. Those who could not apply and were not granted citizenship under the Citizenship Act of 1948 were treated as Naturalized Citizens (Karim, 2000, p. 122).

The partial citizens of 2nd and 3rd categories are excluded from many rights, such as they cannot be given military or bureaucratic positions, cannot vote or take part in the election, and are denied higher education (Phillips, 2013). Rohingyas are the mostly affected victim of the Citizenship Act 1982 because they were excluded from the citizenship according to section 2(b) which denied them as nationals of Myanmar. Rohingyas, being one of the ethnic communities of Arakan, were not accepted as the nationals
eligible to hold NRC. Rather they were treated as a foreigner giving Foreign Registration Card (FRC). It seems like Myanmar took the land of Arakan but denied to accept its people. This is how Rohingyas became alien in the land of their forefather. In 1988, Burma rose up with revolt known as ‘8888 Uprising’. Mass people started demanding to put an end to the military rule and to arrange a democratic election. In response, Ne Win promised that democracy would be revived and multi-party election would be arranged. He resigned which showed a bit light to the pro-democratic people but the military scrambled on the protestors. They then banned most of the political parties and arrested many leaders. On July 1989, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) placed Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest (McGowan, 1993).

In 1990, election was arranged where Suu Kyi led National League for Democracy (NLD) got 392 seats out of 485 but power was not handed over (Chronology for Rohingya in Burma, 2004). In 1991, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. However, Myanmar (renamed in 1989) started continuing under military rulers who again started persecution against Rohingya community. This time, more than 250,000 Rohingyas crossed the border and became refugees to get rid of firing, rape, forced labour and religious persecution done by Myanmar army. Under the international pressure, again there was repatriation agreement between
Bangladesh and Myanmar on which around 230,000 Rohingyas returned to their homeland from 1992 to 1997 (Al-Mahmood, 2016).

Rohingyas were somehow repatriated but not given their expected rights or any compensation. Furthermore, government of Myanmar became enraged about Rohingya issue. In 2005, a Rohingya MP was arrested for helping his community. In 2008, Myanmar’s third constitution was framed where there was nothing good for Rohingya community because it actually reinstated the denial of the constitution of 1982 (Ibrahim, 2016, p. 95). Moreover, state-patronized anti-Muslim propaganda during past two decades made Rakhine Buddhists most infuriated to Rohingya Muslims which led to the massacre in 2012. In early 2012, tension increased between Rakhine and Rohingya community blaming that a Rakhine Buddhist woman was raped by a Muslim. On the contrary, 10 Muslims were murdered by Rakhine Buddhists. These incidents triggered a severe clash, and caused a deadly communal riot between Buddhists and Rohingyas on June which continued up to October. In this riot, more than 200 people were killed and around 150,000 became homeless (Hunt, 2017). Subsequently, state of emergency was declared in the Rakhine State.

The argument employed here is whether this persecution was state patronized or not. President Thein Sein in his interview to the UN
said, ―The million Rohingya people in Rakhine state are simply not welcome in Myanmar. They would be placed in camps or, preferably, deported.” (Bahar, 2010). Therefore, it is clear that it was a state-patronized systematic attempt to force the Rohingya to leave the state where the main motive was ethnic cleansing (Human Rights Watch, 2013). In 2014, Myanmar conducted the first census in more than 30 years, but Rohingyas were excluded (Ferguson, 2015). Furthermore, they were kept out of voting right in the election of 2015. Even Suu Kyi refused any Muslim to contest the election from the NLD platform (McPherson, 2015; Ranjan, 2017). This is how, Muslims are treated in Myanmar.

On October 2016, Burmese state media claimed that 300 Rohingyas attacked on border posts in Rakhine State and killed 9 police. Myanmar military started scrambling on unarmed Rohingyas which killed many Rohingyas and drove around 90,000 to Bangladesh. On 25 August 2017, Myanmar army started a series of attacks as “Clearance Operations” showing an allegation of a so called attack of the ARSA (Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army) on the military of Myanmar. But, different international organizations’ reports state that the persecution on Rohingya was already underway even two weeks before the attack of the ARSA (Rowlatt, 2017). However, the recent plight of the Rohingya community has crossed all previous records. The violence in
Rakhine State which began on 25 August 2017 has driven an estimated 655,500 Rohingyas to Bangladesh (ISCG Situation Report: Rohingya Refugee Crisis, 2018) increasing the total Rohingya population residing in Bangladesh to some 800,000 (International Organisation for Migration, 2017).

Notwithstanding all these massacre and exodus Suu Kyi denied any sort of violation of human rights in a television speech on 19 September 2017 (Amnesty International, 2017). But, there is a complete violation of human rights in Myanmar. Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh have shared their memories of persecution, "Numerous memories associated with the denial of citizenship, eviction from homes, arbitrary arrest, disappearance, unpaid forced labour, excessive taxation, restriction on mobility, police harassment and rape, family segregation, confiscation of property, destruction of religious establishments, and …" (Farzana, 2017, pp. 235-236). The violation of all sorts of human rights has also been reflected in the report of the UNHR (OHCHR, 2017). Many scholars termed the atrocity on Rohingya as a state patronized crime and Genocide (Green, MacManus, & Venning, 2015). This attitude of Myanmar authority proves they are not willing to let Rohingya people live in Myanmar.
The plight of the Rohingya somehow moves around the above cycle. The persecution in 2017 was not new. Therefore, international organizations should be more active to avoid a makeshift solution. Because repatriation without solving the problem cannot put an end to the Rohingya crisis, rather, uprooting the cause of the problem can bring a sustainable and acceptable solution to it.

If statelessness and persecution are considered as the two major causes, then these should be solved first by giving citizenship to Rohingyas and ensuring religious coexistence in Myanmar. Kofi Annan Commission also recommended to ensure fundamental rights for the people of Rakhine state (Annan, 2017). Only after that, repatriation can be successful. Otherwise, it is not possible to come out from this cycle. In this process, Bangladesh has to be more active to initiate international consensus. This process may
not be that much easy for Bangladesh as per as geo-politics is concern (Schendel, 2016). Bangladesh has to try her level best to find out a permanent solution to this refugee-issue because it may instigate threat to its economy and security. On the contrary, Myanmar, as a new democratic country, should play wise role while dealing with ethnic minorities.

**Conclusion**

Rohingya is one of the major ethnic groups in Myanmar. Historically, it has been found that most of them arrived to ancient Arakan or today’s Rakhine state of Myanmar at least more than a millennium ago (Wade, 2017). Nevertheless, they are deprived of citizenship and other fundamental rights. They are viciously tortured and brutally killed in their motherland which often turns into a form of ethnic cleansing. Therefore, the return of the Rohingya refugees to Myanmar never can be a solution because they deliberately have become refugees considering their homeland as unsecured for them. The violence in Rakhine State which began on 25 August 2017 has driven an estimated 655,500 Rohingyas to Bangladesh. This (2017) was not the first time the world community witnessed the largest influx within such a short period of time from Myanmar to Bangladesh; rather it repeatedly happened even before. After negotiation, usually, Myanmar
authorities agree to repatriate a number of Rohingya refugees but not all. Therefore, international community and the UN should negotiate with Myanmar to create a liveable situation where Rohingyas would feel secured to be in Rakhine State. That might be done by giving them citizenship considering their historical attachment with Arakan, along with ensuring all fundamental and human rights.
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