Rohingya Refugee Crisis:
Contexts, Problems, and Solutions

Rey Ty

Introduction

Background

There are many problems related to statelessness and refugees in Asia, among which are the following: Assam in India; Myanmar-Thailand border; and Rohingyas in Myanmar. The Muslim majority Rohingyas have been living in the Rakhine state for as long as they, their parents, their grandparents, and their great grandparents can remember. Their land is in between Bangladesh on its west and the rest of Myanmar on its east. Myanmar is home to a multiplicity of ethnicities, religions, and languages.

Research Questions

This paper responds to the following queries regarding the Rohingya refugee crisis:

1. What are the historical and current contexts that gave rise to the Rohingya crisis?
2. What were the causes and effects of the problem?
3. What are the proposed actions to resolve the current crisis?

Objective

To answer the above questions, this paper presents the contexts, problems, and proposed solutions related to the Rohingya crisis.

Literature Search

Since this crisis is still brewing, there is a gap in the academic journal on this matter, which this paper seeks to fill. Most of the literature cited are from the news media outlets, such as The Atlantic, BBC, Democracy Now, El Diario, Frontline PBS, The Guardian, El Mundo, El País, New York Times, and the Washington Post, to name a few. Insider views from Myanmar are also cited, including publication in the English language, such as the Irrawaddy. From the news sources reviewed, this paper analyzes, organizes, and synthesizes the current state of the literature about the Rohingya refugee crisis, which scrutinizes (1) the historical and current contexts, (2) the causes and effects of the problem which emerged, and (3) the proposed agenda to solve the refugee crisis besetting the Rohingyas. The central focus of this paper was the major events surrounding the refugee crisis which took place in 2017, looking back at the historical contexts that led to this situation as well as the synthesizing the major proposals to solve this refugee crisis.

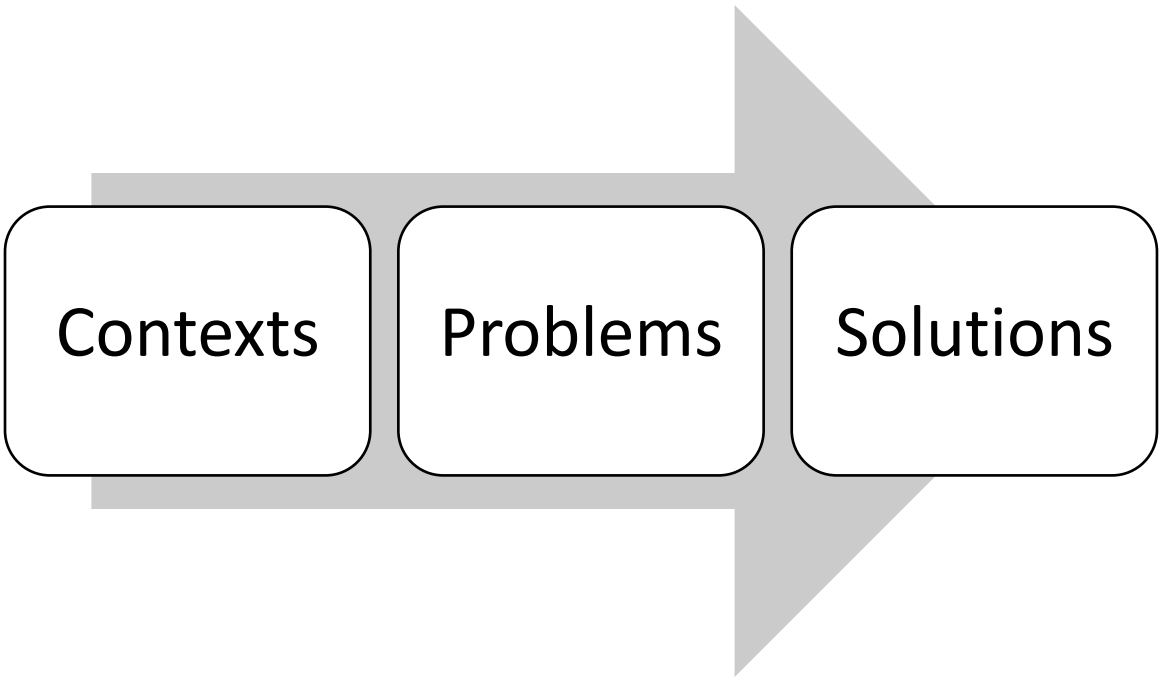

Figure 1: Analytic Framework of the Paper

Findings

Pre-Colonial Era. The Rohingya issue is a very complex case. The Rohingyas, the overwhelming majority of whom are Muslims, have been living in the Arakan state in the predominantly Buddhist Myanmar. It is sandwiched between Bangladesh on the west and the rest of Myanmar on the east. Historically, there had been movements of people as well as conquests from western Asia (Aljazeera, 2017). From 1001 to 1199, the Arabs had invaded South Asia. Around 1001 to 1027, the Turks had invaded the same region. By 1199 to 1200, the Arabs had reached Bengal (Arakanmedia, 2019).

Colonial Legacy. The conflict that beset the Rohingyas is the result of a civil war that started in 1948 during which the British colonials drew the flawed map of what was known as Burma at that time (Duran, 2017 Sept 09). Many of the problems in the world today are the result of maps drawn by the former colonialists. In the post-independence period, many ethnic groups in Burma demanded federalization, while the Rohingyas called for unification which the then East Pakistan, now Bangladesh (Duran, 2017 Sept 09). Many ethnic and religious minorities continue to wage civil war against Myanmar today.

Post-Colonial Context. Since the 1970s, the Rohingyas were persecuted. In 1982, the military junta in Myanmar passed law which listed eight ethnic groups which are entitled to citizenship, which excluded the Rohinyas who enjoyed citizenship rights since independence in 1948 (Atlantic, 2017). Overnight, the Rohingyas, losing their citizenship, became stateless.

The conflict between the Muslim Rohingyas and the Buddhists in the Rakhine state continued but heightened in 2012, 2015, and 2017. The hyper-nationalist Buddhist majority waged reprisals against the Rohingyas (Duran, 2017 Sept 09). In 2012, driven from their places of residence, over 100,000 Rohingyas moved to resettlement camps, while many left on perilous maritime trips (NYT, 2016 05 07).

Outsiders see Rohingyas as the worst persecuted minority on Earth, while the overwhelming majority of the Buddhist insiders in Myanmar view them as Muslim separatist foreigners who are foreign-funded (Atlantic, 2017 09). Former United Nations General Secretary Kofi Annan, who chaired the Myanmar-government appoint Advisory Commission on the Rakhine State remarked that the people should be called "Muslims or Muslim community in Rakhine," not as "Bengali" (2016 Dec 02).

Social Context. Myanmar is a classic textbook case of a mythical nation-state. In fact, it is a state composed not only of one nation, but several nations. By nation we mean a group of people with a shared history, language, ethnic identity, and culture who live in a general territory for a long time. Some of these nations or ethnic groups, aside from the majority Buddhist Bama dominant group, include the Shan, Karen, Rakhine, Rohingya, Kachin, Chin, Karenni, Mon, Wa, and Kokang Chinese. Each of them inhabits in more or less generally defined territories. Many of the ethnic groups practice traditional religions or Christianity, while others are Buddhist. Hence, Myanmar is in reality a state with many nations with different religions. Having a multiplicity of ethnic groups or nations is a blessing because of diversity. At the same time, it is a curse, as nations clamor for self-determination with the ensuing armed conflicts which continue to the present time. Many of the ethnic groups have their armed revolutionary groups with active combatants fighting the central government, while others have ceasefire agreements with the central government. Most Rohingyas are Muslim, while a few are Hindu. Many in Myanmar call Rohingyas "Bengalis" and do not consider them as from Myanmar.

Political Context. On the one hand, the international community expected Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi at the very least to step up to the plate and take up the Rohingya issue, which she failed miserably. On the other hand, ultra-nationalist groups accuse Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) for not promoting and protecting Buddhism. Clearly, Aung San Suu Kyi stands on a tightrope. Many ask the reason for which she is quiet on the matter (El Pais, 2017 Sept 17). To the extreme, some outside Myanmar claim she is complicit in the crime of ethnic cleansing. At best, an explanation is that she is a mere politician but military as an institution wields both political and military power. But an issue is raised: Who is in charge: the military or Aun San Suu Kyi? The role that she plays in this crisis is unclear (El Mundo, 2017 Sept. 20). The relationship between the military and the government might not be so sweet.

The reasons for which many speculate about the important role that Aun San Suu Kyi can play to resolve the Rohingya crisis are manifold. First, she was the symbol of democracy who fought for the political rights of the Myanmar people against the military junta, for which she was placed under house arrest. Second, she sacrificed her personal life and professional career for peace. Third, she is the daughter of Aun San, the founder of modern-day Burma, now called Myanmar. Fourth, she has some connections with Oxford University. Fifth, she had worked at the United Nations Organization which stands for justice, equality, self-determination, and peace. Sixth, she is a leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD). Seventh, she is a Nobel Peace Laureate. The list can go on and on. But she did not take a strong stand to defend the rights of all people in Myanmar, including the Rohingyas.

The Janus Face of Buddhism. The problem is not only religion per se, but the political use of religion. Ultra-nationalist Buddhists, including Buddhist monks, metaphorically sleep in bed with the military (Irrawaddy, 2017 Nov 23). Buddhism is known as a religion of compassion, mercy, harmony, peace, serenity, and calmness, while the military and the police in any country have the monopoly of the use of force and the resort to physical violence. Thousands attend mass rallies, among others, in downtown Yangon, the Karen State, the Mon State, and the Mandalay Region to show their support to the military

actions against the Rohingyas in the Rakhine State. They form such groups as Tatmadaw (Military) Admirer Group (TAG). Some Buddhist monks criticize foreign governments and the international media for lambasting at the military for its use of excessive force against the Muslim majority Rohingyas (Irrawaddy, 2017 Nov 23). Buddhist monk U Wirathu wrote: "Monks and people are the ones who will take care of the helpless army like their sons" (Irrawaddy, 2017 No 23). Ultra-nationalist Buddhists and the military are strange bedfellows. Sitagu Sayadaw, who is a prominent Buddhist monk, stated that taking the life of a human being is fine, as long as that person is not a Buddhist (Global Institute for Democracy and Strategic Studies, 2018 Feb 09).

The Constitution prohibits inter-religious or inter-ethnic conflict. Yet the government then under President U Thein Sein favored the actions of the ultra-nationalists, enacting into law the Protection of Race and Religion Laws, which the ultra-nationalists have drafts which others perceive as discriminatory against women and religious minorities, especially Islam.

When communal violence broke out in 2012 in the Rakhine State, prominent ultra-nationalist Buddhist monks engaged in anti-Muslim hate speech, sowed fear about the danger of Islamic fundamentalism, called for boycotting Muslim businesses, and spread the narrative that the Muslim Rohingyas are a threat to security of the Myanmar state.

However, when Aun San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) came to power in March 2016, ultra-nationalist Buddhists who were hiding under the skirt of Protection of Race and Religion laws lost their clout. For instance, the NLD-led government arrested and prohibited prominent monks from preaching as well as arrested those ultra-nationalists who have committed crimes against the state. Ma Ha Na, which is the State Buddhist Sangha Authority, has declared the Ma Ba Tha, which is the ultra-nationalist umbrella group, as an illegal organization not established according to the monastic rules of the country (Irrawaddy,2016 July 13).

Cleary, Buddhism is Janus-faced in Myanmar. The ultranationalist Buddhist clergy and laity reared their ugly heads, while the NLD indirectly showed its compassionate countenance towards the Rohingyas by putting a brake on the inflammatory Islamphobic speeches and actions. Since then, the outlawed Ma Ba Tha changed its name to Buddha Dhamma Prahita Foundation.

Problem

Causes of the Current Crisis. On August 25, 2017, just hours after Kofi Annans' commission publicly issued their recommendations about the situation in the Rakhine State, which Aung San Suu Kyi embraced, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), using knives and home-made bombs, carried out its attacks on about twenty to thirty police outposts in the northern Rakhine state. During the attacks, about 150 militants were involved, killing 1 soldier, 1 immigration officer, 10 policemen, and 59 militants were killed. (BBC, 20107 Sept 19). ARSA attacks on the security forces triggered a massive security forces counter-attacks on the Rohingya population in general, which is a violation of international humanitarian law. In short, the current problem was sparked when the ARSA attacked the security forces of Myanmar which retaliated with extreme measures of punishing the whole Rohingya population as a whole, which triggered a whole chain of mass exodus for safe haven outside the Rohingya homeland.

Effects of the Attacks and Counter-Attacks. Stirring a bloodbath, more than half a million to one million Rohingyas were displaced due to military operations by the Myanmar army and ultra-nationalist Buddhists (de Bruno, 2018). The Myanmar security forces have the right and duty to engage in battle

with the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), as both sides are combatants who must engaged in armed conflict based on the laws of war. But international humanitarian law states that on the one hand reprisals against civilian population and their properties are forbidden and on the other hand military actions on both sides must be proportionate. Rohingya civilians must be spared from military attacks under all circumstances at all times.

Article 3 common to the 4 Geneva Conventions and Protocol II additional to these Conventions state that (1) there should always be a distinction between the armed forces and civilians; all persons not in combat, including the wounded and the sick, must be treated humanely; (3) the only legitimate objective is to weaken the enemy's armed might; (4) and civilian population, including women and children, as well as civilian homes, property and cultural objects must be protected, as they are not military targets.

Most of the persecuted and fleeing Rohingyas fled to the neighboring Cox Bazar in Bangladesh to seek refuge and safe haven where the Bangladeshi government welcomed them. After Rohingyas left their villages, their houses and properties were bulldozed (CTV News, 2018 Feb 23; Human Rights Watch, 2018 Feb 23). At least 55 of Rohingya villages were destroyed in order to erase evidence (BBC, 2018 Feb 23). About half a million Rohingyas still remain in the Rakhine State in Myanmar. U.N. envoy Yanghee Lee claims that mass graves show "hallmarks of genocide" (Democracy Now, 2018 Feb 02). The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights at that time, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, called the maltreatment of the Rohingyas as a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing" (Guardian, 2017, Sept 11; Washington Post, 2017 Sept 12). A group of Nobel Peace laureates call on the Security Council of the United Nations to protect the Rohingyas from further attacks (Democracy Now, 2017 Sept 27).

What were some of the responses to this crisis? The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) of which Myanmar is a member was blasted for keeping mum on the persecution of the Rohingyas (Democracy Now,2017 November 13). India and Japan support Myanmar. China and Russia oppose U.N. resolution on the Rohingya issue. The European Union (EU) and the U.S. sanction top military. The U.K. calls for repatriation, while China mediates between Bangladesh and Myanmar for repatriation.

With China's overtures, Bangladesh and Myanmar affixed their signature to an agreement to implement the Chinese peace plan for the repatriation of the Rohingyas from Cox Bazar in Bangladesh to the Rakhine State in Myanmar (Duran, 2017 Nov 23).

Pope Francis is concerned about the massacre of Muslims in Myanmar (El Diario, 2017 Sept. 06). Said Pope Francis: "I see Jesus again in the children I met during my recent visit to Burma and Bangladesh, and it is my hope that the international community will not cease to work to ensure that the dignity of the minority groups present in the region is adequately protected" (Democracy Now, 2017 December 26).

After the local correspondents of Reuters published an appalling report on the killing of Rohingyas with before and after photographic evidence, its journalists were arrested, charged with national security crimes, and imprisoned (Democracy Now, 2018 Feb 12). Alas, the journalists were freed as a result of international pressures. But the status of statelessness and refugees of the Rohingyas remain.

Conclusion

Summary

Outsiders see the Rohngyas as the world's most persecuted ethnic and religious minorities, but many insiders in Myanmar see them as a foreign group with a separatist agenda. The democratic system in Myanmar is flawed, as no one or no institution seems to bear the responsibility of making a clear statement and a clear policy action based on rule of law without prejudice. George Orwell reminds us: "The most effective way to destroy people is to deny and obliterate their own understanding of their history."

The summary attacks on the Rohingya civilian population violations international human rights laws as well as international humanitarian law, also known as the laws of war. Crimes committed include crimes against peace, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. U.N. Secretary-General expressed his position according to which "the Rohingya are one of the most discriminated against population in the world—and that was even before the crisis…" (United Nations, 2018 Feb 28).

Solutions

Some of the calls and recommendations to stop the atrocities committed against the Rohingyas in the short-, medium-, and long-term include the following mix: ceasefire, high-level dialogue and negotiations, access to relief now, stop ethnic cleansing, stop the genocide, massive training for the security forces on human rights and the laws of war, interfaith dialogue at the grassroots and middle levels teaching tolerance and acceptance, support reputable humanitarian organizations now, fact-finding missions, repatriation, restoration of citizenship, autonomy or federalism.

Are we holding Aun San Suu Kyi to a much higher and therefore unfair standard? No. She stood up for abstract principles of democracy and equality. She is held to her own high standards. Do these standards apply to the Rohingyas. Yes indeed. Can Aun San Suu Kyi do much, if she wants to? She is the best hope for change in Myanmar. She could take a larger-than-life moral stance against the military, moving from a mere politician to a grand statesperson. Peace is not merely the absence of physical violence, but the presence of the conditions of justice.

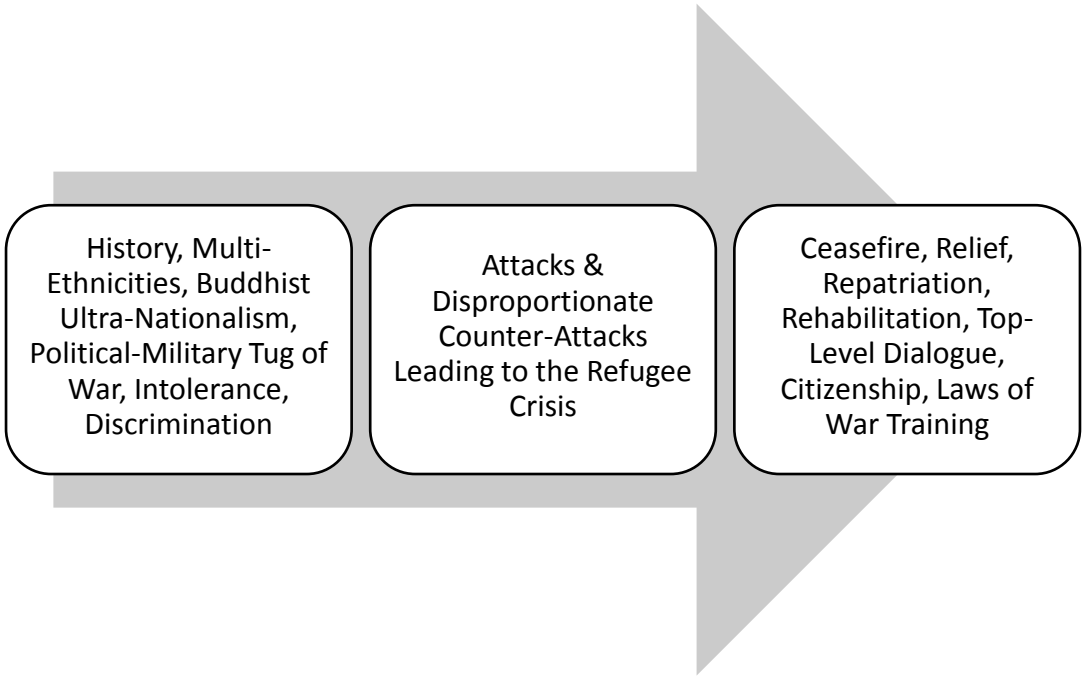

Figure 2: Summary of the Findings

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