

Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingyas in Myanmar: An Examination of Security Concerns for India

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Abstract

This paper examines the situation in Myanmar's Rakhine state, focusing on the Rohingya ethnic community. It explores Myanmar's policies towards the Rohingya since its establishment, considering the involvement of key actors like political parties and the military. The argument presented is that the government is systematically weakening and expelling the Rohingya, leading to ethnic cleansing. The ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya in Myanmar has implications for national security in India. The Indian government has portrayed the Rohingya as "illegal" and a threat to national security, leading to their exclusion from the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019. However, the persecution of the Rohingya is not solely based on ethnic and religious tensions but is also influenced by the nation-building process in Myanmar, which has excluded and marginalized the Rohingya population. The military regime in Myanmar, along with other security forces, has played a significant role in perpetrating crimes against the Rohingya. Additionally, the conflict in Rakhine, where the Rohingya reside, has geo-strategic and economic dimensions, with China and India having vested interests in the region. Therefore, the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya poses both humanitarian and security challenges for India. The primary goal of the paper is to gain a deep understanding of the issue, given its significance as a major cause of the growing number of Rohingya refugees. The research aims to contribute to policy recommendations and formulations for addressing and resolving this longstanding conflict.

Keywords: Ethnic cleansing, Tatmadaw, Rohingya, refugees, Mass migration.

Introduction

Mass migration, particularly in the form of refugees, has become a significant global concern and is posing challenges to world peace and security. This phenomenon forces millions of people worldwide to undergo forced migration due to various reasons such as inter-communal conflicts, identity crises, religious differences, nationalistic tendencies, diversity issues, and ethnic conflicts [5]. The roots of such refugee movements, often stemming from persecution and conflicts, can be traced back to the post-Cold War era. Countries like Pakistan, Somalia, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Rwanda, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines have experienced extensive migration crises [6]. Consequently, Asia remains a focal point in discussions on migration and refugee-related issues.

The Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic group residing in Myanmar's western Rakhine region (formerly known as Arkan), exemplify this situation. Comprising 4% of Myanmar's population, they endure harsh living conditions, relying heavily on fishing and agriculture for sustenance [7]. Their inhabited areas lack essential amenities, with a staggering poverty rate of 78% [8]. The Rohingya face further challenges as they lack legal documentation, are not recognized by the government, and are often labeled as refugees within Myanmar. Their immigrant or refugee status makes them vulnerable, being unfairly blamed for various societal problems, including alleged connections with armed groups that occasionally target law enforcement agencies. Furthermore, the Rohingya are excluded from participating in the state-building process and governmental institutions. Periodic clashes, particularly with Buddhists in the country, escalate tensions and result in violence against the Rohingya, manifesting as deaths, injuries, hatred, and property destruction. These recurrent incidents deepen the existing mistrust and animosity, creating a vicious cycle of violence and persecution.

The situation is similar for the Rohingya, a Muslim group living in the western part of Myanmar, known as Rakhine, previously called Arkan. Making up 4% of Myanmar's population, they face difficult living conditions, relying mainly on fishing and farming for income [7]. Their areas lack essential needs, and the poverty rate is high at 78% [8]. These people lack legal documents, and the government doesn't recognize them, treating them as refugees in Myanmar. Due to their immigrant or refugee status, they are unfairly blamed for various issues and are sometimes accused of having connections with armed groups that target law enforcement. The ongoing and unexpected persecution between the Rohingya and Buddhists has led the Rohingya to seek refuge in state-sponsored camps within Myanmar as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Some have also fled to neighboring countries. Since the unrest in Myanmar that began in August 2017, over 600,000 Rohingyas have left their homes, with the majority seeking refuge in Bangladesh alone [9].

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This pattern suggests that significant state actors are systematically involved in weakening and expelling the Rohingya from the country, resulting in their mass migration.

The main cause of violence against the Rohingya revolves around unsettled questions regarding their identity and origin. The Myanmar government currently refuses to recognize them as citizens or nationals, viewing them as illegal immigrants residing in the country for an extended period. The government classifies them as Bangladeshi, citing perceived physical and cultural similarities with the people of Bangladesh. Additionally, the government claims that Rohingya ancestors migrated from Bangladesh and settled in the Rakhine state during British colonial rule [10]. Conversely, the Bangladesh government rejects these assertions, condemning Myanmar for using force against the Rohingya. The Emergency Immigration Act of 1974, enacted during the Ne Win regime (1962-1988), declared the Rohingya as foreigners, resulting in the loss of their national identity [11]. Consequently, the government views the Rohingya as illegal immigrants, leading to an often-hostile approach in dealing with them. Additionally, the Rohingya have no role in the development of the state or its institutions. Occasionally, conflicts arise with other communities in the country, especially Buddhists, leading to violence, including deaths, injuries, hate, and property destruction. Such clashes contribute to a growing mistrust, widening the gap between communities.

The ongoing and unexpected persecution between the Rohingya and Buddhists has led the Rohingya to seek refuge in state-sponsored camps within Myanmar as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Some have also fled to neighboring countries. Since the unrest in Myanmar that began in August 2017, over 600,000 Rohingya have left their homes, with the majority seeking refuge in Bangladesh alone [9]. This pattern suggests that significant state actors are systematically involved in weakening and expelling the Rohingya from the country, resulting in their mass migration. The main cause of violence against the Rohingya revolves around unsettled questions regarding their identity and origin. The Myanmar government currently refuses to recognize them as citizens or nationals, viewing them as illegal immigrants residing in the country for an extended period. The government classifies them as Bangladeshi, citing perceived physical and cultural similarities with the people of Bangladesh. Additionally, the government claims that Rohingya ancestors migrated from Bangladesh and settled in the Rakhine state during British colonial rule [10]. Conversely, the Bangladesh government rejects these assertions, condemning Myanmar for using force against the Rohingya. The Emergency Immigration Act of 1974, enacted during the Ne Win regime (1962-1988), declared the Rohingya as foreigners, resulting in the loss of their national identity [11]. Consequently, the government views the Rohingya as illegal immigrants, leading to an often-hostile approach in dealing with them.

The research aims to show the long-lasting struggles of the Rohingya community over the past century, including attacks, genocides, and mass expulsion by the majority Burmese population. The systematic denial of citizenship rights and basic human services by Burmese authorities towards the Rohingya is also highlighted. The goal is to demonstrate that Rohingyas are genuine citizens of Myanmar and that the oppression they have faced since 1784 deserves international condemnation. The research advocates for the safe return of Rohingya refugees to their homeland in Rakhine (Arakan) with full citizenship rights.

Myanmar and its Land

Myanmar is an Asian country with a rich history that dates back to the ancient Pagan Kingdom in 839. It gained independence from British colonial rule in 1948. The capital is Naypyidaw, and it has a population of 52.89 million people, covering an area of 676,579 square kilometres. Myanmar shares borders with China, India, Laos, Thailand, and the Bay of Bengal. After Myanmar became independent, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League took control, with U Nu as the first Prime Minister and Sao Shwe Thaik as the first President. However, they had a hard time uniting different ethnic groups. Later on, the military (Tatmadaw) seized power. The most serious issue with ethnic differences happened in Rakhine State, previously called Arakan State, causing the Rohingya crisis.

The country follows a parliamentary system with a two-chamber legislature and is divided into 14 administrative units. Myanmar is known for its ethnic diversity, officially recognizing 135 different races, including some like the Rohingya that are not officially recognized. The major ethnic groups include Burman (68%), Shan (9%), Karen (7%), Rakhine (4%), Chinese (3%), Indian (2%), Mon (2%), and 5% from other ethnicities. Regarding religion, Buddhism is the predominant faith, followed by 87% of the population. Christianity is the second-largest religion at 6.2%, and Islam is practiced by 4.3% of the population. Arakan (presently Rakhine State) is one of the fourteen states in Myanmar. The word "Arakan" comes from an Arabic term, "Rukn," meaning "a pillar." This name reflects the Islamic influence in the region, as it signifies a place where the five pillars of Islam are observed. Arakan became well-known around 1430 AD when it was conquered by Muslims. In Arakan (Rakhine) there are two main ethnic groups: the Rohingya, who are Muslims, and the Maghs/Rakhines, who follow Buddhism. Before the anti-Muslim riots in 1942, both communities lived together without clear territorial boundaries. After the riots, the Maghs moved to the south, and the Rohingya moved to the north of the Rakhine state. Additionally, there are other minority tribes like Chaws, Saaks, Mros, and Kons living in Arakan.

Arakan (Rakhine state) is situated in the northwest of the country, covering about 20,000 square miles. It has a 369-mile coastline along the Bay of Bengal. Geographically, it is a narrow, mountainous strip of land with dense forests, creeks, and rivers. The state shares a 176-mile border with Bangladesh, separated by the Naf River, and the Arakan Yoma Mountain range separates it from the rest of Myanmar. Arakan also shares a border with India. It is the only province in Myanmar with a Muslim majority, and out of the 7 million Muslims in the country, half of them reside in Arakan.

A Brief History of Rohingyas

The history of the Rohingya dates back to the 8th century when they lived in an independent kingdom called Arkan, which is now known as Rakhine. Between the 9th and 14th centuries, Arab traders introduced Islam to the people of Arkan through trade with Bengal, establishing strong relations between the two regions. In 1784, the Burman King Bodawpaya captured Arkan, ruling it harshly. This led thousands of Rohingya to flee to Bengal, where a town was established and later named Cox Bazar after British Diplomat Hiram Cox in 1790. In 1824, Arkan's political landscape changed when the British captured Myanmar, making it part of British India. During World War II, Japan invaded Burma in 1942, and with the retreat of British forces, the Burmese attacked the Muslim community, considering them beneficiaries of colonial rule. After three years, the British, aided by Rohingya and Burmese nationalists led by Aung San, regained control. However, instead of restoring Arkan's independence, the British declared it a province of the newly independent state in 1948, leading to resistance from the Rohingya who wanted independence.

This disagreement marked the beginning of tensions between the Rohingya and other communities in Myanmar. The Rohingya resisted government efforts, resulting in punitive measures such as removal from civil services. In 1962, General Ne Win of the Burma Socialist Programme Party took over the government, adopting a stern approach towards the Rohingya. After a few years of military rule, General Ne Win launched an operation in 1977. The Dragon King operation in Burma aimed to force Rohingya out of the country, leading to around 200,000 Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh. During this mass exodus, Rohingya accused the army of abuses, but the army denied any wrongdoing. In 1982, a new immigration law declared those who migrated during British rule as illegal.

In 1991, violence against Rohingya in Rakhine resulted in rape and forced labor by the Myanmar army, causing over 250,000 Rohingya to become refugees in other countries. The situation calmed temporarily due to a repatriation deal, with 230,000 Rohingya returning to Arakan state by 1997. However, sporadic violence continued, and in 2012, ethnic riots between Rohingya and Buddhists caused over 100 deaths, displacing tens of thousands in Bangladesh and hundreds in internally displaced camps. In September 2016, violence erupted again when the Harakal-al-Yakin armed group attacked border guards, killing nine soldiers. The government blamed Rohingya for harbouring the group. The conflict continued, and on August 25, 2017, violence flared up once more when armed men attacked soldiers in Maungdaw. The Arkan Rohingya Salvation Army claimed responsibility, leading to government crackdowns. Due to persecution, over 600,000 Rohingya have fled from Rakhine to neighboring countries.

Systematic Cleansing of Rohingyas after Independence

Burma Registration Act 1949

After Myanmar gained independence in 1948, the government implemented the Burma Registration Act in 1949, requiring all citizens to register. Under this act, people received either National Registration Cards (NRCs) as residents or Foreigner Registration Certificates (FRCs) as foreigners. Rohingya were initially given NRCs, declaring them as citizens, and even obtained passports for international travel, including pilgrimages to Makkah. According to international law, having a passport or similar documentation is considered proof of nationality. Rohingya, based on their NRCs, also participated in the election of members to the House of Representatives for several years. Rohingya, described by Ronan Lee as a predominantly ethnic minority group identifying as Rohingya Muslims, have a long-standing heritage in Myanmar, living there for centuries. The current conflict stems from years of systematic ethnic mistreatment by the Myanmar government, dating back to the British colonial era.

Operation King Dragon 1978

In 1977, the Burmese military, along with the immigration department, launched Operation King Dragon, also known as Naga Min. The government claimed it was for screening and registering people before the national census and disarming the Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF) in Rakhine state. Despite these reasons, the operation aimed to force Rohingya out of the country. Lasting for five months, involving over a thousand army personnel, it led to the displacement of 200,000 to 250,000 Rohingya to Bangladesh, where they found temporary shelter in Cox's Bazar camps. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) recognized these displaced people as refugees and urged the Bangladeshi government to establish camps for them. This marked a part of the military's ethnic cleansing campaign. In 1991, the second push against Rohingya occurred with Operation Clean and Beautiful Country, also called Operation Pyi Thaya, conducted by the Myanmar army in northern Rakhine state from 1991 to 1992. Once again, it forced around 200,000 Rohingya to flee to refugee camps in Bangladesh, representing another attempt to expel Rohingya from Myanmar.

Citizenship Law of 1982 and the Rohingya

In 1982, under Ne Win's leadership, Myanmar's government took a significant step that worsened the situation for Rohingya. They enacted the Citizenship Law, which categorized citizenship into three types: Full, Associated, and Naturalized. Full citizenship was granted only to those whose ancestors settled in Myanmar before the first British occupation in 1823. Associated citizenship was for those who entered and lived in Myanmar before January 1948, and Naturalized citizenship was given to individuals with "conclusive evidence" of entering Myanmar before January 4, 1948. While many Rohingya have been residents in Burma for a long time, and even those who arrived after Myanmar's independence in 1948 would have been entitled to citizenship, the authorities in Myanmar are now refusing to properly

assess the citizenship claims of those who identify as Rohingya. This has created an identity crisis and made it difficult for Rohingya to assert their citizenship rights.

Operation Clean and Beautiful Country 1991

In 1991, the Myanmar military carried out Operation Clean and Beautiful Country, also known as Operation Pyi Thaya. This marked the second effort to force Rohingya out of Myanmar. Taking place in northern Rakhine state from 1991 to 1992, the operation led to the migration of approximately 200,000 Rohingya to refugee camps in Bangladesh. Once again, it was another attempt to expel Rohingya from the country.

Operation Clearance 2017

In August 2017, armed men attacked security posts in Myanmar, resulting in the death of around 12 security officials. The group claiming responsibility was known as the Faith Movement or Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). In response, the Myanmar government launched an operation against them, suspecting Rohingya support for these armed individuals. However, it was clarified that while there is an armed group called ARSA, there is no evidence that it represents or has the support of the broader Rohingya population. This situation escalated tensions in the Rakhine state, leading to violence between Rohingya Muslims and Buddhists. As a result, thousands of Rohingya women and children fled to Bangladesh as unwanted migrants. According to UN reports, over 600,000 Rohingya have migrated to Bangladesh since August, and the migration continues.

Response of the International Community

At first, Malaysia didn't want to help the Rohingya refugees. But later, both Malaysia and Indonesia agreed temporary help to the Rohingya. Thailand also said they would provide assistance and wouldn't turn away boats coming into their waters. The President of the Philippines, Noynoy Aquino, wanted to give shelter to 3,000 boat people because they signed a convention in 1954 related to refugees. However, Bangladesh's Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, called her country's economic migrants mentally ill and said they could have better lives in Bangladesh, which made the country look bad. After that, the Bangladesh government announced plans to move 32,000 registered Rohingyas who have been living in camps near the Myanmar border for years. They chose Thengar Char Island, 18 miles east of Hatiya Island, for the relocation. On September 28, 2018, Sheikh Hasina told the UN General Assembly that there are 1.1 million Rohingyas in Bangladesh.

The United States State Department said they wanted to take in Rohingya refugees as part of international efforts. President Barack Obama urged Myanmar on June 2, 2015, to stop discriminating against the Rohingya minority. Since 2012, the US has allowed 13,000 Myanmar refugees, with Chicago having the largest population of Rohingyas in the US. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights called the situation in Myanmar a clear example of ethnic cleansing. The UN special investigator on Myanmar, Yanghee Lee, thinks that Myanmar wants to force all Rohingyas to leave. Bishop Desmond Tutu, a South African anti-Apartheid activist, compared the Rohingya situation to apartheid. International organizations like Human Rights Watch criticized Myanmar's citizenship laws from 1982, saying these laws deny Rohingyas the chance to get nationality.

India's Response to Rohingya Crises: A National Security Threat

India didn't sign the Refugee Convention of 1951 or the 1967 protocol for refugees. India said no to Rohingya people entering the country because they believed it could be a threat to national security. However, it was discovered that about 40,000 Rohingya immigrants found shelter in Assam, West Bengal, Haryana, Jammu, and Kashmir. Some Rohingyas got official documents like Aadhar, PAN cards, Ration cards, and voter IDs using dishonest methods.

This news made regular people upset because they worried that Rohingya Muslim settlements in Jammu would change the Hindu population and might lead to violence in the future, similar to what happened with the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits by Kashmiri Muslims. So, the presence of Rohingya Muslims in Jammu is seen as a delicate issue for Indian security. Indian security experts think that some Rohingyas, who support militant groups, might be active in Jammu, Delhi, Hyderabad, and Mewat, posing a potential threat to Indian security. In September 2017, Kiren Rijju, the union Home minister, said, "All Rohingya refugees are illegal migrants and will be sent back." However, he didn't mention when, where, and how. This statement was criticized by the UN, and Rijju responded, "India has the highest number of refugees globally, so we don't need lectures on refugee crises and management."

The Indian Ministry of External Affairs, responding to Bangladesh's request, urged the government of Myanmar to stop violence and bring normalcy to Rakhine state, as many refugees were fleeing to neighboring countries. Bangladeshi Foreign Secretary Md Shahidul Haq expressed hope for a peaceful resolution with support from the international community, especially India. India supported Bangladesh by launching Operation INSANIYAT, providing humanitarian aid to manage the large influx of Rohingya refugees. Sikh volunteers from Khalsa in India reached the Myanmar border under Operation INSANIYAT, organizing Langars for thousands of refugees in camps. The Indian foreign ministry announced that India would give free material, tea, and mosquito nets to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. However, Rohingya Muslims filed a case called Mohd Salimullah vs Union of India in the Supreme Court to challenge the Indian government's decision to deport them. The Supreme Court said it would only consider legal arguments and asked to avoid

emotional discussions since the issue is related to a humanitarian cause. The Supreme Court's verdict refused to stop the deportation of Rohingyas to Myanmar.

Conclusion

The Rohingya crisis is not just a problem within Myanmar; it's an issue that involves the whole region and needs cooperation from countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia to solve disputes. It has become a security threat for everyone. For instance, Rohingya people attempted to attack Myanmar's embassy in Indonesia, and there's an economic burden from the large number of refugees. To address the problem, we need economic and political changes at both the local and international levels. Balanced economic growth can be a solution for Rakhine State, which is facing poverty due to a lack of investment and violence. Myanmar's government should make political reforms to ensure peace, and the military should reduce their operations that cause conflict.

The international community should play a significant role. Myanmar should allow the UN's "Blue Helmets" to access critical areas in Rakhine State to maintain a ceasefire. China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi suggested a three-step solution: first, a ceasefire to restore order; second, stronger communication between Myanmar and Bangladesh with help from the international community; and third, international assistance to develop Rakhine State, addressing poverty at its root. Dialogue between Bangladesh and Myanmar is essential for the repatriation of Rohingyas. At the same time, it's important to ensure protection for Buddhist Rohingyas against Muslim insurgents.

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