

Myanmar: Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya. From Ethnic Nationalism to Ethno-Religious Nationalism

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Abstract: Rohingya, an ethnic minority group in the Rakhine state of Myanmar, has been levelled as one of the most persecuted ethnic groups in contemporary time. For the last five decades, they have been undergoing systematic torture ranging from deprivation of citizenship to mass killing and forceful eviction from their inhabitants. The army of Myanmar spearheads this persecution, which is deemed as genocidal. However, the engagement of radical Buddhist groups and support from the local Burmese population worsened the situation. Along with army intervention and ethnic differences, some economic and geostrategic question is highlighted behind this inhuman situation. But Myanmar consists of more than 100 ethnic groups, and there are other similar areas with similar economic and geostrategic importance. Though there are several instances of conflict in some of those areas, they are almost unparalleled comparing that of the Rakhine state. Having acknowledged the multiple genealogies of this conflict, this paper focuses more on the state/nation building process of Myanmar to understand the exceptionalism of Rohingya persecution. We want to argue that rather than ethnic tension or geostrategic interest, the nation/state-building of Myanmar in different phases of its history can put more light on the unique suffering of the Rohingya population in Myanmar. Analyzing the key historical transition of Myanmar, we attempt to trace the gradual exclusivity of the Rohingya

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people in the evolution of State manufactured discourse on the question of nation and their deliberate enactment of specific identity while alienating the other.

Keywords: Rohingya, Myanmar, Nationalism, Identity, State/Nation-Building.

Introduction

Rohingya, a small Muslim minority group in Myanmar, is often termed one of the most persecuted ethnic minorities on the earth. According to the most prominent human rights organizations, what's going on with Rohingya for at least the last two decades can be termed as a textbook example of ethnic cleansing. Even some academics and researchers have gone to the far, claiming it as slow burning genocide. But the question is why this small minority group, already very impoverished and marginalized, has been targeted for this extreme level of brutality. If we consider Myanmar, which constitutes more than 135 recognized ethnic identity groups and several unrecognized ones like Rohingya, this question becomes puzzling. Though Myanmar is fraught with ethnic conflict where state military dominated by majority Burmans persecuted other groups, very few ethnic entities experienced the devastating fate of Rohingya. Especially in the last 30 years, starting from 1988, ethnic cleansing or genocidal attempt is becoming an exclusive phenomenon for Rohingya in Myanmar. Though the civil war between the Myanmar army and some other ethnic groups like Karen and Kachin are still going on, these are the two longest-running civil wars in modern history (Steinberg, 2013). They are not faced with the same level of devastation in terms of external displacing and mass killing. In earlier decades in the 60s and 70s, persecution level to Rohingya by the state in other groups might be termed as comparable and thus not unique, but what has been happening in the last two decades is incomparable with the fate of any other group. Even in terms of demand and struggle, Karen ethnic groups are fighting for autonomy. At the same time, Rohingya people demanded citizenship as they were stripped of it in 1982. So, it is a very curious case to analyze why Rohingya people face continuous ethnic cleansing while other ethnic groups, notwithstanding their fight with the state, are not suffering at the same level.

Moreover, persecution of Rohingya is not perpetrated only by the Military or Burmans; the leading majority ethnic group, another minority group named Rakhine, is found complicit in the brutality. Though Rakhine Buddhist groups, as a minority in Myanmar but a majority in Rakhine state, have a different history of the fight and struggle with Burmans, they are actively collaborating with the Myanmar state and participating in the ethnic cleansing effort Rohingya. The critical point is that it is unprecedented in Myanmar that minority ethnic groups are actively engaged with the Military to cleanse another minority group despite conflict with the state.

So, this article will attempt to answer the following two questions. First, from 1962, why Rohingya people face continuous ethnic cleansing efforts from the state while other groups are not. The second is why Rakhine, as a minority group within Myanmar, evicted another oppressed minority group. In our endeavor, we will try to deal with these two questions from the enactment of certain features of identity and alienation of others. We will see how this enactment and separation occurred in Myanmar in different phases and how it led to conflict casting Rohingya in a unique situation in Myanmar.

Literature Review

Relevant literature concerning the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya need to be discussed dividing them into two broad categories. The first type of literature which is important to discuss here sees ethnic cleansing in a general theoretical framework where some general rules or preconditions that may cause ethnic cleansing are focused on. Second type of literature deals more specifically with the case of Rohingya.

Among the literature attempting to produce some meta-theory regarding genocide, Barbara Harff (2003) discusses the precondition of ethnic cleansing. In this article, she shows the seven preconditions that may cause genocide or ethnic cleansing. She mentioned some essential preconditions: political upheaval, exclusionary ideology, low economic development, autocratic rule, etc. (Harff & Gurr, 2003). Most of the preconditions are indeed available for the Rohingya population. But the point is that these causes are prevalent for many other ethnic groups of Myanmar. These preconditions cannot sufficiently explain this exclusivity of Rohingya's plight. Another article that deals with ethnic cleansing was written by Hägerdal (2016). Although he deals with the Lebanese civil war, the insight he gathered is very relevant for Rohingya. He shows that ethnic cleansing is rife in areas where inhabitant is predominantly homogenous. The larger the co-ethnic groups in an area live, the lower the likelihood of ethnic cleansing is. The causality behind this is that if antagonistic co-ethnic groups live in the same place, it becomes easy to collect information by intelligence about militant activities. Thus, the state can engage in selective killing rather than mass killing. This conclusion is also very appropriate for the Rohingya population as villages inhabited by Rohingya are very homogenous. The villages where Rohingya lives are inhabited only by them. These meta-theories though help us to grasp the Rohingya crisis to a certain extent, it can not explain the exceptional suffering of Rohingya within the context of Myanmar. Several other ethnic groups in Myanmar live in their areas without any other co-ethnic groups. Still, their plight is not the same as Rohingya's.

The second type of literature, which deals with Rohingya questions and their suffering, can again broadly be divided into two. Some of the literature deals with Rohingya and their identity questions while the other deals with their present conditions and multifaceted repercussions. Several pieces of literature talk about Rohingya identity because it

is assumed that the current plight of Rohingya relates to the citizenship law from 1982. So, in this literature, they tried to deal with the citizenship issue and origin of Rohingya, the validity of the 1982 citizenship law and its application in Rohingya. One such article is written by Kipgen (2013), articulating their historical roots of identity. Several other similar pieces of literature are available, such as Leider (2018), Parnini (2013), Rahman (2008). The other type of literature focusing upon present Rohingya plight and its solutions explains why Rohingyas are victims of ethnic cleansing. Ibrahim (2018) searches the causes of ethnic cleansing to the political instrumentalization of Rohingya. According to him, when military or local politicians need some distraction, they use the Rohingya issue as political tool. He indicted the political othering of Rohingya in far-right politics as an essential element for Rohingya ethnic cleansing. The human rights school of Yale (2015) points to anti-Rohingya propaganda from Government, and Theravada ultra-Buddhism in Rakhine are the prime causes of Rohingya ethnic cleansing. In the above literature, though they show the role of the Government and some elite groups as lynchpins behind this ethnic cleansing, it is not clear why Rohingya are exclusively being targeted by both Government and ultra-Buddhist groups in Rakhine.

In the following sections, it will be attempted to answer this gap in the literature identified above. We will try to answer this question using identity politics and enacting specific identity by military rulers and other social elites' groups. We will see the historical transition of identity in Myanmar. The historical evolution of nationalized ethnic identity and its failure to accommodate specific identity left Rohingya in a unique alienated situation that made them exclusively victim to current ethnic cleansing.

Theory and Methodology

In this article, the basic theoretical frameworks that we will use are underlined by Harold Isaacs (1989) and Kanchan Chandra (2006). Both writers acknowledge the significance of descending related attributes in determining ethnic identity (Chandra, 2006). But the relevant part of their theory is their unanimity that specific details become central for determining individual identity. Chandra has termed this as activated identity. Similarly, Isaac (1989) shows how specific badges or features of identity become relevant in a group's historical and political process to represent themselves or alienate another (Isaacs, 1989). In this article, we will see how the enactment of certain identity features within the context of the Myanmar region in different phases of its history and through other processes pushed Rohingya into a unique place where their identity becomes the cause of its unfortunate fate. Activation and enactment of certain identity features for both oppressed and oppressors and accommodation or alienation based on it will be analyzed, including three broad factors.

One is a historical epoch related to ethnic division and antagonism before independent Myanmar. The second aspect is state engineering of identity and transition of identity

construction in Independent Myanmar and developing an apartheid structure based on it. And the final one is concurrent regional and international factors that help in the crystallization of identity division. So, our theoretical assumption is that Myanmar is a country where ethnic identity is always primal due to nature and method of British colonial rule, which rode on ethnic division. In post-colonial independent Myanmar, the military power established in 1962 utilized this ethnic division and altered it in different phases. In this transition process, the Myanmar state is inclined to ethnoreligious Buddhist identity from ethnic Burman identity. But in every stage of this identity transition, Rohingya remains outside the state incorporated identity repertoire domain. On the other hand, the long history of enmity with Rakhine and the state's incorporation of Rakhine within Buddhist nationalism made Rohingya in the eye of state and Rakhine minority groups (Yunus, 1994). In our article, historical tracing of division through identity enactment will be explored. That's why historical literature will show the incidents and their causality that will prove my points. Besides, concurrent facts supported by relevant sources will be used to establish our claim.

Activation of Identity and Alienation of It: Colonial and Postcolonial State Engineering

To understand the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya, it is essential to locate it within the national history of ethnic conflict in Myanmar running for more than seven decades. But before that, it is necessary to understand the salience of ethnic identity in Myanmar and its roots. People in Myanmar prioritize their ethnic identity before national identity, and all the conflict runs in the line of ethnic cleavages (Gravers 2015). In Most ethnic conflicts, most Burmese ethnic groups (69.8%) led by the army of Myanmar and some other minority ethnic groups appear as protagonists. Suppose we search the roots of this ethnic division and primacy of ethnic identity. In that case, it can be traced back to the British colonial era and in their ruling system. After colonizing present Myanmar, the British started ruling it by enacting ethnic identity where majority Burmese were marginalized and became a minority in military and other bureaucratic administrations (McAuliffe, 2017). For instance, in his Ph.D. thesis, McAuliffe mentioned the military enrollment ratio of different ethnic groups. He shows that enrollment of the Burmese population was 12 %, while they are almost 70% of the aggregate population. On the other, Karen, Chin, Kachin has more representation, although they were a minority, the Karen (27.8 percent), Chin (22.6 percent), and Kachin (22.9 percent), Burman (12.4 percent). Due to such distribution of power and privilege based on ethnicity and its enactment with political consciousness that lasted for more than 100 years, all the political and cultural complexities regarding the state-building process of independent ruling run around ethnic identities. The importance of activating identity by British colonizers and its effect till today will be more conspicuous if we consider India and how it is ruled by the British. British used religious and caste division to rule India.

Most current conflicts or riots occur between religious identity like Muslim and Hindu or between different caste systems (Pandey, 1992).

Though the ascendancy of ethnic identity is related to the nature of colonial rule enforced by British colonizers, the conflict between different ethnic groups had not occurred immediately after the British withdrawal from the region in 1948. Instead, it began after the military takeover of power in 1962 and its Burmanization policy (Steinberg, 2013). British indeed gave power to Burmans, whom other ethnic groups marginalized in the British period even though they were a majority. But at the same time, other ethnic groups would get autonomy in their state was the condition approved in the Panglong agreement in 1947 (Gravers, 2004). So, from 1947 to 1962, democratic regimes tried to accommodate ethnic groups through consociationalism and territorial federalism. But the whole process broke down when the military Government led by Ne Win. Steinberg, in his book, describes the mode of military rule:

"The immediate effects of the 1962 coup were to dismantle all elements of institutional and personal power that could invalidate or threaten military control. The Revolutionary Council ran military rule — a junta of seventeen officers. General Ne Win rejected all accommodative strategy at the apex of which and rather took hardcore Burmanization policy and gradually built an apartheid structure." (Steinberg, 2013).

Military rule led by Ne Win lasted uninterrupted from 1962 to 1988. We can divide this period into two based on different identity activation. From 1962 to 1982 is the first period which went along the line of Burmanization. The second period is from 1982 to 1988. In this period, we see some selective integration strategies based on the notion of native ethnic identity.

In the first period, due to the segregation policy based on Burmanization, ethnic conflict ensued in every minority state which was supposed to get autonomy as per the condition stated in the Panglong agreement. Rohingya people were also persecuted. They were stripped of all government posts given to them on the constitutional quota system (Wade, 2019). From 1962 to 1982, two significant exoduses of the Rohingya population occurred. In 1962 more than 300,000 and in 1970, more than 500,000 Rohingyas fled and took refuge in Bangladesh. But their plight in this period was not unique as they experienced in post-1988 Myanmar. Instead, some other major ethnic groups like Kachin, Karen, and Chin succumbed to the same fate due to their non-Burmese ethnic identity and historic enmity in divisive British policy. Most of the ethnic groups with whom conflict occurred are non-Burmans and somehow identified as oppressive against Burmans in the British period. It is essential to understand that the identity cleavages policy taken by the British and the Burmanization policy brought in the post-1962 period is crucial to understanding the ethnic conflict. Because ethnic groups affected adversely are Burmese and were privileged or collaborators of the British in the pre-in-

dependent period. That's why we see that though Rakhine was not Burmese, they were not targeted for persecution as they had little historical enmity with Burmans in the British period (Kipgen, 2013).

In the second period dating from 1982 to 1988, the Military gave some space to other groups. So far, the state structure was providing Burmans better privileges and discriminating non-Burman groups. But in 1982, the state decided to make a citizenship law based on equal rights. It proposed to incorporate other groups who are indigenous in Myanmar. The condition of being indigenous was to live in current Myanmar before the British came in 1824. Why the military decided to turn back from extreme Burmanization and provide equal citizenship law has many explanations. Some argued that due to external pressure and investment conditions imposed by IMF and World Bank, they started to take such policy (Htoo, 2021). Another explanation is that the Military had opened myriad front of conflict, which proved unaffordable for it. They felt the need to compromise with some groups.

Some other argues that internal and external pressure for democratization compelled the military regime to do this (Steinberg, 2013). Whatever the reason, this is a new period of transition where a different set of identity features were activated to rule, incorporate some groups, and alienate others. In the new citizenship law, Karen, Kachin, and some other ethnic groups were included. In 1985, even the government was seen to make a ceasefire effort with these groups but Rohingya, with some other groups on the pretext of non-indigenous identity, were excluded from citizenship law. In this period, political othering or state-engineering worked on the line of non-native ethnic identity. Due to this new identity policy, all Indian-like ethnic groups faced persecution. Along with Rohingya, Burmese Indians, Gurkha, and some other groups termed Indian origins had also faced persecution from the military. So, in this phase, extreme persecution has good causal relation with enacting a new identity and policy based on it.

Post-1988 And Uniqueness of Rohingya Plight

But in the 1990s, Rohingya people were seen to suffer uniquely. From 1991 to 2017, several mass exoduses have taken place. Several allegations of genocide from the Burmese military were echoed. Indeed, there were still conflicts with other groups, but the state showed a sign to compromise or mitigate. That's why external displacement and mass killing of other ethnic groups did not occur to a large extent. Even some groups who were stripped of citizenship did not suffer to the level of Rohingya. So, to understand the uniqueness of Rohingya plight in post-1988, we must make the change that occurred in the ruling elites and subsequent alteration of identity politics and policy and how it includes some groups and excludes others.

In 1988, due to protests, the previous military government stepped down, and a new junta took power. Initially, it promised to work for returning democracy. The most

important aspect of this regime is its new policy to diminish ethnic conflict. Several efforts were seen but the most important aspect was its emphasis on Buddhist nationalism (Wade, 2017). 89 % population in Myanmar were Buddhists. One of the policies taken by Myanmar to enact Buddhist nationalism was the empowerment of Buddhist monks, eulogizing Buddhism as the historical identity of Myanmar by state media. Why the state halted excessive Burmanization and emphasized Buddhism can be traced back to two reasons. Gravers (1999) mentioned these two reasons: to create division among large ethnic groups like Karen and Kachin. These two ethnic groups constitute Buddhism and Christianity.

Two is as Buddhism is understood as peaceful religion dividing the society using these tools is expedient. The military feels the need for foreign investment and limited liberalization due to an underdeveloped economy. But to attract foreign investment, it is essential to minimize the conflict on the one hand and keep power in the hand of the military; keeping competition alive is necessary for them. So, in this phase, the military took this resort, which, as they thought, would unite a large population under the umbrella of Buddhism. However, the conflict will still exist due to some other religious groups. Though this plan failed in dividing Karen and Kachin ethnic groups into Buddhist and Christian lines, in Rakhine state, it got success in Rakhine state in Rohingya ethnic cleansing. Rohingya was outside in every previous state engineering of identity and enactment of Buddhism also kept them out. This transition from ethnic nationalism to ethnoreligious nationalism made Rohingya the state's sole target of ethnic cleansing. Some other ethnic groups stripped of citizenship did not face similar faces as they were primarily Buddhist. All seven major ethnic groups, except Rohingya, that were deprived of citizenship were Buddhist. Other groups that got oppressed in the previous period have been incorporated within state-engineered identity, at least nominally. But Rohingya ethnic community from 1962 remained outside in every state-sponsored identity activation. Post-1988, they became the only major group that was previously oppressed. In the post 9\11 period, this Buddhist nationalism and the global war on terror worsened the situation for Rohingya. Due to their Muslim Identity, in the name of the counter-terrorism act, it became easier to target Rohingya and purge them (Parnini, 2013). In fact, after 9\11, religious nationalism against Muslims has also been seen in neighboring countries like India and Srilanka, where Hindu and Buddhist nationalists targeted Muslims as their enemy (Hasan, 2017). Those instances in neighboring countries aggravated the situation for Rohingya in the Rakhine state. So, in post 9\11, Rohingya identity alienation did not occur only from the state; instead, global, and regional circumstances helped in this process of othering.

Why Rakhine As A Minority Group Became an Actor in This Ethnic Cleansing

This is the second query of two that has been identified at the beginning of this article. This question is seen from several aspects, from an economic or rational point of view. Some tried to answer it from the perspective of political othering by Rakhine political elites. But those answer is not enough to the question, why no other minority group in any other state did not collaborate with the Burmese army in the ethnic cleansing of another minority group while Rakhine is actively doing that as to Rohingya? It is to be noted that rational or political othering is not anything exclusive in the case of Rohingya. So, the above two explanation seems inadequate in this case. The answer to this question is partially given because Rakhine is Buddhists while Rohingya are Muslim. Enactment of division by state based on religious identity or Buddhist nationalism and subsequent instrumentalization created this clash. But the conflict between Rakhine and Rohingya did not start in the post-1988 Buddhist nationalist period. Instead, it has been ever-present since the independence of Myanmar. Division of ethnic identity and mutual enmity and othering had history beyond that of independent Myanmar. To understand the conflict between them, it is essential to trace back the historical hatred and crystallization of division by essential factors is essential.

Rakhine and Rohingya Muslims have a history of enmity where one group is alleged to oppress the other groups. It is seen that from 1430 to 1638, Rakhine was ruled by Buddhist Rakhine Ruler. After 1638, Arakan or the present Rakhine was captured by Mughal rulers of Bengal. Rakhine alleged that Rohingya or Muslims in Rakhine state helped Mughal win it (Yunus, 1994). On the other hand, in 1734, the current Rakhine state was captured by the Burmese kingdom, where Muslims alleged that Rakhine helped Burmese win it (Yunus, 1994). Again, when the British captured Rakhine in 1824, Muslims in Rakhine were assumed to help the British. Later in the British colonial period, Rakhine Buddhists were discriminated against Muslim by the British.

Due to complex historical enmity, antagonism was seen in the folk narrative where Rakhine mostly portrayed Rohingya as diabolical and foreigner (Prasse-Freeman, 2012). Rakhine worries that giving ethnic rights might have resulted in the separation of the Rohingya state from Rakhine as it was done previously in the Mughal period (Prasse-Freeman, 2012). However baseless this might be, this type of narrative can be spread by elites due to a historical clash that generated identity division. This historical identity clash aggravated in current Myanmar due to state policy where political elites and ultra-nationalist can easily abuse this historical identity division to appropriate their agenda (Ibrahim, 2016). Even general mass also finds it economically beneficial to purge Rohingya and loot their properties. All these factors worked here but without this extreme identity, clash evolved through history, which might not lead to this situation as it did not in the other state of Myanmar.

Conclusion

It is very clear that what is happening to the Rohingya ethnic group is nothing more than an old process of gradually annihilating a nation in a systematic way. The Rohingyas have long been the victims of modern state-sanctioned genocide. The policy adopted by the Myanmar government and military to deal with the Rohingyas, the world's most oppressed people, declared by most international organizations, including the United Nations, is a complete violation of the UDHR and the CRC signed by Myanmar. It is to be noted that mass killing or ethnic cleansing in different places like Cambodia (1975–1979) or Rwanda (1994) resulted from long-standing violence in every case. Ethnic cleansing of Rohingyas was also achieved in several decades of central planning of the state and the Rohingyas as a nation have already experienced all kinds of barbarism which is one of the unprecedented incidents in modern times. It is a fact that Rohingyas are in no way a better off situation compared to Palestine and Kashmir, because the news of these two crisis areas does not reach Arakan exactly the way it reaches the outside world. However, their position is more vulnerable as they are outside of world focus. The military's policy of Rohingyas is far more stringent than that of Myanmar's democratic government, which has already been branded a crime against humanity. This has become a complex unresolved issue due to the strict Burmanization policy of the Myanmar Army in the style of British colonial rule. To solve the crisis, the return of democratic rule in Myanmar and the more critical factor is the change in the autocratic military rule, which finds it expedient to keep the conflict alive.

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