

The Mujahid Rebellion in Arakan: A 1952 Analysis by the British Foreign Office

Derek Tonkin

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Many of you will be aware from [previous articles](#) I have written that the rich tapestry of indigenous and migrant Muslim communities in Arakan prior to the Second World War is nowadays bedevilled by discussion about the true ethnicity of their descendants.

While researching Foreign Office archives from Burma's independence in 1948 to 1960, I came across a revealing analysis of the Mujahid rebellion in Arakan, which started in earnest in 1948. A transcript of this analysis may be found online [at this link](#).

"The Mujahid Rebellion in Arakan" was drafted by Professor Pearn of the Foreign Office Research Department with the support of George Merrells in Rangoon. Bertie Reginald Pearn taught at the University of Rangoon for several years until the Japanese invasion of Burma in December 1941. He was fluent in Burmese, wrote a remarkable "History of Rangoon", returned to Rangoon at the end of the war and then took up a post as South East Asian expert in the Foreign Office which he held until his retirement. George Merrells worked in Arakan from 1942 to 1947, mainly as a Civil Affairs Officer with Allied forces. On independence he took the post of 'Oriental Secretary' at the British Embassy in Rangoon.

The Foreign Office file does not say for what purpose the paper was written, but it is reasonable to assume that it was completed at the request of the South East Asia Department of the Foreign Office as part of an agreed work programme. It was circulated for comments within the Foreign Office and the Commonwealth Relations Office, and the comments of our diplomatic missions at Rangoon and Karachi were also sought. ([The views of the Dacca Office](#) of the Karachi High Commission are attached as they are of particular interest.) The memorandum may therefore be taken as a definitive and authoritative British analysis of the origins of the Mujahid rebellion authored by two leading British experts at the time on Burmese affairs. Bertie Pearn I knew personally during my time as Burma Desk Officer in the Foreign Office 1963-1966.

As the analysis makes clear, the Muslims of Arakan are, "to use an outmoded terminology, 'Indian' in origin." By that the paper means that Muslims came overland to Burma, mostly from the region of Bengal over many years. Among the indigenous stock were what the British called "Arakan Mohamedans", dating from mostly forced migration in the 16th and 17th Centuries from Bengal and known to other Burmese as "Yakhaing Kala".

I was intrigued to learn from the analysis that they had taken to calling themselves "Rwangya", a word of uncertain derivation. I have found no trace of this, or of any similar word in pre-war archives, but it is understandable that after the separation of Burma from India on 1 April 1937, this particular group of indigenous Arakan Muslims might have wished to identify themselves in terms other than "Yakhaing Kala" which has the element "Kala", meaning Indian or foreign, and which had over the years acquired a pejorative

sense. "Arakan Mohamedan" included, so I understand, families of wholly Bengali stock as well as mixed-race marriages.

I have found the term "Rwangya" in other sources at the time. In their 1955 study "Minority Problems in Southeast Asia", Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff remarked on Page 154 that:

"The post-war illegal immigration of Chittagonians into that area [northern Arakan] was on a vast scale, and in the Maungdaw and Buthidaung areas they replaced the Arakanese.....The newcomers were called Mujahids (crusaders), in contrast to the Rwangya or settled Chittagonian population....."

While the Mujahids sought separation from the Buddhist Arakanese and Burmans, "the Rwangya element was reportedly not in favour of this move", noted Thompson and Adloff.

An even earlier report dated 22 December 1949 by British Ambassador James Bowker to the Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, on the Muslim insurrection, the Ambassador reported that:

".....publicity has been given to protestations of loyalty to the Union Government made to U Aung Zan Wai on his visit in October by the "Rwangya" Community (Arakanese as opposed to Chittagonian Muslims); it is doubtful whether these represent the true feelings of more than a small fraction of the North Arakan Muslims."

"Rwangya" appears in inverted commas. It was clearly a new expression which had yet to gain currency. U Aung Zan Wai was the Minister for Minorities and was himself Arakanese. The Ambassador doubts that their expression of loyalty, reflecting no doubt the level of their integration with the local Rakhine community, reflected what most Muslims felt.

"Rwangya" is assuredly not the same as "Rohingya". Elsewhere I have come across a range of R-word designations with differing etymologies for the indigenous pre-1785 communities, legal post-1870 settlers and illegal post-1945 migrants. These include Rowanya, Rwaung, Rahingya, Rooinga, Ruhingya, Rahinja, Roanangya, Rowunhyar, Ronjan and Roewengya. What seems clear however is that the heritage and aspirations of the indigenous "Arakan Mohamedans" have been subsumed in the numerically superior Chittagonians who arrived during and after British rule. You will not however find any of these R-words, including Rohingya, in any British record, official or private, during their administration of Arakan 1826-1948.

The legality of the post-1870 migration into Arakan, recognised in the Indo-Burman Agreement of 1941, has not to my knowledge been openly challenged by the Myanmar authorities and their concerns appear to relate mainly to what happened after the Second World War when many Muslims who had fled for safety to Bengal returned from exile, but in the company of many others who had no claim to domicile in Arakan and who were strongly disposed towards 'jihad'.

Among other Arakan Muslim communities, by 1945 the Myedu seem to have disappeared, while the Zerbadi or descendants of mixed race marriages were according to Thompson and Adloff enumerated in the 1941

Census as "Burmese Muslims". The detail of the 1941 Census though was unfortunately lost during the Japanese occupation. The Kaman alone remain to this day with a separate identity, though their ranks may have been infiltrated unlawfully by other Muslims seeking citizenship.

The first reference to "Rohingya" is said to be found in an article in the (Rangoon) Guardian Daily ¹ of 20 August 1951 implausibly entitled "The Sudeten Muslims of Burma". It was written by Abdul Gafar, a Muslim MP for Buthidaung. No citations from this article, though, exist on "Rohingya" websites; if an original copy should ever come to light, I would be very surprised if it actually contained the word "Rohingya" rather than some other variation.

But "Rohingya" it was that eventually triumphed, despite strong support from the Muslim scholar and banker [U Ba Tha for "Roewengya"](#) (thought to be a corruption of the Rakhine "Tiger from Old Village"), though by 1963 he had finally acquiesced in "Rohingya". The new ethnic designation has since been conferred on as many Muslims in Arakan and elsewhere in Burma as might be willing so to "self-identify" themselves - and then promptly backdated 1,000 years.

The British analysis highlights the misfortunes at the time of the ordinary people of Arakan, Muslims as well as Buddhists, exploited as they were by aggressive Arakan separatists, Muslim and Buddhist, as well as insurgent White Flag and Red Flag communists.

It may be relevant that the declared ethnicity of Bangladeshis in the UK is "British Bengali". In Myanmar perhaps those who are aware of their Bengali heritage might consider the designation "Myanmar Bengali". An update from "Burma Muslims" (reportedly used in the 1941 Census) to "Myanmar Muslims" might be even less controversial. But I can see why Rakhine Muslims today reject the Bengali label, although in terms of race that is what those who today claim Rohingya ethnicity mostly are. At the 1983 Census they were encouraged to register as "Bengali", which many did, [but found themselves enumerated in the report when published as "Bangladeshi"](#) which is not an ethnicity but a nationality and to which I very much doubt that they had agreed.

The pretence by the international Rohingya lobby that the bulk of present-day Rohingya never came overland from India, but only arrived by sea over the years from Arabia and the Middle East and then multiplied naturally, is not taken seriously by scholars and is not supported in any way in the attached analysis. Nor is it shared by the government of any country which is a member of the United Nations, nor by any international agency.

An understanding and acceptance of the historical reality is essential if solutions are to be found to the dire predicament which today faces so many Rakhine Muslims, and especially the pressing and serious matter of their statelessness which the international community rightly regards as intolerable.

Derek Tonkin is a former British diplomat and currently Advisor to Bagan Capital Limited.

¹ The Guardian Daily did not begin publication until 1956 and the Guardian Monthly Magazine only started in 1954.