

Shenanigans in Oslo

Derek Tonkin - 9 May 2015

Almost 100 years ago the Settlement Officer for Akyab District in Northern Arakan (today the combined Districts of Sittwe and Maungdaw in Rakhine State in Myanmar) recorded his concerns for the future of the Buddhist Rakhine population.

Writing in the [1917 edition of the Burma Gazetteer for Akyab District](#), R B Smart noted the influx of Burmese [Burmans] into Arakan. Their population, he observed, numbered only 4,632 in the 1871 Census, but by 1911 had risen to 92,185. "They are more industrious than the Arakanese and have supplanted them in many localities". They were known locally as "Yanbyes", the name derived from Ramree Island from where they had mostly first settled.

Of equal interest to R.B. Smart were the "Mahomedans" who in 1872 numbered 58,255, but by the year 1911 had risen to 178,647. "Many are men who come down for the working season only from Chittagong". Since 1879, however, immigration from Chittagong "has taken place on a much larger scale.....Maungdaw township has been overrun by Chittagonian immigrants. Buthidaung is not far behind and new arrivals will be found in almost every part of the District."

Concluded R.B. Smart ruefully: ".....the Arakanese not having been accustomed to hard manual labour for generations cannot and will not do it now; it has to be brought home to him that if he will not do more for himself, he must give way to the thrifty and hard-working Chittagonian..... between the Chittagonian and the Yanbye the Arakanese proper are not likely to survive long."

On 26 - 28 May 2015 what is billed as "a high-level conference to address the persecution of the Muslim minority group Rohingya and to seek solutions" will take place in Oslo at the Nobel Institute. In the last 100 years, the wheel has indeed turned full circle. It is no longer the Buddhist Rakhine who are threatened with extinction, but the "Mahomedans".

Not only human rights groups, but governments and UN agencies have recorded the serious human rights abuses to which Rakhine Muslims, many of whom have since the late 1950s adopted the emerging, coalescing ethnicity of "Rohingya", have been subject. The urge to highlight a situation which is intolerable and might even indeed contain "elements of genocide", as the former UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar suggested in London last year, is understandable. But solutions are even more important.

The Oslo Conference, though, is not all that it seems. It is innocently billed as "The Oslo Conference to End Myanmar's Persecution of the Rohingyas". But if you look at the [draft programme fly-sheet for 26 May](#) more closely, you will see in small print at the very top that the Conference has another name: "The Oslo Conference to End Myanmar's Persecution of the Rohingyas since 1978".

The addition of those two words "since 1978" conceals a hidden agenda, promoted particularly by the impassioned Maung Zarni who would convince us all in his thesis "[The slow-burning genocide of Myanmar's Rohingya](#)", co-authored with consultant researcher Alice Cowley, that the present-day problems of the Rohingya really only started in 1978 and that the serious communal tensions which particularly arose in the first half of the

20th Century between Muslim indigenous and settler communities on the one hand, and the Buddhist Rakhine on the other, scarcely merit a mention.

Indeed, none of the speakers at the Oslo Conference is likely to reflect on the anti-Indian disturbances of 1930, the anti-Muslim riots of 1938 which hit Maungdaw and Buthidaung in Arakan as well as Rangoon and other cities, the killing of tens of thousands of Arakan Muslims in early 1942 after the British withdrawal from Arakan (including the exodus into India of some 600,000 Indians from all over Burma), the trials and tribulations of these same people confronted by the Mujahid secessionist movement which started on the eve of Myanmar's independence in 1948, and the brutal handling of the local population by the State military and the Rakhine police and local authorities over the three decades 1948-1978 before the mass exodus to Bangladesh.

In 1955 Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff quoted in their "Minority Problems in South East Asia" from Bangladeshi archives:

"These Chittagonian-speaking Muslims from northern Arakan (later known as "*Rohingya*") were compelled to leave their ancestral homes as a result of a deliberate Burmese policy to remove them in an attempt to root out 'Muslim insurgents'. Massacres by armed forces occurred on 10 and 11 November 1948, and the military told surviving 'Rwangyas that unless they vacated Maungdaw and Buthidaung they would be tortured and butchered like animals and that they were appointed to wipe out the Rwangyas from Maungdaw and Buthidaung'." [Reference: Confidential Records Branch CRiV-10/51 in the National Archives of Bangladesh.]

(By 1955 the designation "Rohingya" had yet to be invented. Among R-word new-ethnic designations chosen by some Muslim communities in Northern Arakan [as early as the late 1940s](#) were Rwangya, Rawangya, Ruwangya and Rushangya, though with totally different etymologies from "Rohingya" which first emerged only a decade later.)

"Since 1978" refers, as many of you will know, to the flight of some 200,000 mostly rural and impressionable Muslims from Arakan into Bangladesh which started in March that year in the wake of a nation-wide check on illegal immigrants which was carried out with particular ruthlessness and brutality in Arakan. This exercise has been described by Maung Zarni as "the first large-scale campaign against the Rohingya in Rakhine State", which ended only when "a bilateral agreement between Bangladesh and Burma forced the Burmese Government to accept the repatriation of the Rohingya", a repatriation which Zarni alleges was itself "forced" on the refugees.

Diplomatic, UN and NGO reports at the time, however, flatly contradict this version of events. If you visit National Archives in Kew and look through the many documents from both British and non-British sources on File FCO 15/2468 for 1979, you will find confirmation of the events leading up to the flight of so many people and of the deaths of some 12,000 refugees in Bangladeshi camps, but then you will read of: the resolution of the crisis through negotiations; the belief that there was ["no concerted official move on the Burmese part to push out the Muslims"](#) (British Ambassador Charles Booth); the voluntary repatriation of almost all the refugees (who had initially strongly resisted pressures to return home) through an agreement freely entered into by Bangladesh and Burma; the intervention of General Ne Win personally to ensure the speedy conclusion of the repatriation; the mass

temporary secondment of Burman immigration and police officials to replace corrupt and untrustworthy Rakhine incumbents; [the supportive and friendly reception arrangements witnessed by diplomatic observers](#); and the rare accolades accorded to Ne Win for his personal intervention in this affair.

If Ne Win had really wanted to get rid of 200,000 'Rohingya' said to be illegal immigrants at the time, their unexpected flight to Bangladesh would have been too good an opportunity to miss and he would never have let them back in again. He had after all forced some 300,000 Indians to leave Burma between 1963 and 1967, in the process confiscating all their assets, and this hadn't exactly improved Indian-Burmese relations. But Indian Government concerns had left him totally unmoved (and no doubt there were many Muslims shopkeepers and small businessmen among those sent packing in 1963-67). The Arakan Muslims, on the other hand, were not a threat to his Burmese Road to Socialism, and as they were mainly farmers were in a very real sense 'sons of the soil'.

So much, then, for the "since 1978" tucked away in the small print. No doubt those responsible for this sleight-of-hand refinement in the conference title hope that former Prime Minister of Norway Kjell Magne Bondevik, State Secretary of Foreign Affairs Morten Høglund, the current UN Special Rapporteur Yanghee Lee, and other senior and responsible personalities supporting this event might overlook this little detail, or if they do notice it, will refrain out of politeness from asking about its precise significance.

But let us move on to the other pillar of Maung Zarni's thesis, that: "[The 1982 Citizenship Act](#) stripped the Rohingya of their nationality and led to the creation of the security-legal framework built around their statelessness." He quotes from [General Ne Win's speech on 8 October 1982](#) which gave a detailed clarification of the planned legislation.

Maung Zarni chooses however to omit the main message in Ne Win's speech, no doubt because this does not support his agenda. The message was: "We are in reality not in a position to drive away all those people who had come at different times for different reasons from different lands. We must have sympathy on those who have been here for such a long time and give them peace of mind.....Such being their predicament, we accept them as citizens....There are three types of citizens at present, as said earlier [full, associate, naturalized]. There will be only one type in our country in the future; that is there will only be citizens....When the grandchild is given citizenship, he will, just like any other citizen, become a full citizen." Regardless, I would add, of his/her race, ethnicity or religion. Now it might be argued that Ne Win was not sincere when he made this policy pronouncement, but it needs evaluation and cannot simply be ignored.

"The [1982] law" Maung Zarni says "draws on a list of 135 ethnic groups, which excludes some minority groups such as the Rohingya". It does not. The list of 135 is not mentioned in the Act. It first saw the light of day only on 26 September 1990 when it was published in a Burmese-language newspaper following a [speech on 5 July 1989 by General Saw Maung](#).

It should also be pointed out that Article 6 of the 1982 Act states that anyone who was a citizen at the time the Act comes into effect will remain a citizen, unless that citizenship was acquired by false pretence. That those Rohingya, possibly as many as two-thirds of their Arakan Muslim communities who enjoyed full citizenship under 1948 legislation, did not receive new IDs was in my analysis due to the recalcitrance and corruption of Rakhine State

officials, though central government did nothing to resolve this gross injustice. That is, it was State inaction rather than State action which was to blame, not the provisions of the 1982 Act.

Among numerous inaccurate and unsupported allegations in his thesis, might I quote Maung Zarni's comment on the total absence of any reference to the designation Rohingya during the British administration of Arakan from 1826 to 1948? He writes: "The fact that the British census and other official records did not include the category Rohingya says more about the shortcomings of British pre-World War II social-science methodologies and political and economic power relations during the British colonial period than they do about the history of Rohingya identity." Maung Zarni's comment reflects the classic denialist technique. If irrefutable evidence is presented, the best recourse is to seek to rubbish it through bare-faced bluster and tendentious commentary.

I invite readers to browse through any of the decennial British census records from 1872 onwards. Most of them are available online at the [Digital Library of India](#). The degree of detail is impressive, the training of the enumerators detailed, the concern to record every possible variation found in ethno-linguistic analysis truly remarkable. The 1931 Census records a rich kaleidoscope of Burmese, Indo-Burman and Indian ethnicities, including the following Muslim communities resident in Burma at the time: Arakan-Mohamedan, Zerbadi, Kaman, Myedu, Chittagonian, Bengali, Borah, Chulia, Hindustani Muslim, Kaka, Maimon, Malabri, Nursapuri, Pathan, Punjabi, Surati, Tamil, Telegu. But not a single Rohingya. Nor will you find any mention of Rohingya in any private letters and reminiscences from any source, nor in anything written in English, Burmese, Rakhine, Urdu, Bengali, Arabic, Persian, Hindi or any other known language in which the local population, and the Muslim inhabitants of Arakan in particular, might have expressed themselves. If such evidence existed, it would have been lauded from the hilltops long ago.

So on behalf of the thousands of ordinary people of Burma who formed the backbone of British censuses, as superintendents, supervisors and enumerators - the revenue officers, village headmen, judicial clerks, police officers, pleaders, petition-writers, teachers, merchants, traders, brokers, preachers, country doctors and countless others (including, in the specific case of the 1881 Census, weavers, tattooists, ear-borers, pagoda slave headmen, coolie gang-bosses, toddy-climbers and silk-worm breeders) who gave their time without reward to carry out the census - I must apologize to their descendants today for the tendentious remarks made by their compatriot Maung Zarni.

The second day of the Oslo Conference is by invitation only and is seemingly designed to "seek solutions". I would make two suggestions:

- The first is that Rohingya leaders should be encouraged to be fully open and transparent about how between 1948 and 1958 their predecessors ([who signed the representations at this link](#)) decided on "Rohingya" as their ethnicity, because the longer the present leaders maintain the fiction that the designation "Rohingya" goes back to time immemorial, the less likelihood there is that solutions will ever be found.
- The second is that countries, which choose to use the designation "Rohingya" on the grounds that this is how the Rohingya community have self-identified themselves and that in any case they need to be given an identification of some kind, should make it

clear that this does not mean that they in any sense "recognise" the designation Rohingya as an ethnic identity (as Maung Zarni alleges they all do) or accept the Rohingya narrative, which is little short of preposterous.

Though I am critical of the framework of Maung Zarni's thesis, that should not be taken as scepticism of the human rights abuses which he records. The reports look credible and I have no reason to question them.

But we should remind ourselves that, though reports may be credible, they are not always true. Let us not forget that Navi Pillay, who was then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, described as credible reports of atrocities at the village of Du Chee Yar Tan in Maungdaw in January last year. These reports however later turned out to have been at least partly fabricated and undoubtedly much exaggerated. A Police Sergeant lost his life, but it seems unlikely that anyone else did, certainly not the eight Muslims allegedly killed on the night of 9 January 2014, nor the 48 villagers who are supposed to have succumbed to police brutality a few days later.

It only remains for me to wish the participants at the Conference every success in their deliberations. Next time, though, they might consider inviting representatives of the Rakhine Buddhist community. This community is, after all, the majority ethnic group in Rakhine State and the alleged source of the trials and tribulations of the Rohingya. There are those who could make a balanced, objective and sympathetic contribution. But they cannot do so if they are not invited.

(Derek Tonkin is a retired British Ambassador to Thailand and is currently an Advisor to Bagan Capital Limited)