

A Fresh Perspective on the Muslims of Myanmar

In 1972 Moshe Yegar, who had been posted to Rangoon (Yangon) in 1960 as Second Secretary at the Israeli Embassy, published his MA Thesis on ["The Muslims in Burma: A Study of a Minority Group"](#). This is one of a select [collection of documents](#) which I have assembled to assist those wishing to study the historical background to present problems between the Buddhist and Muslim communities in Myanmar. Moshe Yegar's study was of particular interest to me as it was written by an Israeli of manifest intellectual integrity and independence and made me realise how complex the problem was and how diffuse and diverse were the scattered Muslim communities in Myanmar.

It also highlighted for me the extent to which the migration of both Hindu and Muslim communities from various parts of India into British Burma between 1850 and 1930 helped to create problems which had not existed prior to the arrival of the British. By 1931 a fifth of the total Indian population was concentrated in Rangoon and constituted 63% of the population of the city. Aspiring Burmese were advised to learn Hindi as well as English, if they hoped to prosper in their own capital city.

Concerns have recently focused on the parlous situation of the Rakhine Muslim community who have called themselves "Rohingya" and whose history is well analysed in [Jacques Leider's lecture presentation](#) in October 2012. The designation "Rohingya" only became current after Burmese independence in 1948. Isolated historical references are to be found to the name, notably in [a report published in a learned journal in 1801](#), some years before the British occupation of Arakan in 1825. Francis Buchanan, a Scottish physician, geographer and botanist, had met at the Court of Ava a number of persons of Indian origin, including Hindus and Muslims, who had been transported there in 1785 after the capture of Arakan by King Bodawpaya's forces. One dialect he noted "is that spoken by the Mohammedans who have long been settled in Arakan and who call themselves *Rooinga*, or natives of Arakan". [Rooinga or Rohingya is clearly a geographic locator](#), simply means 'Arakan-ers' and is derived from "Rohang", one of several similar names for the old kingdom whose capital was Mrohaung (current-day Mrauk U).

In a [report on Indian Immigration published in 1941](#), Finance Secretary James Baxter analysed the sources of Muslim and Hindu migration and noted, in terms similar to those of Buchanan, that: "There was an Arakanese Muslim population settled so long in Akyab [Sittwe] District that it had for all intents and purposes to be regarded as an indigenous race." In 1785 the number of these original "Rohingyas" and other Muslims was decimated by deportations to the Burman capital, then at Amarapura, and by the flight westwards into exile in Bengal of thousands of other Muslims, and Rakhine Buddhists as well, so much so that by the time of the British conquest of Arakan in 1825, the former kingdom had become seriously depopulated.

After 1825 both Rakhine Muslims and Buddhists started to return from exile, the Buddhists hoping, but in vain, that the British might restore their former kingdom. As Arakan again began to prosper, hundreds and then thousands of seasonal labourers began to arrive from the early 1850s. [The Baxter Report identified them as "Chittagonians"](#), who spoke the Chittagong region dialect of Bengali, though

some others came from further afield in Bengal and were identified simply as "Bengalis". At all events, the original "Rohingya" inhabitants of Arakan were soon totally swamped by "Chittagonian" new arrivals, many of whom decided to settle permanently in Arakan - and until 1 April 1937, Burma was administered as a province of India and there were no restrictions on overland migration.

The Rakhine Muslims were accordingly by 1930 predominantly of Bengali origin, though even the original "Rohingyas" would also have had a strong, if not major historical element of "Bengali". When the Myanmar Government nowadays describes them as "Bengalis", a term also used in the report of the Special Commission of Enquiry published on 22 April 2013 (of which only the [Executive Summary](#) and [Detailed Recommendations](#) have yet appeared in English), and eschews the name "Rohingya", I have considerable understanding for their position, as "Rohingya" has never ever been used - except by the Rohingya themselves - as any kind of ethnic designation. It is a measure of the success of the international "Rohingya" lobby that they have been able to induce Western Governments to use the designation as though it were an ethnic, rather than a geographic description.

As to whether Rakhine Muslims, only some of whom accept the "Rohingya" label, might also be "illegal" immigrants as many in Myanmar allege, I would comment that the more Rakhine Muslims demand to be called "Rohingya", the less likely it is that the Myanmar Government will accede to their request for full citizenship. "Rohingya" is seen as confrontational, opposing Rakhine Buddhists to Rakhine Muslims. For that reason, many Muslims in the southern part of Rakhine State would rather not be designated "Rohingya" at all, as that could jeopardise their chances of eventual acceptance as citizens of Myanmar.

The flow of migrants from Bengal to Arakan and in the reverse direction was particularly acute at various stages after Independence in 1948, as crises in Pakistan/Bangladesh and repression in Myanmar induced scores if not hundreds of thousands of "Rohingya" to seek on occasions exile, asylum or repatriation. It would be beyond the wisdom of Solomon to say who in Rakhine State are nowadays "legal" and who "illegal" according to Burmese law when for many, if not most, all personal documentation has been lost or destroyed over the years.

There are in any case today at least 2.5 million Muslims permanently resident all over Myanmar, and most of these do not in any sense claim to be "Rohingya". The number might even be as high as 4 million out of a population of around 60 million, but we shall have to await the results of the planned census in 2014 to get more accurate figures. I have no idea what percentage of all Muslims in Myanmar already enjoys full citizenship, but I suspect that a sizeable minority already do.

Full citizenship has long been a demand of the "Rohingya" lobby. The restrictions applied to the "Rohingya" in past years have been a serious infringement of their human rights. However the appalling events in Rakhine State last year have been followed by increasing hostility towards non-Rohingya Muslim communities, so much so that Muslims now find themselves under unwelcome pressures, wherever they are resident in Myanmar. There is palpable fear in many isolated Muslim communities.

Particularly unfortunate has been the fate of the Muslim Kaman community in Rakhine State, who supposedly enjoy full citizenship as a recognised ethnic group. Many Kaman now find themselves internally displaced, some in the same camps as Rohingyas, and likewise very restricted in their movements, despite their supposed "full citizenship". In Meiktila, displaced Muslims are held under tight restriction, even though some of them, possibly most, have full citizenship. For many Muslims holding documentation as Burmese citizens, the citizenship rights which they thought they enjoyed have effectively been suspended, indefinitely.

In other words, although the statelessness of many Muslims in Myanmar remains a serious longer term issue, it is not (or at least ought not to be) their principal concern at the present time, which is how to secure their very survival in a situation where they cannot earn a living as they previously did as farmers, fishermen and traders and where they would not in any case be allowed to sell their produce in towns, or to reopen their shops

Contrary to what many Western politicians and activists frequently allege, the restrictive [Burmese Citizenship Act of 1982](#) did not strip anyone of their citizenship: Article 6 of the Act makes it clear that anyone who was already a citizen remains a citizen. Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides that no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of nationality and no one has (yet) suggested that Myanmar is in breach of that provision. The Act has certainly made it much more difficult for Rohingya to acquire citizenship, unless they speak Burmese and can prove at least three generations of residence. Even so, as a rule of thumb, international law accepts that States themselves alone have the responsibility to decide who shall be their citizens and may reasonably resist pressures to make their rules and regulations more inclusive.

In the present fraught situation, Western Governments have to tread delicately along a difficult path. On the one hand the failure so far to indict any Buddhists for atrocities against Muslims ([10 Muslim pilgrims taken from a bus and murdered](#) in southern Rakhine State a year ago, and up to [32 children and four teachers from a school killed in Meiktila](#) in March this year) is reprehensible, in a situation where Muslims held responsible for murders in Rakhine State and Meiktila have already been arrested, tried and sentenced. On the other hand, Western Governments these days have a better understanding of local sensitivities in Myanmar and wish to take no action which might undermine the current reform process and the rapprochement with non-Burman nationalities.

While the radical monk [U Wirathu urges a boycott](#) of Muslim businesses and a ban on Muslim-Buddhist marriages (and worse), the British Government might well recall their own problems with mixed marriages, notably over conversion to Islam and inheritance, on which they sought to legislate in 1872 (Special Marriage Act), 1923 (Revision of the Special Marriage Act) and 1939 (Buddhist Women's Special Marriage and Succession Act which provided the option of a civil marriage for Buddhist women marrying Indian men). "It became evident to us" stated *The Riot Enquiry Interim Report* in 1939 on the anti-Muslim riots of the previous year "that one of the major sources of anxiety in the minds of a great number of Burmese was the question of the marriage of their womenfolk with foreigners in general and with Indians in particular."

Independent Myanmar followed this up in 1954 with new legislation to replace the 1939 Act. It might now be time to update the 1954 Act. Not the version proposed by U Wirathu, but something more moderate as suggested recently by the National Democratic Force, a splinter group of the National League for Democracy.

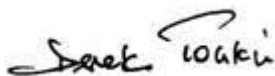
The Rohingya have reportedly been described by the UN as "one of the most persecuted minorities in the world", though no one, in the UN or outside, has been able to say who supposedly said this, or on what occasion. I do not myself believe that any Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar in recent years would ever presume to make such a broad brush, quasi-doctrinal comment - it is not to be found anywhere in the [478 pages of documentation of their collected reports to the UN General Assembly](#). If there is a document where any such UN expression would be recorded, it would be in the lengthy recitals and preambles of the critical Resolutions on the Situation of the Rohingya which the European Parliament (EP) adopts from time to time, [most recently on 13 June 2013](#). No such expression is to be found in any EP Resolution this century.

The issue, though, is now far wider than the "Rohingya" themselves and concerns all Muslims in Myanmar. The West is right to offer constructive help and to restrain their natural inclination to lecture and hector. The West also has its own geo-political and economic interests.

There are many problems in Myanmar which the West cannot hope to fully understand, let alone resolve, and this is one of them. It is something the people of Myanmar need to settle through discussion and reconciliation among themselves at time when the gradual emergence of basic civil and political liberties has unleashed worrying pent-up forces and emotions after so many years of repression.

At the same time, it would be wrong to dismiss Buddhist anxieties, notably of being swamped by Muslim immigrants from overcrowded Bangladesh, as groundless - though Myanmar's Buddhist majority need to battle the demons of their prejudices against dark-skinned peoples. Under British administration these anxieties by the predominantly Buddhist population were very real and were recognised by the British administration, which had unwittingly created the problem.

The impact of these concerns on political reform and the fortunes of political parties in the run-up to the 2015 elections could be significant. Myanmar is still very much a country not only in transition, but even in the making.



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