

# “Rohingya,” Rakhaing and the Recent Outbreak of Violence - A Note

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“Rohingya” is both an old noun and a new label. Old, but exceedingly rare in both Western and Asian sources, new, though widespread in the international media. Not unreasonably challenged as an ethnic denomination, it is indeed unfamiliar to large parts of the Muslim community of Arakan that it is supposed to name.<sup>1</sup> It was, as far as we know, the endonym of Muslims who lived there in pre-colonial times. The term was noted by Dr. Francis Hamilton in his article, “A comparative vocabulary of some of the languages spoken in the Burma Empire,” published in volume V of *Asiatick Researches* (1799), where he distinguished six languages and three dialects in the kingdom. One of these dialects “evidently derived from the language of the Hindu nation,” he says was spoken by the “Mohammedan who have long settled in Arakan, and who call themselves Rooinga, or natives of Arakan” (p. 237). He further writes that the “Yakain, the proper natives” of Arakan called the Muslims “Kulaw Yakain, or stranger Arakan.” Two distinct cultural communities thus co-existed at the time the Burmese conquered the Arakanese kingdom in 1785.

Since the 1950s, the term “Rohingya,” which went unrecorded in British administrative sources, has been

claimed by vocal representatives of the Muslim community of Rakhaing State as an ethnonym for their community. Though no one contests that the overall majority of Muslims in Arakan originate from Bengal, either in the past or the recent present, the Muslims there themselves paradoxically are opposed to any reference to their land of origins. They want to be called “Rakhaing Muslims,” neither “Bengali Muslims” nor “Rohingya.” The term “Rohingya” spread with great success after the refugee crises in the 1970s and 1990s. The media outside of Myanmar now commonly refer to all Muslims of Rakhaing State uniformly as “Rohingya,” though the name has stuck in particular with those of the population who live abroad or who have claimed refugee status. To put the matter another way, a careful delineation of the term Rohingya reveals that while the term has a lineage of several centuries, the way it is used today by some members of the Muslim community in Rakhaing State to refer to themselves is of fairly recent origin. Most Muslims in Rakhaing State—which includes many non-Rohingya Muslims—do not like or use the term. Many people outside the community, both in Rakhaing State and elsewhere, tend to call anyone who is a Muslim in Rakhaing State a “Rohingya.” In

the correct sense, “Rohingya” only applies to a portion of the Bengali-origin Muslim population of Rakhaing State, to those who wish to call themselves that way. Outside of this self-designated group, there are other Muslims who are largely—though not exclusively—of ultimate Bengali origin, but who are nevertheless not Rohingya.

Rohingya leaders both inside and outside of Myanmar who speak on behalf of the Muslims of Rakhaing State claim to be the descendants of the old, pre-colonial Muslim community of Arakan. Nobody doubts the historical existence of that community. But the composition of the Muslim communities in Myanmar is much more complex than many of the “streamlined” accounts would have it. Most of the Indian Muslims came to Arakan during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when during the colonial period they were unrestricted by migration regulations, and then also after independence. Taking a long-term view, one has to keep in mind that there has been migration back and forth along the north to south coastline of Arakan for a long time, including of Rakhaing into what is now Bangladesh. The superficial judgement that all Muslims in Rakhaing State are *de facto* post-independence illegal immigrants cannot be justified.

<sup>1</sup> I have used the following terms: “Rakhaing” to denote both the people and language, but also an adjective in some contexts; “Arakan” to denote the place before independence in 1948 – the adjectival form being “Arakanese”; and “Rakhaing State” to denote the modern political entity. This is not a perfect solution, but goes a long way to alleviate the ambiguities the term “Rakhaing,” which potentially covers all these senses.

Having said that, one cannot fail to see that illegal Bangladeshi immigration exists and persists. In Assam, for example, Bangladeshi immigrants are numerous, but they do not claim to be a separate ethnic group of Northeast India, claiming rather to have an “Indian Muslim” identity.

With regard to the current situation in Rakhaing State, extreme statements on the balance between the Rakhaing Buddhist and Muslim populations have had great popularity in the absence of reliable statistics and records.<sup>2</sup> As any particular statement provokes a counter-claim and breeds further mistrust, the long-standing communal tensions between Buddhists and Muslims have made predictable the most recent clashes. These tensions are clearly not new; British observers noted them in the 1920s. Neither then nor later has any relevant government tried to introduce any sensible policies to remedy the situation. Searching for legitimacy in the absence of legal security, each side has turned to history, which they have used and abused. Indeed, neither side has been satisfied with citing widely-accepted historical fact for their rhetorical strategies: All too often they have amplified, if not embellished or distorted, the meager historical record. To say that the Rohinyas are descended from Arab seafarers of the seventh century is a matter of sheer belief. From Arab sources, we know nothing of the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal, as a look at Tibbetts’ 1979 *Study of the Arabic texts Containing Material on South-East Asia* will show. The acceptance

of such interpretations is more a matter of personal conviction than something based on evidence. The visit of the Buddha to Arakan is a deeply-held belief of Rakhaing Buddhists, but does not withstand the critical eye of historical scholarship.

As a Persian inscription in Mrauk U shows, the historical antecedents of Muslim settlement go back at least to the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, when the cultural influence of the prestigious sultanate of Bengal was manifest, for example, in the design of local coins. During the rule of the Mrauk U kings, Muslims coming from various Indian lands were an altogether marginal community, but they undoubtedly played a noteworthy role in the fortunes of the independent Buddhist kingdom of Arakan in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. We know relatively little about their history. Their competition with the Portuguese for influence at the court prevented them from having any dominant cultural or political impact there. In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Arakanese kings ran a lucrative slave trade that was based on the deportation of peasants from East Bengal. Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there was an official policy to keep the most qualified of the deported in Arakan. A famous example is the great Bengali poet Alaol, who thrived at the court of King Candasudhammarājā (1652-1670) and praised the king, his benefactor, as highly knowledgeable of the Buddha. Many of the Bengali peasants deported in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries were settled on agricultural lands in Arakan. On the other hand, in 1661 Wouter Schouten, a Dutch doctor, wrote

that Indian Muslim traders were involved in the seasonal trade with ports on the Coromandel of India, but did not settle in Arakan. For the pre-colonial period, nothing is known about those Muslims who, gradually arriving as mercenaries, came to settle in Arakan and ultimately supported the Arakanese king’s anti-Mughal foreign policy until 1666, when the Rakhaing lost the port of Chittagong, a main pillar of their trade.

The majority population of Arakan has been and still is the Rakhaing, who are Buddhists and ethnically akin to the Burmans. The history of Arakan in the early modern period (15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries) is foremost the history of a Buddhist kingdom which had privileged, but often strained, relations with neighboring Buddhist capitals, such as Ava, Pegu, Kandy and Ayutthaya, whose monkhoods generally adhered to the Sri Lankan Mahāvihāra textual tradition. The supreme symbol of the Buddhist virtue of the Rakhaing kings was the Mahāmuni statue, now the most revered Buddha statue in Myanmar. It was deported to Amarapura from its site in Arakan in early 1785 after the Burmese king Badon Min’s (*aka* Bodaw Phaya’s) conquest of Arakan.

The Rakhaing proudly remember the golden era of their 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century kings, who were warriors, but also shrewd businessmen and Maeceneas-like patrons of literature at the court. The loss of their kingdom is quite prominent in the historical memory of the Buddhist Rakhaings. Among the educated

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<sup>2</sup> This is true for all of Myanmar, where accurate census data are largely unavailable or undisclosed.

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class, it has fuelled a persistent sense of loss of identity for over two centuries. The resentment against the Burmese as invaders has a surprising resilience. Unexpectedly, the thousands of Burman immigrants to Arakan in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, well documented in British sources, have been thoroughly Arakanized. Since independence, this lasting grudge against the Burmans has fuelled Rakhaing Buddhist nationalism, and has been a part of Rakhaing claims for greater autonomy.

The angry rejection of local Muslims' claims to be an ethnic group of Rakhaing State under the Union of Burma and of the very appellation of “Rohingya” are other recurrent grievances of Buddhist Rakhaing nationalists and have been integral to their discourse since the 1950s. For decades, the Buddhist Rakhaings have felt that no outsider or any national government has paid serious attention to their anxieties that they have become increasingly marginalized in their own land. Some may question whether this marginalization is a reality or a reflection of Rakhaing self-perceptions of victimhood. But the reality of mutual antagonization between the two communities, and the considerable hostility of the Buddhist Rakhaing hostility towards the UN and NGOs in Rakhaing State show that we must take seriously their sense of being treated unfairly. In their eyes, the Muslim Rohingya community in northern Rakhaing State has been

accorded preferential treatment. That group of Rohingya, especially as they have sought refugee status in Bangladesh, have been defined internationally as a “most vulnerable” group as displaced persons. This recognition and treatment are factors that have fuelled the recent protests of the Buddhist Rakhaing.

We should also keep in mind that the current economic, demographic, social and ultimately legal problems linked to the Muslim community and their coexistence with the Buddhists in Arakan do not go back to the pre-colonial period, when these communities lived side by side. As I have said, these communal problems have their origins in the immigration of Bengalis into Arakan during the British colonial period, which is well documented for the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Muslim communities of Indian descent are to be found all over Southeast Asia, starting with Myanmar itself. Such immigrants generally acknowledge their Indian roots and cultural identity and have followed various courses of communal integration. It is also well-known that the presence of such Indian communities, notably in port cities like Rangoon or Singapore, was intimately linked to the expansion of the British empire, its economic policies, and opportunities. In broader historical perspective, Bengali immigration to Arakan is thus but one chapter in the history of migration of Indians to serve British interests

and administrative needs in colonial Burma.

So what is so different about the situation in Arakan? One aspect that could puzzle the observer is the discrepancy between, on the one hand, the arguments that the two sides put forward to legitimize their rivalling claims, and on the other hand, the representation of the conflict by those who have entered to mediate or remediate. To an unprecedented degree, both Muslims and Buddhists have been fixated on making claims for historical legitimacy, and counter-claims by Buddhicizing or Islamicising the Arakanese past. This is first of all a cultural war to gain hegemony over the interpretation of history. The antiquity of each community's supposed first settlement in Arakan is used to oppose any contestation of what are factually untenable positions of propoganda. Again: Those who consider most Muslims in Rakhaing State simply as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh miss the point, while those who would deny that the border has always been porous, or that checks on migration have always been less than perfect, with corruption rife, are equally mistaken. In the end historical truths and counter-truths will be of little help to address the underlying social problems which have been made that much worse by reiterating extremist positions.

On the other hand, is it more helpful to represent and interpret the current conflict as an injustice (the non-recognition of

citizenship), as a persistent failure of the government to protect parts of the population, or as successive humanitarian crises for the international community to address? All these perspectives are part of the problem as much as they are of any way to resolve the conflict. Depicting the Muslims as the eternal stateless victims who alone bear the brunt of oppression, and the Buddhists in Rakhaing State as criminal aggressors in collusion with the *Tatmadaw* or the *Nasaka*, is not the best way to understand the nature of the conflict. The recent situation and the violence in Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Sittwe was not manifest in the same way in all places. While responsibility for the violence is allegedly shared equally in Sittwe, there was reportedly much less aggression in Buthidaung, where there is a greater numerical balance between the two communities. In Maungdaw, Buddhists form only two percent of the local population. Rakhaing Buddhists fight an uphill battle to have others understand that they are in the minority there and that they have been largely the victims of violence. In a better world, Buddhists and Muslims could work together for a better future for Rakhaing State, one of the most underdeveloped areas in Myanmar. They could do so by standing up to the central government when necessary, or defend their regional interests against the monopolizing tendencies of foreign economic interests. But they are unlikely to do so in the near future.

The intractability of the conflict at present is due to three overlapping reasons: cultural, demographic, and communication. Unlike

in other areas of Myanmar, the Muslims of northern Rakhaing State or "NRS" are largely not integrated into Rakhaing society. This is an uncomfortable truth, but is how many Buddhists view the situation. The Kaman Muslims are integrated into Rakhaing society, which is why no Rakhaing Buddhist would ever contest their historical presence in Arakan or their legitimacy. In northern Rakhaing State, the Muslims form their own exclusive society because they are a large majority and for any analytical purposes cannot actually be referred to as a minority, at least locally. The Buddhist Rakhaing resent this fact, as they feel threatened from many directions. The Rakhaing problems are more complicated than conflicts elsewhere in Myanmar because they are triangular, not binary, involving three parties: the central government, which is largely Burman; Rakhaing Buddhists; and Muslims. In the past, there was no trust between them, and at present there is none. The parties are talking past each other, not to each other.

Governments and army commanders are prepared to deal with policy and security issues, NGOs are prepared to deal with humanitarian and human rights issues. So is the UN in various instances. As things appear, they seem ill-equipped to face the cultural, psychological, demographic or communicative aspects involved in this conflict. Moreover, the persisting ignorance of the media and human rights organizations of the complexity of the relations between the three parties involved, together with the UN and INGOs being discredited

in the eyes of the Buddhists because of ten years of unilateral support for the Muslims, does not inspire confidence or hope to see a sudden improvement in the general situation. The Muslim leadership will place their bets on outside intervention and eventually interference, as their lobbying of the international media has proved successful. The Buddhist Rakhaing lack charismatic leadership and are notoriously bad at lobbying. They nonetheless have a fair chance of counting on an increasing solidarity with other Buddhists in the country. Some will predictably interpret this solidarity as cultural empathy, others will denigrate it as racism. While a further drifting apart of the two communities looks as a likely scenario, it will not help that the educated members of both readily acknowledge their own intra-communal divisions.

For those out to criticize the actions of the government or the declarations of the Burmese political opposition, they will find this the easiest of all tasks. True, the government has its work cut out for them to reform the army to get them to respect human rights. But even then, once the government has set its troops to task, they will be accused of doing things the old fashioned way. If the army shows too much restraint, they will be accused of not protecting the citizens. The sad fact is that there is actually no political prize to be won in Rakhaing State because the conflict is deeply embarrassing in the long run and hampers the reform and progress of the whole country. It is probably an understatement to say that the future looks bleak.

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