

# The Rohingya Situation

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Three years ago I knew very little about the problems of Rakhine State. As an Advisor to a private equity company however I felt it important that I should take a closer look at what threatened to develop into a major issue affecting the security and stability of Myanmar in the wake of serious intercommunal violence which started in July 2012.

A basic quest has been to discover when and where the designation "Rohingya" originated. I have yet to uncover the full truth, but I have reached preliminary conclusions which I have no difficulty in defending.

In no way does this imply that I am opposed to use of the designation "Rohingya". People can call themselves whatever they like and we should defend their right to do so. But in using the designation "Rohingya", we need to be so careful that this does not imply our uncritical support for a narrative which many might find rather fanciful.

There are four main points I would like to make about the Rohingya situation.

The first is that I have found no references to the term "Rohingya" in any shape or form in any documents or correspondence, official or private, created during the 122 years of British rule in Arakan from 1826 to 1948.

The second is that those who support the Rohingya narrative of a specific ethnicity going back many centuries invariably do so on the basis of a very few unconnected historical occurrences, all of which I have found unconvincing and totally at variance with the weight of substantial evidence to the contrary.

The third is that, while I accept unreservedly that the Rohingya have been the victims of serious human rights abuses and have suffered and are suffering far more than their Rakhine Buddhist neighbours, their political leaders have an important responsibility to be open and transparent about how the designation "Rohingya" came to be created in the late 1950s.

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The fourth is that if such transparency could be achieved with the encouragement of the international community, there could be sufficient room for manoeuvre available to the Myanmar authorities to launch a serious programme of citizenship for those Rohingya who are still stateless.

During my research I paid several visits to the British Library near St Pancras Station (which also now houses the British Newspaper Library formerly situated at Colindale in North London) as well as the National Archives at Kew. I was greatly helped in this task by a serious and independent Rakhine researcher who recently spent four months in London studying all available archives, on a grant funded by the EU and the National University of Singapore. We have between us trawled through the archives, I would like to think, like no one else before. This also involved contact with academic institutions in Singapore and the United States, as well as with Myanmar National Archives in Nay Pyi Taw and Yangon.

The first records I investigated were British census reports between 1826 and 1948. I have yet to study some of them in depth. I have also not been able so far to track down the original annual 'capitation-tax' censuses which were carried out jointly by revenue officers and local officials, in the case of Arakan from 1829 onwards. However extracts from these annual records are available in other documents. An American Baptist missionary who spent some ten years in Arakan, the Rev GS Comstock, has left an account of his experiences <sup>2</sup> which includes data from the 1842 census, while the first full census of British Burma made in 1872 <sup>3</sup> includes a comparison of decennial local censuses from 1832, 1842, 1852, 1862 and 1872 as well as a comparison of the annual capitation-tax return of 1872 with the full Census conducted in the same year.

I have been greatly impressed by the detail, clarity and intellectual integrity of the full censuses held in 1872, 1881, 1891, 1901, 1911, 1921 and 1931. (The detail of the 1941 Census was lost during the Second World War, though fortunately typed summary tables survive). Where mistakes were made in a Census, these were acknowledged and every effort was made to correct these on the next occasion. I also found other reports from the British era of invaluable assistance, including local and national gazetteers and official reports such as the Report on Indian Immigration released in 1941 by the Financial Secretary James Baxter <sup>4</sup>, as well as private papers and correspondence and personal reminiscences.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF18/Comstock.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF18/1872-Census-Arakan.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF13/baxter-report-part-a.pdf>

In all this documentation covering over 122 years in the case of Arakan, now Rakhine State, I found not a single reference to "Rohingya" or anything remotely resembling this designation. It was totally unknown to the British administration. On the other hand, I found copious information about the historical presence of Muslims in Burma generally, presented in official reports and private documents in considerable detail.

I first recorded my findings in an article circulated in April 2014 <sup>5</sup>. These were not to the liking of Rohingya activists. A leading Rohingya politician, U Kyaw Min, Chairman of the Democracy and Human Rights Party based in Rangoon, chided me <sup>6</sup> for what he saw as my "attempt to appease his Myanmar friends in his working environment", adding that I should not allow myself "to be a tool to kill the identity and citizenship of about three million Rohingya." U Yaw Min should know that I was on the contrary seeking to preserve their heritage and bring an end to their statelessness.

As I have retired to a village in Surrey where there are to my knowledge only a few Burmese inhabitants of the feline variety, I asked myself in what kind of conspiracy U Kyaw Min thought I might be involved. It did not take me long however to realise that his approach generally reflected all the characteristics of what we know as "denialism" <sup>7</sup>, replete with untruths, false analogies and illogical assumptions.

One of his main objectives would seem to be to debunk the validity of every British census, record and official report ever made. "In fact", he wrote, "British time censuses were bereft of reality and accuracy. In 1871 [in fact 1872] census Burmese Muslim figure was shown as 99,846 where in 1891 it became 24,647. Can we say it is reliable?"

The 1891 Census is available online. It records the Muslim population of Arakan at the time as 126,604 and the total Muslim population of a British Burma expanded after the Burmese defeat in the Third Anglo-Burmese War in 1886 as 253,640. You would need to ask U Kyaw Min from where he derived his remarkable figure of 24,647 - less than one-tenth of the figure actually on record.

Another example of his denialism - and this is only one of several I could quote from his article - is his conviction that: "So called Bengali or Chittagonians [in British censuses] were mostly foreigners.....seasonal labourers who did not bring their spouses. Once the working season is over, they returned to their native land." Financial Secretary James Baxter noted in his 1941 Report on Indian Immigration <sup>8</sup> that in Akyab District (present -day Sittwe and

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF17/Rohingya-Identity-rev.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.rohingyablogger.com/2014/04/why-not-rohingya-antiquity-part-2.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Denialism>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF13/baxter-report-part-b.pdf>

Maungdaw Districts combined) no less than "79% of the Indian population was born in Burma, evidence of the presence of a large and established Chittagonian agricultural community". Tables in his report show that as many as 82.43% of all 186,327 Chittagonians and 15,586 Bengalis recorded in the 1931 Census as living in Akyab District gave Burma as their place of birth. Again you would need to ask U Kyaw Min to explain how so large a proportion of Chittagonians and Bengalis actually born in Arakan came to be only seasonal labourers in the land of their birth.

The rejection of factual evidence generally accepted as historically uncontroversial is a particular feature of denialism. Another characteristic is the cherry-picking of sources which appear to favour a particular interpretation while ignoring or rejecting all others. Almost all apologists for the Rohingya narrative I have come across base their case - that Rohingya is a long established ethnicity rooted in Arakan's history - on a very few unconnected pieces of evidence which in my opinion are of only limited value and relevance.

First, a single sentence in a linguistic essay<sup>9</sup> first published in 1799 by Dr Francis Buchanan, a British surgeon who accompanied a diplomatic mission in 1795 to the Court of Ava, is the only historical record extant that there were "Mohammedans who have been long settled in Arakan and who call themselves *Rooinga* or natives of *Arakan*". These were Muslim residents of Arakan who had been transported to Ava after the conquest of Arakan by Burmese forces in 1785. Both they and locally resident Hindus "by the real natives of *Arakan*, are called *Kulaw Yakain*, or stranger *Arakan*".

Buchanan never used the term again, though he wrote extensively. Nor was the description used at all by any of his contemporaries, except in documents of encyclopaedic reference quoting Buchanan as the source, while providing no additional materials or independent research<sup>10</sup>. Yet this single historical reference of uncertain relevance in a linguistic essay has today become one of the main pillars of the "Rohingya" narrative, all the proof supposedly needed of a Rohingya ethnicity going back a thousand years. The very absence of any repetition of the designation until the late 1950s must surely make this isolated record of 1799 of doubtful validity as an ethnic description, though it has historical value as a linguistic or geographic determinant.

Second, another single sentence supposedly showing that indigenous Muslims in Arakan at the time of the British conquest in 1826 were so numerous that they accounted for 30% of the total population compared with 60% Rakhine Buddhists was contained in a hand-written

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.networkmyanmar.com/images/stories/PDF12/rohingya-origins-1-rev.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> See for example <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF19/Hamilton-Encyclopaedia-1820.pdf> in which the Buchanan narrative is summarised, using identical vocabulary in a work of reference.

report to the East India Company by Sub-Commissioner Charles Paton in 1826, later printed as an article in the 1828 edition of "Asiatic Researches" <sup>11</sup>. We read:

"The population of *Aracan* and its dependancies (sic), *Ramree*, *Cheduba* and *Sandoway*, does not, at present, exceed a hundred thousand souls, and may be classed as follows: Mugs [Rakhine], six-tenths, Musselmans, three-tenths, Burmese, one-tenth : Total 100,000 souls".

This estimate can have been no more than a very rough guess, as the census was conducted immediately after the conclusion of hostilities and can only have been of a very rudimentary nature in a region where some districts must have been well-high inaccessible. It also omits all reference to the several other indigenous ethnicities in Arakan.

In a 1999 dissertation <sup>12</sup>, Michael Charney noted (page 264) "the surprisingly low percentage of Muslims (twenty per cent) in the Arakan Literal found by the British at the close of Burman rule". Only a year after Paton's article appeared in "Asiatic Researches", the first properly conducted peace-time census for the capitation tax assessed the population of Arakan at 121,288 <sup>13</sup> by which time many of those, both Muslims and Buddhists, who had sought refuge in Bengal during Burman rule, had returned home. By 1832 the population had risen to 195,107 and by 1842 to 246,766, recorded in detail in the Rev Comstock's account <sup>14</sup> who noted that the 1842 Census estimated the population at the time at about 250,000, of whom about 167,000 were "Mugs" (Rakhine), 40,000 Burmese, 20,000 "Mussulmans", 5,000 new arrivals from Bengal, and sundry other ethnic groups. This indicates an 8 to 1 ratio of Buddhists (Rakhine and Burmese) to Muslims.

By the time of the first full census of 1872, the population of Arakan had doubled to 484,673. Buddhists (364,023) however still exceeded Muslims (64,313) by a ratio of nearly 6 to 1. At the 1931 Census there were still more Buddhists (721,432) than Muslims (384,475). But the ratio had fallen dramatically in the intervening years to less than 2 to 1 as a result of immigration from the Chittagong region of Bengal.

The reason why the population of Arakan trebled during the first twenty years of British rule from 100,000 or so to more than 350,000 (352,348 recorded in the 1852 Census) was, as Lt. Gen Albert Fytche, late Chief Commissioner of Burma put it <sup>15</sup>, "due to immigration from provinces under Burmese government, and notable from Pegu". This meant "the desertion of

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF19/Paton-1828-Aracan.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.scribd.com/doc/97188422/Where-Jambudipa-and-Islamdom-Converged-Religious-Change-and-the-Emergence-of-Buddhist-Communalism-in-Early-Modern-Arakan-15th-19th-Centuries-by-Mic>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF18/1872-Census-Arakan.pdf> para.22

<sup>14</sup> See Note 2.

<sup>15</sup> <https://archive.org/details/burmapastandpre02fytcgooq>

their own sovereign and country by these masses, and their voluntarily placing themselves under an alien rule, coupled with the vast increase of prosperity in every shape of the portion of Burma which has become British." The increase in the ratio of Buddhists to Muslims at this time was indeed due to Burmese migration into Arakan. The migration of Muslims from Bengal only started in earnest after the whole of Burma came under British control in 1886.

To rely solely on Charles Paton's guesstimate of 1826 and to refuse to take into account the statistics of carefully conducted annual peace-time censuses which in the case of Arakan started in 1829, is not in my opinion the hallmark of serious historical research.

There is a third pillar of the Rohingya narrative to which I would draw attention. In "Burma Outpost" published in 1945 Anthony Irwin <sup>16</sup>, who fought with local Muslims in Northern Arakan against the Japanese in 1942 and 1943, expressed the view that: "They are generally known as Bengalis or Chittagonians, quite incorrectly, and to look at they are quite unlike any other product of India or Burma that I have seen. They resemble the Arab in name, in dress and in habit.....As a race they have been here for over two hundred years."

Captain Irwin was the son of General Noel Irwin, Commander for a time of the 'Eastern Army' in India. Captain Irwin arrived in India having no experience of Burma. His account generally has been described by the late British Ambassador and Burma specialist Peter Murray <sup>17</sup> in 1980 as "grossly overwritten and factually unreliable; many of the adventures he claims to have had happened to other people." Yet there could be an element of truth in what he said, in the sense that Arab historical influences on Chittagong have been uncontroversially recorded by scholars and that accordingly all Chittagonians, whenever they arrived in Arakan, might have reflected these influences.

No one though would seriously dispute that there was a group of "Arakan Muslims" who could indeed trace their roots back to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century and even earlier and who were quite distinct from the later Chittagonians and Bengali immigrants to Arakan. It might well be that Irwin had met descendants of the indigenous Muslim population of "Yakhain Kala" (the "Kulaw Yakain" of Francis Buchanan, recorded in English as "Arakan Muslims" in the 1921 and 1931 British Censuses); or settled Chittagonian migrants who could have appeared to Irwin to be more Arab than any other Muslims he had met in India. His remarks however can scarcely be taken as evidence that all Rohingya can trace their roots directly to Arab migrants.

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF17/Extract-Irwin-rev.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF13/peter-murray-1980.pdf>

Against this historical background of Muslim migrants moving into Arakan, often in groups, over the centuries, let us take a brief look at the situation in Arakan after the Second World War. The Japanese invasion of Burma brought massive intercommunal violence which saw the flight in 1942 of most Muslims in southern Arakan to the north, or into Bengal itself, and of most Buddhists to the south. By the time of independence in 1948, Arakan was in a state of ferment.

The Muslim communities of Arakan understandably felt that they needed to redefine their status, not least in order to demonstrate their loyalty to the newly independent Burma. An initial approach on 24 February 1947<sup>18</sup> by the The Muslim Council of North Arakan (Jamiat UI Ulema or “Council of Religious Leaders”) to the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State Arthur Bottomley seeking an autonomous district for North Arakan and the same status accorded under the Panglong Agreement<sup>19</sup> to certain other frontier areas fell on deaf ears. Eighteen months later the Council, which had been founded in 1936 (or possibly 1932)<sup>20</sup> at the time of the separation of Burma from India, and at some point assumed the name “Rohangya Jamiat UI Ulama”, laid the blame on the British for the rise of inter-communal tensions over the years, citing as the unlikely cause their alleged “divide and rule” policy which “culminated in the massacre of 1942” of Muslims in the central and southern regions of Arakan.<sup>21</sup>

The Council again sought an autonomous region, and for the first time described their descendants as “Ruhangyas” or “Rushangyas”<sup>22</sup>. They also denied that there had been any substantive immigration from Chittagong:

“We are dejected to mention that in this country we have been wrongly taken as part of the race generally known as Chittagonions [sic] and as foreigners. We humbly submit that we are not. We have a history of our own district [distinct?] from that of Chittagonians. We have a culture of our own. Historically we are a race by ourselves.....Our spoken language is an admixture of Arabic, Persian [sic], Urdu, Arakanese and Benglis [Benglish or Bengali?].....”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF18/Representations-1947-rev.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs/panglong\\_agreement.htm](http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs/panglong_agreement.htm)

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.rohangya.org/en/about-rja>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF19/J-U-25-October-1948.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF19/J-U-25-October-1948.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> This archaic dialect was indeed spoken by those enumerated as “Arakan Muslims” or “Yakhain Kala” by the British and was recorded by Francis Buchanan in 1799. But it is not the dialect of most Muslims in Rakhine State which is close to the Chittagonian dialect. That the Council claimed that in 1948 this was the *lingua franca* of the population generally might well suggest that they had already taken a conscious decision to deny their Indian roots and to cloak themselves protectively in a minority Muslim culture, though two or three members of the Council may well have been of “Yakhain Kala” origin.

History, it would seem, was already in the process of being rewritten and historical facts recorded during the British administration denied out of hand. The origins of the “denialism” which I have earlier noted might well be traced to such pronouncements.

It was already apparent in immediate post-independence Burma that the designations which the British had used to describe Muslims in Arakan were felt to be out of date and out of place. In a despatch dated 22 December 1949 to the Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, on the Muslim insurrection, British Ambassador James Bowker reported that:

".....publicity has been given to protestations of loyalty to the Union Government made to U Aung Zan Wai <sup>24</sup> 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," who were mainly Chittagonians.

The "Arakan Muslims" had indeed started to call themselves "Rwangya", a word whose etymology might be related to the words "rwam" and "kya" meaning "in-between", according to Foreign Office historical advisor Professor Bertie Pearn in an internal Foreign Office memorandum in 1952 <sup>25</sup>. The “Chittagonians” also felt <sup>26</sup> that they no longer wished to be designated by the name used in British censuses, and the non-Chittagonian “Bengalis” likewise, and so both cloaked themselves in the "Rwangya" mantle.

By 1955 Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff were writing <sup>27</sup> :

"The postwar illegal immigration of Chittagonians into that area [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, and though they were economic differences between them, both groups were Muslims and together came to outnumber the Arakanese Buddhists."

In Bengal, a number of "Rwangya" (aka "Rawangya") support groups had indeed emerged, and the cross-border origins of and support given to the Mujahid rebellion were no secret. Willem van Schendel referred in a 2001 article <sup>28</sup> to the "All-Burma Rwangya Refugee Organisation (East Pakistan)" at the border settlement of Nhila which had in 1951 sought the

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<sup>24</sup> Minority Affairs Minister, himself a Rakhine Buddhist

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF18/Pearn-1952-rev.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> See Page 3 of <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF19/ARNO-2009.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> Minority Problems in Southeast Asia - Stanford University Press 1955.

<sup>28</sup> Willem van Schendel 'Making a living in the Bengal Borderlands' - IIVSG



support of the Burmese Consul to introduce a "permit system to facilitate their going to Burma for earning their bread". In a footnote, the authors commented:

"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.]

This leads me to believe that there was indeed a mini-exodus of up to 30,000 people during the next 18 months, but it is said that they mostly returned in the following years, but I have no confirmation of this.

In the 1950s other possible designations in addition to "Rwangya" emerged, and we can trace in Burmese periodicals a lively discussion among the Muslim scholarly and political elite about various designations with varying etymologies <sup>29</sup>, all based on words beginning with 'R', such as Rwangya and its variant Rawangya, Roewenhnya, Roewengya <sup>30</sup>, Ruhangya, Rushangya, and finally Rohingya and its variant Rohinja.

The etymology of Rohingya is contested. If Buchanan's "Roinga" means by his own definition "natives of Arakan", derived from one of many similar variants of the Bengali word for Arakan, that implies a strong Bengali connection. This is denied by the more vociferous protagonists of the Rohingya narrative, who assert instead that the word is rather derived from the Arabic "raham" which means mercy or blessing <sup>31</sup>; any Bengali connection would clearly be unwelcome.

As 1960 drew near, "Rohingya" was used for the first time, a new designation owing much to the Bengali-inspired *jihad* in Arakan. It has been impossible to confirm the earlier appearance of "Rohingya" in an article in the "Guardian Daily" reportedly dated 20 August 1951 by Abdul Gaffar, a prominent elected politician at the time, and frequently quoted by Arakan-watchers <sup>32</sup>. Quite simply, the Guardian Daily did not commence publication until 1956, nor the Guardian Monthly until 1954. A typescript of a five-page comment on the article apparently published (but where?) at the time by U Phaw Zan, a Rakhine scholar at

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<sup>29</sup> <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF19/Power-of-the-R-word.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> "Roewengyas in Arakan": U Ba Tha – "The Guardian" Rangoon May 1960

<sup>31</sup> See for example <http://www.rohingyana.org/history.html> about the founding of the ANU.

<sup>32</sup> See for example the comment on Page 17 in an article by Dr Aye Chan - SOAS Bulletin 2005

Rangoon University, makes it clear however that the word used was not "Rohingya", but "Rwangya" - which is what I would have expected.<sup>33</sup>

Rohingya is even today however still more of a political label seeking to associate a number of Muslim communities rather than an established ethnic designation. Rohingya might however be seen as an emerging, coalescing ethnicity with whose origins many of us may well have considerable sympathy, designed as much for self-protection in an increasingly hostile environment. But in the process, the former quasi-indigenous Muslim communities - the Arakan Muslims (aka Yakhain Kala), the Myedus, the Zerbadis designated "Burmese Muslims" in the 1941 Census<sup>34</sup> - have faded as the non-indigenous Chittagonians moved to centre-stage. Only the Kaman have remained distinct, though I think it likely that their separate identity is under threat as well.

Calls for unity among the Muslim population of Arakan were a particular theme in the 1960s. Writing in the "Guardian Magazine" of August 1960<sup>35</sup> on the need for Arakanese unity primarily between Buddhists and Muslims, Mohammed Akram Ali was moved to say:

"I feel very sorry to mention that there is also a lack of unity among the Arakanese Muslims themselves. The main causes of the disruption of unity among them are racial and sectional prejudices. Some of them style themselves as Rowengyas<sup>36</sup> while others call themselves Kamans and yet others Chittagonian descendants etc., and they take pride in being so called. Some of them have a deep-seated sense of localism and therefore take pride in their birth places, such as Maungdaw, Buthidaung, Akyab, Mrohaung, Kyaukpyu, Sandoway. If we go on in this way, I can say with certainty that we will not be able to achieve any good work, nor will we be able to get unity among ourselves. I should therefore like to request my people that they should forget the past and make their future bright by sinking their racial differences."

The writer however makes no mention of "Rohingya". That designation had scarcely come on to the radar-screen. Even respected Muslim scholars like U Ba Tha (see Note 20) had yet to accept the term which he seems to have done only in 1963<sup>37</sup>.

Independent Myanmar has viewed with increasing alarm this transformation and coalescence of a rich kaleidoscope of Muslim communities in Arakan, encouraged by a

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<sup>33</sup> <http://networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF19/Phaw-Zan-Guardian.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> Page 70 'Minority Problems in SE Asia' - Thomson and Adloff 1955

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/M-Ali.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF19/Guardian-May-1960-rev2.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> "A Short History of Rohingya and Kaman in Burma": U Ba Tha - 1963

vociferous and well-coordinated international lobby<sup>38</sup> and enhanced by substantial illegal emigration from Bengal, into a monolithic political community. The 20,000 souls recorded by the Rev Comstock in 1842 have seemingly mushroomed to one million or more. At least another million "Rohingya" are reported to have sought asylum overseas, mainly in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Malaysia, Thailand and Saudi Arabia. This suggests a newly created ethnicity of up to three million Rohingya. Even higher figures are mentioned.

The Rohingya narrative, based apparently on a 100-fold natural increase in the Rohingya population since the 20,000 souls of 1842 and allegedly unsupported by immigration from Bengal, may well strike many as fanciful, if not preposterous. Indeed it is. But it has become politically correct not to challenge this narrative.

Senior representatives of the United Nations and Western Governments are under pressure to accept the Rohingya identity. That is a political decision which only they can take. It is important though that they should be aware that their unqualified recognition of the Rohingya identity in Myanmar and overseas is bound to provide moral and political support to a highly questionable and pretentious narrative which to my knowledge no independent scholar accepts as reflecting the historical truth.

More importantly, this uncritical acceptance damages the prospects for reconciliation by further polarising the Buddhist and Muslim communities. It is therefore important that, in using the Rohingya designation, governments and UN representatives should from time to time make the *caveat* publicly that use of the designation by them reflects the right of individuals to call themselves what they will, but not acceptance of any related narrative or historical justification. If representatives find the narrative spurious, they should not hesitate to say so. They should not take refuge in the timorous position that these are matters best left to scholars and historians to debate. I would hope that the experience of British interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya has underscored the vital importance of understanding the history of those countries, of which we failed to take serious account from the very outset.

British Ambassador Andrew Patrick in Myanmar made his position clear when he said in an interview with Mizzima Business Weekly on 8 May last year<sup>39</sup>:

"Generally in the UK, and in Europe, ethnic groups are allowed to call themselves by the name they want to use, whether or not that name has any historic validity. Of course when we use it, that's not to say we're expecting some sort of special status

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<sup>38</sup> <http://www.bt.com.bn/2011/06/10/arakan-rohingya-union-aru-formed>

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF17/Mizzima-Business-Weekly.pdf>

or a recognition of the Rohingya as an ethnic group. That is for the Burmese parliament to decide. What I would say, is that it's obviously very important for that community to have the rights they are entitled to. And the Government has made a commitment to ensure that everyone who is entitled to citizenship under the 1982 law gets that."

However, I have little doubt myself how even a democratically elected Burmese Parliament would at present decide if the question were put to them.

In this context, Western Governments have a responsibility to ensure that, if they are disposed to use the designation "Rohingya" in their statements, this does not imply any recognition of the Rohingya as an ethnic group, nor any view about where they might be living in Myanmar. Chittagonians and Bengalis did not only settle in Arakan.

As Robert Taylor has also recently noted <sup>40</sup>, the Rohingya issue is not simply a Myanmar responsibility. There is an international dimension to the problem, and especially a Bangladeshi one. It is impossible to say just how many Bangladeshis have migrated illegally into Myanmar since 1948, but the number may run into tens if not hundreds of thousands <sup>41</sup>. Yet in most cases even these illegal migrants have now been in Myanmar for 30 years or more, and so it is difficult to see, on a purely practical basis, how any person currently living in Myanmar, even if unable to establish family origins in the country, could now be forcibly removed to Bangladesh, especially while some 200,000 'Rohingya' refugees in Bangladesh are awaiting repatriation to Myanmar.

Precisely because Myanmar is stuck with an inward migration problem which is not of its own making, whatever their undoubted responsibility for related human rights issues, the practical support and guidance of the international community is essential.

Current inter-communal tensions in Rakhine State are not a new problem. The 1921 Census report <sup>42</sup> noted on Page 214:

"The Arakanese Buddhists in Aykab asked the Deputy Commissioner there not to let the Arakanese-Mohamedans be included under 'Arakanese' in the census. The instruction issued to enumerators with reference to Arakanese-Mohamedans was that this race-name (in Burmese Yakaing-kala) should be recorded for those Mohamedans who were domiciled in Burma and had adopted a certain mode of dress which is neither Arakanese nor Indian and who call themselves and are

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<sup>40</sup> [http://www.iseas.edu.sg/documents/publication/iseas\\_perspective\\_2015\\_12.pdf](http://www.iseas.edu.sg/documents/publication/iseas_perspective_2015_12.pdf)

<sup>41</sup> On 23 December 1975 the Bangladeshi Ambassador in Rangoon told the British Ambassador that there were "upward of ½ million Bangalee trespassers in Arakan whom the Burmese had some right to eject".

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF18/Census-1921-Extract.pdf>

generally called by others Yakaing-kala" ['Rakhine foreigner', to which Francis Buchanan first alluded in 1799].

The 2014 Census was bedevilled by the same local animosity.

In their paper "Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State" (22 October 2104), the International Crisis Group highlighted the dilemmas facing all parties, and the anxieties of both Buddhist Rakhine and Muslim Rohingya. ICG quote a Rohingya elder as saying:

"The violence in 2012 changed the situation. Before the violence our Rohingya name was not something we thought about every day. Since the violence, everything has been stolen from us - now all we have left is our Rohingya identity. All of us are united on this."

The ICG commented: "Rohingya leaders see defending their political identity as vital to gain Myanmar citizenship and ease discrimination and denial of rights. They see international use of the term as an important source of legitimacy and support for their rights."

The international community seem prepared to recognise this political identity, but some may be reluctant to fully accept the ethnic identity at this stage.

It would make it so much easier for us all to do so if Rohingya leaders were to be completely open and transparent in explaining how the designation emerged in the late 1950s rather than proclaiming an historical narrative which is scarcely credible and is based on a virtual absence of documentary sources. Emerging ethnicities cannot reasonably be backdated many hundreds of years in support of a political agenda. I recognise however that it would be exceptionally difficult for these leaders to recant and admit that their narrative was speculative if not contrived from the start. This is not how politicians react to unwelcome disclosures.

The determination of Rohingya leaders to press their case that they are an indigenous ethnicity however undermines the historical reality that there are indigenous Muslim ethnicities in Arakan and indeed in Myanmar generally which are being forced into oblivion. This plays into the hands of those who wish to exclude Muslims from contemporary Myanmar.

The ordinary Rohingya people are mostly fearful, impoverished, poorly educated and in many cases unable to earn their traditional living as farmers and fishermen. But as the ICG report of last October noted: "Camp leaders have considerable coercive powers, and there is widespread fear, limiting the possibility for individuals to break with the political orthodoxy".

As furthermore Melissa Crouch of the University of New South Wales has also reported <sup>43</sup> in *New Mandala* of 4 November 2014: "Some religious leaders from the Indian Muslim community issued a *fatwa* (Islamic legal opinion) to their community members to instruct them on how to list their identity in the census. They emphasized that Muslims should not be afraid to list their religious identity on the census. Some Indian Muslim leaders even argued that it was *haram* (forbidden) for a Muslim to fail to list their religion on the census." Under the pressure of camp leaders and on the advice of religious leaders, the "self-identification" among Muslim communities in Rakhine State in favour of the Rohingya ethnicity is likely to be a foregone conclusion.

In paragraph 46 of her most recent report <sup>44</sup> to the Human Rights Council, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar Yanghee Lee commented:

"The Special Rapporteur once again highlights the right of Rohingya to self-identification according to international human rights law. She believes the ongoing focus on the terminology used to describe this group has paralysed progress on addressing important human rights issues and achieving durable solutions."

I would venture to suggest that if Rohingya leaders were transparent about the origins of their designation, the Myanmar Government might even be inclined to work towards a grudging tolerance of the designation, even if they did not use it themselves. In China, by way of example, some 55 ethnic groups are officially recognised, but another 20 groups are acknowledged but "undistinguished" or not officially recognised <sup>45</sup>. This is not however a matter of internal dispute.

The Rohingya should drop their pretence that they are a monolithic indigenous ethnicity in existence for several centuries. Their claim to citizenship should be based on the existing rules and they are far more likely to achieve or regain citizenship, and in quicker time, than if they continue to maintain their present divisive narrative.

The main responsibility for resolving the Rohingya crisis however rests squarely on the Myanmar Government. Numerous commentators, including the ICG, have noted that prior to the 1982 Citizenship Act a majority of Muslims in Myanmar, including Arakan, held National Registration Certificates (NRCs) which meant that they were recognized as Burmese citizens. These were surrendered under the terms of the Act, and although Article 6 stated

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<sup>43</sup> <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2014/11/04/myanmars-muslim-mosaic-and-the-politics-of-belonging/#comment-1920987>

<sup>44</sup> Document A/HRC/28/72 Advance Unedited Version dated 9 March 2015

<sup>45</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_ethnic\\_groups\\_in\\_China](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ethnic_groups_in_China)

that anyone who was a citizen at the time of the Act would remain a citizen, very few Muslim NRC holders in Rakhine State were issued with new Citizenship Registration Cards (CRCs) but only, somewhat belatedly, Temporary Registration Certificates (CRCs) known as "White Cards".

This has seemingly not been the misfortune of most Muslim NRC holders elsewhere in Myanmar, including those who might quietly choose to identify themselves as Rohingya and who were successfully enumerated in the 2014 Census without controversy, though not of course as Rohingyas. In Rakhine State, however, hundreds of thousands of former NRC holders have effectively been stripped of their citizenship, not because of the 1982 Act, but because of the failure by obstructive and corrupt local authorities to implement and abide by its terms. That is, it is not State action, but State inaction which is primarily responsible for the present level of statelessness among Rakhine Muslims.

Western Governments tend to lament that this problem over the designation "Rohingya" is a distraction. In August last year it was reported that US Secretary of State John Kerry had told Myanmar's leaders <sup>46</sup> that the name issue should be set aside and that to force any community to accept a name they consider to be offensive is to invite conflict. I take a different view. It is of the very essence of the dispute and should not be swept under the carpet. While Rohingya may say they find it offensive to be called "Bengalis", Rakhine Buddhists find it offensive that Rakhine Muslims are called "Rohingya". It works both ways.

It is not the central government which proclaims that all "Rohingyas" are illegal Bengalis, but the local Rakhine Buddhist population. The reality is however is that over 90%, if not over 95% of all Muslims in Rakhine State could trace their ancestry back to Bengal. In terms of race, they are Bengalis, whatever the varied composite elements of their DNA, although many Rohingya leaders flatly deny this and repeatedly assert they they overwhelmingly trace their ancestry back to early settlers from the 8<sup>th</sup> Century. But their ethnicity is another matter, and designations used during the British administration like Myedu, Kaman, Zerbadi and Yakhain Kala made this crystal clear.

In the 1973 and 1983 Censuses, Muslims in Arakan seemingly had no problem about registering as "Bengalis" which was after all for most their heritage and racial ancestry. They would however have been rather shocked to discover that in the English-language census report <sup>47</sup> their ethnicity had been classed as "Bangladeshi", which is of course not an ethnicity but a nationality which they neither claimed nor wanted.

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<sup>46</sup> [Reuters 9 August 2014 "Kerry presses Myanmar leaders on human rights, reforms"](#).

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF17/Extract-1983-Census.pdf>

The Myanmar Government for its part has indicated that Rohingyas born in Myanmar are eligible to apply for citizenship if at least three generations of their families have lived in Myanmar, meaning that at least two generations must be born in the country. Immigration Minister Khin Yi told the *Radio Free Asia* Burmese Service on 12 September 2012:

"Foreigners, like the Bengalis, have the right to apply for citizenship if they want to, citing an amendment to the country's constitution in 1982 [the Citizenship Act] during the rule of the former military regime. 'The requirements are that their grandparents and parents must have lived here and died here, that the applicant was born here and can speak the Burmese language, and that he or she wants to live here, among other things'."

On 11 July 2012 President Thein Sein met the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres and in a statement issued through the Presidential Office the following day, in the Burmese language only and not reported at all in the local press, we read <sup>48</sup>:

"The President said that Bengalis came to Myanmar because the British colonialists invited them in prior to 1948, when Myanmar gained independence from Britain, to work in the agricultural sector. Some Bengalis settled here because it was convenient for them to do so, and according to Myanmar law, the third generation of those who arrived before 1948 can be granted Myanmar citizenship.

"He added that, if we look at the situation in Rakhine State, some people are the younger generation of Bengalis who arrived before 1948, but some are illegal immigrants claiming to be Rohingyas and this threatens the stability of the State.

"The Government has been looking seriously for a solution to this problem. The country will take responsibility for its native people, but it cannot accept illegal immigrant Rohingya in any way.

"So in the end the solution to the problem is to set up refugee camps for them so that UNHCR can look after them. If a third country accepts them, we will send them there."

Probably because no English version of this statement appeared, it was almost universally reported as though the President was telling the UN High Commissioner that all those who claimed to be Rohingya were illegal Bengali immigrants. This was not the case. Only Radio

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<sup>48</sup> <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF19/Guterres-11072012-English-revised.pdf>



Free Asia carried a reasonably objective report in its Burmese-language service <sup>49</sup>. The President was however making the additional point that in his view the "Rohingya" designation had cross-border origins (which might well be the case) and those claiming to be "Rohingya" could not claim to be indigenous to Myanmar.

This cross-border dimension is well illustrated by reports emanating from the Bengali side of the frontier relating to the Mujahid insurgency which plagued Rakhine State after the Second World War. Reporting from Sittwe on 18 May 1949, "The Scotsman" correspondent Michael Davidson described <sup>50</sup> the Muslims of Rakhine State as "natives of Chittagong in Bengal.....The great majority of Arakan Muslims are said to be really Pakistanis from Chittagong, even if they have been settled here for a generation. Of the 130,000 Moslems here, 80,000 are still Pakistani citizens."

The Mujahid insurgency petered on until 1961 when Brigadier Aung Gyi, then Vice-Chief of the General Staff, presided at two surrender ceremonies. On 4 July 1961 he declared <sup>51</sup> that:

"Like all other minorities like Nagas, Shans, Yingphaws [in Kachin State], Lisus, people of Chinese origin in Kokang and others who live on both sides of the 2,000 mile long frontier, there are people of Chittagonian origin living on both sides of the border. As the Lisus on the Burma side of the frontier is [are] taken as the Burmese citizens, similar status applies to the Rohinjas who have been living on Burma side of the frontier for generations. But these minorities must be loyal to the Union, Brigadier Aung Gyi emphasized.

"In a 45 minute long speech VCGS impressed on the Rohinjas that they were Union citizens and there was no racial or religious discrimination in the country and that everyone in the Union are brothers and sisters of one big family.

"He stressed the need for every Union citizen to be loyal to the Union and to cooperate with the authorities to establish the rule of law and restore peace and security in the country....."

That is, the VCGS went out of his way to stress that there were Chittagonians on both sides of the frontier, often closely related.

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<sup>49</sup> <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/rohingya-07122012185242.html>

<sup>50</sup> "Burmese Border War" - Michael Davidson: The Scotsman Special Correspondent 18 May 1949

<sup>51</sup> "690 Mujahid rebels surrender: Rohinja is one of the minorities of the Union" - The Guardian 6 July 1961

At the time of the first mass exodus in 1978 of some 200,000 mostly rural Muslims into Bengal, the Bangladeshi press had no hesitation in describing them as "Rohingyas", the UPI correspondent in Dacca <sup>52</sup> explaining that: "most Burmese Rohingya came from Bangladesh in the days of the British rule when the entire Indian sub-continent was a colonial unit and former borders meant nothing. Others fled to Burma during the Indo-Pakistani war which gave birth to Bangladesh in 1971". This was not however a fair or accurate account, since the presence of Muslim communities in Arakan since the 15<sup>th</sup> Century and the earlier arrival of traders, scholars and mercenaries has been well attested by all serious scholars of all persuasions.

Discussing the issue, the respected writer on strategy JP Anand, a frequent contributor to the Indian Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), noted in July 1978 <sup>53</sup> that "a large number of people are believed to have taken shelter in the Arakan region after the establishment of Bangladesh in December 1971: over 16,900 of such persons were repatriated later". <sup>54</sup> He went on to say that: "According to some observers, the genesis of the current exodus of refugees lies in the liberation movement of 'Mujahids' in the Muslim dominated area." He quoted from an interview given to a Dacca weekly by Mohammed Zaffir [Zaffar], the leader of the "Rohingya Muslim Independence Force" reportedly founded in 1964-65 who said that the only objective of their movement was to achieve liberation.

This influx of Chittagonians into Arakan at the time of the creation of Bangladesh has been confirmed in British diplomatic archives <sup>55</sup>, notably an admission <sup>56</sup> by Bangladeshi Ambassador Kaiser in Rangoon in December 1975 to his British colleague Terence O'Brien "that there were upward of ½ million Bangalee trespassers in Arakan whom the Burmese had some right to eject." Even so, Mr O'Brien's successor Charles Booth was to report in 1979 <sup>57</sup> that 65% of the 185,000 or so Arakan Muslim refugees who had fled the previous year to Bengal were recognised by both the Burmese, Bangladeshi and UNHCR authorities as holders of National Registration Certificates (NRCs) to which all Burmese citizens were then entitled. The complexity of the situation was however acknowledged in a US diplomatic cable at the time <sup>58</sup> which reported that since the coup of 1962 no new NRCs had been issued in Arakan at all, and as these were not available in any case until a child was 12

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<sup>52</sup> "Muslim refugees from Burma mean more mouths to feed" - UPI Dacca 29 June 1978

<sup>53</sup> "Refugees from Burma": JP Anand - Economic and Political Weekly 8 July 1978

<sup>54</sup> An article in the Working People's Daily of 18 January 1972 put the number of Bengalis who had fled to Arakan in 1971 at some 20,000. In addition some 174 Pakistani military and officials landed at Akyab in 14 aircraft and helicopters, according to British Ambassador Edward Willan (Letter dated 14 January 1972 on file FAB 3/313/1).

<sup>55</sup> See <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/FCO15-2468-4.pdf>

<sup>56</sup> Folio 35 on File FCO 15/2041 (1975): National Archives.

<sup>57</sup> <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/FCO15-2468-4.pdf>

<sup>58</sup> [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1978RANGOO02338\\_d.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1978RANGOO02338_d.html)

years of age, this meant that in 1978 no one under the age of 28 actually held an NRC, while others had been withdrawn under false pretences. In point of fact, the evidence from other sources is that new NRCs continued to be issued spasmodically until 1970, but the general point is valid.

NRCs were officially exchanged throughout Myanmar after the 1982 Citizenship Act came into force, and indeed Article 6 of the Act stated that anyone who was a citizen before the Act came into force remained a citizen. In Arakan however the decision was taken not to issue new IDs to Muslim holders of NRCs on the grounds that there was evidence that a number of NRCs were not genuine documents, or had been improperly acquired. As a result, many genuine holders of NRCs were issued Temporary Registration Cards instead, the so-called "White Cards", whose validity has now been finally cancelled.

The Mujahid rebellion has meanwhile rumbled on beyond 1961, and by the time of the next major exodus of Muslims from Arakan in 1991, its leaders were not hesitant to assert yet again that their aim was full independence. In an interview <sup>59</sup> with the experienced correspondent Edith Lederer of Associated Press, subsequently the winner of many international awards for her journalism, one of the leaders of the "Rohingya Solidarity Organisation", reportedly founded in 1982, Professor Mohammed Zakariya, told her that hundreds of trained guerrillas were scattered in some 12 camps along the border, that shortage of weapons was their only problem about going on the offensive and that thousands of insurgents inside and outside Myanmar were awaiting the order to fight.

No doubt there is a good measure of bravado, even wishful thinking, in these interviews conducted in Bangladesh, but the Myanmar authorities understandably had no choice but to take these threats of secession by force of arms seriously, and increasingly equated, as did the local Rakhine population, the insurgent Mujahid with the Rohingya, even though the strong evidence is that the bulk of Muslims in Rakhine State did not give support to these recurrent Mujahids and themselves suffered because of their presence and their actions.

The Mujahid insurgencies were treated less seriously over the years, either by the Government of Myanmar or the international community, than the struggles for autonomy, if not independence, in Shan, Karen and Kachin States. State actions in Rakhine State were however repressive, discriminatory and unlawful. Though the State pulled back from the brink on several occasions - in 1961 when the Mujahid were induced to surrender, in 1979

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<sup>59</sup> "Mujahids training to fight for free Arakan": Edith Lederer - New Straits Times 4 July 1991.

when nearly 200,000 refugees who had fled to Bangladesh were repatriated with the express authority and support of General Ne Win, and again in 1991 when over 200,000 refugees fled to Bangladesh - the communal riots of 2012 which brought great loss and suffering to Muslim communities have marked a steady escalation of tensions.

In this situation, the central authorities were in 2014 left with little choice but to renege on undertakings, unwisely sought and given, to allow Muslims to self-identify as Rohingya in the March census. A failure to do so would most probably have resulted in serious communal disturbances and a boycott by the majority Buddhist population of the census, which would have been far more damaging to the census and to local society than the exclusion of most Rakhine Muslims from the Census. The Myanmar authorities were even so sharply criticised by the international community for changing their minds - in the interests of security and stability.

Buddhist-Muslim relations though are now further complicated by the planned laws on religion, marriage and population control as well as by the decision to withdraw Temporary Registration documents known as "White Cards" which could well disenfranchise Muslim voters unless alternative documents are issued. These actions suggest an unwillingness to face up to the need to confront extremism, as did the government's failure to criticise, let alone take action against the maverick monk Wirathu who has made provocative and insulting comments about the UN Special Rapporteur Ms Yanghee Lee.

I see little prospect that the planned laws will be postponed and this will be bound to earn the State further widespread criticism for breaches of international norms and conventions to many of which Myanmar is already a party. I suspect that the authorities will now simply drag their feet on as many other controversial issues as possible until after the elections due in November this year which, I suggest, may now not have quite the importance which some would attach to them.

But even if remedial action to mitigate the situation in Rakhine State is not taken, the ancillary responsibilities of the international community should not be overlooked. Bangladesh, impoverished and instable as the country may well be, has historical engagements which cannot be swept under the carpet. The international community also has the responsibility not to inflame the situation though an immoderate and unconstructive response.

To conclude: If only the Rohingya political and spiritual leaders could be totally honest and transparent about their origins, that would in my view greatly help to reduce tensions and to open a dialogue leading to eventual reconciliation and resolution of the problem of statelessness.

In this context, the recent UN Human Rights Council Resolution on the Situation in Myanmar at the Human Rights Council <sup>60</sup> was in my view generally counterproductive, a sterile ritual which only strengthened the determination of the Myanmar Government not to accept the "Rohingya" designation in any circumstances. The Myanmar Government should not be expected to accept the narrative of a long extant Rohingya ethnicity, but they might be brought, perhaps not to accept, but at least not to object to Rohingya as an emerging ethnicity if Rohingya leaders were to be honest and open about where the name actually came from.

There is a naivety in Western thinking on this issue based on a lack of knowledge about the true agendas of most international Rohingya protagonists who descend on Geneva every spring and above all about the historical facts. These facts, alas, only tend to get in the way of political posturing.

For the present, it may not be possible to do more than to contain and manage the situation so that both Muslims and Buddhists can live their separate lives in relative peace, as co-existence at the present time, in Rakhine State at least, is fraught with difficulties.

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<sup>60</sup> [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/28/L.21/Rev.1](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/28/L.21/Rev.1)