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Issue Brief

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The Rohingya Crisis: History and Politics

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The recent events in Myanmar's south western province of Rakhine have drawn considerable global and local attention. Dubbed as "clearance operations" by the Myanmar's government, nearly 436,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled from their homes in northern Rakhine regions into neighboring Bangladesh, while approximately 400 people have been killed since August 24, 2017.¹

The Myanmar's government claims that the ongoing operations in the northern Rakhine region is being carried out in response to terrorist attacks conducted by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) that killed 11 members of the security forces.²

The issue and origins of the latest violence directed against ethnic Muslim in the Rakhine province (previously named as Muslim Arakah) cannot be seen in the narrow context of terrorism as the history of dispute is old and the current political context unique enough to warrant a deeper inspection.

Myanmar is composed of 135 officially recognized ethnicities in country's eight different regions with Bamar being the largest and politically dominant of them belonging from the country's heartland.³ Rohingya Muslims from Rakhine state, with an estimated population of around 1.1 million, are not officially recognized by Myanmar since the controversial 1982 citizenship law.⁴

According to this citizenship law, most Rohingya are considered by the Burmese authorities to be "resident foreigners" not citizens. This lack of full citizenship rights means that the Rohingya are subject to other abuses, including restrictions on their freedom of movement, discriminatory limitations on access to education, and arbitrary confiscation of property.⁵ Furthermore, the verification scheme under this law mandates to give proof of ancestorship before 1823 for all ethnicities except Muslims, as they

¹ ALJAZEERA Report .<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/rohingya-bangladesh-massive-assistance-170924110654841.html>

² "Military action in Rakhine legal, says security chief", *Myanmar Times*, August 30, 2017, <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/military-action-rakhine-legal-says-security-chief.html>

³ Hannah Beech. New Yorker. "What Happened to Myanmar's Human-Rights Icon?". <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/10/02/what-happened-to-myanmars-human-rights-icon>

⁴ Discrimination in ARAKAN, *Human Rights Watch Report*, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/burma/burm005-02.htm>

⁵ Ibid

are not recognized as a race in the country despite having Rohingya history that dates back to the 15th century. The UN describes Rohingya Muslims as being "the most friendless people in the world."⁶

It is worth noting that Muslims in Myanmar were recognized as citizens till 1958.

Despite having a rich Muslim history of presence, trading and ruling the Rakhine region (also called Arakan kingdom) since 1430,⁷ the local narrative in Myanmar is outright hostile, claiming that Muslim population is in fact "Bengalis" imported during the British colonial rule of then Burma for their local projects. The Kingdom of Muslim Arakan was economically and politically closely linked to Sultanate of Bengal, but relatively independent bordering Buddhist dynasty in upper Burma.⁸



There are two major ethnic communities in Arakan. The Rohingyas who form the majority population of Arakan as a whole, are the believers in the religion of Islam and the Maghs (Rakhaings) who are the

⁶ "Who will help Myanmar's Rohingya"? *BBC Report*, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-38168917>

⁷ Dr Mohammad Yunus. *A History of ARAKAN, Past and Present*.
<http://www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/19940101-Dr-Yunus-History-Of-Arakan.pdf>

⁸ Kofi Annan Final Report of Advisory Commission on Rakhine State.
http://www.kofiannanfoundation.org/app/uploads/2017/08/FinalReport_Eng.pdf

minority, profess Buddhism. During the 1942 anti-Muslim rioting, the Muslims of southern Arakan had been pushed to the north, whereas the Buddhist Maghs took over the southern half of the country where they now form a majority. There are a few tribes dwelling in Arakan hills who are mostly animists. Their number is still insignificant.⁹

Extreme communal violence against Rohingya Muslims has been a permanent feature of Myanmar's polity even before independence of 1948. Historical fear and hatred within Buddhist community against Muslims is widespread as per the finding of the Kofi Annan Advisory Commission on Rakhine State.¹⁰ The military junta drafted citizenship law in 1982 which stripped Rohingya Muslims of their citizenship, thus increasing their resentment, hardships and political exclusion.

Sources of communal anger against Rohingya are both historical and ideological. Historically, the Mughal military campaign under Aurangzeb of the mid-17th century to liberate Dhaka, Chittagong and Arakan territories from Buddhist (and Portuguese Christian marauders) occupation¹¹ left a deep imprint on the psyche of followers of Theravāda branch of Buddhism which is dominant in Myanmar.¹²

During the WWII, the British recruited Rohingya and Bengali Muslims to repel the Japanese invasion. A significant faction of pro-independence movement against the British had close ties with Japan. This anger was reflected by Army Commander Sr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing recently when he was quoted by media on September 2, 2017 saying:

"It (army) won't ease off its campaign, describing it as 'unfinished business' dating back to World War II. Army was pursuing its patriotic duty to preserve Myanmar's borders and prevent Rohingya insurgents carving out their own territory in northern Rakhine State. We will never let such a terrible occurrence happen again."¹³

⁹ Dr Mohammad Yunus. A History of ARAKAN, Past and Present.

<http://www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/19940101-Dr-Yunus-History-Of-Arakan.pdf>

¹⁰ Kofi Annan Final Report of Advisory Commission on Rakhine State.

http://www.kofiannanfoundation.org/app/uploads/2017/08/FinalReport_Eng.pdf

¹¹ Dr. Habib Siddiqui. MUSLIM IDENTITY AND DEMOGRAPHY IN THE ARAKAN STATE OF BURMA http://www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/20111029_analysis-of-demography-in-arakan-by-habib-siddiqui.pdf

¹² Kofi Annan Final Report, op.cit

¹³ "Myanmar Says Clearing of Rohingya Is Unfinished Business From WWII", *CETUS News*, <http://www.cetusnews.com/news/Myanmar-Says-Clearing-of-Rohingya-Is-Unfinished-Business-From-WWII-.Bkg5ATeYYb.html>

Ideologically, the Buddhist 969 movement is gaining ground within Myanmar and specially in Rakhin and led by a monk named Wirathu. Wirathu urges Buddhists to boycott Muslim shops and shun interfaith marriages. He calls mosques “enemy bases.”¹⁴ Referring to Muslims, he is also quoted as saying : “You can be full of kindness and love, but you cannot sleep next to a mad dog,” referring to Muslims.¹⁵

The Rohingya crisis has seen large number of protests within the Muslim countries showing solidarity with Rohingya cause. Many humanitarian and Islamic groups from Muslim countries have contributed in the relief efforts near the Bangladesh-Myanmar border.

The Rohingya crisis has deep roots within Buddhist society in Myanmar and the regime has taken no serious measures to stop the ongoing violence in northern Rakhine state. State Counselor Aung Sang Suu Kyi’s address to the UN General Assembly session from capital Naypyidaw on September 18, 2017 labeled the media coverage of Rohingya issue as mere “allegations and counter allegations” and condemned “all human rights violation” without specifically addressing the causes of Rohingya misery.

Moreover, the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State under the leadership of Kofi Annan in its report admitted the existence of significant opposition from parties backed by the military establishment regarding its the formation by State Counselor Aung Sang Suu Kyi.¹⁶ Interestingly, the attack by ARSA militants happened at the time of submission of the Kofi Annan Advisory Commission report which resulted in the ongoing crisis.

Advisory commission’s recommendations, however weak and limited in scope, can at least generate a political momentum in addressing the real root causes of Rohingya crisis. But without a political will from Myanmar’s leaders, the current crisis will remain prolonged for a foreseeable future increasing, and sometime decreasing in magnitude.

Additional Reporting by *Wall Street Journal*: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/myanmar-army-chief-defends-clearing-rohingya-villages-1504410530>

¹⁴ Reuters. Special Report: Myanmar gives official blessing to anti-Muslim monks
<http://uk.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-969-specialreport/special-report-myanmar-gives-official-blessing-to-anti-muslim-monks-idUSBRE95Q04720130627>

¹⁵ THOMAS FULLER. NY Times .Extremism Rises Among Myanmar Buddhists.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/21/world/asia/extremism-rises-among-myanmar-buddhists-wary-of-muslim-minority.html?mcubz=3>

¹⁶ See reference 8, Pg 07.