

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE, STATE POLICY AND ETHNIC PROBLEM: THE CASE OF ROHINGYA IN MYANMAR

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Abstract. The study examines the historical perspective to resolve the Rohingya crisis problem. This article utilizes a descriptive and historical methodology to examine the plight of the Rohingya people in Myanmar. Through a comprehensive literature review, analysis of government policies, and statistical data, it constructs a narrative spanning from ancient times to the present day, contextualizing the experiences of the Rohingya within broader historical and regional contexts. The study finds that the Rohingya, a group of ethnic Muslim people have been living in Arakan, Myanmar over 1300 years but have no rights of Citizenship in Myanmar. From the independence in 1948 to the present, there were no Myanmar governments who were willing to give the rights and solve the Rohingya problem. Rather, during the time being, in several eras, thousands of the Rohingya people had to fly to Bangladesh from Arakan due to torcher, destroy, and killing mission by the military under all kinds of regimes. The Myanmar government had no desire to bring them to Arakan, but rather to flee them to Bangladesh. This study suggests that to resolve this problem, an acknowledgment of the government is very important about the existence of the Rohingya in Myanmar is a historical fact. Besides, the status as an ethnic minority needs to be restored. Finally, the government of Myanmar must change the state policy and give citizenship to the Rohingya people under the supervision of the United Nations or regional powerful countries to live all the ethnic minority people peacefully in the country.

Keywords: Rohingya, Arakan, Myanmar, ethnic people

Introduction

Republic of the Union of Myanmar is a sovereign state at the juncture of three regions of Southeast Asia, South Asia and East Asia and border with India, China, Bangladesh, Thailand and Laos and the Indian Ocean, Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea. It is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country with eight major ethnic groups and 135 'national' or 'principled races' (Smith, 1993) that qualify the people for citizenship. The majority ethnic group is the Burmans that make up 68% of the population and other ethnic groups are the Shan (9%), the Karen (7%), the Rakhine (4%), the Chinese (3%), the Indian (2%), the Mon (2%), and other (5%) where eras in terms of religious basis, it is consisted of Buddhists (89%), 4% Muslims, 1% animist, and others 2% (Ullah, 2011; Singh, 2014; Warzone Initiatives, 2015). But the Rohingya people is not included as one of the 'national' or 'principled races' and as such are denied the full benefits of citizenship described as their "nonindigenous ancestry."

Arakan, the east state of Myanmar governed by Hindu dynasties from the 1st century to 10th century and many Muslim Arab traders came to Arakan in the pre-Islamic period. They gradually settled in this area. In 10th century, Sino-Tibetans invaded Arakan

and started to live in this area. Later gradually, the emergence Mrauk-U Dynasty, Burmese, British Empire and Japanese invaded Arakan and finally Arakan came as a state after independent of Myanmar in 1948. The Muslims from different part of the world came in Arakan mostly as traders, warriors, preachers and captives through the sea route or overland from the 7th century and many of them settled in Arakan. During Sino-Tibetan invasion, some of them mixed with the inhabitants of the eastern-side now known as the Rakhine Arakanese. Ethnically most of the Arakanese Magh belongs to the Mongoloid race and ethnologists point out that north-western China. Burmese invaded Arakan in 1784 and forced the Rohingya to migrate to India (Bangladesh). After independence, the Myanmar governments continued same role in several times. Though the Rohingya people is the ethnic religious group in Myanmar living over 1300 years but the government blames them as nonethnic and keep out of rights, the denial of their "citizenship" (Holiday, 2014).

From the independence in 1948, the country has experienced with armed ethnic conflict and political instability, conflict between two main regimes democracy and military coup one party governing, as a result, the country experiences democracy

governing after independence in 1948 to 1960 and 2011 to 2021, besides, the military governing from 1962 to 2011 and 2021 to present. As noncitizens, the Rohingya can only possess Foreign Registration Cards, which are rejected by a number of schools and employers. Besides, the government has also restricted their rights to marry, own property, and move freely—rights guaranteed to noncitizens as well as citizens under international law (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Literature review

Early History of Arakan

Arakan, one of the states of Myanmar located in the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal from the Naf River to Cape Negaris and separated to the north by the high hills and deep forests of the Chin State and to the east by the Arakan Yoma Mountain range from the rest of Burma. It is the living state of the Rohingya that was sovereign and independent for the long period under different periods of history, ruled by Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims. Two major ethnic races, the Rohingyas and the Rakhines (Maghs) lived in Arakan. The Muslims of Arakan called the country 'Rohang' or 'Arakan' and called themselves 'Rohingya' or native of Rohang and the Maghs called the country 'Rakhine Pye' or country of Rakhine and called them 'Rakhine'.

The Hindu dynasties ruled Arakan to the 10th century and came to an end in 957 by Sino-Mongolian invasion. Earlier of this period, ethnic people settled in the coastal region of Arakan. In the sites of major habitation, Sanskrit became the written language of the ruling class, and the religious beliefs were those prevalent at that time in south-Asia (or Indian sub-continent) (Singer, 2008). Between the 4th and the 6th century they established their kingdom and named their capital Vaishali. As a port city, it was in contact with Samatat (the plains of lower Bangladesh) and other parts of India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Historically, these early rulers came to be known as the Chandras and controlled the territories as far north as Chittagong (Singer, 2008).

Rohang, the old name of Arakan, was very familiar region to the many foreigners, mostly to the Muslims. After the rapid expansion of Islamic civilization in the 7th century many Muslims started to come to the Southeast Asia for trade. The Arabs, Persians, Turks, Pathans, and Moghuls came in Arakan mostly as traders through the sea route on the other hand many Bengalis came as captive through overland from the 7th century. During time being,

many of them settled in Arakan and mixed with the local people with distinct culture, civilization, and religion. "Colonies of Muslims, both Arab and Persian, spread all along the sea trade routes... As early as the middle of the 8th century, a sizable Muslim concentration could be found in along the southern coast of China, in the commercial ports of southern India, and Southeast Asia... Merchants brought silk, spices, perfumes, lumber, porcelain, silver and gold articles, precious jewels, jewelry, and so forth from these countries, and some of the trade made its way to Europe" (Yegar, 2002). "To the maritime Arabs and Persians, the various ports of the land of Burma and more specially the coastal regions of Arakan... were well known. Naturally, therefore, when from the 8th century onwards, Muslims traders and navigators were spreading over the eastern seas from Egypt and Madagascar to China, and forming commercial settlements at points of vantage, the coastal regions of Burma were not overlooked. Originally, the intention of these traders and sailors had not been to establish permanent colonies, but owing to peculiar circumstances these acquired the nature of permanent settlements" (Khan, 1936: 418)." Thus, the earliest Muslim merchants influenced in the coastal area of Arakan with culture and religious. R.B. Smart writes in the British Burma Gazetteer as follows: "The local histories relate that in the ninth century several ships were wrecked on Ramree Island and the Mussalman crews sent to Arakan and placed in villages there. They differ but little from the Arakanese except in their religion and in the social customs which their religion directs, in the writing they use Burmese, but amongst themselves employ colloquially the language of their ancestors" (British Burma Gazetteers 1917, District Akyab: 90). As a business fertile coastal belt, many Muslim merchants came to Arakan and many of them settled and mixed with local people and have living for hundreds of years in this region.

Sino-Tibetan Invasion of Arakan

In 957, Sino-Tibetans invaded Arakan and established sovereignty in this rejoin by their kings. They made a historical decision to cut Arakan away from Indians and mix in sufficient number with the inhabitants of the eastern-side now known as the Rakhine Arakanese. The date 957 may be said to mark the appearance of the Rakhine in Arakan, and the beginning of fresh period (Collins, 1970). Ethnically most of the Arakanese Magh belongs to the Mongoloid race and ethnologists point out that north-western China, the cradle land of mankind

between the upper courses of the Yang-Tse-Kiang and of the Hoang-Ho rivers was their earliest home (Alam, 2004). Over the centuries, thus, two communities emerged—one the indigenous with Indian (Bengali/Arakanese) features (the forefathers of today's Rohingya Hindus and Muslims) and the other, the new-comers with Mongoloid features (the forefathers of today's Rakhine Buddhists) (Siddiqui, 2011).

Involvement of Bengal Sultanate in Arakan

In 1404, the king of Arakan, Naramaikhla was forced to flee to Gaur, the capital of the Bengal Sultanate of the Mogul Emperor. Sultan of Gaur, Ahmed Shah welcomed the fled king and endured at the court of Gaur, where he served as an officer in army. Eventually, the Bengali sultanate helped the Arakan king to get back his territory. There was a war and after the victory, king Ahmed Shah handed over the throne of Gaur to his son Nazir Shah in the year 1426 (Collis, 1970). Later, King Naramaikhla requested help from the king to regain for his lost sovereignty at Launggyet in Arakan. According to Rakhine Razawin (Rakhine History), the Sultan of Bengal agreed to do so when Naramaikhla agreed to abide the following 6-point conditions: 1) to return the twelve towns of Bengal, 2) to receive Muslim title for the kings of Arakan from Bengal, 3) the court emblem must be inscribed with Kalima Tayuba in Persian, 4) the coins, medallions must be inscribed with Kalima Tayuba in Persian and to mint them in Bengal, 5) to use the Persian as court language of Arakan, and 6) to pay taxes and presents annually (Alam 2009). Naramaikhla agreed to six-point conditions and Sultan Nadir Shah sent Gen. Wali Khan with 20,000 Pathan army to restore the sovereignty of Arakan to Naramaikhla in 1429. The Pathan army conquered Arakan from the control of Mon and Naramaikhla ascended the throne. (Alam, 2004). It made a significant role to development a historical relation between Arakan and Bengal.

The Emergence Mrauk-U Dynasty and Islamization

The Islamic influence grew dramatically in Arakan since 1430 after returning in power of Naramaikhla from the Bengal due to agree of 6-point conditions and kept continue to maintain the conditions. Besides, many Muslim soldiers came the king and settled in Arakan. Muslim's influence and rule in Arakan lasted for more than 350 years until it was invaded and occupied by Burman in 1784 (Yegar, 1972). The leading in the Mrauk-U

dynasty (1430-1784) by Naramaikhla is a revolving fact in the history of Arakan. From this time onward, many of its rulers, indebted to the Muslim Sultan, even adopted Muslim names (and may even have converted to Islam), a practice that would continue for the next two centuries, until 1638 (Yunus, 1994). Naramaikhla's Muslim soldiers, who came with him from Bengal, settled in villages near Mrohaung and built the Sandi Khan Mosque, which still exists today (Alam, 2004). Naramaikhla not only took help but also accepted certain territory system from the Sultan of Bengal and introduced Nadir Shah's system that was followed by the twelve kings one after another at Mrauk-U in unremarkable succession. In this way, Arakan became definitely concerned with the Muslim State and contact with a modern civilization resulted in a renaissance. Some of the Mrauk-U Dynasties also extended their territory to east part of Bengal. Many Muslim inhabitant hold important posts in the court as well as in the field of trade and commerce possessing a far superior culture and civilization. The Arakanese court also adopted many Muslim customs and terms during time being. As a result, Arakan region was Islamized and stood as an independent Muslim kingdom in the end of 1500. During the successive centuries, the Muslim population in Arakan grew in large numbers as a result of inter-marriage, immigration and conversion.

Burman Buddhist Rule and Forced Migration of the Rohingya

In 1784, Burmese king Boddawphaya sent 30,000 soldiers to Arakan to conquer in response to the request of Nagasandi, a dissident member of the Arakanese royal family and returned in February 1785 with the royal family and 20,000 inhabitants as prisoner (Alam, 2004). The Burmese soldiers killed many Arakanese Muslims and Buddhists and destroyed valuable infrastructures like mosques, temples, shrines, seminaries and libraries, including the Mrauk-U Royal Library. The fall of Mrauk-U Empire was a mortal blow to the Muslims, materially and culturally Islamic was razed to the ground (Yunus, 1994). During 40-years of Burmese rule (1784-1824), two third (2,00,000) of the inhabitants (Rohingyas and Rakhines) of Arakan were said to have fled to Bengal (India) (Collis, 1970), a massive flee of the inhabitants in the Arakanese history. The Indian government, British East Indian Company accepted their settlement in the southeast parts of Bangladesh. Many Rakhine still live in the east part of Bangladesh and holding Bangladeshi citizen.

British Colonial Rule and Remigration

This area was under the territory of the British colonial rule from 1824 to 1948 without 1942 -1946. The coastal area of Arakan was very fertile for business and agriculture, and the British policy was to increase the growth of agricultural products. Hence, the Bengali inhabitants from the adjacent areas were encouraged to migrate into the fertile valleys. As, the British East India Company extended the administration of Bengal to Arakan, the border was open. Actually, there was no international boundary between the two countries and no restriction was imposed on the emigration that help the local people for free movement between two regions. During the Burmese occupation, there was a breakdown of the indigenous labor force both in size and structure. As a result, the British policy was also favorable for the settlement of Bengali agricultural communities in Arakan. R.B. Smart, the deputy assistant commissioner of Akyab, wrote about the immigrants “Since 1879, immigration has taken place on a much larger scale, and the descendants of the slaves are resident for the most

part in the Kyauktaw and Myohaung (Mrauk-U) townships. Maungdaw Township has been overrun by Chittagonian immigrants. Buthidaung is not far behind and new arrivals will be found in almost every part of the district (Smart, 1957). A colonial record says: “Bengalis are a frugal race, who can pay without difficulty a tax that would press very heavily on the Arakanese.... (They are) not addicted like the Arakanese to gambling, and opium smoking, and their competition is gradually ousting the Arakanese (Report of the Settlement Operation in the Akyab District 1887-1888). During this period, the flow of Bengal labor added the core motivation to the economic development in Arakan within a few decades along with the opening of regular commercial shipping lines between Chittagong and Akyab. During a century of colonial rule, a huge number of immigrants came to Arakan and became the numerically dominant ethnic group in the Mayu Frontier. The following census assessment shows the increase of population of the various ethnic/religious groups inhabiting Akyab District according to the census reports of 1871, 1901 and 1911.

Table 1 – Population censuses of Arakan (Burma Gazette)

Races	1871	1901	1911	1871-%	1901-%	1911-%
Muslim	58,255	154,887	178,647	21.05	32.16	33.71
Burmese	4,632	35751	92,185	7.42	7.42	17.40
Arakanese	171,612	230,649	209,432	62.02	47.89	39.52

Source: author’s own compilation

The Table 1 shows that there were 58,255 Rohingyas, who had identified themselves as Muslims in 1871, 154,887 in 1901 and 178,647 in 1911 which was 21% in 1871, became 32.16% in 1901, and 33.7% in 1911. It proved that the major Muslim population in the Akyab district did not come soon after the annexation of Arakan by the British in 1826. Mr. Paton, the British official who was the Controller of the Civil Affairs in Arakan, prepared an official report in which he mentioned that the total population of Arakan did not exceed 100,000 of which 60,000 were Maghs (Arakanese Buddhists) and 30,000 (Rohingya) Muslims, approximately one third of the population (Paton, 1964).

During the World War II, the Japanese invaded Burma for (1942–1945) and Rohingyas remained loyal to the British and were seen as being on the opposite side of pro-independence Buddhist

Rakhine (Yin, 2005). Resulted the opposition stand of the two ethnics living in Arakan that made a historical untrust relation between them. Regarding the beginning of the ethnic violence in Arakan, the British administration was withdrawn them from Arakan to India in 1942. The Arakanese hoodlums began to attack the Muslim villages in southern Arakan and the Muslims fled to the north where they took vengeance on the Arakanese in Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships (Yegar, 1972) that made more complicated relation between two ethnics. After the end of the World War II, Rohingya leaders were unhappy that Arakan was to be included within Burma since Burma is multiethnic nations and religiously, most of them followed Buddhism. Therefore, they approached to Mohammad Ali Jinnah (Pakistani leader) to incorporate northern Arakan into the East Pakistan (Bangladesh) in 1947

but Arakan was excluded from the Independent Bangladesh in 1948. Since then, the Rohingyas became the object of mistrust and discrimination (Yin, 2005) that resulted to Arakan as well as the Rohingyas in very complicated and conflict geo-political era which has been going on for decades.

Results & Discussion

In 1947, Army General Aung San negotiate for the independence of Burma with the British authorities as well as convinced minority groups to join the Union of Burma. Then, through the Panglong Agreement (1947), Aung San outlined his government's commitment to the minority rights. Specifically, consideration gave the Shan, Chin, Kachin and Karenni ethnic people, the option to withdraw from the Union of Burma after 10 years of the independence. But the new government after independence, led by the civilian elected Prime Minister U' Nu failed to regard minority rights and demands for independence and federalism. Since then, almost every non-Burman ethnic group has acted an armed rebellion against the central government in the past 70 years, fueling decades of low intensity conflict in which civilians have suffered the most. The situation of the Rohingyas were one of the worst minority groups. Successive military governments have concealed an exceptionally vicious hatred to the Rohingya.

A bilateral parliament was formed in Myanmar which was consisted of a Chamber of Deputies and a Chamber of Nationalities. Multi-party elections were held in 1951–1952, 1956 and 1960 and election wined party formed the government in a systemic way. But, on 2 March 1962, the military led by General Ne Win took control of Burma through a coup and the government has been under control by the military. Since then, the military ruled this country through one party system from 1962 to 2011. As a result, everything was nationalized or brought under government control to the way of Socialism. After a long period, due to mutual understanding, a political reform era was from 2011 to 2015 that resulted a general election, was held in 2015. These were the first openly free and fair contested elections that made Myanmar to come back in democracy system but unfortunately, the Rohingya people were tortured worst way under this democratic government that made hundreds of thousands to flee to Bangladesh in 2017, consider as one of the worst

ethnic massacred in the world. The military handed the power again in 2021.

Since 1962, various laws and regulations had been publicized in different time but all of them were disfavor of the Rohingya people, even harassed them. Since the 1970s, Rohingya was not accepted into the army. In 1974, all citizens were given National Identification Certificates (NIC) but were offered Foreign Registration Cards (FRC) to the Rohingyas. In 1977, the Burmese government conducted the Nagamin (Dragon King) Operation to flush out illegal immigrants targeted the Rohingyas designed to drive them out of the country (Yin, 2005) and as result, more than 200,000 Rohingya moved into Bangladesh. Again, in 1991, the Burmese army repeated this pogrom and about 250,000 Rohingya were driven out of Arakan into Bangladesh.

In October 1982, the country's new rulers updated and enacted the Citizenship Law, which divided the people living in the country into three unequal classes of citizens, namely (1) full citizens, (2) associate citizens and (3) naturalized citizens in which full citizenship was conferred to those people whose ancestors had domiciled in Myanmar previous to 1823, a year before the First Anglo-Burmese War; associate citizens were those whose ancestors had settled in the country during and after the war; and naturalized citizens were those who were born in the other countries but moved to this country. The most important negative impact of this law was the nullification of the equal citizenship principal enshrined in the 1947 Constitution targeted to some ethnics not to accept a peacefully living in the country. By obliquely, emphasizing the superiority of the Bamar (Burmese) over the country's many ethnic minorities, the law not only disenfranchised Myanmar's numerous ethnic groups but even marginalized them (Seekins, 2002). According to the 1983 census report, all Muslims in Arakan constituted 24.3% and they all were categorized as Bangladeshi, while the Arakanese Buddhists formed 67.8% of the population of the Arakan (Rakhine) State (Immigration and Manpower Department, 1987). In a statement of 26 February 1992, Myanmar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that "In actual fact, although there are 135 national races living in Myanmar today, but the so-called Rohingya people is not one of them. Historically, there had never been a 'Rohingya' race in Myanmar, was a creation of a group of protestors in the Rakhine State.

Since the First Anglo-Myanmar War in 1824, the people of Muslim Faith from the adjacent country entered Myanmar, particularly Rakhine State. Though, many of the Muslims have been living for the centuries but the authority mixed all the people in a same category. Being immigrants, they do not hold immigration papers like other nationals of the country” (ALTSEAN-Burma, 2006).

In 2005, the government authority enacted a restriction a part of well-planned to the Rohingya people and the acclimatization of restrictions of movement had excessively affected the Rohingya in northern Rakhine. A pass was then required for any movement between villages, even for day trips to health clinics. Some Rohingya communities were herded into “new villages” where the military monitor them and seize their land for military-connected business projects. Human rights violations such as land confiscations, discriminatory restrictions on employment, education, access to forest resources and arable land, together with tighter controls of local economies, and arbitrary taxes, had created problems of poverty and food insecurity (Ekeh, 2007). They started of forced labor, expropriation of property, and religious persecution. As a result, many mosques destroyed or ordered to be emptied. Even, extra-judicial killings were common. They required permission to marry such that Muslim Rohingya women were only allowed to marry after they has reached the age of 18 and the men 24 that was considered a defeated life in an independent country. Since the early 1990s, the rise of the militarization of Western Burma has been dramatic, the number of army battalions from 3 to 43, the biggest increase in the country. The Burmese army used the local population to maintain their presence, stealing food, appropriating land and forcing civilians to build camps, excavate roads and carry supplies (Mathieson, 2009). Apart from being inflicted by the Myanmar army and police, these human rights violations against the Rohingya were also the work of the notorious Nasaka, the country’s border security force (Sidhu & Parnini, 2011).

The Rohingya people have been facing of systematic discrimination, statelessness and targeted violence in Rakhine State, Myanmar. In August 2017, the largest and fastest refugee influx into Bangladesh from Myanmar more than 773,000 Rohingya—including more than 400,000 children by burning the ground, separating the families and

and raping the women and girls. Most of the people who escaped were severely traumatized after witnessing unspeakable atrocities. Waiting for decades and hoping democracy system in the country that will solve historic problem. But unfortunately, this was happened under the long waiting democratic government aligned her with previous military junta policy on this predicament that proves the state plan to erasing the Rohingya people from the country.

Conclusion

Muslims started to come into Arakan from different parts of the world from the pre-Islamic period before the Arakanese. They gradually settled in this area and mixed with the local people, developed the present stock of people known as ethnic Rohingya with distinct culture, civilization, and religion from the 7th century. Over the centuries, ethnic groups of people live in this area peacefully. Later, Burmese invaded Arakan and forced the Rohingya to migrate to India present Bangladesh in the 18th century and after independence, the Myanmar government continued same role. During time being, several times, thousands of the Rohingya people had to flew to Bangladesh from Arakan due to heavy torcher, destroy, and killing mission by the military under the all kinds of regime and have been living in Bangladesh. The Myanmar governments had no desire to bring them in Arakan.

The Rohingya people is the ethnic religious group of Myanmar who have been living over 1300 years but the state policy of Myanmar has kept them out of rights. The ‘Rohai’, a group of people live in southern Chittagong and trace their origin to Arakan. They are citizens of Bangladesh and have no desire to return to Arakan after more than two centuries. Similarly, many Rakhine Buddhists also are now citizens of Bangladesh and live east part of this country who had come from Arakan.

So, to resolve this problem, the first step needs to acknowledge by the government, the existence of the Rohingya in Myanmar is a historical fact and the status as an ethnic minority needs to be restored. Gradually, s political and social protections of a victimized ethnic minority need to be ensured. Finally, the government of Myanmar must change the state policy and give citizenship to the Rohingya people under the supervision of the United Nations or regional powerful countries to live all the ethnic minority people peacefully in the country.

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