FOCUS

CRISES AND CHALLENGES : MYANMAR, AFGHANISTAN, PAKISTAN AND BANGLADESH

Situation Analysis of the Ongoing Crisis in Myanmar

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The intercommunal, sectarian conflict that broke out in Rakhine State in June 2012 has not subsided despite efforts by the Myanmar authorities to contain it. Worse, fresh riots between the Rakhines and the Muslims (however we call them) erupted again in Mrauk U, Minbyar, and Kyauk Phyu in the third week of October resulting in more than two thousand houses burned and thousands of people, mainly from the Muslim community, displaced. A night-time curfew was imposed by the local authorities, and more security forces arrived following an order by Myanmar President Thein Sein. However, the tension has not diminished and further unrest is expected if the authorities cannot contain it. Even if the authorities do contain it, they must do so in a way that will lead to permanent peace and reconciliation between the two communities, not only within Rakhine State but within the whole country.

Usual Explanations of the Issue

The Rakhine conflict, which dates back decades, is complex and multi-faceted. This analysis does not aim to be grounded in history. It will not cite references since it is not an academic paper but will analyse the widely reported and known events and attitudes. In spite of the glaring shortage of studies of the issue, two common explanations will be briefly mentioned here:

1. Statelessness, both *de jure* and *de facto*, of the Rohingya though they have lived within the territories of Myanmar at least for generations;
2. Decades-long discrimination against and oppression of the Rohingya by the Myanmar authorities.

Some writings do note successive Myanmar governments' practices of divide-and-rule between the Rakhine Buddhists and the Muslims, and they note that the Rakhines too have suffered from various practices of oppression by the central and local Myanmar authorities, particularly under the previous military regime (1988-2011). Some writings also highlight the fact that exile Rakhine activists and organisations used to object to the inclusion of the Rohingya people in Myanmar

society. Organisations and various multi-ethnic bodies formed outside Myanmar offer clear evidence of the animosity of the Rakhines towards the Rohingya. However, we must note a most important fact: all of these explanations were made in the context of the military dictatorship which ruled Myanmar from 1988 to 2011. The Rakhine-versus-Rohingya issue has never been seen as significant among democracy campaigners whether within and without the country during the years of military rule, despite sporadic coverage of and campaigns for the Rohingya by international human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

The 2012 conflict is the most serious in Rakhine State since Myanmar's independence in 1948. Such serious intercommunal violence did not break out under the previous military regime. Therefore, we are obliged to consider the impact on the conflict of the recent phenomenon of Myanmar's democratisation. A few commentators have pointed out, correctly, that democratisation played a role in this year's conflict.

Protagonists

The Rohingya issue once was seen as involving only the authorities and the Rohingya, with a few commentators assigning a role, though not a major one, to the Rakhines.

However, with the recent process of democratisation in Myanmar, many new protagonists have come to the fore: the media, Myanmar politicians, Rakhines in Rakhine State and elsewhere in Myanmar, the majority Myanmar Buddhist community inside and outside the country, the Buddhist monkhood – all of whom are seen to have played a major role in informing and influencing public opinion in Myanmar. These actors must also be considered in context. With little or no questioning of the claims by their Rakhine brethren, the overwhelming majority opinion in Myanmar on the Rakhine-Rohingya issue is outright rejection of the Rohingya as illegal Bengali Muslim migrants who are terrorising the indigenous Rakhine ethnic Buddhists.

President Thein Sein himself suggested during a meeting with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, that the “Bengalis” who had illegally entered Myanmar should be sent to other countries willing to take them, with the help of the UNHCR. Although the exact wording is not known, according to the posting on the Myanmar President's Office website President Thein Sein did make a distinction between the Bengalis/Rohingya who have lived in Myanmar for generations and those who only entered Myanmar after independence, and he reportedly told António Guterres that the government had been trying to find a solution to the problem. However, other Myanmar government ministers repeatedly said in following months that, contrary to

popular opinion, there has been little or no illegal infiltration of Muslims into Rakhine since independence.

However, the Myanmar public, mainly monks and Rakhines, have exploited President Thein Sein's qualified statement that only overstaying Bengali illegal migrants would be resettled in other countries. Monks and Rakhines initially urged the outright deportation of all Muslims or Rohingya from Rakhine, and called for strict and steady adherence to the 1982 Myanmar Citizenship Law which does not recognise the Rohingya as a distinct ethnic group with ties to Myanmar prior to 1823. Both versions of their calls eventually will lead to the Rohingya being effectively stateless and facing deportation. Moreover, the larger Myanmar public seems to agree that even those Muslims in Rakhine State who do have citizenship certificates (National Registration Cards) bought them from corrupt immigration officials. These Muslims include the ethnic Kaman, who are officially recognised as one of the 135 ethnic groups or national races in Myanmar. Many Kaman also were attacked by the Rakhines during the riots in parts of the Rakhine State. This view indicates a growing public unwillingness to accept Muslims as legitimate citizens.

Moreover, during the recent protests over plans by the Organisation of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to open an aid office, the Myanmar public, led by monks, has argued that the OIC planned only to help the Rohingya and to muddle local politics. That the OIC is an international body comprising Muslim or Muslim-majority countries understandably worries Myanmar Buddhists. However, the campaigns mainly within Rakhine State against the humanitarian assistance provided by the international NGOs are not wholly sensible, given statements by the campaigners that the aid is biased toward the Rohingya. Even if most, if not all, the international NGOs provided humanitarian assistance to the Rohingya in the past, that was mainly because of the extreme poverty and oppression under which the Rohingya lived. Although the Rakhines too were oppressed under military rule, it is common knowledge that they were less severely oppressed than the Rohingya, especially in terms of economic, social and cultural rights. In fact, the whole Myanmar civil society has shown its outright bias in favour of the Rakhines by not donating at all to the Muslim refugees in the Rakhine State camps, partly due to the shock of the riots.

In the aftermath of the June 2012 riots, it is true that a number of doctored photos showing the slaughter of Rohingya by the authorities, monks, and Buddhists were posted and shared on social media sites such as Facebook. This, in part, led to an emotional uproar in the Muslim world, not all of which is well-informed on the issue, against the Myanmar authorities and the Rakhines. But not all the news and photos on the conflict are fakes. Actually, both sides posted doctored photos and news on the Internet. However, the bulk of Myanmar society seems not to

recognise the involvement of both communities and just pointed to doctored photos and fake news posted by some irresponsible Muslims. This led the larger Myanmar society and some government officials, including President Thein Sein, in press interviews with local journalists, to hide or ignore the bitter truth that the Rohingya have suffered various forms of discrimination and oppression for decades. Even worse, members of the Buddhist majority denied the allegations that the Myanmar security forces were complicit in the attacks on the Rohingya, and joined and took sides with the Rakhines in certain instances since last June.

On the other hand, the Nobel Peace laureate and democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, who is widely respected and is seen as the future leader of Myanmar, has been criticised by a number of commentators and organisations as politically silent at best and biased at worst. She remarked that the issue stems from lack of rule of law, but without specifying how her version of the rule of law would ameliorate the situation. In addition, she pointed to the porous border between Bangladesh and Rakhine State as one of the major causal factors. This amounted to a *de facto* accusation that some or many of the Rohingya in Rakhine are illegal migrants. She has said that, as a first step, those who are eligible are to be given Myanmar citizenship under the present legislation, thus postponing the critical revision of the Citizenship Law to bring it in line with international standards. However, other senior leaders of her National League for Democracy (NLD) party, such as Tin Oo, Win Tin and Nyan Win have called the Muslims of Rakhine State illegal Bengali migrants. Therefore, even though Aung San Suu Kyi indeed has enormous influence within her own party, her attitude alone will not counter the majority NLD opinion, since decisions on major matters are made by majority vote at party meetings.

High expectations by various persons and organisations for a potential key role by Aung San Suu Kyi are not realistic for another reason: the involvement of monks, most of whom are young, in this anti-Rohingya or anti-Muslim campaign in the country. It is not alleged here that all or even most of the monks are involved. However, since a number of monks began this campaign a few months ago, no senior Buddhist monk has stepped up and forbade the young monks from getting involved. At this stage, even if Aung San Suu Kyi herself were to get involved and say no to the feverish anti-Muslim campaign, she would be unable to stop it because despite her popularity she does not have the high moral stature that monks have in Myanmar society.

Current Situation

Although the Myanmar government does not seem to recognise the Muslims in Rakhine State (especially those in Northern Rakhine State) by the name 'Rohingya', officials have said that they (or most of them) are eligible for

Myanmar citizenship as Bengalis who have lived in Rakhine State for generations, and have called for harmony and peace between the Muslims and the Rakhines. In the immediate aftermath of the June riots, the Myanmar government formed a special commission (the Rakhine Conflict Investigation Commission) to seek ways of reconciling the two communities. Two famous Rakhine politicians, Dr Aye Maung and U Aye Thar Aung, sit on the commission. Despite this, Rakhine monks, men, women and university students have called for the segregation and deportation of the 'Bengalis' from Rakhine State. This emotionally-charged situation will not cool down soon and tensions will remain for some time.

Even though we can trace the Rakhine community's widely-felt hatred of the Rohingya from the 2012 riots back to the 1940s, the significantly improved role of the Rakhines in the current political landscape also explains the sudden emergence of Rakhine State-wide campaigns against Muslims. The Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP) headed by Dr Aye Maung won 35 out of 44 seats it contested in the 2010 general election, which was discredited by the international community as unfree and unfair. Among the fourteen Region or State Hluttaws or parliaments, the Rakhine State Hluttaw is the only one in which the national ruling military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) is not the majority party, which shows the RNDP's popularity among the Rakhines. The RNDP also has formed alliances with various democratic and ethnic parties in Parliament. This will make it very difficult for any present or future endeavours to change the law in order to grant citizenship to most or all the Muslims in Rakhine State.

Because of the Rakhine incident, the recent anti-Buddhist riots in neighbouring Bangladesh, anti-OIC protests across Myanmar, and the involvement of various Buddhist groups, mainly monks who hold a very high moral stature in Myanmar, hostile sentiments against the Rohingya are running high among the Buddhist majority. However, this hostility among the Buddhist majority now seems to indiscriminately target all of Myanmar's Muslims.

While the Myanmar authorities have repeatedly portrayed the issue as Rakhine-versus-Rohingya intercommunal conflict and toned down its religious dimension, i.e., Buddhists versus Muslims, many Buddhist monks and laypeople highlight it. For example, protests were held last week in many cities across Myanmar against the plan by the OIC to open an office to coordinate its humanitarian assistance to both communities in Rakhine. The demonstrations clearly showed the religious dimension in the placards which the Buddhist monks and laypeople displayed.

The most worrying developments in the increasing religious dimension on the Buddhist side are the four resolutions, or orders, made by the multi-body Buddhist organisation for defence and protection of Śāsana in Hpa-an, Kayin State, on 10 September 2012.

The orders are:

1. Don't sell, rent, or pawn Buddhist-owned properties (houses, lands and fields) to Muslims;
2. Buddhist women shall not marry Muslim men;
3. Buddhists shall only buy from the shops run by Buddhists;
4. Buddhists, under their names, shall not buy, build, or rent houses, lands, fields, or buildings for Muslims.

At the end of the orders, there is a warning that whoever violates them shall be punished, which effectively amounts to an enforceable law. The orders were endorsed by the Myanmar National Movement Committee, which comprises Buddhist monks and laypeople. The committee also said that it would make its own announcements based on the four orders and express its support through public meetings across the country. Highly inflammatory anti-Muslim pamphlets titled "Future Myanmar and Bengalis" referred to all Myanmar Muslims as Bengalis who have a secret mission to overwhelm the Buddhist Myanmar nation in every possible way. The pamphlets reportedly were circulated in the suburbs of Yangon. Because of threats from some civil society groups, the Myanmar Muslim Organization, which is composed of all the five government-registered and recognised organisations, announced that Muslims in Myanmar would not hold Eid al-Adha celebrations on 26 October, citing weak security and the ongoing conflict in Rakhine.

Possible Scenarios and Solutions

There are three possible scenarios for the future: the positive, the negative, and the most probable. The positive scenario is that people cool down and Rakhines start to recognise their neighbouring Muslims as their fellow citizens with whom they share the state of Rakhine. At the same time, the majority Myanmar Buddhist community, including the monks, laypeople and media, must clearly understand the distinction between the *cultural* other (Muslims versus Buddhists) and the *legal* other (Bangladeshis versus Myanmar Muslims); must revise their view of all Muslims in Rakhine as illegal Bengali Muslim infiltrators; and start to conceptualise the Rakhine versus Rohingya conflict just as an intercommunal conflict, not as one between indigenous Rakhine Buddhists and illegal Bengali Muslim infiltrators. Most importantly, the Myanmar government must state clearly to the country and the international community, without playing the communal card for political capital, that most, if not all, the Rohingya are eligible for Myanmar citizenship and that their citizenship applications will be processed without delay.

However, the negative scenario is that the people grow more and more emotional and the conflict erupts into large-scale country-wide anti-Muslim

protests or riots in the near future. That possibility will not be elaborated here.

The middle-way, or the most probable scenario, is that a small-scale anti-Muslim protest breaks out soon and the authorities get involved before it is too late. However, enforcing the rule of law (whatever is meant by that) alone will not be a long-term solution because Myanmar is now democratising with a freer press and a civil society that is politically and socially more active. Only when the larger society at least accepts the legal legitimacy of the presence of Muslims (both Rohingya and non-Rohingya) within Myanmar, will the issue be permanently solved. This will take much time and dedicated effort on all sides.

Note

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Why Pursue Negotiations with the Taliban?

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Despite the unprecedented international financial aid and military support to the government of Afghanistan, the scaled-up military presence of the United States and the variety of US and ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) tactics used in the ongoing effort to defeat the resistance and establish peace, security and the rule of law, the situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated. The resistance has grown, war and insurgency in Afghanistan have intensified, and the Taliban have expanded their activities, becoming a countrywide movement with territory gained in the north and west. Conversely, the United States is facing great economic challenges both at home and abroad, and there is pressure from Congress and the American public on President Barak Obama to bring American men and women deployed in Afghanistan back home.

The Pashtun insurgency, which is composed of multiple, seemingly infinite, local groups, is fed by what is perceived by the Pashtun people as a continued and sustained assault, going back centuries, on Pashtun land, culture, tradition and religion by internal and external enemies. The US and NATO presence and operations in Pashtun valleys and villages, as well as Afghan army and police that are led and composed of non-Pashtun soldiers and police, provide an occupation force against which the insurgency is justified.¹ The intensity of resistance varies from province to province, being the strongest in the south and east, yet resistance is expanding and has swept through many areas throughout Afghanistan.