

“History and Victimhood: Engaging with Rohingya Issues”

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Extracts

Page 101 - Claims of victimization have a long tradition in the political discourse of the Muslims of Northern Rakhine State and reach back to the period of the Second World War. However, victimhood was not the defining marker of the ebullient Rohingya movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Only in the 1970s did their self-projection as victims of an unfair state become a key element of the political rhetoric of militant Rohingya organizations.

Page 104 - Considering “victimhood” as a tool within political discourse, and bearing in mind Bismarck’s description of politics as “the art of the possible, the attainable...,” one may step back for a moment and wonder if the victimhood status of the Rohingya in the worldwide media has done the Rohingya cause any political good. Sure, *outside* of Myanmar the greater public awareness may be rated as a political bonus. But within their country of birth, the answer to that question is simply “no.”

Page 105 - Why have the Rohingya obtained support from all over the world, and after 2012, more so than ever before, but never among ethnic groups in Myanmar, not even among the various other Muslim communities, not during the parliamentary 1950s, not under the military regime and not following the recent political opening?

Page 105 - The state’s performance in the Rakhine State crisis has been weak, inconsistent, and clueless. Notably, it has failed to convey to the world beyond Myanmar the rationale of its own policies.

Page 106 - The multiple failures of the Myanmar authorities to streamline their responses to the crisis, coordinate communication and counter foreign disapproval with informed policy briefings, have created a vacuum that is now filled by an internationally accepted account of Rohingya victimhood.

Page 107 – Temporal expressions in introductions of the Rohingya, such as “for generations” and “for centuries,” have been recurrent, but they are shallow and bloodless. They have at best helped to shroud history in an indefinite past to convey a sense of timeless victimhood that ignores Rohingya agency.

Page 108 - It is therefore not exaggerated to say that now the human rights-informed representations of Rohingya or Rakhine issues in general enjoy a quasi-monopoly on politically correct interpretations.

Page 109 – To be sure, and this is remarkable, human rights activism has transformed the grieves of a poorly known minority nestled in an obscure spot along the Bay of Bengal into a global cause. However, it has not driven positive change at the level of government or civil society, it has not engaged the country and its multi-ethnic society, but has resulted instead in a hardening and widening of nationalist positions in Myanmar.

Page 110 - One needs an excessive dose of optimism to hope that targeted sanctions will cajole the military into concessions or reverse public opinion, and one must be very sanguine indeed to see a self-ruling Rohingya zone emerging from the current disasters. What keeps such beliefs and dreams alive is precisely the essentialization of a passive Rohingya victimhood, with its corollary that Rohingya Muslims need international caretakers and protectors and will reach their goals only with their support.

Page 112 - The colonial migration of Bengali labor from the area of Chittagong rapidly became a taboo in Rohingya historiography. Rohingya historians referred to the steady flow of migrants after the opening of the Suez Canal (1869) as mainly seasonal labor, although in 1931, the British census report certified that 80 percent of the Muslims in Arakan (Rakhine) were Chittagonians, and that three quarters of them had already been born in Arakan.

Page 113 - Currently there is no level field for discussions on Rohingya issues. Prejudice and partisanship rule. While there is no well-assessed and reliable information on how the Rakhine Buddhists and the Muslims (Rohingya as well as others) fared in their isolated state from the 1940s down to the 1990s, there is presently no dearth of cast-iron, partisan certainties that determine historical interpretations of this period.

Page 114 - In the long run, the victimhood discourse alone promises no future for the Rohingya people. Representatives of the group need to take stock of a much broader reality of people who self-identify as Rohingya and who live outside the national frontiers of Myanmar.

Page 115 - To call oneself a Rohingya was always more important outside than inside the country, because it represented a political cry for international recognition that had no chance of gaining support within the country.

Page 116 - This essay does not intend to diminish the weighty accusations of ethnic cleansing by diluting human tragedies in an academic discourse on political history and allusions to a mysterious past. It has rather tried to address the fact that demonstrations of victimhood rest tenuously upon scant awareness of the human, social and political stories, and the complications of competing identities that underpin the history of migrants in the Bangladesh/Myanmar border region.

Page 117 - Designations of victimhood offer a safe zone of protection and a short-term promise of redress, but it is only the painful dialogue through history and culture, the one language that people have spoken for centuries, that can heal and promote reconciliation in the long run. It has never been started, it has never been mediated, it has never even been imagined in this border area. The outlook is bleak, but this is the challenge.