

The Labyrinth of the Rohingya Conundrum: “The Burmese Path to Genocide”

U Nu as presented in the Special Exhibition in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum

On Saturday 25 September 1954 Burmese Prime Minister U Nu gave what we in Britain would call a “fire-side” chat on the Burmese radio. U Nu was a devout Buddhist, and **his homily that Saturday** ¹ was on religious tolerance, though it had a political message as well.

In his talk, U Nu quoted from the Burmese court playwright U Ponnya (1812-1867) on the importance of fixing a centre point when building a pagoda or drawing a tattoo. U Nu gives as an example building a house on land with depressions where the earth needs to be levelled to make sure the construction does not collapse. So too, U Nu continues, the construction of the State calls for equality among communities so that the majority will not treat the minorities arrogantly and arbitrarily, which is not the sort of country that he wants to build. After referring to the Kachin and Shan States where Christians and Buddhists live along the border with China and Laos, he mentions Arakan. An unofficial translation reads:

“In the southwest of the country is Arakan Division. In Akyab District ², there are the two townships Buthidaung and Maungdaw. These two townships are on the border with Pakistan. In these townships of Buthidaung and Maungdaw, the nationals [natives] who live there are ethnic Ruhingya in the majority and they are Muslims. There is also a gang of rebels called the Mujahid. The main aim of this group is nothing less than to detach Buthidaung and Maungdaw from the Union and set up a separate Muslim state.”

U Nu continues by saying that the plans of the rebels have not yet materialized and that it is the duty of everyone in the country to defend the 2,000 miles-border. He praises the leaders of the Muslim community in Buthidaung and Maungdaw who have pledged their unshakeable loyalty to the Government. The moral lesson then follows:

“It is well known that most of the population of Maungdaw and Buthidaung are Muslims. Their leaders also give us the pledge that their loyalty to the Government will never be shaken.

¹ The only known source of this radio broadcast is a text included by the activist Abu Taher (also known as Abu Tahay) in his publication “National Democratic Party for Development 2012. Submission of monograph in respect of the fact that local Islam, Inhabitants within Rakhine State, are native race and citizen.” Yangon: NDPD. This publication appeared many years after the actual radio broadcast on 25 September 1954. It has not been possible to authenticate the text. It is however reasonable to conclude that U Nu did not use the word “Rohingya”, but another word “Ruhingya” or possibly “Ruhangya”.

² Akyab District in Arakan Division (today Rakhine State) then included today’s Sittwe, Mrauk-U and Maungdaw Districts combined, or the whole of North-Central and Northern Rakhine State.

What is more, they are actually leading their followers in battle with Government arms against the Mujahids. This area would have been the most unruly area were it not for the right policy of religious toleration.”

U Nu’s remarks were clearly not a formal statement of government policy, but were designed to curry favour with Arakan’s Muslim population. U Nu was anxious to secure the support of Arakan Muslims to counter **the insurgency launched in 1948 by the Mujahid** (who were in any case also mostly Arakan Muslims). At the time Burmese listeners would have interpreted his reference to “Ruhingya/Ruhangya” - one of several variations of “Rwangya”, the word for indigenous “Arakaner” Muslim communities in circulation - as no more than political support from the Prime Minister to Arakan Muslims whose representatives in Parliament invariably voted with U Nu’s AFPFL (Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League) against his political opponents in Arakan, the Rakhine Buddhist ANUO (Arakan National United Organisation). The ANUO leader at the time, the British-educated former Indian Civil Service officer U Kyaw Min, **was well known for taking the AFPFL to task.**

To the best of my knowledge, U Nu never used the term “Ruhingya” again. Nor did anyone else. One Ruhingya swallow between independence on 4 January 1948 and Ne Win’s coup on 2 March 1962 does not make a Rohingya summer.

This brings me to one of the exhibits in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum’s special exhibition: **“The Burmese Path to Genocide”**. One online collage disarmingly reads:



Burma’s first prime minister, U Nu, recognized the Rohingya as nationals of Burma in 1954.

“Located to the southwest of the Union [Burma] is ‘Rakhine’ There are two townships [there] called Maungdaw and Buthidaung. The majority of the nationals residing in those townships are Rohingya who are Muslims.”

— Prime Minister U Nu

Prime Minister U Nu.
Photo: AGE Fotostock

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The text clearly comes from U Nu's fireside chat of 25 September 1954, possibly paraphrased from a reported official translation ³ released on 29 September 1954 and which reads:

“Southwest of the Union of Burma is the Arakan Division. Within that division are the two townships of Buthidaung and Maungdaw in Akyab District, and these are contiguous with the frontier of East Pakistan. The nationals of the Union in those townships are Ruhinjas [sic] who are Muslims. There are the Mujahids too whose aim is no less than to secede Buthidaung and Maungdaw from the Union of Burma and set up a separate Muslim state.” ⁴

The term “nationals” though is in my view not related to nationality or citizenship (နိုင်ငံသားများ - ninengansarmyar), but to ethnicity (တိုင်းရင်းသားများ - tinerainnsarmyar) which is the word to be found in the Burmese version and is appropriately translated on Page 1 of this blog.

Indeed, တိုင်းရင်းသားများ is not to be found at all in Burmese citizenship legislation, so it is quite clear that U Nu was not referring to their nationality/citizenship, but to their ethnicity.

Furthermore, the word used in the original Burmese article for this ethnicity is “Ruhingya/“Ruhinja” spelt ရူးဟင်ဂျာ which the Museum has improved to “Rohingya” spelt ရိုဟင်ဂျာ . This is, I regret, very much in line with what seems to me to be an ideologically motivated Inclination among activists for the Rohingya cause to “improve” original documents when the “wrong” spelling in Burmese occurs, or of replacing the term “Arakan Muslims” with “Rohingya” wherever it appears. Neither practice is conducive to historical accuracy or compatible with academic integrity.

My conclusion is that it is less than honest for the Museum to cherry pick an isolated phrase and to conclude in their caption that U Nu “recognized the Rohingya as nationals of Burma in 1954”. My reasons are:

- (i) There is no reference to Ruhingya or **any variation of this or any other designation** based on “Rohang” in either primary or secondary Burmese legislation since independence in 1948.
- (ii) U Nu's assertion, whether referring to ethnicity or citizenship, is not compatible with the 1953/54 Census. The total of inhabitants in the eight towns of Akyab District (Akyab [now known as Sittwe], Myohaung, Buthidaung, Rathedaung, Maungdaw, Ponnagyun, Minbya, Pauktaw) in the **First Stage 1953 Census Report** (pages 152 and 153) are given as 68,458. Excluding the majority

³ Compare this “official” translation with my own on Page 1 of this blog.

⁴ Taken verbatim from a now defunct blog by scholars Michael Charney and Maung Zarni.

“Burmese” (mostly Rakhine Burmese) amounting to 44,636, the remaining 23,822 include 18,867 (79%) who are listed as “Indian and Pakistani Races”.⁵

- (iii) This Indian and Pakistani presence in Arakan was recognised in 1949 by “**The Scotsman’s**” special correspondent **Michael Davidson** who reported from Akyab on 18 May of that year that: “Of the 130,000 Moslems here, 80,000 are still Pakistani citizens”. It is doubtful that a few years later the 80,000 mysteriously became descendants of an indigenous Arakan race. By any standards, the majority of Muslims in Maungdaw and Buthidaung in 1954 were not descendants of indigenous communities, but of British-era migrants from Bengal, though entitled to full citizenship by birth and by statutory right.⁶
- (iv) The 1973 Census mirrors the 1953-54 incomplete Census. There is no mention of “Rohingya”. **My own analysis is at this link.**
- (v) Thaug Myine, a leading political journalist in U Nu’s party, the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL), who specialised in ethnic minority affairs, wrote a quartet of articles on Arakan⁷ in the monthly “Guardian” Magazine in 1954. In striking contrast to what his party leader U Nu had said only a few days earlier, Thaug Myine wrote in the October 1954 issue:

“The Muslim leaders claim that the Muslim population are indigenous “Rowangyas” [sic] descended from Arab settlers who took service under the Arakanese kings but there is little ethnological or historical evidence to support it. The apparent fact is that a greater number of Muslims than the Muslim leaders would concede belong to the annual influx of cheap Chittagonian labour brought in by the Arakanese landowners to help till the soil, harvest the paddy crop, transport and convey in the paddy trade, and permitted by the British administration to settle down in Arakan. In the course of years with the rapid growth of Muslim population and consequently with this immense pressure on the land which the Arakanese cultivators steadily lost to the more industrious Muslims, the complacent Arakanese attitude towards the Muslims as a source of cheap and compliant manual labour changed into that of hostility as winning competitors in the economic and racial field. On their side the Muslim settlers had developed a strong sense of grievance against the Arakanese whom they call “Maghs”, a historical appellation which the Arakanese had earned in their turbulent history by their predatory habit of raiding the

⁵ “In Buthidaung town about per cent of the population are classified according to the current census as Pakistanis; in Maungdaw about 45 per cent are Pakistanis”. Source: Professor Hugh Tinker, quoting Census Release No. 3 of 1953 - “The Union of Burma” Page 357 OUP 1957

⁶ Section 4. (2) of the **1948 Citizenship Act** reads: “Any person descended from ancestors who for two generations at least have all made any of the territories included within the Union their permanent home and whose parents and himself were born in any of such territories shall be deemed to be a citizen of the Union”.

⁷ <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/Asmi-extract.pdf>

coast of Bengal and enslaving Muslims. The Muslims considered that the Arakanese in government service were in concert out to humiliate them and evict them from their hard-won land. In consequence there obtained a situation pregnant with communal enmity which only needed an outside event to touch off an all open fight.”

- (vi) Thaug Myine, in short, seemingly directly contradicted what his party leader had said. U Nu set out to flatter his political allies Sultan Ahmed and Abdul Gaffar by asserting that all the “good guys” in Maungdaw and Buthidaung were ethnic Ruhingyas or Rwangyas, even though, like Thaug Mine, he knew they were not. The “bad guys” were the Mujahid, who enjoyed a measure of support among the local Muslim population. U Nu does not say whether he sees the “bad guys” also as Ruhinjas, or interlopers from Bengal.
- (vii) To add to the debate, [the ideologue U Ba Tha proclaimed in 1960](#) that the Muslim population in Akyab District were in fact “Roewhengyas” [sic] who were 95% of the Muslim population of Maungdaw and Buthidaung Townships. “Roewhengya”, U Ba Tha would have us believe, is a corruption of the Rakhine words “Rwa-haung-ga-kyar” which means “Tiger from Old Village”. U Ba Tha was to change his mind completely a few years later when he concluded that Arakan Muslims were in fact “Rohingyas”. [At this link is my critique](#) of the development of his thought 1959 - 1966. ⁸
- (viii) Two contemporary sources commented on U Ba Tha’s historical claims thus:
 - (a) Seit Twe Maung, [a contemporary Arakanese source \(1961\)](#), [observed](#) in an article entitled “Rohengya [sic] Affairs”: “Let me stress that I am not against those Arakan Muslims who have stayed among us for generations. We will continue to regard them as our kinsmen and brethren. However, we cannot accept those Rohingyas who are trying to create discord among our people. We will not recognise them as a separate indigenous race. But if they prefer they can remain as foreigners the Chittagonians. Appropriate action will have to be taken if they continue to interfere in our political affairs. So let me appeal to these Muslim of Buthidaung and Maungdaw not to meddle in this so called Rohingya affairs as instigated by certain mischievous persons of Chittagonian descents, who besides trying to create Chittagonian Sudetenland, trying to make [take?] our rightful Statehood movement by creating and igniting racial problems.” Seit Twe Maung saw only too well that later Chittagonian settlers were only too keen to jump on the “Rohengya” band-waggon.

⁸ Section 3. (1) of the [1948 Citizenship Act](#) reads: “For the purposes of section 11 of the Constitution the expression ‘any of the indigenous races of Burma’ shall mean the Arakanese, Burmese, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah, Mon or Shan race and such racial group as has settled in any of the territories included within the Union as their permanent home from a period anterior to 1823 A. D. (1185 B.E.)”. But no list of sub-groups was ever published under this Act. Indigenous Muslim communities in Arakan included pre-1823 settlers.

- (b) As for the “Royanka” band-waggon, Tha Thu, **another contemporary writer (1963)** noted: “Locally, those slave Muslims are known as Royanka [sic] or Arakanese Muslims. The immigrants of the Chittagonian race find their way into society of local Royanka and gradually they become absorbed within them. Eventually, they also claim to be Royanka, descendants of the Muslim slaves in Arakan. Consequently, the Arakanese are slowly but surely being ousted by the peaceful penetration of the Chittagonians in every walk of life.”

Let us now look at another collage:



LEADING A NEW NATION

Burma gained independence from Great Britain in 1948. In the years leading up to independence, Rohingya played important roles in establishing Burma's new government.

Two Rohingya served on the country's governing body, the Constituent Assembly, in 1947. One was a member of the committee that laid out the fundamental rights and citizenship of the nation.

Rohingya and leaders from other communities meet in 1946. Burma's founding father, Aung San, is standing fourth from the left. U Nu, fourth from right, would become Burma's first prime minister. Rohingya leader M.A. Gaffar stands second on the right.

Photo: Nurul Islam

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The captions highlight the close political connections between Aung San, U Nu and the Arakan Muslim leader Muhammad Abdul Gaffar. Abdul Gaffar and another Muslim leader Sultan Ahmed took political office in the Government formed on independence (4 January 1948) when Abdul Gaffar became Parliamentary Secretary for Health and Ahmed Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Minorities. (As I have already pointed out in a tweet, it was “The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland” which gave Burma its independence, not Great Britain alone, while the 1947 Constituent Assembly was elected to draft the Constitution, which is why the Governor Sir Hubert Rance and his Executive Council governed until Independence Day.)

But though in 1954 U Nu was to praise the “good guys” in the Arakan Muslim community and condemn the “bad guys” in the Mujahid insurgency, Abdul Gaffar **wrote a forthright memorandum in 1948** in which he was ambivalent if not supportive of the Mujahid as true patriots, while attacking the violence of Muslim gangs. At the same time Sultan Ahmed was not as blameless as U Nu might have thought, as a **SECRET Pakistani Intelligence Report** in late 1948 listed Sultan Ahmed as one of the four main leaders of the Mujahid insurgency. Abdul Gaffar used **the term “Rwangya”** during the 1950s to describe indigenous Arakan Muslims. He claimed that all Muslims in Arakan were “Rwangya”, which denied any

Chittagonian migration at all into Arakan during British rule. It is even alleged that U Nu cast a blind eye on illegal Bengali migration after independence in order to increase the number of Muslim voters in Arakan who generally supported U Nu's AFPFL, though I have no actual evidence for this. But there is ample **evidence of AFPFL electoral skulduggery** in other reports. Abdul Gaffar later changed all his references retrospectively from "Rwangya" to "Rohingya". There is no need for me to tell you why.

Finally, we might look at this online caption:



The Rohingya trace their history back to a kingdom known as Arakan in present-day Burma. It is illustrated here.

WHO ARE THE ROHINGYA?

The Rohingya are a religious and ethnic minority in Burma. They are Muslim. Most Rohingya live in Rakhine State on Burma's western coast. For centuries, they lived side by side there with the Rakhine Buddhist community. But in the last 200 years, Rakhine State was invaded—first by the British, later by the Japanese. These outside influences created divisions between the local communities that would later intensify.

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The historical reality is that the Mrauk-U Dynasty of the Buddhist Kingdom or Arakan 1429 - 1794 was in its hey-day an aggressive imperialist power which gradually ceded land and influence to the Mughals until it was finally captured in 1794 by the Burmese Konbaung dynasty. Mrauk-U was known for its **piracy and slave trade** - indeed, most of the quasi-indigenous Rakhine Muslims were brought as slaves from outlying regions of the Arakan Kingdom. The Burmese invasion of 1794 was a cataclysmic affair which resulted in the deportation of thousands of Buddhist and Muslim residents (along with the prestigious **Mahamuni Buddha image**), the flight of many more to British India, and the deaths of many others in occupied Arakan. You would have thought that the Burmese invasion was worth a mention by the Museum. The British invasion of 1824 was welcomed by some as a deliverance, with armed support for the British Army from both Muslim and Buddhist militias recruited in Bengal.

The population of Arakan, depopulated as a result of the Burmese invasion, trebled during the first 25 years of British rule from 100,000 or so to more than 350,000 (352,348 recorded in the 1852 Annual Census). This was, as former Chief Commissioner of Burma Lt. Gen Albert Fytche put it ⁹, "due to immigration from provinces under Burmese government, and

⁹ Lt Gen Albert Fytche "Burma Past and Present" published 1878: Pages 256-7

notably from Pegu". This meant "the desertion of 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."

These migrants were overwhelmingly Buddhist, not Muslim.

The victimisation and persecution of the Arakan Muslim community, known internationally in recent years as "Rohingya", over several decades since World War II has been highlighted in countless articles and reports. There has been debate over whether the atrocities committed against them amount to genocide. Ethnic cleansing may well have taken place, but the charge of "genocide" has yet to be tested in a national or international court, though cases are in action before the International Criminal Court, the International Court of Justice and the Argentinian Courts.

There is indeed more than enough good reason for the Museum to organise a special exhibition on the matter. Yet **as I have already shown**, I am concerned that the special exhibition is being used as a propaganda platform to disseminate a particular historical narrative of **the kaleidoscope of Muslim communities, Indian and Indo-Burman**, who have in recent years coalesced into the "Rohingya" community, an ethnicity in the making. Most Myanmar citizens, I believe, would find the exhibition controversial. It will not help to promote reconciliation between the Buddhist and Muslim communities in Rakhine State. Its implicit portrayal of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as somehow complicit in genocide is unfortunate and widely disputed, **however naïve and ill-informed she may well have been**.

It is for the Trustees of the Museum to decide whether to review the captions in the special exhibition on Burma. As I have not visited the exhibition, I do not know what other misleading historical assertions might be on display.

Derek Tonkin - 6 April 2022 (revised 18 June 2023)

[See also my article in the TOAEP Policy Brief Series **"A Critical Assessment of the Holocaust Museum Exhibition on Burma"** as well as my Op-Eds **"The Burmese Path to Genocide"** and **"The Presidential Determination"**]