

Review of the Revised Edition of Azeem Ibrahim's "The Rohingya"

Derek Tonkin 1 February 2018

Azeem Ibrahim and I are appalled at the persecution and victimisation of the Rohingya Muslims of Rakhine State, known to the British as "The Arakan". However, we differ fundamentally about the historical origins of the Rohingya people. My own views may be read in Chapter 8 of "Citizenship in Myanmar" edited by Ashley South and Marie Lall, available now for pre-order from Amazon.

While Azeem Ibrahim acknowledges that there was migration from India to Burma during British rule, he concludes that: "None of this significantly involved the Rohingya who mostly carried on working as farmers and fishermen.....". My own presentation, quoting from British censuses, official reports and gazetteers, highlights the extent of migration into Rakhine State between 1875 and 1930. I conclude: "In the 1931 Census Chittagonian migrants from Bengal ('Indians') outnumbered indigenous Muslims in Arakan ('Indo-Burmans') by at least four to one." Taking into account illegal migration from Bengal into Arakan after Burmese independence in 1948, in my current assessment probably less than 15% of the present population of Rakhine State can trace their ancestry back to before British rule which started in 1824. The gulf between Azeem Ibrahim and myself on this basic issue is thus immense and, I fear, unbridgeable.

Azeem Ibrahim has been good enough in this revised edition to identify the Muhammad Yunus who wrote the Foreword to the first edition as the Nobel Peace Prize Winner of that name. I had wrongly supposed it was more probably the President of the militant Rohingya Solidarity Organisation who has the same name. He has also listed in "Acknowledgements" the various sources for his information.

For a full account of the numerous errors of fact in this revised edition, which has corrected none of the errors in the first edition and about which Azeem Ibrahim was fully informed, readers may wish to see my 1 March 2017 detailed analysis at:

<http://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/Detailed-Examination-Misinformation-Azeem-Ibrahim.pdf>

I would once again assure Azeem Ibrahim that there was no "Emergency Immigration Act" in 1974 from which he quotes on several pages: the Act was in 1947 during the last year of British rule and is still in force; there was (Page 8) no census in 1961 and this non-existent census did not list "Rohingyas" as an ethnic group; the 1799 reference to "Rooinga" by Dr Francis Buchanan (Pages 24 and 25) is an isolated reference of doubtful interpretation, unsupported by any other independent sources, for those Azeem Ibrahim provides as supposedly additional sources all without exception acknowledge that Francis Buchanan is the sole source of their information.

Azeem Ibrahim notes on Page 6 that "the British Census of 1911 identified the Buddhists of Arakan (that is, the Rakhine) as having a population of 210,000 (compared to 60,000 in 1824) and the Muslims as numbering 155,000". An examination of the Census however reveals the following:

1911 Census: Part II Imperial Table VIII Part B Pages 67-68

Akyab	302,597 Buddhists
	178,381 Muslims

Sadoway	91,062 Buddhists 4,257 Muslims	
Kyaukpyu	165,804 Buddhists 3,641 Muslims	
Northern Arakan	1,785 Buddhists 0 Muslims	
Total for all four Districts of Arakan	561,248 Buddhists [Azeem Ibrahim – 210,000] 186,279 Muslims [Azeem Ibrahim – 155,000]	
Total Population of Arakan	839,896	(Part II - Imperial Table I Page 3)

It is not possible to say from where Azeem Ibrahim has derived his figures which are blatantly wrong. The 1826 (not 1824) rudimentary headcount of the population in Arakan recorded 70,000 Buddhists, 60,000 Arakanese and 10,000 Burmese. This 1826 estimate however was little more than guesswork immediately after the cessation of hostilities.

The revised edition includes an Epilogue about recent tragic events which has resulted in the flight of some 700,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh. His criticisms of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi are in my view more than justified and I fully support the general thrust of his presentation. Nonetheless, his tendency to exaggerate events leads him to assert: “After the 2012-13 assaults on the Rohingya community, the great majority found themselves in internal refugee camps” which, if true, would not explain the flight of some 700,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh and the burning of many of their villages.

Whether we are witnessing the “genocide” of the Rohingya people, I rather doubt. Rather we are witnessing an attempt to expel them to where most of them came from over the centuries – Bengal. If “genocide” were the objective, many tens of thousands more would have been killed. They would not have been allowed, even encouraged to flee, as a Rohingya community.

I nonetheless welcome the publication of this revised edition as a classic example of how spurious historical data can be assembled to provide a grievous misrepresentation of the Rohingya identity which is only grist to the mill of hostile anti-Muslim forces in Myanmar.