

The Rohingya Conundrum

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The Myanmar Armed Forces, the Tatmadaw, have a reputation for suppressing revolt, whether in Rakhine State or elsewhere, in rather brutal fashion.

The recent action taken against poorly armed but resolute insurgents of the so-called Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) is not the first time that Myanmar has had to contend with incursions into Rakhine State organised from outside the country. From 1948 to 1961 a **Muslim Mujahid rebellion** operating out of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) sought autonomy if not independence for the Muslim dominated region of Arakan, as Rakhine State was previously known. The movement was by definition a *jihad* against the Burmese State, and caused misery to both the Buddhist and Muslim populations alike.

Assaults by ARSA militants started in October last year and were renewed on 25 August. Attacks were launched not only against police posts. ARSA also terrorised the local Muslim population. Some village leaders suspected of collaborating with their local authorities were murdered. Many thousands of people who fled to Bangladesh in October and November were escaping as much from ARSA predations and reprisals as from counter-terrorist operations by the military. It is important however neither to overplay the capacity of ARSA to launch a sustained guerrilla movement, nor yet to underestimate the threat ARSA poses to national security.

When ARSA resumed its attacks last month, the Tatmadaw responded very forcefully, and the testimony of recent refugees fleeing to Bangladesh highlights serious human rights abuses during clearance operations which have been internationally condemned, with some Western leaders now **characterising these operations** as “ethnic cleansing”. Reports from the border also suggest that many, perhaps most refugees in the latest exodus fled more in blind panic than under expulsion order from the military.

But what explains the ferocity of the Tatmadaw’s response? There may well be several reasons: racial prejudice, religious bigotry, military overkill. The main geo-political reason, which is all too easily overlooked, is that the State must have serious concerns about attacks sponsored and led from outside the country, especially in the light of Arakan’s turbulent history since early 1942 when the British Army was forced out of Burma. In Arakan,

thousands of **Muslim residents in Central Arakan were killed** or driven north or out of the country; retaliation against the Buddhist population in the North followed within days. The subsequent *jihad* from 1948 against the newly independent State and the establishment in Bangladesh from the late 1960s onwards of militant Rohingya movements were a constant and unwelcome security threat.

The Myanmar Government's concerns are reflected in their refusal to recognise the designation "Rohingya" as a genuine historical ethnicity. History is very much on their side. The sole documentary reference to anything resembling "Rohingya" prior to Burmese independence in 1948 was in an article on *Languages of the Burma Empire* by the physician to a diplomatic mission sent by the East India Company to the Court of Ava in Burma in 1795. Dr Francis Buchanan recorded very briefly in his **article published in Volume V of *Asiatick Researches*** in Calcutta in 1799 that one of three dialects "evidently derived from the Hindu nation" was "spoken by the Mahomedans, who have been long settled in Arakan, and who call themselves Rooinga, or natives of Arakan". Dr Buchanan adds that both Mahomedans and Hindus living in Arakan "by the real natives of Arakan, are called Kulaw Yakain, or stranger Arakan". Dr Buchanan makes a distinction between the migrant Mahomedans who were "long settled" and the "real natives of Arakan" who were the Buddhists.

As for the meaning of "Rooinga", it is generally agreed by Muslim scholars that the name is derived from the Bengali word for Arakan, which is "Rohang" with the addition of the family taxonomic suffix -gya. The most we could safely conclude from Dr Buchanan's article is that "Rooinga" means "Arakaner", not necessarily as an ethnic designation but rather as a geographic locator, as much as one would say "I am a New Zealander" without any ethnic connotation. Anything beyond this is pure speculation, in the total absence of any supporting evidence. **In the words of the French historian Jacques Leider:** "Rohingya is a name, not an ethnic category, that has been revived in modern days to identify Muslims in Rakhine as a separate social group."

The British arrived in Arakan in 1824, but until they finally departed in 1948, they made not a single reference in any document, private or official, to the "Rooinga" designation. In annual tax and house registration censuses which started in 1829 and which continue to this day, as well as in decennial full censuses which started in 1872, in gazetteers, special reports, settlement ledgers, official inquiries, private letters and reminiscences during 124 years of British rule, "Rooinga" or anything similar was not recorded or even hinted at as an ethnicity in Arakan or anywhere else in Burma.

It took some years for the British to decide on the most appropriate designation of the several Muslim ethnicities settled in Arakan over the years. By the time of the 1921 decennial Census, the British had determined that those who could trace their settlement in Arakan back to before British rule should be classified as “Indo-Burman”, to reflect their dual Indian and Burmese heritage, while those who arrived during British rule from Bengal should be classed among the many “Indian” ethnicities which came to Burma in the 19th and 20th Centuries.

The first group consisted mostly of Rakhine Burmese-speaking “Indo-Burmans” and included the Kulaw Yakain (“Rooinga”) of Dr Buchanan, whom the British first defined in [Paragraph 159 of Part I of the 1921 Census](#) as “Arakan Mahomedans”; this became “Arakan Muslims” in the 1931 Census. The group also included smaller communities like the Kaman who are descendants of the retinue of the Mughal Prince Shah Shujah who arrived in Arakan in 1660; and the Myedu, Burmese captives of the 16th Century who formed a Myedu Army contingent supporting the Burmese annexation of Arakan in 1785. (There were also many thousands of “Indo-Burmans” - 122,705 at the 1931 Census - living outside Arakan, descended through intermarriage with local Burman and non-Burman women, and known as Zerbaidis. In 1941 at their request they were reclassified as “Burmese Muslims”. No Zerbaidis are listed for Arakan in the 1921 or 1931 Censuses.)

The second group of Bengali-speaking “Indians” who settled in Arakan mostly came from the Chittagong region of Bengal and were agricultural labourers, encouraged by the British to settle on vacant land instead of only staying a few months for the rice harvest. By the 1931 Census, the “new” British-era settlers outnumbered the “old” precolonial settlers in Arakan by a ratio of about 4 to 1. Thus Part II of the 1931 Census records in [Imperial Table XVII \(Page 250\)](#) some 217,801 “new” (Indian) settlers and descendants against 57,952 descendants from “old” (Indo-Burman) settlers; the figures are for all religions, though the population is overwhelmingly Muslim. A detailed analysis of the immigrant Indian (as opposed to the quasi-indigenous Indo-Burman) population of Arakan based on the 1931 Census may be found in Chapter VII of the [1941 Report on Indian Immigration](#) by Financial Secretary James Baxter.

The distinct ethnicities of these two groups broadly survived until the mid 1970s. At the 1973 Census, recognised quasi-indigenous Muslim groups in Burma included Arakan-Chittagong, Kaman, Myedu, Burmese Muslim, Other Indian Muslim and Chinese Muslim [in a national race listing of 144 ethnicities](#). This was revamped in 1990 to a list of 135 national races from

which all Muslim ethnicities except the Kaman were excluded, and which remains today the current list of national races.

On independence in 1948, there was thus not a single confirmed or conclusive reference to any historical “Rohingya” ethnicity in Arakan. The mention of “Rooinga” by Dr Buchanan in 1799, apparently the record of a chance discussion in Amarapura, the capital of the Kingdom of Ava, in 1795 with one or more Arakan Muslims deported thence in 1785, has however been given by “Rohingya” ideologues the status of almost divine revelation akin to the Tablets of Moses, a holy grail of supposed proof of the existence of a Muslim-only ethnic identity from time immemorial. I do not accept this view.

It was from 1948 onwards that the Kulaw Yakain of Dr Buchanan, representing but a minority of the Arakan Muslim population, let it be known that they had taken the name “Rwangya” whose meaning was unclear, but was quite probably a rendering of Dr Buchanan’s “Rooinga”. So there might be a link between “Rooinga” in 1795 and “Rwangya” in 1948. The Rwangya differentiated themselves from the Chittagonians, who in turn said that they wished to be known henceforth as “Burmese Muslims” or “Arakan Muslims”. **By 1972 the Israeli scholar Moshe Yegar (Note 1 Page 95)** was already using the variation “Rohinga” to describe the old settlers whom he contrasted with the “Chittagongs” in precisely the same terms that I have used. In his **book published in 2002** about Muslim communities in South East Asia, Yegar noted (Page 25) that “.....Arakan Muslims are Sunnis who call themselves *Rohinga, Rohingya* or *Roewengya*. In his **2005 essay “Salience of Ethnicity”**, the Muslim scholar Khin Maung Yin *aka* Mohammed Sulaiman Al-Hafiz observed that: “The word Rohingya, also known as Rwangya, is derived from the word “Rohang”, the ancient name of Arakan.....”. Even as late as the 21st Century, the Rohingya designation is far from established among writers.

By the late 1950s Muslim scholars were engaged in exploring in historical and cultural essays the origins of the Rakhine Muslim communities; many of these articles **appeared in the monthly *Guardian Magazine***. Various designations were given to these disparate communities. Apart from Rwangya, we may note Rushangya, Roewengya, Ruhangya and Rowunhyar among several, some derived from the Bengali word “Rohang” but others with more fanciful derivations. The surrender in 1961 of Mujahid rebels brought in “Rohinja” which later morphed into “Rohingya”. The Burmese authorities tolerated this last designation for a time, but it is not to be found in any legal instrument in the Burmese Civil Code such as laws and regulations concerned with population census, immigration or citizenship.

Since the late 1950s, the rich historical kaleidoscope of Muslim ethnicities in Arakan has coalesced into the “Rohingya” colossus. The communities abandoned their old designations in favour of unity under the “Rohingya” definition, respecting the guidance of their political and religious mentors.

The creation of this new ethnicity was at root a political construction, driven mainly by the security concerns of the Muslim communities in an increasingly hostile environment. The reaction of the Buddhist majority in Myanmar was however one of considerable alarm. An immigrant Muslim population mostly consisting of 19th to 20th Century agricultural labourers from the Chittagong region of Bengal was seen to emerge as an expanding, allegedly indigenous community, now claiming ancestry from within Arakan, dismissive of any suggestion of Bengali origins and proclaiming a direct lineage reaching back many centuries. The “Rohingya” were now aspiring to nationhood, on a par with the Mons and the Shans, but without any serious historical justification and even though they still have no written language, despite a supposed history of 1,000 years or more.

It is nowadays rarely reported that on 11 July 2012 **former President U Thein Sein made it clear** to the then UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres, now UN Secretary-General, that Bengali agricultural labourers who chose to settle in Arakan during British rule until 1948 did so legally and that the grandchildren of such migrants are entitled to citizenship. This did not apply, U Thein Sein said, to Bengalis who arrived after 1948 because they could only have done so illegally. These illegal migrants he confusingly defined as “Rohingya”. Mr Guterres, and the world press generally, mistakenly thought U Thein Sein was talking about everyone who called themselves “Rohingya”. This was not the case. He used the term “Rohingya” only to designate illegal Bengali post-1948 migrants.

The emergence of a contrived “Rohingya” community must appear to many Burmese as a Trojan Horse. What had previously been a scattered mosaic of Muslim communities living on the whole peacefully with their Buddhist neighbours was now perceived as an existential threat to the Rakhine Buddhist population. The Myanmar authorities are determined that this should not happen and this is one of several reasons why the Tatmadaw have conducted their counter-insurgent operations with such ferocity, suspecting that an intention of the ARSA command is to establish an independent Muslim liberated zone within Arakan.

None of this excuses the serious human rights abuses which have undeniably taken place at the hands of the Tatmadaw, but the actual circumstances of the establishment of a “Rohingya” ethnicity after Burma’s independence in 1948 need to be understood

internationally and taken into account when analysing the present situation and determining policy.

It is my conclusion that the narrative which proclaims “Rohingya” as an historical ethnicity is not based on known historical fact; however, as a nascent, emerging ethnicity formed under pressures of victimisation and discrimination in post-independence Myanmar, “Rohingya” has now passed the threshold of international recognition and has become a reality.

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