

‘Rohingya’ versus ‘Bengali’

Some readers may not be aware that the English translation of the [Final Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State](#), dated 8 July 2013, was released earlier this month. The Burmese version of the full report was released on 22 April 2013, while only the [Executive Summary](#) and [Recommendations](#) were released in English at the time.

I reproduce below Section 10 of the report. It is worth adding that in his account of his latest visit to Myanmar and in his interviews with both the Voice of America and the Democratic Voice of Burma, UN Special Rapporteur Tomás Ojea Quintana avoided use of the term “Rohingya”, no doubt in deference to his hosts. However, the “Rohingya” themselves have made it very clear to Western visitors that they (say they) are deeply offended when the Myanmar authorities refer to them as “Bengalis”. UK House of Commons Speaker John Bercow, [previously among the most fervent supporters of unilateral British sanctions](#) against the former military regime, [highlighted this issue](#) during his recent visit. However, much as I for once support the general thrust of his remarks, I wonder whether he really understood the full historical implications or had read the detail of the Final Report.

The point also needs to be made that many Burmese are equally offended by use of the term “Rohingya” and refuse to be bullied into using the term. As a result, an impasse has developed between the two communities.

The extract below is in my view correct in saying that the term “Rohingya” was first used in an article by Dr Francis Buchanan, geographer, zoologist, botanist and linguist who was a prolific and erudite writer on Bengali affairs, but never once used the term “Rohingya” in any of his other writings. He did so in article on linguistics following conversations with Muslims whom he had met in 1795 as a member [of an official British delegation under Major Michael Symes](#) to the Kingdom of Ava at Amarapura and who had been deported there after the fall of the Arakan Kingdom to Burman forces in 1785. In essence they told him that they came from Rohang (Arakan, Rakhine) and were “Rohingyas” or Arakaners, rather than residents of Bengal. The term is clearly a geographic locator, not an ethnic description. “Rohang” is the Bengali word for Arakan/Rakhine.

During the period of British rule in Arakan from 1825 to 1948, Indians in Burma were broadly [designated as Muslims \(Mohamedans\) or Hindus](#), and Muslims were described either [as Chittagonians - or as Bengalis](#) if they came from further afield in Bengal. They were also known for short as [“CFs” if they were men and “CKs”](#) if they were women. (I have not however yet discovered what these abbreviations stood for.) The terms Chittagonian, Bengali, CF and CK were perfectly acceptable to the persons concerned at the time, and it is only in the post-Second World War turbulence in Arakan that the term “Rohingya” was resurrected as Arakan Muslims understandably sought a definitive identity in independent Burma where they could no longer count on British protection.

In other words, what was totally acceptable prior to 1941 (ethnic “Bengali”) has now become totally unacceptable. The present situation, though, is seen by many as contrived. When young children are taught to chant “Rohingya, Rohingya, Rohingya” to visiting UN officials, it is reasonable to assume that they have been groomed to behave in this way.

The UN are said to be looking closely at the 1982 Citizenship Law, to assess whether it conforms to accepted international standards. They have a difficult task. Assurances though have been given that anyone who can prove [a minimum of residence by three, even only two generations](#) is eligible to

apply for citizenship, though many might not yet meet the language qualification required in a national language.

Relations between Muslims and Buddhists remain fraught and tense in many areas. No progress can be made until both sides have learnt to talk again to each other. The first essential for Westerners is to attempt to understand the historical background. [There is much material available for further study.](#)

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Annex

Extract from "Final Report of Inquiry Commission on Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State"

10. The issues related to the term Rohingya

10.1. Rakhine history records close interactions between Rakhine people and Muslim Bengalis. The more powerful Rakhine kings had suzerainty over 12 regions in Bengal, including the Chittagong region. At that time, those kings had Rakhine titles to their names and adopted Islamic titles as a political strategy to gain the trust of their subjects. The Rakhine kings were close to the Bengali kings, often supporting them as allies in war. Muslim soldiers served in the forces of the Rakhine kings - the descendants of these soldiers are the present day Kaman people of Muslim faith, recognized as one of Myanmar's indigenous Taing-Yin-Tha. The close association and peaceful relations over centuries between the Rakhine and these Muslims from Bengal are documented with solid evidence and is well accepted by the majority of present-day Rakhine people. Despite this, some in the international and diplomatic community accuse the Rakhine of denial, stating that the majority of Rakhine refute the evidence of Muslims in the Rakhine region before the British colonial period.

10.2. The Rakhine and the Bengalis lived together amicably for many years. The Rakhine do not accept the name "Rohingya", widely used internationally, for the Bengalis. They state there is no firm historical evidence for the use of this name. The first published use of the word Rohingya seems to be in 1799, by Francis Hamilton (also known as Francis Buchanan) in his paper "*A Comparative Vocabulary of Some of the Languages Spoken in the Burma Empire*" in 1799, in the fifth volume of Asiatic Researches. The paper mentions, "*Mohammedans, who have long settled in Arakan, and who call themselves Rooinga, or natives of Arakan.*" In the British colonial period, Bengali migrant workers from Chittagong came to work agricultural land in the Rakhine region around Butheetaung and Maungdaw but moved between Bengal and Rakhine according to the seasons. Bengalis living in the south of Chittagong called the Rakhine region at the time "*Rohin Maloke*" in their dialect with *Rohin* meaning Rakhine and *Maloke* meaning country in that dialect. This is the root of the word Rohingya, with the "*gya*" meaning "going to live." Thus "Rohingya" was not the name of a distinct race or people.

10.3. The British colonized Rakhine State in 1826, at the end of the First Anglo-Burmese War. In 1869, after the Suez Canal was complete, the price of rice rose on world markets, and the British brought large numbers of Bengali Muslims from Chittagong into the Rakhine region as agricultural workers. However, no connection has been found between these later Bengali workers brought in by the British and the earlier people calling themselves Rohingya. Furthermore, in censuses taken under the British colonial system, there are no records of a people called "Rohingya". Often, ethnic groups living close to a country's borders have communities living on both sides of the border. For example, along the Myanmar-China border, the Jingpaw people live on both sides.

Similarly, along the borders between Rakhine and Bangladesh, there are Rakhine communities as well as Bengali communities living on both sides of the border. However, it is the Bengali groups of today living in Myanmar who call themselves Rohingya, and not the Bengali groups in Bangladesh. This is one reason why the Rakhine people will not accept the term Rohingya.

10.4. In the early years just after Myanmar's independence, from 1948 to the early 1950s, the Bengalis living in Butheetaung and Maungdaw in northern Rakhine State started to call themselves Rohingya. The term first appeared in a publication in Myanmar in an article called "The Sudeten Muslims," published in the 20 August 1951 issue of the Guardian Daily. The author of this article was Mr Abdul Gaffer, a member of the Mujahid Party. From that time on, Bengalis would repeatedly use the term in their many demands to the Government, as well as in their organizations. The Rakhine bitterly contested these demands from the Bengalis. Historical records of that early period show that Bengalis using the name Rohingya made repeated insistent demands and formed organizations that eventually became armed rebel groups (the Mujahid) who then waged an insurgency against the Union of Myanmar.

10.5. In one survey in 2008, 150 villagers from one village in Maungdaw township were asked, "Which ethnic group (*lu myo*) are you?" 85 percent replied that they were Muslim, 2 percent replied they were Kala, and 1 percent responded that they were Rohingya. Of this 1 percent, one-third did not understand the meaning of the term.

10.6. After 2010, some political and social leaders in the Bengali community became more prominent in the movement demanding human rights for Bengalis. Amongst these was U Shwe Maung, a Member of Parliament from the Union Solidarity and Development Party. At the time, U Shwe Maung stated to international journalists that the usage of term Rohingya was not important, and that obtaining citizenship was the only important issue. On 18 March 2013, on the second day of the first session of the Union Parliament, U Shwe Maung presented a proposal for granting the status of Taing-Yin-Tha to the Bengali people.

10.7. During its first field visit in the second week of September 2012, the Commission visited Bengali IDP camps and Bengali villages in the townships of Sittwe, Pauktaw, Rathe-Taung, Butheetaung and Maungdaw, conducting interviews with the Bengali population. In all these interviews, Bengalis were asked, "What ethnic group (*Lumyo*) are you?" Most of the time, they answered, "I am of the "Muslim ethnic group" (Muslim Lumyo). However, in group meetings, when the question was posed to members of the group randomly selected by the research team, the leader of the group said something in Bengali language to the rest of the group and after that, no more answers were forthcoming; the group appeared to be intimidated by the leader. In the early part of the Commission's visit, only a few respondents replied they were Rohingya, but later visits found increasingly greater numbers of Bengalis stating they were Rohingya. After the first visit by the Commission, the majority of Bengalis stated they were Rohingya (85 per cent of the 800 interviewed). Even so, around 60 per cent of those who stated they were Rohingya only did so in the first part of the interview. As the interview went on, they called themselves members of a "Muslim ethnic group," and not Rohingya.

10.8. The Government of the Union of Myanmar does not recognize the name Rohingya, yet the Bengali community is pushing this term to the point where it is becoming the object of an intensive campaign. The Commission was informed that leaders of the Rohingya movement in Yangon, New York and London were calling the Bengali communities in Rakhine State on mobile phones and urging them to declare themselves "Rohingya". On the other hand, all the 1,200 Rakhine people interviewed objected to using the name Rohingya for the Bengalis. The majority of other Taing-Yin-Tha living in Rakhine State also did not support using the name Rohingya for

the Bengalis. Elsewhere in Myanmar as well, most Taing-Yin-Tha did not support using the name Rohingya. The research team also surveyed 1,000 citizens living in the Union of Myanmar but outside Rakhine State. All responded that they did not recognize the name Rohingya for Bengalis. Consequently, the Commission notes that the use of the name Rohingya is not a trivial matter and that the authorities should not rush a decision.

10.9. In the above matter, should the Bengalis continue to insist they should be called Rohingya, the majority in the country will not accept this and there could be further unrest. The indigenous Rakhine can be expected to have an intense reaction. Thus, Bengalis now pushing to use the term Rohingya are surely fanning the flames of sectarian violence. The Commission noted that some local Bengalis were demanding to be recognized as "Rohingya Taing-Yin-Tha." The Rakhine people warn that if the Government ever officially approved the name Rohingya, the Bengalis will ask for a separate state. Furthermore, it is almost certain that other indigenous Taing-Yin-Tha groups will also protest against such recognition. The subsequent protests and acts of violence are likely to spread to other parts of the country. Much bigger problems would result between the two ethnic groups, with the outcome being a halt to development of Rakhine State. The goal of peaceful coexistence will also be undermined. Whilst there are, at present, some issues that can be resolved through peaceful debate and negotiation, Bengali demands to be recognized as Rohingya will only be divisive, leading to more conflict, possibly with greater losses than before.