



universität
wien

MASTERARBEIT / MASTER'S THESIS

Titel der Masterarbeit / Title of the Master's Thesis

„The Crisis Around the Rohingyas in Myanmar: Actors,
Narratives and History“

verfasst von / submitted by

Aishwarya Parihar

angestrebter akademischer Grad / in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master (MA)

Wien, 2022 / Vienna 2022

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt /
degree programme code as it appears on
the student record sheet:

UA 067 805

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt /
degree programme as it appears on
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Individuelles Masterstudium Globalgeschichte

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Acknowledgement

A dear friend once advised me that writing a Master thesis is a marathon, not a race and that I should treat it as such. I would like to thank everyone who has been a support in little and big ways during this marathon. Writing a Master thesis in 2021 was undoubtedly a challenging feat, still in the throes of the pandemic and the unfortunate coup in Myanmar which significantly affected the development of the thesis.

I would like to start by thanking my thesis supervisor Dr. Rolf Bauer for his kind support and helpful guidance in always making the thesis better. He genuinely took the time to engage with me in the writing process, which made me aware of what this process is meant to be, and for that I'm very appreciative. Further I'd like to show my gratefulness to my dear friend Louise, for being my thesis-buddy, proofreading the thesis and always ready to give helpful insights.

My dear flat mates were a great support during this entire journey. They have been my human diaries, witnessing the entire process. Gretel, Maxi, Rebeka and Eva saw me on my good days and bad, and supported me by creating comfortable writing environment, where I did not have to worry about anything else and bringing encouraging teas and hot chocolates to my study space.

Arslaan has been my cheerleader from far away, always encouraging me to keep writing on tough days. Vatya helped me overcome emotional obstacles by patiently listening to my frustrations. Janne was the best co-working buddy, writing alongside me. A special mention to my professor in Leipzig, Dr. Wolfram Von Scheliha, who was the first person ever to hear the idea for this thesis and encourage it, his class on Transitional Justice inspired the idea in the first place.

Finally, I am forever grateful to my supportive family, my brother, my mom and my dad, without whom nothing would be possible. Admittedly, this Masters program and this thesis writing was a very crucial part of my life in a very challenging time and I am a lucky girl for getting all the support I could have possibly had.

Abstract

Rohingyas of Myanmar are presently amongst one of the most persecuted minorities in the world. Although they have been a subject of mass international attention and discussion in the past decade, truly understanding their plight and the underlying sources demands critical attention at the multifaceted crisis. The situation and the crisis surrounding the Rohingyas are composed of a multitude of factors, and the worst thing that can be done with respect to discussing this situation is to reduce it to simplistic binary narratives. A critical attention, therefore, requires that we are wary of the circulating mainstream narratives of such nature which disregard the myriad of underlying elements that firstly make up the crisis and then secondly play a part in its escalation.

This thesis attempts to take on such an analysis that addresses all the crucial elements of this complex web of underlying factors that form the architecture of the situation of Rohingyas mired in bleak realities. After primarily establishing a strong base for what the crisis surrounding Rohingyas is and all that it entails, the thesis digs deeper with a critical observation of underlying narratives and the multitude of actors which are the catalysts in the situation. The analysis of the situation is not complete without a breakdown to the historical roots of the crisis. Additionally, as an already complicated situation continues to tread uncharted waters, an epilogue that gives a window to the contemporary elements impacting the situation, of the pandemic and the 2021 coup help overcome short-sightedness with respect to the issue. This critical approach battles the mainstream binary narratives that surround and harm the situation and also becomes a crucial turning point before indulging in any talks about resolution. Any discussions in line with reconciliation can only be initiated after truly understanding the complexities surrounding the conflict. A deeper exploration of the situation of Rohingyas also becomes a window to understanding what comprises Myanmar's dystopic reality.

Die Rohingyas in Myanmar gehören derzeit zu den am meisten verfolgten Minderheiten der Welt. Obwohl sie in den letzten zehn Jahren Gegenstand großer internationaler Aufmerksamkeit und Diskussionen waren, erfordert ein wirkliches Verständnis ihrer Notlage und der zugrunde liegenden Ursachen eine kritische Betrachtung der vielschichtigen Krise. Die Situation und die Krise um die Rohingyas setzt sich aus einer Vielzahl von Faktoren zusammen, und das Schlimmste, was man in Bezug auf die Diskussion dieser Situation tun

kann, ist, sie auf vereinfachende binäre Narrative zu reduzieren. Eine kritische Betrachtung erfordert daher, dass wir uns vor den kursierenden Mainstream-Narrativen solcher Art hüten, die die unzähligen zugrunde liegenden Elemente außer Acht lassen, die zum Einen die Krise ausmachen und zum Anderen eine Rolle bei ihrer Eskalation spielen.

In dieser Arbeit wird versucht, eine solche Analyse vorzunehmen, die alle entscheidenden Elemente dieses komplexen Geflechts zugrunde liegender Faktoren anspricht, aus denen sich die Situation der Rohingyas in ihrer düsteren Realität zusammensetzt. Nachdem zunächst eine solide Grundlage für die Krise um die Rohingyas und alle Gegebenheiten und Faktoren, die sie mit sich bringt, geschaffen wurde, wird die These durch eine kritische Betrachtung der zugrundeliegenden Narrative und der Vielzahl von Akteur:innen, die als Katalysatoren für die Situation dienen, vertieft. Die Analyse der Situation wäre ohne eine Aufschlüsselung der historischen Wurzeln der Krise nicht vollständig. Da sich die ohnehin komplizierte Situation weiterhin in unbekannten Gewässern bewegt, trägt ein Epilog dazu bei, die Kurzsichtigkeit in Bezug auf das Thema zu überwinden. Dieser wirft einen differenzierten Blick auf zeitgenössische Elemente, wie die Pandemie und den 2021-Coup, um somit die Auswirkungen aktueller Situationen einschätzen zu können. Dieser kritische Ansatz bekämpft die binären Mainstream-Narrative, die die Situation umgeben und ihr schaden, und wird schließlich als Ausgangspunkt verwendet, um Lösungsansätze aufzuzeigen. Denn Gespräche im Sinne der Versöhnung können erst dann aufgenommen werden, wenn der Konflikt in seiner Komplexität verstanden wurde. Eine tiefere Erforschung der Situation der Rohingyas dient schließlich als Schlüssel zum Verständnis dessen, was Myanmars dystopische Realität ausmacht.

Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations.....	10
1 Introduction and Concepts	11
2 Overview: What is the Crisis Associated with Rohingyas and its Impacts?.....	16
2.1 Impacts: Migration and Displacement.....	18
2.1.1 Difficulties in Repatriation	20
2.2 Impact: Fears of Terrorism	22
2.3 Impact: Statelessness	23
3 Dissecting the Crisis: Actors and Narratives	25
3.1 The Myanmar Military	27
3.2 The Civilian NLD Government	28
3.3 Armed Ethnic Organizations	31
3.3.1 Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA)	31
3.3.2 Arakan Army (AA).....	32
3.4 The Majority Buddhist Population	33
3.5 International Scrutiny: An actor in the crisis	35
3.5.1 The Public Trial of Suu Kyi	52
3.6 The Problems of Nomenclature	53
3.7 Taingyintha	57
4 The Historical Roots of the Crisis: From Burma to Myanmar.....	61
4.1 Pre-Colonial.....	62
4.2 Colonial.....	64
4.3 Collapse of Colonial Empire	65
4.4 Post-Independence	67
5 Concluding Remarks.....	71
6 Epilogue: Myanmar, a dystopia	74
6.1 Rohingyas in the COVID-19 Pandemic	74
6.2 2021 Coup d'état.....	79
7 Bibliography.....	84
7.1 Primary Sources.....	91

List of Abbreviations

AA	Arakan Army
ARSA	Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Nations
BIA	Burma Independence Army
ICC	International Criminal Court
INGO	International Non-governmental Organization
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MSF	Medicins Sans Fronteras
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NLD	National League for Democracy
NRC	National Registration Cards
OIC	Organization of Islamic Cooperation
PM	Prime Minister
SDPC	State Peace and Development Council
TRC	Temporary Registration Cards
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNHCR	United Nations Human Rights Commission

1 Introduction and Concepts

When the Military finally seemed to be giving up control of Myanmar in early 2010s, the view of the country looked totally different as to how it turned out in a span of less than a decade. That was a pivotal point for Myanmar, that held promise of transformation, and emergence from its colonial past, and a shadow of brutal dictatorships. In the duration of almost a decade, Myanmar sure grabbed attention as it housed another one of world's biggest humanitarian crises in form of the situation of the Rohingyas. The crisis further points to all the other aspects that went downhill for Myanmar other than widespread human destruction, fragile reforms, refugee crisis, stunted development, rising poverty, economic crises, food insecurity and yet another military coup in early 2021 when Myanmar was fighting a grim war against COVID-19 along with the rest of the world. The story of Rohingyas is delicate, complex and very nuanced and one that requires much more than a simplistic analysis of the events of the last two decades to be understood well enough. Within the story of Rohingya also ingrained is the story of Burma/Myanmar similarly complex and unique.

While discussing the Rohingya conflict in Myanmar the term 'intractable conflict' becomes pertinent. An 'intractable conflict' consists of recurring violent episodes and an existential threat experienced by all communities involved with a looming sentiment of irreconcilable differences amongst them.¹ This dynamic is true of the interaction between the minority Rohingya Muslim community and majority Buddhists especially the ethnic Rakhine.

Scholars and writers Anthony Ware and Costas Laoutides present another insight into understanding this dynamic of the conflict, that even though ethnic Rakhine might be doubly populous than the Rohingyas and have more rights, they feel threatened and insecure by the massive Muslim population in neighbouring Bangladesh. "Seen from a regional and social-psychological perspective, a majority group within a country or region can feel as if they are a threatened minority competing for territorial and cultural survival, if a smaller local group is (or appears to be) closely linked to a populous or powerful neighbour." This implies that while Rohingya might be the powerless, marginalized community in Myanmar, the ethnic Rakhine feel insecure and existentially threatened by a huge Muslim population in the close neighbour.²

¹Anthony Ware and Costas Laoutides, "Myanmar's 'Rohingya' Conflict: Misconceptions and Complexity," *Asian Affairs* 50, no. 1 (2019): 72.

²Ware & Laoutides, 2019: 74.

Identities in South and Southeast Asia, whether ethnic, religious, cultural, national or even associated with a region are majorly shaped by the high mobility of ideas, people and goods, rendering the characteristics of high scale of hybridity as well as ambiguity.³ This is the case for the shaping of Rohingya identity as well which is heavily inspired by this fluidity as ethnic and religious identities and space are continuously transformed, challenged and rearranged in Myanmar's political scenario especially in Rakhine state.⁴ Immigration, intercultural marriages and cross border relations in the history of Myanmar present the difficulty of considering what might be "ethnic or racial purity".⁵

The identity formations and conflicts have been tumultuous in Myanmar owing to its difficult transformations from the early sociopolitical setups being replaced by colonial institutions and later to a military rule in 1962.⁶ Such drastic shifts that were withholding of civil liberties also contributed to creating fractions rather than harmony in an ethnically diverse Myanmar society with a fragile societal structure after colonizations and conflicts.⁷

For this thesis, the definition of ethnicity considered is as defined by Donald L. Horowitz who considers ethnicity as a broad concept that "easily embraces groups differentiated by color, language and religion; it covers 'tribes', 'races', 'nationalities' and 'castes'.⁸

In her work *Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture*, sociologist Joane Nagel explains how identity is constructed and reconstructed by individuals or groups and further discusses that ethnic identity is "the result of a dialectical process involving internal and external opinions and processes, as well as the individual's self-identification and outsiders' ethnic designations- i.e. what you think your ethnicity is, versus what they think your ethnicity is."⁹ Any contestation in identity leads to rifts amongst the groups of people or with the state.¹⁰

³Anas Ansar, "The Unfolding of Belonging, Exclusion and Exile: A Reflection on the History Of Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Southeast Asia," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 40, no. 3 (September 2, 2020): 444.

⁴Ibid: 444.

⁵Ibid: 449.

⁶Jobair Alam, "The Rohingya OF Myanmar: Theoretical Significance of the Minority Status," *Asian Ethnicity* 19, no. 2 (November 23, 2017): 187.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Nehginpao Kipgen, "The Rohingya Crisis: The Centrality of Identity and Citizenship," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 39, no. 1 (February 2, 2019): 62.

⁹Kipgen, 2019: 61.

¹⁰Ibid.

Identity has primarily been studied in the context of minorities or “otherwise ‘threatened’, ‘subaltern’ or ‘weak’ groups”.¹¹ The formation of minority identity is impacted from society to society and is shaped by specific characteristics that are unique to them like race, ethnicity, region, religion or class.¹² The formation of the minority identity and the relationship between the state and the minorities is potentially determined by the roles that the state and power play.¹³ At the same time, the presence of the minority group infers the presence of ‘the majority’ which is a dominant group regarded with more privileges and a higher social status.¹⁴ As explained by Easman nationalism as an ideology “proclaims the distinctiveness of a particular group and their right to self-rule in their jurisdiction”.¹⁵ A notable basis of upholding minority identity is also religion which can contribute to group unity.¹⁶

The minority status itself can appear to be a foundation of identity politics due to certain reasons that can either be a positive distinguishing feature or based on mistreatment and hence negative feature.¹⁷ Depending on the distinctive traits related to minority groups, practices of group-based maltreatment such as through racism, homophobia and ethnocentrism gives rise to the organization of group members in a form of resistance or to have their cultural identities be publicly acknowledged.¹⁸ In this manner, identity politics help certain groups to gain semblance and overcome neglect while discerning hierarchies, power inequalities and cognizance.¹⁹

Post-independence governments of Myanmar have formulated three constitutions so far, in 1947, 1974, and 2008, and all of these have influenced the status of the Rohingyas in either transforming their status, conferring it, or withholding it.²⁰

In the last few years, the situation of Rohingya and the mass displacement garnered widespread global attention. A crucial part of this thesis is to highlight that despite the attention centered in the events of the last decade, which often reduces the crisis to a victim-minority and

¹¹ Alam, 2017: 181.

¹² Ibid: 182.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid: 188.

¹⁶ Ibid: 183.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

perpetrator-state narrative, the complex roots of the crisis go back and beyond Myanmar's colonial history.

This thesis is majorly divided into four parts. The first part establishes a strong base into understanding of the situation of Rohingyas and the associated conflicts. This part gives an overview of the recent events as well as the implications of these events with respect to the Rohingya community and Myanmar. The second part truly scratches below the surface of the events, to reveal underlying actors and narratives associated with the crisis that have played a part in its escalation in the last decades. The understanding of actors is considered to be that of social catalysts without which certain processes or events would not be realized or heightened.²¹ The third part of the thesis essentially goes back to the history to untangle complexities and uncover reasons and answers rooted with the grim conflict situation of Rohingyas. The fourth and final part of this thesis is an epilogue chapter which is so intended to tie the entire analysis together with the history, with tumultuous events of the immediate present hinting towards how the situation might develop and what a future discussion might hold. This I recognized to be crucial, to contextualize the situation of the Rohingyas in the volatile socio-political state of Myanmar as well as uncertain times of the pandemic that we live in. A curious aspect of the thesis is also to observe how specific groups within a society express themselves in a more radical fashion than others and how the governing bodies in said society react differently to such circumstances.²² Framing the Rohingya conflict in the present reveals the contemporary setting with the rise of populism on a global scale along with an anti-migrant sentiment, is worsened by the onset of a pandemic.

This thesis is majorly based on a qualitative analysis of secondary sources, papers and literature review. I also incorporate excerpts from the direct resources from The President's Office of Myanmar, the Ministry of Information of Myanmar, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Myanmar. This is done due to the following reasons: firstly, to establish a confirmatory link with analysis of literature. Secondly, to present a view of the situation from Myanmar's state apparatus and the stance taken by them. And thirdly, it is primarily useful in demonstrating the effect of international criticism on the present crisis. These sources are primarily between the timeline 2014-2020. I also incorporate excerpts from International Organizations such as the

²¹Middell, Matthias, and Katja Naumann. "Global History and the Spatial Turn: from the Impact of Area Studies to the Study of Critical Junctures of Globalization." *Journal of Global History*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2010, pp.152.

²²Nehginpao Kipgen. "Addressing the Rohingya Problem." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 49, no. 2 (2013): 234.

International Criminal Court or INGOs to clarify and elaborate on any reference made in any above-mentioned excerpts.

This thesis was not without its challenges and is written within constraints of resources. Especially post the 2021 coup, a lot of online primary sources became unavailable mid-research which caused some degree of inconvenience. It is also worth acknowledging that the history of a country is difficult to contain in some pages, let alone that of Myanmar which has a rich, tumultuous history. Therefore, there still remain several historical accounts left to be explored and studied. My investment in the topic is also due to being a South Asian myself, hailing from neighboring India, which once was part of the same colonial British empire as Myanmar.

Although Shakespeare's *What's in a name?* is much popularized in daily life to demonstrate the superficiality of terms, such is not the case in the subject of observation as the usage of 'Rohingya' itself is contentious as will be described later in the thesis. I use the term 'Rohingya' as is self-identified and opted by the community in question. Additionally, in 1989, the ruling military junta changed the official name of the country from Burma to Myanmar. While I use the term 'Myanmar' primarily in discussion of the contemporary events, I also use 'Burma' in the historical account. Therefore, I have essentially attempted to adhere to the timeline of the official usage of the names in this respect. Such is also the case with the usage of 'Arakan' and 'Rakhine' as the name of the state of Arakan was changed to 'Rakhine' in 1983. However, in this case, the terms are used more interchangeably often to denote the historical belonging of the Rohingyas to the Arakan region. Finally, I use "Burmese" to refer to the ethnic majority population in Myanmar who speak the language Burmese and are mostly Buddhist.

With these tools and devices, I have attempted to breakdown and analyze a complex, ongoing episode in human history and emphasize its novel elements that are overshadowed in mainstream narratives. This episode evidently also encompasses the discussion of a grave humanitarian tragedy. Humanitarian tragedies have one simple aspect that is more discernible: that persistent suffering needs to be addressed. The complexities, however, remain in the intrinsic elements that make up a conflict. These elements demand careful observation if we as a society are to find lasting resolutions to conflict situations such as that of Rohingyas and this observation is what this thesis attempts.

2 Overview: What is the Crisis Associated with Rohingyas and its Impacts?

*“Violent extremism stems from a kaleidoscope of factors, creating infinite individual combinations.”*²³

As per the 2014 Myanmar census, Rohingyas in the Rakhine state are mainly situated in the townships of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung which are along the Bangladesh border, while the rest of the Rohingya population is situated outside of Myanmar.²⁴ There is still a lack of anthropological studies that focus on the Rohingyas as a distinct cultural community.²⁵

In October 2016, The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) claimed responsibility for attacking the Myanmar’s Border check-posts and killing off more than a dozen security personnel.²⁶ This started an insurgency from the military against the organization which went on to gather international attention. The said “retaliation” by the authorities of Myanmar was excessive in nature, also triggering a mass exodus of Rohingyas to Bangladesh.²⁷ Labelling the attacks as measures of anti-terrorism, the military initiated a campaign to drive out most of the Rohingyas. The crisis was further intensified in August 2017, when ARSA deployed another attack on the police stations and other government offices, killing several police and government officials.²⁸ Wherein the actions of the authorities to the attack in 2016 could be considered responsive in nature, the immediacy of carrying out such actions by the authorities in 2017 showed that the attacks were more premediated than responsive and massively disproportionate in nature.²⁹ Myanmar’s armed force *Tatmadaw*’s actions, extremely brutal in nature, employed the mass murder, gang rapes of females, arson of entire villages of Rohingyas as an army tactic of response.³⁰

²³Andrew Selth. "The Rohingyas: A New Terrorist Threat? (06:00 AEDT, 6 September 2018)." In *Interpreting Myanmar: A Decade of Analysis*, 449-54. Acton ACT, Australia: ANU Press, 2020.

²⁴Jacques Leider. Rohingya: The History of a Muslim Identity in Myanmar. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History, 2018: 2.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Iftekhharul Bashar. "Rohingya Crisis and Western Myanmar’s Evolving Threat Landscape." *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 11, no. 6 (2019): 14.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Tun Khin. "Rohingya: A Preventable Genocide Allowed to Happen." *Insight Turkey* 19, no. 4 (2017): 43.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Zoltan Barany. *The Rohingya Predicament: Why Myanmar’s Army Gets Away with Ethnic Cleansing*. Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), 2019: 2.

The standoff between the Rohingya surgency organization and the Myanmar authorities has been a subject of international controversy and criticism as the gravity of the human rights violations carried out by the authorities dwarf the attacks by ARSA. Although the group's rebellion was not new, their motives emphasized the need for legal recognition of ethnic identity and citizenship than any secessionist aims.³¹ The rebellion of organizations such as ARSA has also existed in the context of prolonged systemic discrimination and grave persecution of the Rohingya community.³² In fact, the events that took place in the state of Rakhine from August to December 2017 have been categorized widely by several public figures, officials, organizations and other states as instances of "ethnic cleansing" or even "genocide".³³ The tensions are further heightened by the involvement of the civilians in the anti-Rohingya rhetoric, who have been stoked up on the fear of Islamic extremism by the government.³⁴

The press release by Myanmar's president's Office post the European Union Foreign Affairs Council meeting involving the ministers of foreign affairs of the EU on the 26th February 2018, reveals the government's stance on the events of the conflict: it unilaterally assigns blame to Rohingyas themselves, who are denoted by terms that strip them of identity. The press release reads:

"In fact the conflicts broke out in Buthidaung-Maungdaw region of Rakhine State in 2012, 2016 and 2017 after Myanmar democracy transition in 2010 were not started by ethnic natives or security forces including the Tatmadaw. They were ignited by the illegal migrants who have been unlawfully living in the area for many consecutive years. The 2012 crisis broke out when Bengalis raped a native Rakhine woman and the 2016-2017 conflict broke out when armed terrorist group launched synchronized attacks against the police border guard headquarters and police outposts. During the conflict, nine Tatmadaw members, 21 police security personnel totalling 30 and 21 natives, 52 Hindus, 51 Muslims totalling 124 lost their lives. Ethnic natives and Hindus became homeless as they had to flee their homes. The government and the Tatmadaw

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid: 6.

³³Ibid: 7.

³⁴Tun Khin. "Rohingya: A Preventable Genocide Allowed to Happen." Insight Turkey 19, no. 4 (2017): 44.

have already released information about the events. ARSA, an extremist terrorist group has already committed that it launched all the terrorist attacks."³⁵

The friction between the security forces and the Rohingya insurgents only worsened in the following years post the 2016 crackdown, wherein the security forces were accused of widespread killings of the residing, non-combatant Rohingya population, arson of villages, forced migration and rapes.³⁶ That grave crimes were committed by the soldiers and police authorities in Myanmar was verifiable, however whether they were ordered to carry out such atrocities as measures of enforcing orders remained difficult to confirm.³⁷ When accused by the United Nations Human Rights Chief Zeid Ra'ad al-Husseini, of carrying out a "textbook example of Ethnic cleansing"³⁸, the authorities rejected the accusations saying that the military only carried out counter-insurgency operations against the Rohingya militants.³⁹

While studying the Rohingya conflict which has particularly become a subject of mass international attention, it is also of importance to consider that it is in fact not the only ethnic conflict in Myanmar.⁴⁰ The Tatmadaw has been engaged in a prolonged conflict with the Kachin and Kokang communities that reside in Northern Myanmar.⁴¹ Kokang and Kachin peoples however, have not met with the same persecution as the Rohingyas owing to the relationship with China and receiving support from the Chinese government.⁴² Risking escalating tensions with the Chinese government is a major geopolitical threat that prevents the military from initiating any hostile encounter against the Kokang or the Kachin.⁴³

2.1 Impacts: Migration and Displacement

Recurring events of violent nature, conflicts and atrocities have resulted in the mass displacement of the Rohingya population further resulting in migration.⁴⁴ "Migration is

³⁵"News Release on the Act of British MPs in Connection with Rakhine Issue and the Decision of European Union Foreign Affairs Council Meeting on Myanmar" (Myanmar President Office, February 2018), <https://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=issues/rakhine-state-affairs/id-8546>.

³⁶Steven CM Wong, Yasmin Puteri Nor Ariane, and Institute of Strategic and International Studies. *ISIS Focus: 1/2017 ISSUE NO. 4*. Report. Institute of Strategic and International Studies, 2017: 4.

³⁷Selth, 2018: 447.

³⁸Baladas Ghoshal. India's Responses to the Complex Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar. East-West Center, 2017.

³⁹Baladas Ghoshal, "India's Responses to the Complex Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar," *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, no. 404 (November 9, 2017).

⁴⁰Kevin Bi. "The Politics of Slaughter: Why Myanmar's Military Targets the Rohingya." *Harvard International Review* 39, no. 4 (2018): 14.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid: 15.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Wong and Yasmin, 2017: 4.

borderless”⁴⁵ and as such the entire conflict has become a phenomenon of transnational nature and speculation with great security implications. The Rohingya conflict is not limited to Myanmar anymore as the neighboring countries also bear the brunt of it, exposing southeast Asia to security vulnerabilities.

Rohingya exodus amounts to about 60% of the total Rohingya population of the entire Rakhine state.⁴⁶ Driven away from Myanmar and rejected from Bangladesh, scores of Rohingya refugees resort to take voyages towards Malaysia in extremely dangerous circumstances, many of whom die on the way.⁴⁷ In Malaysia, fourth generation Rohingya reside already with the 54,856 that are registered with UNHCR and can be accounted for, apart from the unregistered population.⁴⁸ First denied refugee status in Bangladesh, Rohingyas are further declined several protections ensured through international law, as without any formal registration there are no grounds for repatriation or resettlement to another more hospitable nation.⁴⁹ The new arrivals find themselves amidst restrictions on work and schooling and forced to work illegally in the informal sector.⁵⁰ Growing global evidence suggests that formally integrating the refugees in the labor force encourages self-reliance and even positive contribution to the local economy.⁵¹ Unable to participate in the labor market, the Rohingya population in Bangladesh could only add to the dependency ratio.⁵² The sweeping denial of human rights and hostile government approach has resulted in severe health outcomes for the Rohingyas, such as prevalent malnutrition, child and maternal mortality.⁵³ Providing access to schooling to the populations on move appears as a vast challenge in context of Rohingyas, as they remain very low on literacy levels, significantly impoverished and unable to access UNHCR-led services due to denied refugee status.⁵⁴ Further, high levels of food insecurity was found prevalent in the study conducted in Rohingya migrants in the Cox bazar areas. It was also found that the children had

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ware & Laoutides, 2019: 61.

⁴⁷Nurul Islam, “Rohingya: A People under Endless Tyranny,” *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 48, no. 1 (2020): pp. 24-25.

⁴⁸Wong and Yasmin, 2017: 6.

⁴⁹Abhishek Bhatia et al. "The Rohingya in Cox's Bazar: When the Stateless Seek Refuge." *Health and Human Rights* 20, no. 2 (2018): 119.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Abhishek Bhatia et al, 2018: 118.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid: 106.

⁵⁴Ibid:117.

not been vaccinated while in Myanmar which became evident through the outbreak of diseases in the Cox bazar area.⁵⁵

Rohingya refugee women remain more vulnerable to gender-based violence and assault as stateless refugee women.⁵⁶ In their home country, they are often targeted by the NaSaKa which is a combination of police, military, intelligence, customs officers in the border security force of Myanmar.⁵⁷ While on the move as well the Rohingya community is extremely vulnerable to attack especially of sexual nature at different stages by pirates, bandits, smugglers, traffickers and often members of security.⁵⁸

2.1.1 Difficulties in Repatriation

Bangladesh, a country with a high extreme poverty rate, receives the greatest number of refugees from the Arakan region, a main cause of which is also the religious similarities.⁵⁹

While subjected to the mass influx of the Rohingyas, initially the government of Bangladesh chose not to raise any alarms to draw the attention of the international community towards the crisis.⁶⁰ Further the government chose to securitize the issue, refusing to officially harbor any responsibilities towards the migrants, citing matters of overpopulation and scarcity of resources.⁶¹ Key government functionaries even implied the prevalence of criminal activities and Islamic fundamentalism associated with the community as reasons to not take them in.⁶² Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's stance was however altered after August 2017, as more refugees crossed the Bangladesh border and were in the limelight of the international reporters.⁶³ Through emphasizing the inability of Bangladesh to take in refugees, she addressed the plight of Rohingyas in a new frame of shared human rights. Her stance also emerged as being critical of Myanmar's government with constant urging for Rohingya refugees being Myanmar's 'responsibility'.⁶⁴

⁵⁵Ibid:118.

⁵⁶Ahsan Ullah, A. K. "Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar." *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 32, no. 3 (2016): 290.

⁵⁷Ibid: 293.

⁵⁸Ibid: 290.

⁵⁹Ullah, 2011: 151.

⁶⁰Abrar, C.R. *Multilevel Approaches to Human Security and Conflict Management: The Rohingya Case*. S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2013: 4.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Albert Van Wijngaarden. *Politicised Humanity?: Tracing Discursive Shifts in Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Stance on the Rohingya Before and After August 2017*. Report. Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 2018: 7.

⁶⁴Ibid.

Bangladesh attempted to coordinate repatriation efforts together with Myanmar post an agreement on 23 November 2017, which was also met with skepticism from international critics. UN secretary General Antonio Guterres urged for the UN refugee agency to be involved in the process along with the need for reconciliation, expressing that “The worst would be to move these people from camps in Bangladesh to camps in Myanmar, keeping an artificial situation for a long time and not allowing for them to regain their normal lives.”⁶⁵ In light of the repatriation efforts Myanmar also signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on June 2018 with UNDP and UNHCR regarding voluntary return and rehabilitation of the refugees after an assessment of the situation in Rakhine.⁶⁶ The MoU stipulated for support programs in Rakhine state and did not include a set timeframe for the return so as to foster the voluntary aspect of it.⁶⁷ However, by November 15 repatriation efforts again seemed to be rushed by the two countries resultant of different international pressures that they experience. For Myanmar it is the heightened international scrutiny especially after the UN’s fact finding report in August 2018, while Bangladesh cites overburdening of national resources.⁶⁸ While keeping the borders open for the refugees, Bangladesh government also clarified that the displaced Rohingya refugees need to be repatriated to Myanmar and that this cannot be a long-term solution.⁶⁹ About more than 200,000 refugees residing in Bangladesh are situated in flood-prone areas.⁷⁰ For the government, shortage of suitable, habitable land is a major issue and simultaneously decongestion of the camps and refugee settlement a priority.⁷¹

Another important observation is regarding the 1951 UN convention on the status of Refugees is that it has not been signed by most of the countries that are receiving the Rohingya Refugees.⁷² The only countries in South East Asia which are signatories are Cambodia and Philippines, both of which do not receive many Rohingya refugees due to their geographical positionality.⁷³ The reluctance observed by the countries in signing the convention is due to the

⁶⁵Kipgen, 2019: 67.

⁶⁶Kipgen, 2019: 70.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Alistair D. B. Cook, and Foo Yen Ne. *Complex Humanitarian Emergencies and Disaster Management in Bangladesh: The 2017 Rohingya Exodus*. Report. S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2018. 32.

⁷⁰Ibid: 33.

⁷¹Ibid: 34.

⁷²UNHCR 1951 convention on the status of Refugees.

⁷³A. K. Ahsan Ullah, “Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar,” *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 32, no. 3 (2016): pp. 295.

fear that becoming a signatory will lead to an escalation of the number of refugees leading to financial and resource overburdening.⁷⁴ This points to a shortage of protection space for Rohingya refugees due to the lack of national legal framework in a lot of Southeast Asian countries.⁷⁵

2.2 Impact: Fears of Terrorism

The escalation of terrorism concerns is another important point as militant sentiments rise in the region with certain groups amongst the Rohingya community resorting to violence.⁷⁶ In view of this new militant groups have come to light such as the Bangladesh based *Harakah al-Yaqin* and the *Aqa Mul Mujahidin*.⁷⁷ As it stands, Rohingya Muslims stranded in Bangladesh are around 1.1 million and the persistent refugee crisis has been a vulnerable spot in terms of exploitation by transnational terrorist outfits such as Al-Qaeda and Islamic state.⁷⁸ The underlying reasons of why the Rohingya issue remains a vulnerable spot for exploitation by the extremist and terrorist organizations is due to grievance of the Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine prone to motivations of vengeance, regional online extremists capitalizing on the issue by pledging support in cyberspace and the ever-growing Buddhism nationalism and radicalism in Myanmar.⁷⁹ In November 2012, the international health NGO Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) even reported encountering fliers being distributed in Rakhine state that threatened health workers who treated Muslims.⁸⁰

Research further points to a newer speculation that the neighboring countries also become prone to rising terrorist sentiments and recoils from other Muslim militancies in Southeast Asia.⁸¹ During the repatriation process from Bangladesh after the 2017 agreement between the two countries, Myanmar authorities claimed to have found three terrorists in the list prepared by Bangladesh for repatriation.⁸² The border between Bangladesh and Myanmar is permeable and a common arena for smuggling of products ranging from Chinese consumer goods, to drugs

⁷⁴Ullah, 2016: 296.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Wong and Yasmin, 2017: 4.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Iftekhharul Bashir. "Rohingya Crisis and Western Myanmar's Evolving Threat Landscape." *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 11, no. 6 (2019): 14.

⁷⁹Ibid: 17-18.

⁸⁰C.R. Abrar. *Multilevel Approaches to Human Security and Conflict Management: The Rohingya Case*. S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2013: 3.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Kipgen, 2019: 68.

and armaments.⁸³ Refugees do not form a security concern by themselves albeit, not providing concrete solutions for refugees may result in increased security risks at different levels.⁸⁴

Historian Eric Tagliacozzo writes about the commonalities in the current global sentiment against terrorism and the often-extreme overcorrection with the sentiment in Myanmar which easily perceives Burmese Islam “as marking out potential fertile ground for extremism.”⁸⁵ This intense global discourse around Islam and terrorism has been adopted by orthodox Buddhist monks who leverage it in a way to account for the resentment against Burmese Muslims in general not limited to Rohingyas.⁸⁶

2.3 Impact: Statelessness

The ethnic Rakhine Buddhists also struggle to acquire enough political agency to strengthen their cultural survival along with access to national services and resources. The Rohingya however face imminent physical danger along with deprivation from having any form of political and cultural representation at all.⁸⁷ In the present-day Myanmar, citizenship laws acknowledge only the indigenous ‘national races’ that enjoy complete citizenship rights based on the race. Such ‘national races’ can follow a simple procedure to obtain citizenship with inalienable rights while those other than ‘national races’ even if granted citizenship as individual citizens,⁸⁸ can have it revoked any time. Thus, the central struggle for Rohingyas in Myanmar rests more upon being recognized as a ‘national race’ rather than obtaining citizenship which is still an insecure parameter considering what race one belongs to.⁸⁹ Therefore a central problem in the externalization of the Rohingya is the political centrality of ethnicity in form of ‘national races’. The citizenships itself in a way exist in hierarchy in Myanmar, as in not all citizenships are equal (as should be in a democracy) regardless of people’s origin.⁹⁰ The statelessness faced by Rohingya is not a driver of the conflict but one of the consequences of the negative ethnicization of politics in Myanmar.⁹¹

⁸³Ullah, 2011: 155.

⁸⁴Brian Gorlick, “The Rohingya Refugee Crisis: Rethinking Solutions and Accountability,” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, December 2019, pp. 27.

⁸⁵Ansar, 2020: 450.

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷Ware & Laoutides, 2019: 71.

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰Ware & Laoutides, 2019: 71.

⁹¹Ibid.

The creation of citizenship in Myanmar is inclusive of those minorities which fit in the structure of Burmese-constructed ideals and identity of which Rohingya are not a part. They are excluded “owing to their demonization and eventual construction as a foreigner of the state”.⁹²

The Rohingya could only gain any political rights for representation if they were to be recognized constitutionally as an ethnic group.⁹³ The segregation, enforced by the state and in parts of Rakhine state and conducting citizenship verification exercises have also increased a tendency for dehumanization.⁹⁴ While the Rohingya community overall hopes for recognition of their human rights, there is no common understanding on what might be the most appropriate path to achieve it.⁹⁵ The two different inclinations are of either prioritizing gaining citizenship anyhow, including if it requires to adopt an alternate ethnic categorization or whether to advocate to be recognized as ethnic Rohingyas.⁹⁶ This understanding is often amiss in both domestic and international discourses which organically adopt a “one size fits all” approach.⁹⁷ The voices of Rohingya in the Rakhine state have been underrepresented in both domestic and international discourses, with more accessible Rohingyas from Yangon who are often detached from the daily sufferings and perspectives of Rohingya in the Rakhine state, voicing the entire community.⁹⁸

This situation of turmoil for the Rohingya community also exists in the context of the truth of the Rakhine state that remains one of the most poverty-stricken and politically marginalized ethnic state in Myanmar.⁹⁹

⁹²Alam, 2018: 197.

⁹³Gabrielle Aron. “Reframing the Crisis in Myanmar’s Rakhine State.”. US Institute of Peace, 2018: 3.

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵Ibid: 4.

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷Ibid.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Ibid: 3.

3 Dissecting the Crisis: Actors and Narratives

This section essentially delves deeper in the whole complex situation and uncovers the consequential instances of the situation as well as the underlying narratives and actors that have crucial parts to play in the aggravation of the conflict. While some of these narratives are mainstream, the actors involved in the escalation of the conflict either do not become so easily evident or are popularly misunderstood.

A central complexity of the crisis is that it is surrounded by several often-contradictory narratives, along with the spread of misinformation and publicly released binary opinions on a situation that is very politically sensitive.¹⁰⁰ The intensity and suddenness of violent events have often shifted the focus from the broader conflict, with responses from both the domestic and the international front being more reactive in nature and inclining to popular pressures than emphasizing effective resolutions.¹⁰¹ The Rohingya crisis becomes exemplary of how narratives meaningfully shape the dynamics of conflicts.¹⁰² One of the two prominent conflicting narratives since October 2016 frames ARSA as critical national security threat to Myanmar. This view is majorly subscribed by the military, government and the several “non-Muslim constituents” across Myanmar.¹⁰³ In this narrative Buddhist nationalism of the civilian population in Myanmar is also invoked, giving rise to islamophobia. Additionally, this population views international criticism as harmful for the nation.¹⁰⁴ The second narrative lays importance on the suffering of the Rohingyas and is subscribed mainly by the local Rohingya community and the diaspora and is supported by the international community.¹⁰⁵ The military, Aung san Suu Kyi herself, and her government, all come under fire in this narrative.¹⁰⁶ A major obstacle in the conflict mitigation has been the international community’s blame giving approach.¹⁰⁷ The condemnation of the actions of the central authorities of Myanmar appears counterproductive as the officials are defensive towards validating public criticism.¹⁰⁸ These positions come into the context of recognizing the delicate situation of Myanmar as a relatively

¹⁰⁰ Aron, 2018: 1.

¹⁰¹ Ibid: 2.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

new democracy in which the civilian government and the military are still negotiating power.¹⁰⁹ The heavy international criticism has given rise to an anti-international sentiment blended with nationalism, in defense of the government and the military diminishing the chances of accountability of human rights abuses.¹¹⁰

Another aspect within these narratives is that of violence perpetrated on the part of ARSA which albeit being part of the national discourse, is not comprehensively documented by international human rights agencies.¹¹¹ This further heightens the anti-international sentiment amongst the majority population of Myanmar. International voices such as renowned global media, international organizations as well as spokespersons of other countries have had a prominent impact in the escalation of the conflict in the recent years. This is a crucial point of this thesis as well and is elaborated in detail as a sub-section below.

The narratives presented by the two principal sides (Rohingya and the state), these narratives are also severely ridden with exaggeration and myth-making.¹¹² In this respect it is important to consider whether an uncritical embracing of the narrative of just the Rohingya, as they are the primary victims fulfil the overarching goal of peacemaking in Myanmar.¹¹³ The severity of the circumstances for the Rohingya community, encouraging one of the biggest migrant exoduses as well as creating another one of histories gravest human rights disaster is a complex episode that needs to be understood beyond binary, black and white narratives. In this pursuit, it becomes crucial to critically chalk out the actors that influence the crisis and the entanglement of their complex positions in the context of the conflict surrounding Rohingyas. Below, I attempt to point out these actors and analyze the intricate positions they hold and how these positions are impactfully relevant to the situation of Rohingyas. A vital part of this chapter further is also establishing the role of the international community and the scrutiny itself as an actor in this conflict. The excerpts from primary sources such as press releases by government units, ICC court records, draft resolutions by regional organizations are intermittently embedded in the analyses to clearly show the impacts of the international scrutiny and how the Myanmar government and authorities react to it.

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

¹¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹¹Ibid: 3.

¹¹²Ware & Laoutides, 2019: 73.

¹¹³Ibid.

3.1 The Myanmar Military

The fundamental reality of Myanmar is that military still controls it and does not show any signs of withdrawing control in the slightest. At the core of military's approach is that only it can represent the nation.¹¹⁴ Although the Burmese army is not essentially held in high regards by the people of Myanmar, it has managed to integrate itself into the society as an institution, complete with running its own socio-economic units such as universities and hospitals etc.¹¹⁵ Following the democratic elections held in November 2010, the Military junta rule in Myanmar collapsed to give way to a democratic government in 2011.¹¹⁶ The Military in Myanmar has had a persistent record for being notorious in handing over the power to a democratically elected government. The military government of 1988-2011 was already created in response to nation-wide pro-democracy movement against the military general Ne Win.¹¹⁷ It also refused to hand over power to NLD after the multi-party elections of 1990 and stalled political change for as long as possible.¹¹⁸ The military generals were unhappy with the disorder and instability brought upon by the pro-democracy movements.¹¹⁹ When the era of Suu Kyi and NLD emerged out of the pro-democracy struggle, the junta reacted by confining members of opposition and in fact placing Suu Kyi herself on a house arrest that lasted more than a decade.¹²⁰ Needless to say, the military has trouble accepting the democratic governments that strip the military off of power.

Even in course of the establishment of a democratic government, the military manages to retain an immense amount of power constitutionally. Military authorities designed the 2008 Constitution as such to maintain a dominant position in Myanmar's politics and government. It possesses effective veto powers in adoption of constitutional resolutions and furthermore selects and controls candidates in three major ministerial positions: border affairs, home affairs and defence.¹²¹ Through the constitution, the military attempted to ensure that Suu Kyi cannot head the country, through a clause that rendered her unable to be the President because she had

¹¹⁴Azeem Ibrahim, "The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide," in *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide* (London, England: Hurst & Company, 2018).

¹¹⁵Trevor Wilson. "Working Under Military Authoritarian Rule." In *Eyewitness to Early Reform in Myanmar*, ANU Press, 2016. 36.

¹¹⁶Kyaw Yin Hlaing. "Understanding Recent Political Changes in Myanmar." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 34, no. 2 (2012): 197.

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹¹⁸*Ibid.* 198-199.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.* 199.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*

¹²¹Gorlick, 2019: 12-13.

married a foreigner.¹²² The constitution ensures military representation in the government as well as both the regional and national parliaments.¹²³ The commander-in-chief of the armed forces has complete control over military and border affairs and remains a member of the National Security Council. Moreover, in case of national emergency, the commander-in-chief has the right to practice executive power.¹²⁴ Essentially, it can be derived that apart from the military Junta rule, the military still retains an immense amount of power even when it is not the government. The attacks on the Rohingya communities were a military operation, a move directed by the commander-in-chief that does not even require the consent of the democratically elected government to enforce.¹²⁵ This statement itself clarifies the amount of weight military holds in the development of the situation of Rohingyas in Myanmar.

The military resorts to labeling of radical nature, such as “Islamic terrorist” while referring to the Rohingya militant groups.¹²⁶ Such a move further elevates the deep-seated fears, extreme in nature amongst the non-Muslim communities, especially in times of global neurosis regarding Islamist extremism.¹²⁷ Further, the security forces, claiming these measures to enforce order, maintained an intensified presence and practiced segregation between Rohingyas and Rakhine in vulnerable areas. Segregation practically meant restricting Rohingyas to access urban hubs such as Sittwe, even for medical reasons.¹²⁸

Not only does the military actively take part in the worsening the crisis for Rohingyas, the position it holds in the governmental power dynamics prevent it from being made accountable by the government which further defends its actions.

3.2 The Civilian NLD Government

The government’s response to the Rohingya crisis and the remarks by the international community has been disparate and non-linear. This is due to complex power dynamics in Myanmar, that often distort the notion that Myanmar is ultimately a real democracy or that it is a unique democracy in the least. Even though the civilian government came to power after

¹²²Wilson, Ross. “Myanmar Today: Democracy or Demagoguery?” *New Zealand International Review* 43, no. 4 (2018): 20–23.

¹²³Hlaing, 2012: 206.

¹²⁴Ibid.

¹²⁵Wilson, 2018: 21.

¹²⁶Ware & Laoutides, 2019: 64.

¹²⁷Ware & Laoutides, 2019: 64.

¹²⁸Ware & Laoutides, 2019: 73.

emerging clearly victorious (by huge margin in 2015 elections) and hence by the will of the people, the fact that military continues to hold substantial power in the governance of Myanmar, makes it clear that the autonomy and power of the civilian government comes with strings attached.

On 28 August 2018, the United Nations Security Council held an open briefing on “The situation in Myanmar”, Permanent Representative of Myanmar, Ambassador U Hau Do Suan’s statement suggested a justification of the counter attacks deployed by Myanmar security forces. The statement reveals the government’s defensive stance towards the acts perpetrated by the military forces, showcasing the gravity of the power military holds.

“In the early hour of 25 August 2017, just a few hours after Mr. Kofi Annan handed his final report, ARSA launched premeditated, well planned and coordinated simultaneous armed attacks on 30 Border Guard posts and one army Battalion headquarters in northern Rakhine. [..]

The ARSA attacks triggered predictable and logical response of Myanmar security forces to protect the life and property of every citizen, resulting in the subsequent mass displacement of people. [..]

With regard to the allegation of atrocity crimes committed by Myanmar security forces as contained in the recent report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar, I would like to reiterate that we did not accept the mandate of the Mission because we have our concern about the Mission’s impartiality.[..]”¹²⁹

In other instances, the state system appeared to be attaching the labels “Indian”, “Pakistani”, along with “Bangladeshi”, to the ethnic identity of the Muslim population in a way to establish the idea of Muslim population as only the successors of immigrants and never a part of indigenous population.¹³⁰ The framing of the Muslim identity as the frightening “other” allows both state and non-state actors to justify violence and persecution on them as they are made categorically fearsome, similar to the case of Sikh-Hindu violence in early 1980s in India, as

¹²⁹“UN Security Council Held Open Briefing on ‘The Situation in Myanmar’ (31 August 2018),” UN Security Council held open briefing on “The situation in Myanmar” (31 August 2018), August 31, 2018, <https://www.mofa.gov.mm/un-security-council-held-open-briefing-on-the-situation-in-myanmar-31-august-2018-nay-pyi-taw/>.

¹³⁰Ansar, 2020: 452.

argued by anthropologist Veena Das.¹³¹ The Rohingya community has found itself at the epicenter of this projection of historical resentment and fear, although the Burmese Muslim community also needs to be in the scope of this consideration.¹³²

At the initial stages of criticism received by the international community, the government followed through the growing international pressure by showing willingness to cooperate.¹³³ The government's cooperative stance with the international community was met with criticism and as a display of weakness by nationalist organizations, opposition and the military who also viewed this as an attack to the national interests and sovereignty of Myanmar.¹³⁴ With time, government's fragile political position was made visible by its contrasting reactions in the domestic and international spheres regarding cooperation with international organizations. It ultimately appeared bowing down to the domestic politics and becoming less approachable to international pressure.¹³⁵ For instance, the government prohibited the organization Médecins Sans Frontiers (MSF) in 2014, which was a crucial network of health care provision for thousands of Rohingya.¹³⁶ Although the organization was allowed to return later, the period of their absence resulted in several deaths due to insufficient medical assistance.¹³⁷

In the context of the Rohingya situation, the Myanmar government itself seems to be "stuck between a rock and a hard place".¹³⁸ The space between the demands of the Rohingya leaders and of the international community was simply too big for the government to fill, after factoring in the realities of the local context.¹³⁹ The heightened international pressure in fact aggravated the nationalist sentiment amongst the Myanmar majority population and pushed the government to detach itself from the international community and turn inwards.¹⁴⁰ The government's moves also remained cautious of not displeasing the majority Buddhist population which is hugely responsible bringing the NLD government into power amidst an ever fragile and collapsible state of democracy and constant push and pull from the military.¹⁴¹

¹³¹Ibid.

¹³²Ibid.

¹³³Morten B. Pedersen "Myanmar in 2018: New Democracy Hangs in the Balance." *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2019, 232.

¹³⁴Ibid: 233.

¹³⁵Pedersen, 2018: 233.

¹³⁶Daniel P. Sullivan "Aung San Suu Kyi's Ultimate Test." *Harvard International Review* 38, no. 1 (2016): 31.

¹³⁷Sullivan, 2016: 31.

¹³⁸Pedersen, 2018: 235.

¹³⁹Ibid.

¹⁴⁰Ibid.

¹⁴¹Ibid: 237.

The government declared that the ongoing conflict between the Rakhine ethnic group and Rohingya is a situation that has sprouted due to communal tensions, which was a consequence of Rakhine's impoverished and underdeveloped state and the lack of international assistance in that matter.¹⁴² The entanglement of the conflict with the politics of Myanmar definitely deflect chances of a peaceful resolution. Although the NLD government elected after the 2015 elections led by Suu Kyi represents the first truly civilian led government in Myanmar in a course of half a century¹⁴³ the power that military holds, has considerable gravity. For example, the security affairs of the country are at the hands of military, which essentially means that the defense, home, and border affairs ministers are all appointed by the military and not the democratic government.¹⁴⁴ This basically holds the government in a constrained position where makes it mandatory for it to work in concert with the military.

3.3 Armed Ethnic Organizations

3.3.1 Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA)

The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, initially known by its Arabic name *Haraka al-Yaqin*, actively came to limelight in 2016 and 2017 due to its operations that led to a massive crackdown by the national army *Tatmadaw*.¹⁴⁵ ARSA has repeatedly presented itself as defenders of the civilian Rohingyas in response to the persecution by Myanmar's military. It has frequently portrayed itself in an ethno-nationalist context, emphasizing that it has no relations to any trans-national jihadi organizations.¹⁴⁶ According to the International Crisis Group (ICG), ARSA in itself does not function in pursuit of some transnational Islamic extremist agenda, however, its possible links with other extremist groups remain dubious. Especially considering the vulnerability of the situation in Myanmar, ARSA remains precarious to be exploited by foreign terrorist outfits for a greater global damage.¹⁴⁷

ARSA's attacks on the border security posts in 2016, and right after the recommendations of Kofi Annan's Advisory Commission on Rakhine state was received in 2017, gave *Tatmadaw*

¹⁴²Kipgen, 2013: 306.

¹⁴³Sullivan, 2016: 29.

¹⁴⁴Wong and Yasmin, 2017: 5.

¹⁴⁵Ronan Lee. "Myanmar's Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA): An Analysis of a New Muslim Militant Group and Its Strategic Communications." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 6 (2021): 65.

¹⁴⁶Ibid.

¹⁴⁷Selth, 2017: 438-439.

a reason to carry out and justify a disproportionately violent clearance operation against the Rohingyas.¹⁴⁸ The extreme measures taken by the Myanmar security forces to bring order to the conflict only resulted in ARSA expanding recruitment at village levels and further strengthening their position for organized attack (referring to the 25 August 2017).¹⁴⁹

ARSA utilized phone text messages, social media and messengers such as WhatsApp, Facebook and twitter for recruitment and to establish a presence. It was declared a terrorist organization by the Myanmar government in 2017.¹⁵⁰ Its presence in Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh makes it more prone to access other transnational Jihadi groups and vice versa which would have not been a possibility if most Rohingya lived in Myanmar before the mass deportation in 2017.¹⁵¹ There are several militant Muslim groups in Myanmar, although they are small in number and disorganized, there is a risk of them developing connections with international terrorist groups especially in the case of radical Rohingyas.¹⁵²

3.3.2 Arakan Army (AA)

Other than the conflict between ARSA, the national army has been embroiled in a conflict with another armed ethnic organization in Rakhine- the Arakan Army (AA) which has severely escalated since 2018.¹⁵³ This conflict that has overtaken the Rakhine territory has created setback to the repatriation hopes for Rohingyas.

The *Tatmadaw* has been involved in multiple conflicts with other ethnic armed groups in Myanmar in the past. AA came into being in 2009 by Rakhine youth who were linked with ethnic armed groups in the northern states of Myanmar, they fought together with the Kachin Independence Army against the national army.¹⁵⁴ AA's principal demands are regarding the self-determination of Myanmar's Rakhine (previously Arakan) ethnic minority along with the promotion of their cultural and national identity.¹⁵⁵ The motivations behind these demands are

¹⁴⁸Lee, 2021: 66.

¹⁴⁹Ware & Laoutides, 2019: 66.

¹⁵⁰Lee, 2021: 67.

¹⁵¹ Ibid: 70.

¹⁵²Selth, 2018: 449, 452.

¹⁵³David Scott Mathieson. "The Arakan Army in Myanmar: Deadly Conflict Rises in Rakhine State." US Institute of Peace, 2020: 3.

¹⁵⁴Ibid: 4.

¹⁵⁵Ibid: 3.

a combination of historical resentments as well newer frustrations regarding developmental neglect and state's exploitation of the natural resources of the region.¹⁵⁶

AA adapts the primary strategies of traditional insurgent methods which include, guerrilla warfare, conventional warfare along with the persecution of civilians and state bodies, to fit to spatial specifications of Rakhine state.¹⁵⁷ AA leverages the use of social media and modern communication tools to gain formidable base of national and international supporters and it disseminates information through its website and YouTube channel. In March 2020 the government named AA as a terrorist organization further diminishing any chances of reconciliation in the Rakhine state.¹⁵⁸

As the conflict in Rakhine state prolongs, the Rohingya population keeps getting caught in the crosshairs of the violence between AA and *Tatmadaw*, this is on top of dealing with their own persecution. Although AA leaders refrain from associating themselves with the Rohingya community in public statements and there is little reason for any cooperation between ARSA and AA, *Tatmadaw* has projected a collaboration between the two without any evidence indicating so.¹⁵⁹ The ongoing violent confrontation between AA and *Tatmadaw* needs to be crucially factored into the situation of the Rohingyas as there exist no chances to protect the residing Rohingya population while the said confrontation persists or any chances of repatriation in conflict-ridden Rakhine.¹⁶⁰

3.4 The Majority Buddhist Population

In the context of the majority population, it is important to point out the intricate role that Buddhism plays in politics in Myanmar. The way that religious nationalist views are expressed in Myanmar is driven by country's colonial historical legacy, demographic fluxes.¹⁶¹ When the majority Burmese Buddhist population perceives these views to be undermined, they feel insecure regarding the religious and cultural well-being of the country, and whether the government is either incapable or unable to safeguard it.¹⁶² Therefore, in a way, Buddhism

¹⁵⁶Ibid.

¹⁵⁷Ibid: 9.

¹⁵⁸Ibid: 4.

¹⁵⁹Ibid: 16.

¹⁶⁰Ibid: 20.

¹⁶¹International Crisis Group. (2017). Buddhist Nationalism in Myanmar and the Region. In *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*, p.3 International Crisis Group.

¹⁶²Ibid.

plays an intrinsic role in legitimising the state. Any attempts by the civilian government to curb the Buddhist nationalist wave is perceived as a challenge to those “protecting the faith”.¹⁶³

Owing to a persistent existential discomfort and cultural anxieties felt by the Buddhist majority along with fears of being demographically overcome, sustains this nationalist tension which manifests specifically with an antipathy towards Islam.¹⁶⁴ Especially in the case of Rakhine, which was once considered a terminal between Buddhist and Muslim Asia, there exists a pervasive idea that if Rakhine Buddhists had not stood against the demographic pressure from a primarily Muslim Bengal, then not only Myanmar but most of South East Asia would have “succumbed” to the pressure and become Muslim, a long time back.¹⁶⁵

As Myanmar underwent a political transition in 2011, freedom of speech and expression became more unbridled, which also gave way for old grievances to emerge in the open and Buddhist nationalism became strongly visible.¹⁶⁶ A group of highly influential monks in Myanmar led a protest in September 2012 to support President Thein Sein’s proposal to relocate the Rohingyas to third countries, encouraging scores of demonstrators from general public. The protesters argued that, the international interference, especially by United Nations is unnecessary and instigating communal violence in favor of Rohingyas.¹⁶⁷

The relationship between religion and state has a powerful status in the Burmese society. Influential Buddhist monks significantly alter the political scale by lending their voice in political matters and the more they participate, the more powerful their participation is in the political landscape of Myanmar.¹⁶⁸ This has been visible in their proactive participation in the Saffron Revolution in 2007 and humanitarian activities in 2008 when cyclone Nargis hit, but they have also been known to give nationalist Buddhist edge to the protests by the use of slogans as “Burma for the Burmans” and “to be Burman is to be Buddhist” as witnessed in the Rangoon riots of the 1930s against the migrant Indian harbor workers.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶³Ibid.

¹⁶⁴Ibid, 6-7.

¹⁶⁵Ibid, 6-7.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 6-7.

¹⁶⁷Kipgen, 2013: 306.

¹⁶⁸Ahsan Ullah, A. K. “Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar.” *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 32, no. 3 (2016): 289.

¹⁶⁹Ibid.

The notion regarding Buddhism that is prevalent amongst the greater Buddhist population in Myanmar is that since it is a non-proselytising religion which is more peaceful in nature, it is prone to be oppressed by more aggressive religions.¹⁷⁰

Majoritarianism in Myanmar is also in line with the broader political context in post-colonial South Asia wherein exists such a trend, similar to Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh as well.¹⁷¹ In this majoritarian trend, the people of belonging to the majority faith emerge as “the nation’s true citizens”, in the case of Myanmar it is the Buddhist majority being 88 percent of the total population.¹⁷²

3.5 International Scrutiny: An actor in the crisis

A crucial part of this thesis is highlighting how the criticism from the international community plays a definitive role in the conflict situation associated with the Rohingyas. To elaborate, the ‘international community’ per se entails international governing bodies, regional associations of nations, international non-governmental organizations and other nation-states. The criticism becomes a means of involvement of the international community in the conflict situation. This section explores this engagement, through the help of excerpts from press releases by Myanmar’s governmental bodies, as well as draft resolutions adopted by regional organizations, court releases from ICC to establish the nature of involvement of the international community as well as the perception and responses of the governing bodies of Myanmar. The analysis in this section therefore showcases more broadly the involvement of the international community in the conflict, thereby distinguishing it as a significant actor in the situation. More specifically, the more predominant means of engagement by the international community, i.e. deploying criticism of the Myanmar government and authorities, itself becomes a direct actor in the conflict situation.

The following excerpt is taken as early as 2014, even before the much-worsened escalation of the conflict situation in Myanmar that followed in the leading years vis-à-vis the treatment of Rohingyas by Myanmar security forces and retaliation by armed Rohingya groups. This excerpt from a press release by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in January 2014 remarks the government’s strife with international scrutiny.

¹⁷⁰International Crisis Group, 2017: 9..

¹⁷¹Wilson, 2018: 20–23.

¹⁷²Ibid.

“The Union Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar and the local authorities are taking every step to ensure security, rule of law, justice, humanitarian access, and reconciliation in Rakhine State. At this critical juncture of political, socio-economic and administrative reform process in Myanmar, will only unbiased, constructive and well-objective activities be helpful to the people of Myanmar.

The international media and international agencies should release only information which is verified with responsible officials of the government. Failing to do so, releasing unverified information would tantamount to interfering internal affairs of the host country.[..]”¹⁷³

Amnesty International termed the situation of Rohingya in Rakhine State as experiencing “apartheid”.¹⁷⁴ The Independent International Fact-finding mission on Myanmar in the September 2018 report presented “reasonable grounds to conclude the existence of the imposition of conditions of life calculated to bring about the physical destruction of the Rohingya group, as an underlying genocidal act.”¹⁷⁵ Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dato’ Sri Najib Razak put out a statement against the authorities in Myanmar labeling the violence against Rohingya as an offense to Islam.¹⁷⁶ The two countries Myanmar and Bangladesh, the primary subjects of international limelight have also taken defensive stances where Bangladesh blamed the Burmese government to have purposely driven out the Rohingya Muslim population to Bangladesh while the Burmese government maintained that they are illegal migrants who have encroached the Myanmar frontiers.¹⁷⁷ As a result of the international accusations of using excessive force, Myanmar government declines that intense violence was perpetrated and also condemns the attempts of certain organizations of politicizing the conflict in a religious light.¹⁷⁸ Further, the government claimed that the violence was heightened and instigated by the involvement of local and international actors.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷³“Government, Authorities Taking Every Step for Security, Rule of Law, Justice, Humanitarian Access, Reconciliation in Rakhine State,” *Government, Authorities Taking Every Step for Security, Rule of Law, Justice, Humanitarian Access, Reconciliation in Rakhine State* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Myanmar, January 24, 2014), <https://www.mofa.gov.mm/government-authorities-taking-every-step-for-security-rule-of-law-justice-humanitarian-access-reconciliation-in-rakhine-state-press-release/>.

¹⁷⁴Alice Debarre. *Delivering Healthcare amid Crisis: The Humanitarian Response in Myanmar*. Report. International Peace Institute, 2019. 4.

¹⁷⁵Ibid.

¹⁷⁶Wong and Yasmin, 2017: 5.

¹⁷⁷Kipgen, 2013: 301.

¹⁷⁸Kipgen, 2013: 303.

¹⁷⁹Ibid: 304.

The official statement of Permanent Representative of Myanmar, Htin Lynn at the 27th Special session of the United Nations Human Rights council held on 5th December 2017 in Geneva reveals discord with the international scrutiny, referring it to be in a manner that is biased and polarizes the situation in Myanmar. Excerpt of the statement as released by the President's Office:

“As a matter of principle and like many is this chamber, Myanmar opposes any country specific resolutions. They are not conducive to meaningful dialogue but give rise also to polarization, division and even confrontation.[..]

It is regrettable to see that our collective efforts in acting as responsible members of the council for strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights around the globe are slowly and gradually drifting away from the cardinal principles of impartiality, objectivity, non-selectiveness and balance. Pre-determined politicization and partiality seems to be taking roots in our work. [..]

The draft resolution is focusing on a particular group of people belonging to a particular faith. Promoting and Protection of Human Rights should be for all people of the globe irrespective of race, religion and gender. A United Nations forum such as Human Rights Council should not be a platform for such a biased approach, setting a bad precedence for the Council.

The draft resolution fails to condemn the attacks of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army- ARSA against police and military posts on 25 August 2017 which had triggered unprecedented humanitarian situation in Rakhine State. [..]

[..] This undue attention is redundant and excessive for a country which has been facilitating the mandate of successive Special Rapporteurs into the country since 1992.

The complexity of Rakhine issue is gigantic, and thus requires a closer and better understanding of the challenges in Rakhine State by the International Community.[..]”¹⁸⁰

¹⁸⁰“Statement by Ambassador H.E. Mr. Htin Lynn, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Myanmar at the 27th Special Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council,” <https://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=issues/rakhine-state-affairs/id-8096> (Myanmar President Office, December 5, 2017).

Leaders from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation countries appealed to take more concrete steps to end the violence against Rohingyas.¹⁸¹ At the 45th session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) which was held at Dhaka in May 2018, the part of the Dhaka declaration referring to Rohingyas, expressed concerns on the treatment of the Rohingya community by the state, through the usage of the term “ethnic cleansing”:

“We express deep concern over the recent systematic brutal acts perpetrated by security forces against the Rohingya Muslim Community in Myanmar that has reached the level of ethnic cleansing, which constitute a serious and blatant violation of international law, and which has affected over one million Rohingya who have been forcibly displaced to Bangladesh, in addition to the burning of their houses and places of worship.[..]”

We also reaffirm our full solidarity with Bangladesh in the face of the huge Rohingya influx with its humanitarian and security consequences for the country and with the Rohingyas, victims of the state backed violence in Myanmar.[..]”¹⁸²

In response of which, the Myanmar government’s statement rejected the claims of the declaration and ascertained the responsibility of the initiation of the conflict to ARSA,

“[...] The Declaration lacks balance and fairness, and fails to denounce the brutal attacks of the terrorist group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) which triggered the humanitarian situation unfolding today.

Myanmar categorically rejects the irresponsible labelling of “ethnic cleansing” or “State backed violence” to describe events in Rakhine State. More than 50% of the Muslim community, which represents a majority in Maungdaw Region, have remained in their villages.”¹⁸³

¹⁸¹Kipgen, 2013: 304.

¹⁸²“The Dhaka Declaration 45th Session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (Session of Islamic Values for Sustainable Peace, Solidarity and Development),” Foreign Ministers (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation), <https://www.oic-oci.org/docdown/?docID=1907&refID=1078>.

¹⁸³“Myanmar rebuts Dhaka Declaration’s reference on situation in Rakhine State. Myanmar calls for Bangladesh’s sincere cooperation to start early repatriation,” <https://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=issues/rakhine-state-affairs/id-8745> (Myanmar President Office, May 9, 2018).

At the Third Committee of the 73rd United Nations General Assembly at the United Nations Headquarters in New York on 16 November 2018, The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the European Union (EU) tabled a draft resolution titled the *The Situation of human rights in Myanmar*. In response of which Myanmar's Permanent Representative Ambassador U Hau Do Suan delivered a statement, presenting a total rejection of the draft resolution. His statement reveals the government's grievances, as in the following excerpts regarding what the government considers a biased approach of the international community through the resolution, international scrutiny as well as resentment towards not considering ARSA accountable:

"[...] Although the draft resolution is labeled "Situation of human rights in Myanmar", 90 percent of the draft is devoted to the rights of Muslims in Rakhine.[...]

In addition, the draft fails to reflect positive political and socio-economic developments in Myanmar. There is no mention of the Government's tireless efforts for national reconciliation and peace, for building a democratic federal union, no supporting for such endeavour. The objective of the draft resolution, based on sensational narratives, seems to garner international pressure against Myanmar. It sows the seeds of mistrust and further polarization among different communities in Rakhine as well as between Myanmar and the international community.[...]

*Moreover, the draft resolution deliberately ignored the threat of terrorism which is the real cause of present humanitarian problem. [...] This deliberate omission of the role of ARSA terrorists in the draft resolution calls for great concerns with regard to the true intention and sincerity of the co-sponsors of the draft resolution."*¹⁸⁴

The excerpt clearly presents the government's view of such resolutions by powerful regional associations, that such resolutions instead of pacifying the conflict situation, create further polarization and mistrust.

The international response by other countries has been resounding against the atrocities committed by the state on Rohingya peoples, on November 11, 2019, The Republic of Gambia

¹⁸⁴"Myanmar Delegation Votes against the Resolution on Myanmar Tabled by OIC & EU at the Third Committee of the 73rd UNGA" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Myanmar, November 17, 2018), <https://www.mofa.gov.mm/myanmar-delegation-votes-against-the-resolution-on-myanmar-tabled-by-oic-eu-at-the-third-committee-of-the-73rd-unga/>.

along with the 57 members of the Organisation of Islamic cooperation (OIC) legally appealed before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the grounds that Myanmar state's actions against the Rakhine state violate the various clauses of the Genocide convention.¹⁸⁵ Further, on November 14, Rohingya and Latin American human rights groups, under the 'universal jurisdiction' concept, filed a lawsuit demanding the incrimination of major leaders such as State counsellor Suu Kyi and Army chief Min Aung Hlaing.¹⁸⁶ Along with the criticism of Suu Kyi's handling of the crisis foreign commentators have also asked that her Nobel peace prize be stripped away.¹⁸⁷

The United States has expressed the criticism of the crisis by suspending military programs with Myanmar's military and imposing sanctions against Myanmar, which were lifted in December 2016 by former president Barack Obama quoting efforts in improvement of human rights.¹⁸⁸ This move was criticized by several other countries and international organizations as premature since it took place amid an army crackdown on the Rohingyas.¹⁸⁹ The US government then continued to impose sanctions on the Myanmar military commanders in 2018.¹⁹⁰ Similarly, while the European Union declared maintaining an arms embargo with Myanmar, France and UK also deferred the bilateral training programs with Myanmar's military.¹⁹¹ It is worth pointing out that as opposed to a more popular critical approach, several countries have also adopted a neutral policy towards Myanmar, such as the members of ASEAN nations in the interest of strategic self-interests.¹⁹² For China, Myanmar forms a crucial part of its Belt and Road Initiative and its approach towards Myanmar are adapted more based on the economic ambitions.¹⁹³ While Japan was a strong supporter for Bangladesh and showed empathy for the plight of the Rohingyas through donations, it was amongst the few states, along with India to abstain from casting a vote on General Assembly and HRC resolutions on human rights in Myanmar.¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁵Islam, 2021: 30.

¹⁸⁶Ibid.

¹⁸⁷Andrew Selth. "A Big Step Back for Myanmar (07:17 AEDT, 13 September 2017)." In *Interpreting Myanmar: A Decade of Analysis*, 432.

¹⁸⁸Saddam Hossain MD. "Rohingya Identity Crisis: A Case Study," *Saudi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, April 30, 2019, pp. 242.

¹⁸⁹Ibid.

¹⁹⁰Ibid.

¹⁹¹Simon Adams, "If Not Now, When?: The Responsibility to Protect, the Fate of the Rohingya, and the Future of Human Rights," *Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect*, no. 8 (January 2019): pp. 8.

¹⁹²Engy Abdelkader, "The Rohingya People: Past, Present, and Future," *Oregon Review of International Law*, July 2014, pp. 113.

¹⁹³Gorlick, 2019: 17.

¹⁹⁴Ibid: 16.

Concerning the role of a significant regional organization which remains closer to conflict-ASEAN, the ASEAN chief clarified that regional body can only go as far as to provide humanitarian aid.¹⁹⁵ U Ko Ko Hlaing who was the adviser to former prime minister U Thein Sein also stressed the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of the member states as per the ASEAN charter.¹⁹⁶ In this respect, the question of importance becomes: to what degree do other states consider the conflict to be domestic or international, and their responses remain driven by the personal interests and alliances.

Myanmar government's perception of the reporting done by INGOs has also been of shifting and unfavorable nature. INGO Human Rights Watch released reports in 2012 urging the government to take measures to end violence on Rohingya population, and in another report, it documented the atrocities committed by the security forces.¹⁹⁷ Further the international news media network Al-Jazeera released a documentary in 2012 alleging intentional attacks on the Muslim population by the Myanmar security forces.¹⁹⁸ In such instances, the government defended the security forces, denying the participation of the authorities in perpetrating communal violence as well as strongly criticizing the documentary for fabrication and exaggeration of incidents.¹⁹⁹ Moreover, the government proceeded to utilize the presence of such INGOs, UN agencies in affected areas as a testament to its transparent position on the issue allowing such bodies to assess the "situation by themselves".²⁰⁰ In the proceeding years however, as the international scrutiny seemed to have dug deeper, the government prohibited the presence of external organizations including those providing humanitarian aid.²⁰¹ More recently, to add to the complexities, the government has also taken a selective position on the reports released by INGOs, where it discarded any human rights violation committed by the authorities, from the same report it acknowledged and lauded the efforts of INGOs in revealing the crimes committed by ARSA.

Excerpt from a report released on 24th May 2018 from the President's Office of Myanmar emphasizes and applauds a renowned international NGO for covering the attacks deployed by

¹⁹⁵Kipgen, 2013: 305.

¹⁹⁶Wong and Yasmin, 2017: 5.

¹⁹⁷Nehginpao Kipgen, (2013) Conflict in Rakhine State in Myanmar: Rohingya Muslims' Conundrum, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 33:2, 305.

¹⁹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹⁹Ibid.

²⁰⁰Ibid.

²⁰¹Daniel P. Sullivan "Aung San Suu Kyi's Ultimate Test." *Harvard International Review* 38, no. 1 (2016): 31.

²⁰¹Sullivan, 2016: 31.

ARSA. The excerpt also shows an antagonized stance with regards to the international criticism:

“The Tatmadaw True News Information team released a press release yesterday praising Amnesty International for their report on inhuman massacres, terrorist attacks and human rights abuses by ARSA in Rakhine State. [..]

The press release also said the Tatmadaw has been vigilantly broadcasting news on this situation, but international media and governments have been directing one-sided accusations on the Tatmadaw and the Union Government.”²⁰²

Where the said report from Amnesty International as referred to above did cover the violence committed by ARSA, it also provided an expansive account of the widespread violence in Myanmar perpetrated by the authorities, along with the denial access to INGOs. The account of the report released by the President’s Office selectively excluded this mention of information. The greater excerpt from the Amnesty International report is as such:

“Early in the morning of 25 August 2017, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), a Rohingya armed group, attacked around 30 security force outposts in northern Rakhine State. The attacks, which were carefully planned and coordinated, came just hours after the release of the final report of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, led by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, which had been tasked with identifying solutions for peace and development in one of Myanmar’s most underdeveloped and volatile regions. In the days that followed, ARSA fighters, along with some mobilized Rohingya villagers, engaged in scores of clashes with security forces.

The Myanmar security forces, and in particular the military, responded to the attacks and subsequent clashes with an unlawful and grossly disproportionate campaign of violence marked by killings, rape and other sexual violence, torture, village burning, forced starvation tactics, and other human rights violations and crimes under

²⁰²“Tatmadaw Supports Amnesty International’s Reveal of ARSA Terrorists’ Massacre,” <https://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=issues/rakhine-state-affairs/id-8801> (Myanmar President Office, May 24, 2018).

international law, all of which has been well documented by Amnesty International and others.[..]

Since the outbreak of violence in August, the Myanmar authorities have refused to grant access to northern Rakhine State to Amnesty International and other independent investigators, which has made it incredibly difficult to access those communities affected by ARSA and to corroborate witness accounts.[..]”²⁰³

In 2018, the International Criminal Court first sought ruling on the question of jurisdiction over the alleged deportation of the Rohingyas from Myanmar to Bangladesh.²⁰⁴ The pre-trial chamber III of ICC is said to have collected views from or on behalf of thousands of alleged victims that as per the ICC registry insisted on an investigation of the issue.²⁰⁵ The chamber, upon review of available information had reason to believe that crimes that could classify as crimes against humanity of deportation might have taken place across the Myanmar-Bangladesh border on grounds of religious or ethnic persecution.²⁰⁶ Although the chamber noted the number of alleged victims and the gravity of situation quite exceptional to justify probe in the situation, one big hindrance towards such an investigation remained the fact that ICC can only practice jurisdiction when the part of the crimes take place on the territory of a state Party which has ratified the ICC Rome statute in 2010.²⁰⁷ Myanmar is not a signatory. This fact became a significant point of contention on Myanmar’s side.

The government of Myanmar maintained as meritless, the ICC pre-trial and the attempts to look into the situation in Myanmar, in a press release from the Ministry of the Office of the State counsellor dated 9th August 2018:

“The ICC has the jurisdiction to prosecute individuals for the international crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. Myanmar is not party to the Rome Statute and the Court has no jurisdiction on Myanmar whatsoever. Myanmar has

²⁰³ “Myanmar: Attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army on Hindus in Northern Rakhine State” (Amnesty International, 0AD), pp. 1-8, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa16/8454/2018/en/>.

²⁰⁴“Prosecution’s Request for a Ruling on Jurisdiction under Article 19(3) of the Statute” (International Criminal Court, April 9, 2018), https://www.icc-cpi.int/CourtRecords/CR2018_02057.PDF.

²⁰⁵“ICC Judges Authorise Opening of an Investigation into the Situation in Bangladesh/Myanmar,” Welcome to the International Criminal Court, November 14, 2019, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/Pages/item.aspx?name=pr1495>.

²⁰⁶Ibid.

²⁰⁷Ibid.

*declined to engage with the ICC by way of a formal reply due to the reasons stated below.[..]*²⁰⁸

These reasons also include: bad Faith, irregularities in procedural framework, lack of transparency and fairness of the ICC proceedings, Amicus Curiae submissions allowed by the court, allowance of applications by unsolicited victims.²⁰⁹

On 14th November 2019, the International Criminal Court (ICC) finally authorized an investigation into the crimes that fall into ICC's jurisdiction and have been allegedly committed in the case "The situation in Bangladesh/Myanmar".²¹⁰ The court further justified its jurisdiction in this case, as per the excerpts from the court records:

*"Consistent and credible public reports reviewed by the Prosecution indicate that since August 2017 more than 670,000 Rohingya, lawfully present in Myanmar, have been intentionally deported across the international border into Bangladesh. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has described the Rohingya crisis as "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing", and according to the UN Special Envoy for human rights in Myanmar, it potentially bears the "hallmarks of a genocide".² The coercive acts relevant to the deportations occurred on the territory of a State which is not a party to the Rome Statute (Myanmar). However, the Prosecution considers that the Court may nonetheless exercise jurisdiction under article 12(2)(a) of the Statute because an essential legal element of the crime—crossing an international border—occurred on the territory of a State which is a party to the Rome Statute (Bangladesh).[..]"*²¹¹

The ICC case further acknowledges the specific role and position of the military as well as the government in the worsening of the situation as:

²⁰⁸Press release: 9th August 2018, Government of the republic of the Union of Myanmar, Ministry of the office of state counsellor, <https://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=briefing-room/statements-and-releases/2018/08/09/id-8937>

²⁰⁹Press release: 9th August 2018, Government of the republic of the Union of Myanmar, Ministry of the office of state counsellor, <https://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=briefing-room/statements-and-releases/2018/08/09/id-8937>

²¹⁰"ICC Judges Authorise Opening of an Investigation into the Situation in Bangladesh/Myanmar," Welcome to the International Criminal Court, November 14, 2019, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/Pages/item.aspx?name=pr1495>.

²¹¹"Original: English Date: 9 April 2018 President of the Pre-Trial Division." International Criminal Court, April 9, 2018. https://www.icc-cpi.int/CourtRecords/CR2018_02057.PDF.

“The Prosecutor submits that in Myanmar’s political and constitutional context the Tatmadaw in Myanmar, but more specifically in Rakhine State, there is systematic discrimination, institutionalised oppression, human rights violations, and hostility against the Rohingya. The Prosecutor alleges that the government has discriminated against this ethnic group for decades, by implementing policies and laws that deny citizenship to persons of this ethnic group, ‘rendering them stateless. The Prosecutor also states that the government of Myanmar has violated fundamental rights of the Rohingya people, including by restricting their movement between townships. [...]

The Prosecutor further submits that on previous occasions the government of Myanmar forced many Rohingya to flee Myanmar (including in 1978, 1991-1992, and 2012-2013). She also states that there was increasing Buddhist nationalism and use of hate speech against Muslims in general and the Rohingya in particular. Within this context, the Prosecutor submits that ARSA emerged and launched attacks against government posts in Rakhine State. Consequently, the prosecution states that the Tatmadaw launched ‘clearance operations’ that resulted in the 2016 and 2017 waves of violence, which are the subject of this Request. [...]”²¹²

In the United Nations Security Council briefing held on October 2018, Myanmar’s Permanent Representative Ambassador U Hau Do Suan put forth government’s rejection of ICC’s ruling and questioned the prioritization of accountability in the situation, while also reminding about the precarity of Myanmar’s democracy:

“The Government of Myanmar has resolutely rejected the ICC’s ruling of 6 September 2018 in connection with Rakhine State.[...]”

Putting accountability above all else without regard to other positive developments will only result untoward consequences. Unilateral coercive measures without regard to the objective situation in Myanmar and imposition of politically motivated external

²¹²Situation in the People’s Republic of Bangladesh/Republic of the Union of Myanmar (International Criminal Court November 14, 2019).

pressure will be detrimental to the existing good will and cooperation of the Myanmar Government with the international community.[..]

I would like to remind the distinguished members of the Council that Myanmar is still in its critical juncture of transition to fully functioning democracy. [..]”²¹³

A survey of several scholarly articles in the course of this research reveals that the solution/policy suggestions section recommend increasing political pressure on Burma and other neighbors as well as increase in vocal support. This observation itself could be considered a simplistic approach which does not deeply assess the multilayered aspect of the conflict.²¹⁴

The Rohingya conflict also reveals the loopholes in UN mechanisms which cause immobilization of said mechanisms. One such is the persisting power imbalance which has resurfaced in some of the gravest human rights issues in the UN Security council (such as the US vetoes in the Israel-Palestine issues), when it collides with the interests and alliances of the permanent members. This persistent loophole appears when a permanent member implies using the veto power in favor of the interests of the state carrying out persecution, in the case of conflict situation in Myanmar, it is most often Russia and China.²¹⁵ Additionally, UN peacekeeping as an option of mitigating conflict has proven to be most effective only in situations when the host state is in strong resonance with the UN Security Council regarding the core directive of the mission.²¹⁶

On 24th October 2018, in a United Nations Security Council briefing held by the chairman of the International Fact Finding Mission of the Human Rights Council, Myanmar’s Permanent Representative ambassador Ambassador U Hau Do Suan called the Fact Finding mission to be “flawed, biased and politically motivated with hidden agendas from its genesis”²¹⁷ further

²¹³“Myanmar Permanent Representative to the United Nations Delivers Rebuttal Statement on Briefing by HRC-FFM on Myanmar at the UNSC” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Myanmar, October 24, 2018), <https://www.mofa.gov.mm/myanmar-permanent-representative-to-the-united-nations-delivers-rebuttal-statement-on-briefing-by-hrc-ffm-on-myanmar-at-the-unsc/>.

²¹⁴ Islam, 2021: 33-34.

²¹⁵ Adams, 2019: 9.

²¹⁶ Ibid: 14.

²¹⁷“Myanmar Permanent Representative to the United Nations Delivers Rebuttal Statement on Briefing by HRC-FFM on Myanmar at the UNSC” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Myanmar, October 24, 2018), <https://www.mofa.gov.mm/myanmar-permanent-representative-to-the-united-nations-delivers-rebuttal-statement-on-briefing-by-hrc-ffm-on-myanmar-at-the-unsc/>.

rejecting the report. An excerpt of his official statement reveals the government's perception of international scrutiny and criticism as a means of pre-determined targeting and prejudice:

“The methodology of its investigation is also flawed as the report was prepared on results of interview to selected groups of displaced persons in Cox’s Bazaar and information gathered from some NGOs, INGOs and human rights group who have already set their pre-determined agenda on the issue. [..]

We have repeatedly explained the fact that the current humanitarian crisis in Rakhine State was ignited by the unprovoked and premeditated attacks against 30 police outposts and a military battalion headquarters by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) terrorist group in August 2017 and in October 2016.

The ARSA terrorists had massacred security personnel and hundreds of innocent civilians including a hundred Hindu villagers, other ethnic minorities and pro-government Muslims. The atrocities perpetrated by ARSA had made thousands of innocent ethnic population fled their villages to the other parts of Rakhine State. Likewise, it created a massive exodus of Muslims to the neighbouring country. It is crucial to bear in mind that the present crisis affected not only the Muslim community. When we talk about human rights, we should look at human rights of both communities.

My delegation categorically rejects inference of “genocidal intent” on the legitimate counter terrorist actions by the security forces in Rakhine. [..]”²¹⁸

A repatriation exercise based on an MoU between the Bangladesh government and the UNHCR took place in the 1990s for around 230,000 Rohingya refugees. The Rohingya repatriation attempts in 1970s and 1990s appear as disappointing low-points in the history of UNHCR which revealed the absence of long-term integration possibilities and were mired by poor living circumstances, political ostracism and lack of legal and human rights on top of the voluntariness of returnees in question.²¹⁹

The larger international community whilst focusing on the human rights abuses at the center of the issue did not consider the ethnic Rakhine and their grievances leading to resentments. Their perception has been that of being deprived of economic support from the several military

²¹⁸Ibid.

²¹⁹Gorlick, 2019: 2.

rules, on top of tensions and perceived threat from Rohingya and now from the international organizations.²²⁰ The Myanmar government repeatedly displayed discontentment with international community's narrowed and obtuse approach to the situation of Myanmar and its complex democratic operation and a fragile status.

On the 74th session, U Kyaw Tint Swe's statement referred to the vulnerability of Myanmar's democratic transition and ICC's pre-trial investigation into the situation in Myanmar as well as repatriation of refugees from Bangladesh:

"[...] Our democratic transition is still young and as yet incomplete. As we struggle to step out from poverty's shadow, while striving for inclusive development and peace, we must overcome a range of challenges, from imperfect Constitution to continued conflicts.

The displaced persons now in Cox's Bazar who had been resident in Rakhine State have different legal status. We are willing to repatriate them in accordance with the bilateral agreement signed between Myanmar and Bangladesh. The agreement calls for the issuance of identity cards to the returnees. Those who qualify for citizenship under our Citizenship Law will be issued with citizenship cards. The rest will be issued with National Verification Cards (NVC). [...]

*The ICC Prosecutor is focusing on the outflow from Rakhine State to Bangladesh, while she is silent on the broader picture of the various reasons, immediate as well as long-standing, that brought about the displacement, and the various actors who were involved. This silence widens the divide between the International Criminal Court and the people of Myanmar who have been made to feel that their concerns are of less import than the perceptions of influential nations and organizations acquainted but superficially if at all with the true situation on the ground."*²²¹

He further presented the government's stance on the historical roots of the crisis:

²²⁰Tom Lambert. "Myanmar's Problem State." *The World Today* 73, no. 4 (2017): 37.

²²¹Statement by Ambassador Hau Do Suan, Permanent Representative of Myanmar to the United Nations on Agenda Item 109 "Measure to Eliminate International Terrorism" at the Sixth Committee of the 74th Session of the United Nations General Assembly,"(Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Myanmar, September 28, 2018), <https://www.mofa.gov.mm/statement-by-ambassador-hau-do-suan-permanent-representative-of-myanmar-to-the-united-nations-on-agenda-item-109-measure-to-eliminate-international-terrorism-at-the-sixth-committee/>

“Myanmar was a British colony for nearly one hundred years. During this period, the colonial power transferred hundreds of thousands of civilians from British India to the then Burma to propel the rapidly expanding rice production and export. In 1927 alone, there were more than 480,000 such transfers into occupied colonial Burma. The Burmese were reduced to a minority in their own main city, Rangoon (Yangon). The British census of 1872 reported 58,255 Muslims in Akyab District (modern Sittwe). By 1911, the Muslim population had increased to 178,647. The waves of migration were primarily due to the requirement of cheap labour from British India to work in the paddy fields. Immigrants from Bengal, mainly from the Chittagong region, “moved en masse into western townships of Arakan”. As in other colonized territories across the world, our local population had no say whatsoever with regard to the seismic demographic transformation of their lands. Nevertheless, Myanmar accepts it as part of the chequered legacy for which we assumed responsibility when we won our independence in 1948. [...]”²²²

Legal experts along with organizations claiming to be the defenders of Rohingya human rights in the retelling of the conflict meshed in the events of the recent years present the issue as a “state/military against the ethnic minority” issue quite simply, weakening the communal aspect.²²³ The media iterations, which heavily focus on the global issues today, such as xenophobia, islamophobia, state suppression and ethnocultural differences, then disregard the local and historical complexity rooted in the crisis turning it into a global issue vocalized by non-Rohingya activists.²²⁴ A real investigation into the conflict, one that could lead to fruitful results and long-term alleviation of the conflict would require moving beyond the event analysis based approach as well as the perpetrator versus victim rhetoric.²²⁵ This would essentially also require recognizing the agency of each group and broadening the scope of investigation.²²⁶

²²²Statement by Ambassador Hau Do Suan, Permanent Representative of Myanmar to the United Nations on Agenda Item 109 “Measure to Eliminate International Terrorism” at the Sixth Committee of the 74rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly,”(Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Myanmar, September 28, 2018), <https://www.mofa.gov.mm/statement-by-ambassador-hau-do-suan-permanent-representative-of-myanmar-to-the-united-nations-on-agenda-item-109-measure-to-eliminate-international-terrorism-at-the-sixth-committee/>

²²³Leider, 2018: 20.

²²⁴Ibid.

²²⁵Ibid: 22.

²²⁶Ibid.

On 27 February 2020, the Interactive Dialogue on *High Commissioner report on the situation of human rights of Rohingya and other minorities in Myanmar* took place during the 43rd Session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland. The Permanent Representative of Myanmar U Kyaw Moe Tun's statement in response to the report of the High Commissioner on Myanmar touched upon the complexity of the situation in Myanmar and the transitional nature of its democracy:

*"[...] The present democratically elected government of Myanmar which came into office in 2016 has been transforming the country from the authoritarian to a democratic federal union in the midst of multiple challenges resulted from decades of armed conflict, years of underdevelopment and social and political stagnation."*²²⁷

He further addressed the nuanced issue of Rakhine state and expressed sharing a common concern with the international community regarding the conflict in the Rakhine state, he urged for:

*"[...] the Council to look the root causes objectively and comprehensively as well as consider all political and economic issues involving cross-border migration since colonial time, poverty, lack of rule of law and security without overlooking the human emotions steamed from historical tension, mistrust and fear between the communities."*²²⁸

While he reassured that Myanmar is willing to address accountability, he also said,

*"[...] that targeting unfairly and disproportionately under special scrutiny by multiple mechanisms of the UN will not contribute positively to our efforts for building a democratic federal union."*²²⁹

While the conflict certainly has a critical element of the state oppressing an ethnoreligious minority group, that is only one dimension of the conflict, and the crisis in its entirety should not be narrowed down to it.²³⁰ The narratives emerging from the international commentary

²²⁷"Permanent Representative Makes Rebuttal Statement on the Report of High Commissioner for Human Rights" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Myanmar, February 28, 2020), <https://www.mofa.gov.mm/permanent-representative-makes-rebuttal-statement-on-the-report-of-high-commissioner-for-human-rights/>.

²²⁸Ibid.

²²⁹Ibid.

²³⁰Ware & Laoutides, 2019: 68.

often present a too simplistic and reductionist approach to the crisis which ignores the nuanced multiparty involvement as well as an interplay of socio-political elements.²³¹ The psychosocial depths of the crisis are often overlooked in the mainstream international commentary.²³² An important crux of the criticism and commentary directed by several international actors is wanting of the depth of the crisis. It only obsesses over the recent events creating this general misconception that the conflict itself is a recent phenomenon and that it could be resolved by addressing the recent grievances.²³³

Reviewing the excerpts that mainly record the reactions and the perceptions of governing bodies in Myanmar reveal some recurring points:

1. The government recognizes the fragile and transitional state of Myanmar's democracy and resents the often-simplistic international approach to an issue that has complex underlying historical factors. The frequent mention of the delicate state of Myanmar's democracy and emphasis on considering the complex underlying situations behind the issue, is also in reference to government's own precarious position with the military.
2. The government considers the intense international gaze on the issue, a breach of trust as well as a trespass to state's own governing mechanism, when it considers that all the means of the state in resolving the conflict have not been exhausted. As the international scrutiny gets deeper, the government becomes more defensive and shuts out external bodies, including humanitarian aid agencies.
3. The state considers international scrutiny to be biased, pre-determined and only favoring a certain section of the aggrieved population in Myanmar which is the Rohingya Muslims, further causing resentment amongst the state apparatus and majority population towards the community.
4. The state repeatedly blames ARSA for initiating the crisis and spreading violence in the conflict areas.

Another element attached with point 3 and 4 is that, considering the atrocious nature of the conflict in its entirety, atrocities were committed by all parties involved, as is also noted by the UN Human Rights council. This clarifies that several non-Muslim communities (such as Hindus, Buddhists) were also embroiled in the violence and were displaced. All communities involved suffer deep trauma, security anxieties and existential fears. This fact often goes

²³¹Ibid: 62.

²³²Ibid.

²³³Ibid: 67.

unnoticed in mainstream international commentary further causing grievances and bitterness amongst the rest of the population and the government. The primary victims of the conflict have undeniably been the Rohingyas, however, ethnic Rakhine have also perpetrated as well as faced violence by the Myanmar security forces.

3.5.1 The Public Trial of Suu Kyi

As discussed earlier, the position of the government in Myanmar is quite unique and precarious as it has to reluctantly practice power-sharing with the military. The position of Suu Kyi in the context of the Rohingya crisis is also rather significant, as the official head of the state in this peculiar relationship with the military with convoluted power dynamics. Especially considering that she herself was a victim of political persecution.²³⁴ Where it cannot be denied that she has on several occasions practiced silence on the issue or even defended the actions of the military, it is worth looking at her actions with a grain of salt and the impact that international scrutiny entails in this matter.

The UN fact-finding report of August 2018 appealed for a trial of the military heads of Myanmar for crimes against humanity, while also condemning the state counsel Suu Kyi for not using her position as the Head of the Government and moral authority to curb the escalating maltreatment of the Rohingyas and the civilian population or devise alternative means to protect the population.²³⁵ A complex issue is that of addressing the international communities particularly the western and the Muslim countries in directing intense criticism towards Myanmar's state counsellor's Aung San Suu Kyi for failing to stand against the military crackdown and to protect the human rights of the Rohingyas. While undeniably the military attacks against the Rohingyas have been severely disproportionate and exhibiting some of the most brutal actions against humanity, the condemnation against Suu Kyi has only resulted in critics unconsciously shielding the Army chief from responsibility for grave persecution of the Rohingyas.²³⁶ On one hand this has shifted the attention from the actual perpetration of crimes by the military authorities to criticism of Suu Kyi, on the other hand it has severely weakened her position against the powerful, dictatorial military, where the fact remains that Suu Kyi is the only popular most democratic force in Myanmar. Where Suu Kyi's popularity in Myanmar

²³⁴Aron, 2018: 4.

²³⁵Kipgen, 2019: 70.

²³⁶Baladas Ghoshal. India's Responses to the Complex Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar. East-West Center, 2017.

remains quite strong, the political base of her party NLD is frail.²³⁷ The criticism of Suu Kyi's silence is a natural course aligning with the universal humanitarian values, it comes misplaced in the complex military-civilian relations and other such complexities of Myanmar politics where ethnicity, history and cultural identity intertwine as grounds of legitimacy.²³⁸ Myanmar, which has made limited progress in terms of the democratic transition under constitutional constraints, would be put in a precarious position for the military to channel Buddhist nationalists' hate towards Rohingyas if Suu Kyi were to take an overt stand for the Rohingyas.²³⁹ As a state counsellor, her actual powers in the practical and executive matters of the state is quite limited and prone to be undermined by the military on such a stance.²⁴⁰ Therefore, the condemnation of the NLD-led Myanmar government by other countries or international organizations also have counterproductive consequences, as it would undermine their power-sharing position with the military.²⁴¹

3.6 The Problems of Nomenclature

During a bilateral meeting between the Myanmar state counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and US secretary of State John Kerry in May 2016, a discussion regarding the Rohingya community also struck a dialogue regarding the usage of terminologies in the conflict-ridden situation. An account of Suu Kyi's statement as per the report by the President's Office:

“Emotive terms make it very difficult for us to find a peaceful and sensible resolution to our problems,” Daw Aung San Suu Kyi told reporters, referring to the term ‘Rohingya’, which is highly controversial in Myanmar. Most Myanmar Buddhists believe the Muslim community to have emigrated from Bangladesh and refer to them as ‘Bengalis’. [...]

[...] All we are asking is people should be aware of the difficulties we are facing and to give us enough space to solve the problem,” the State Counsellor said.”²⁴²

²³⁷Ibid.

²³⁸Ibid.

²³⁹Ibid.

²⁴⁰Ibid.

²⁴¹Wong and Yasmin, 2017: 6.

²⁴²“State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and US Secretary of State John Kerry discuss sanctions, sectarian issues,” <https://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=issues/foreign-policy/id-6342> (Myanmar President Office, May 22, 2016).

A news release post the European Union Foreign Affairs Council meeting involving the ministers of foreign affairs of the EU on the 26th February 2018 again reveals the issues in terminologies in common practice in Myanmar,

“[...] The meeting reached a conclusion that continued help must be provided to Bengali refugees, the media and the fact-finding mission of the UN Human Rights Council must be rendered freedom and cooperation, continued cooperation must be made with the special rapporteur on human rights, the verdict under the power of the International Criminal Court-ICC must be accepted, the defence cooperation with Myanmar must be reduced to the lowest level, the proposal to impose targeted restrictions and sanctions on senior officers of the Myanmar Tatmadaw who are responsible for human rights violations must be presented soonest.

The report continuously uses the term “Rohingya” which is totally unacceptable for all the people of Myanmar. The accusations made in the report are the same old ones that have been made since the start of the Rakhine issue [...].”²⁴³

The discussion around the historical origins of Rohingya Muslims has also been a topic prone to controversies. The two prominent conflicting narratives are that Rohingyas come from the lineage of Muslim Arabs, Moors, Persians, Turks, Mughals and Bengalis who were by profession merchants, warriors, saints that came in through sea-routes and that they have actually inhabited Myanmar for centuries. The other narrative followed by the government and a general perception amongst the population is that of Rohingya being Bengali Muslims from Bangladesh.²⁴⁴

The recognition of the Rohingyas itself remains a huge issue at hand, as the community wishes to be called and recognized as Rohingyas, the local population of Myanmar is of the idea that this is a label given by the international community and in reality the Rohingyas are illegal migrants from Bangladesh.²⁴⁵ The Bangladeshi government also in turn rejects this claim of the Myanmar government about Rohingyas being illegal immigrants with origins in

²⁴³“News release on the act of British MPs in connection with Rakhine issue and the decision of European Union Foreign Affairs Council meeting on Myanmar,” <https://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=issues/rakhine-state-affairs/id-8546> (Myanmar President Office.).

²⁴⁴Kipgen, 2013: 300.

²⁴⁵Kipgen, 2017: 3.

Bangladesh.²⁴⁶ Rohingyas as a self-identifying ethnic entity is not acknowledged by the Rohingyas who refer to themselves as “Myanmar nationals”.²⁴⁷ The military and civilian authorities as well as the staggering population of Myanmar refer to the Rohingya community as “Bengalis” with the implication that they are illegal migrants from Bangladesh.²⁴⁸ However, said people do not identify with that reference. State counselor Aung San Suu Kyi herself, commenting for the first time on the nomenclature in May 2016 expressed that usage of both the terms “Rohingya” or “Bengali” has political grave political insinuations and therefore she doesn’t support either.²⁴⁹

The terminology ‘Rohingya’ in itself is polemic as they identify themselves with the term and also by international organizations such as UN, but an overwhelming majority of Myanmar along with the government invalidate the term and instead address them as illegal Bengali migrants from Bangladesh.²⁵⁰

Muslim leaders and students in North Arakan (which came to be known as the Rakhine state after 1989) during the 1950s began the usage of the term *Rohingya* as a means to establish a distinct ethnoreligious identity for the Muslim community of the region.²⁵¹ The Buddhist population of the region was referred to as *Rakhine*, to which the name of the state was later changed to.²⁵² Leider suggests that the term *Rohingya* is an identity in constant transformation, one that has united Muslim minorities in the region of North Arakan, who have a similar cultural profile although might simultaneously have a varying historical background.²⁵³ Debates on what should be adopted as the apt spelling only ended around 1963, before which spellings such as *Rwangya* used amongst the old Muslim community of Arakan or *Roewengyas* as used by the father of Rohingya Muslim history Mohammed A. Tahir Ba Tha, were also circulated.²⁵⁴ The variations in spellings adopted over a longer span of time shows that the term had not been put into writing much but rather was adopted by amongst the people who referred to it orally themselves²⁵⁵.

²⁴⁶Kipgen, 2017: 3.

²⁴⁷Leider, 2018: 20.

²⁴⁸Kipgen, 2019: 66.

²⁴⁹Ibid.

²⁵⁰Kipgen, 2013: 299.

²⁵¹Leider, 2018: 2.

²⁵²Ibid.

²⁵³Ibid.

²⁵⁴Ibid: 9.

²⁵⁵Ibid.

Scottish physician and geographer Francis Buchanan-Hamilton, in 1799 published an article which referred to “Mohammedans, who have long settled in Arakan and who call themselves *Rooinga* or natives of Arakan.”²⁵⁶ His mention of the term is said to confirm at least the presence of a native ethnically Muslim community.²⁵⁷

The emergence of Rohingya identity coincides with the rise of Buddhist nationalist views in Rakhine state in the 1950s.²⁵⁸ In the present times, global media reports narrow down the Rohingya identity to that of a minority community facing systemic oppression and a crisis of belonging and the primary aspects of their public identity is defined by their refugee status and statelessness.²⁵⁹ Such rampant media descriptions frame the Rohingya identity in these and often only in these terms when referring to group.²⁶⁰

The mainstream narrative about the ethnic roots of Rohingyas that states that they were a mix of early Arabs, Persians, Afghans, Bengalis, Mughals and other such Muslim communities from around the Indian ocean sort of became grounds for new, unfamiliar certainties.²⁶¹ However numerous sources that trace the origins of Rohingyas solidify their centuries old presence and a gradual adoption of the name Rohingya. In his book history of Chittagong, historian Khanungo noted that the term “Rohang/Roang/Roshang” is an old Arakan term.²⁶²

Several British census records cover another ethnic blend through Arakanese-Bengali intermarriage which explains the roots of old Muslim community of Arakan.²⁶³ A British census report on Burma from 1872 makes a mention of “Arakanese Mussulman” as an indigenous group residing in Arakan as “Mussulman” was colloquially used to denote Muslim identity in Bengal and Arakan.²⁶⁴

Where on the side of Rohingyas, identifying with ‘Rohingya’ is a critical step in the struggle to be recognized and accepted as national ethnic community in Myanmar, opposing forces decline this acknowledgement in a constant battle of nomenclature. In this sense, along with

²⁵⁶Haque & chambers, 2021: 3.

²⁵⁷Leider, 2018: 5.

²⁵⁸Ibid: 2.

²⁵⁹Leider, 2018: 3.

²⁶⁰Ibid.

²⁶¹Ibid: 12.

²⁶²Mahbubul Haque (2017) Rohingya Ethnic Muslim Minority and the 1982 Citizenship Law in Burma, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 37:4, 461.

²⁶³Ibid.

²⁶⁴Ibid: 464.

the entire presence of the community, even the assertion of an apt name- the problem of nomenclature becomes a major contentious factor in the escalation of the crisis.

3.7 Taingyintha

The idea of national races or *taingyintha* is a crucial political concept in present day Myanmar. The political prevalence of the national races achieved stronghold after 1962. This was achieved through widespread deportation of the supposed alien inhabitants, strengthening of the political base by nationalization of assets, and imprisonment of thousands on alleged economic crimes.²⁶⁵ Where in 1964 Ne Win's government launched an Academy for the Development of National Races, the department of national registration and committees for the scrutiny of citizenship was also set up in 1968.²⁶⁶ *Taingyintha* was made central in the national scheme via the constitution of 1974 which stated that state would ensure "constantly developing and promoting unity, mutual assistance, amity and mutual respect among *Taingyintha*."²⁶⁷ *Taingyintha* emerged as a national central concept in the 1940s, was later institutionalized in the 1960s and further revived during the 1990s. Scholar Nick Cheesman describes two disparate meanings of the term that were revived, the first in which the national races were members of a united political community fighting against the internal and external enemies and the second in which national races were a part of such a community who couldn't flourish due to the backwardness coupled with civil war and lack of guidance.²⁶⁸

The very spread of nationalist mobilization called for the delineation of what that nation was, in a manner that multiethnic polities could produce national identities, choose national languages and delimit borders as described by Ferguson²⁶⁹ "the vision for a newly independent Burma crucially depended on an image that included these eight official races, and this independent nation posited its indigeneity in opposition to foreign control, and more specifically, against non- indigenous capitalists such as the Chinese, Indians, and Europeans."²⁷⁰ In Southeast Asia, nationalist mobilization coincided with the era of mass politics in a way that religious, nationalist and socialist mass organizations discarded European

²⁶⁵Nick Cheesman (2017) How in Myanmar "National Races" Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 47:3, 465.

²⁶⁶*Ibid*: 466.

²⁶⁷*Ibid*.

²⁶⁸*Ibid*: 467.

²⁶⁹Ferguson, 2015: 10.

²⁷⁰Thomas B. Pepinsky, "Migrants, Minorities, and Populism in Asia," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2019, 8-9.

and American colonial rule.²⁷¹ Another understanding around the deep-seated discontentment against Rohingyas and Burmese Muslims could be a translation of centuries old Indophobia held by the Burmese into islamophobia.²⁷² The debate of the nationalist nature is often based on the dread of gradual Islamisation of Myanmar as briefly touched upon in an earlier section.²⁷³

The constitution of 2008, through its preamble places *taingyintha* over citizenship allocating more importance to it referring to the political community not as an assemblage of citizens but rather as a group of “national races”.²⁷⁴ This surpassing of national races over citizenship is a newer development, meaning that in the independence constitution of 1947, citizenship was actually placed higher than national races and also enveloped the criterion.²⁷⁵ Therefore, there exists a crucial gap in the understanding perpetrated by international news medias as well as research and scholarly work which puts forth that the 1982 law denies the Rohingya both full and associate citizenship. The law in itself per se doesn’t contain any such stipulations that strip Rohingya off the citizenship, but it instead makes being a part of the national race the essential criteria for citizenship, and only grants primary rights to such a member of Burma (and later Myanmar).²⁷⁶ Therefore, since Rohingyas are not recognized as a national ethnic group, they are automatically not given citizenship. The 1982 citizenship law validates 8 major national ethnic groups in Myanmar which are Bamar, Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Mon, Rakhine and Shan.²⁷⁷ These are further subdivided into 135 recognized national ethnic groups which does not include Rohingyas.²⁷⁸

Additionally, while article 362 of the 2008 constitution stipulates freedom to profess all religions and also “recognizes Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Animism as the religions existing in the Union at the day of the coming into operation of this constitution”, article 361 clearly states the special importance of Buddhism “The Union recognizes the special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union.”²⁷⁹

²⁷¹Ibid: 9.

²⁷²Ansar, 2020: 450.

²⁷³Alam, 2018: 196.

²⁷⁴Cheesman, 2017: 470.

²⁷⁵Ibid.

²⁷⁶Ibid: 471.

²⁷⁷Alam, 2018: 188.

²⁷⁸Ibid.

²⁷⁹Ansar, 2020: 443.

Also, for the people who did not fall into the category of *taingyintha*, section 6 of the article 145 of the 1974 constitution provided that people who already had the citizenship would not lose it. The process of alienating the Rohingyas and consequentially their displacement was not carried out through the Citizenship Law as such albeit it was particularly hostile to the Rohingyas, but the statelessness was imposed on them through intentional breaches and discriminatory application.²⁸⁰ For the impoverished and often uneducated inhabitants of Myanmar, producing adequate proof of ancestry in Myanmar before 1823 is itself an arduous ask.²⁸¹

The Union Citizenship Act of 1948 mentioned national races as groups which had permanently resided in the country before the first Anglo-Burmese War, before 1824.²⁸² The Union Citizenship Act of 1948 mentioned Arakanese to be one of the indigenous races in Burma, but the 1982 law was specifically changed to “Rakhine” in place of Arakanese, which would not include Rohingya anymore.²⁸³ Further, according to the 1982 citizenship law, the council of state possesses unrestrained powers to decide whether any ethnic group is national or not as well as can rescind citizenship of any category except the one by birth.²⁸⁴

While a vast majority of Myanmar’s Muslim population resides in urban areas, speak Burmese and have Burmese names and citizenships, the Rohingya on the other hand reside in the rural parts of Rakhine state without a citizenship and speak dialect of Bengali (Chittangongian).²⁸⁵ The anti-discrimination laws that the state does have in place are not enjoyed by the group for the reason that they are noncitizens.²⁸⁶ The article 34 of the 2008 constitution stipulates that “Every citizen is equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess and practice religion subject to public order, morality or health and to the other provisions of this constitution.”²⁸⁷ For the Burmese authorities the Rohingyas are only but a source of instability and they are recognized neither as citizens nor as an ethnic group. For the authorities to recognize them as a separate ethnic group would automatically entitle them to a separate state

²⁸⁰Cheesman, 2017: 473.

²⁸¹Haque & chambers, 2021: 4.

²⁸²Leider, 2018: 14.

²⁸³Haque, 2017: 460.

²⁸⁴Haque, 2017: 457.

²⁸⁵Zoltan Barany. The Rohingya Predicament.: Why Myanmar’s Army Gets Away with Ethnic Cleansing. Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), 2019: 4.

²⁸⁶Abdelkader, 2014 : 110.

²⁸⁷Abdelkader, 2014: 110.

where they could enjoy citizenship rights like the rest of Muslim communities, as Burmese states are formed on the basis of ethnicities.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁸Ibid.

4 The Historical Roots of the Crisis: From Burma to Myanmar

As per the discussion above, it becomes clear that the discussion around the Rohingya, the treatment of them and the embroiling unrest and conflict around them is rather multidimensional. Along with that the conflict is not a recent phenomenon but a situation that has only worsened over the course of decades, the roots of which lie about a century back and is entangled with the colonization of Burma. These historical accounts become a crucial point of study when considering the conflict as they give a detailed and nuanced insight into the situation as it is now and prevents jumping into simplistic conclusions which may lead to simplistic and ineffective solutions. An informed and elaborate study into the roots of the conflict might simply aid in an informed understanding of the situation which deals with delicate sensitivities and also aid in providing critical resolutions or mitigating steps to the present circumstances or simply help in not worsening them further. Said investigation also helps thrash incorrectly assumed notions about the belonging and origins of the Rohingya community as such.

A news release post the European Union Foreign Affairs Council meeting involving the ministers of foreign affairs of the EU on the 26th February 2018 presents a brief account of historical origins and the causes behind “the Rakhine issue”, as per the stance taken by the government,

“[...] After the 1824 First Anglo-Myanmar War, the British government imported from the Bengal region of India to use as farm labourers in Rakhine State. They settled in the state and their population grew. Rakhine-Bengali conflict started when those Bengalis attacked and drove out native ethnics from their homeland. 152 Rakhine villages were destroyed in Alethankyaw incident in 1942 which displaced over 100,000 Rakhine people and left over 20,000 dead. Mujahid armed insurgency and Rohingya National Liberation Army emerged after Myanmar gained independence, and attempted to establish Buthidaung, Maungtaw and Rathaedaung townships in Rakhine State as Arkistan or Rohingya State. Every country in the world has its own citizenship laws and citizenship eligibility criteria, and as citizenship will be granted to eligible

ones only through citizenship verification process, they were time and again urged to accept citizenship verification process, but they have rejected so far.[..]”²⁸⁹

While the government’s portrayal of the historical roots to explain the crisis is selectively distorted to justify its position, resorting in name-calling, taking a historical route to clarify the complexities and review the origins of the crisis is a useful approach. An analysis of the historical roots of the present-day Rakhine state in Myanmar, more specifically into tracing the background of the Rohingyas paints a complex picture with multiple ethnoreligious, cultural disparities, confirming that the historical roots are as said: complex, widespread movement in and out of the region, and mired with numerous narratives. It does however also confirm that existence of these narratives far back into the history establishes some form of claim and presence of the community which calls itself Rohingya. Survey of historical records point to the fact that certain Muslim groups were already residing in Arakan state, even before the colonization by Burmese and later British.²⁹⁰

Historically, the mass Rohingya exoduses in and out of the present Myanmar region are traced around the following four waves: late 1700s and early 1800s, the 1940s, 1978 and 1991-1992, until the recent exodus starting from 2012.²⁹¹ The recurring waves of exodus tracing back to centuries attest to the historical presence of Rohingyas in Myanmar.²⁹²

4.1 Pre-Colonial

Arakan region was under Hinduist rule from 100 AD until 1000 AD, when Buddhists became rather influential.²⁹³ During the 1430s, Muslim influence over the Buddhist Mrauk- U dynasty further deepened. In the year 1784, Burma’s Buddhist king Bodawpaya annexed the Arakan kingdom, resulting in a mass exodus of Arakan refugees to Bengal.²⁹⁴

Until 1826, Arakan was maintained under Burma but the first Anglo-Burmese war resulted in Arakan being taken over by the British colonial rule.²⁹⁵ The British had expanded into all

²⁸⁹“News release on the act of British MPs in connection with Rakhine issue and the decision of European Union Foreign Affairs Council meeting on Myanmar,” <https://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=issues/rakhine-state-affairs/id-8546> (Myanmar President Office.).

²⁹⁰Haque, 2018: 463.

²⁹¹Ullah, 2016: 287.

²⁹²Ibid: 287.

²⁹³Md Mahbubul Haque & Paul Chambers (2021) Introduction: Suppressed and Subjected: Rohingya People in Asia Today, *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 48:1, pp. 2.

²⁹⁴Ibid: 3.

²⁹⁵Ibid: 3.

frontiers of what is modern day Myanmar by 1885 and there existed no clear boundaries between the Bengal colonies and Arakan region, with the British government even encouraging migration to Arakan.²⁹⁶

Geographically, Arakan is a belt of coastal lands, river valleys and mangrove marshlands linking the lower Myanmar region to Bangladesh, running in a north-south direction beside the eastern Bay of Bengal area²⁹⁷. Buddhist kingdom of Arakan historically has its roots centering on Mrauk U which was a non-coastal urban site facing the fertile lands of Kaladan and Lemro valleys. It was situated in a complex ethnoreligious setting in 21st century at the periphery of south and southeast Asia, which points to the presence of a dense Buddhist population (over a million) in the Chittagong region of Bangladesh and similar composition of Muslim population in the North Rakhine region.²⁹⁸ The strong influence of the Bengal sultanate on the elite members of the court of Mrauk U in 15th century is attested by the usage of Muslim titles by Arakanese kings and inscriptions on the coins.²⁹⁹ Further, the existence of a community of Muslim traders and a revered group of Sufi Saints is also verified to have genuinely existed.³⁰⁰ The prosperous port of Chittagong of Bengal which is said to have been under the control of Muslim lords since the 14th century was conquered and expanded into the kingdom of Arakan in the 16th century.³⁰¹ Sources from the Oxford Research Encyclopedia on Asian History suggests a Muslim population with privileged members of the court along with influential Muslim traders coming from all the way around the Indian Ocean.³⁰² Additionally, there are traces of Arab and Persian in the eastern Bengali dialects spoken by the Muslim population in Arakan which attributes to a complex multifaceted ethnocultural background in the history of Rohingya or the Rakhine state in Myanmar.³⁰³ In the late 17th century, when the Mrauk U kingdom suffered a political setback, a lot of traders exited the region.³⁰⁴

In late 1784, the Burmese conquest of the Arakan region, enforced the deportation and resettlement of influential Buddhist, Muslim, and Hindu families from Mrauk U to the capital

²⁹⁶Haque & chambers, 2021: 3.

²⁹⁷Leider, 2018: 4.

²⁹⁸Ibid.

²⁹⁹Ibid.

³⁰⁰Ibid.

³⁰¹Ibid.

³⁰²Ibid.

³⁰³Ibid..

³⁰⁴Ibid.

Amarapura.³⁰⁵ After the conquest of Arakan followed the forced labour movement and deportations of a great part of the population into Bengal, which included people from local Muslim communities across the Naf river which acted as the frontier line since the rule of Mughal and Rakhine kings.³⁰⁶ Following the year 1799, several from the displaced population were resettled at Cox Bazar by the British East India company named after its founder Hiram Cox which now operates as a seaside resort in Bangladesh.³⁰⁷

Historian Jacques Leider proposes a doubt on the notion Buddhist-Muslim intercommunal tension was a reason of social disintegration in the precolonial era. He reasons that during the early 19th century the driver of the sociopolitical order was based more on functionality than ethnicity.³⁰⁸

4.2 Colonial

During the 1800s, after a series of invasions, Britain successfully colonized Burma and the colonial rule lasted for 64 years.³⁰⁹ This was achieved following three Anglo-Burman wars in 1824-26, 1852 and lastly in 1885 which resulted in the conquests of upper Burma.³¹⁰ Burma was administered as a province of India until 1937 as a part of British Indian empire after which it became a self-governing colony.³¹¹ Both the territories of Burma and Bangladesh were controlled by one British India.³¹² There was a lot of movement between Burma and East Bengal facilitated by the British for their labor needs.³¹³ The opening of the Suez Canal in 1800s was also a significant moment in history, also becoming a driver of seasonal migration for labor for the export of rice.³¹⁴ The presence of people from Indian descent contributed in the growing bitterness at the time of the world's first major global recession in late 1920s, the resentment towards foreign immigration is considered a primary reason for anti-Muslim riots in Myanmar.³¹⁵

³⁰⁵Ibid: 5.

³⁰⁶Leider, 2018: 5.

³⁰⁷Ibid.

³⁰⁸Ibid.

³⁰⁹Ullah, 2011: 141-143.

³¹⁰Ansar, 2020: 444.

³¹¹Ullah, 2011: 140-141.

³¹²Ullah, 2011: 142.

³¹³Ullah, 2011: 143.

³¹⁴Ibid. 5.

³¹⁵Ansar, 2020: 446.

The primary British census reports have the criteria based on the religious identity “Muslim” as well as the linguistic criteria of “Bengali”. Majority of population as divided according to the British census were mainly in two subdivisions: Arakanese speaking Buddhist population and Bengali-speaking Muslim population.³¹⁶ The latter subdivision further fused the old Muslim community inhabiting Arakan before 1785 with the new arrivals from Chittagong region after 1826.³¹⁷ Post 1931, seventy percent of the descendants of the migrants from Chittagong had already been born in Arakan.³¹⁸

Rather than securing the pre-existing relationships in society, British policy had a rather opposite effect of further complicating the ethnic relations in Myanmar.³¹⁹ The information about ethnic composition of Myanmar were largely recorded, many reports were written during the colonial period itself which contributes to perceptions in present-day narratives as well.³²⁰ The British colonial government created “confusing categorization” through imposing labels on the inhabiting population such as “Burman” for anyone from any minority group and “Burmese” for anyone from the ethnic majority group.³²¹ This system went against the past indigenous pattern of ruling in Burma and was rejected by the locals.³²² Additionally, Burma’s diverse ethnic and religious composition was ripe for the application of the hallmark British colonial policy of “divide and rule” which was similarly employed in India as well.³²³ Other than the ethnic categorization, military units were also designated on the ethnic basis such as Karen Rifles, Chin Rifles etc.³²⁴ Although several conflicts already existed before the British colonial rule, they were aggravated even more so through the British administration’s territorial divisions and military recruitment policies.³²⁵

4.3 Collapse of Colonial Empire

In tracing the conflict, the second World War is a significant global moment in which British witnesses vouched for atrocities and widespread violence perpetrated by both sides (because they supported different sides). The deep-rooted trauma of this epoch has still not been properly

³¹⁶Leider, 2018: 6.

³¹⁷Ibid.

³¹⁸Ibid.

³¹⁹Ansar, 2020: 445.

³²⁰Ibid.

³²¹Ibid.

³²²Ibid.

³²³Ibid.

³²⁴Ibid.

³²⁵Ibid.

addressed in popular narratives in the international community.³²⁶ The violent memory of this period also shows effects in the recent events, including the memories of historic displacement and violence along with the exaggerated narratives presented by the military post 1962 when it took over Myanmar.³²⁷ Therefore, to effectively address the conflict requires a profound engagement with the history and anything less would be shortsighted.³²⁸ In the present context, the underlying uncertainty about the other's actions can enforce that different groups gauge at each other through the historical lens.³²⁹

After the collapse of the colonial rule, during late March-April 1942, the anticolonial Burma army (BIA) lead by the Japanese troops along with Arakanese Buddhists proceeded to attack the Muslim villages in central Arakan. As a counter to this, the Buddhist population was attacked in the principally Muslim townships of Maungdaw and Buthidaung.³³⁰ Incidents of such nature during the interwar periods fueled communal bitterness between the two communities.³³¹ In the interwar timeline of 1942-1945 the Arakan region of Burma was divided in its allegiances with the Japanese forces in control of the majority Buddhist areas and the stationed British forces in the northern region with the assistance of local Muslim recruits.³³² After Burma gained independence, the Arakanese Muslims requested to be declared an indigenous population for the sake of political autonomy but were dismissed by both the Burmese and the British authorities and met with resentment by the local Buddhists.³³³ The time period leading from 1800s to World War II is also a crucial duration in structuring of the Rohingya identity. The Japan invasion of Burma, which led to the British withdrawing from Burma saw Rohingyas fleeing to East Bengal in huge numbers.³³⁴

The time period situated around the second world war is highly crucial for the course of Burmese history, but also for ethnic relations and in shaping people's political experience as their country was almost completely shattered under the crossfires of the Japanese and British colonial armies.³³⁵ In this traumatic event for Myanmar's history, ethnic groups stood on opposite sides, such as Rohingyas who remained loyal to the British under Japanese occupation

³²⁶Ware & Laoutides, 2019: 68.

³²⁷Ware & Laoutides, 2019: 68.

³²⁸Ibid.

³²⁹Ibid: 75.

³³⁰Leider, 2018: 7.

³³¹Ibid.

³³²Ibid.

³³³Ibid.

³³⁴Ullah, 2011: 143.

³³⁵Ansar, 2020: 446.

causing the pro-independence Rakhine supporting Japanese to attack the minorities.³³⁶ The buildup of Burmese nationalism is marked by the perception of Rohingyas as being anti-Burma post the independence of Burma.³³⁷

4.4 Post-Independence

The name of the newly independent nation was proclaimed Burma in the 1947 constitution, and renamed in 1989 to Myanmar under the rule of the military junta.³³⁸

There was an administrative absence in Arakan right after the British had withdrawn from Shimla, India and taking advantage of the vacuum, gangs of armed Buddhist Rakhine under the Burma Independence Army (BIA) carried out mass violence on unarmed Rohingya.³³⁹

The British colonial period in Burma was characterized by widespread Islamophobic sentiment which in turn created insecurities and deep-seated fears in the minds of the Rohingya who consequentially took arms as a measure of self-defense.³⁴⁰ Thousands of Rohingya refugees were not permitted to return in a post-independence Burma and those who could, faced obstacles in rebuilding a life. These fraught situations resulted in the birth of the first Rohingya resistance called the “Mujahid movement” in 1948.³⁴¹ As a response to the British colonial rule and influenced by Japanese fascism, Buddhist nationalism also saw a steep rise in Myanmar.³⁴² The politically dominant Burmese ethnic nationalism did not provide space for the development of any newer identity.³⁴³

In 1962, Chief Ne Win, who expressed a clear bias against the Rohingyas, came to power after a military takeover. Ne Win renamed Arakan as the “Rakhine state” to the appeasement of the Buddhist population, granting it statehood in 1974.³⁴⁴ After Bangladesh gained independence in 1971, mass Rohingya populations from the previous Arakan region were driven off to Bangladesh first in 1978 through “operation Nagamin (dragon king)” and later during 1991-92

³³⁶Ibid.

³³⁷Ansar, 2020: 446.

³³⁸Haradhan Kumar Mohajan, “History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims,” *Munich Personal RePEc Archive*, July 2018, pp. 2.

³³⁹Islam, 2021: 17.

³⁴⁰Ibid: 18.

³⁴¹Ibid: 18.

³⁴²Mohajan, 2018: 2.

³⁴³Alam, 2018: 187.

³⁴⁴Islam, 2021: 18-19.

under the “operation Pyi Thaya (clean and Beautiful nation)”.³⁴⁵ The previously produced list of 144 ethnic groups of the country was shortened to 135 in 1990 by the military State Law and Order Restoration council under General Ne Win. The deleted groups included the three Muslim groups: Rohingya (Muslim Arakanese), Panthay (Chinese Muslims) and Bashu (Malay Muslims) along with other non-Burman groups.³⁴⁶ Several ethnic groups posed questions on the legitimacy of the list and how it was formulated as the basis of preconditions and categorization remained obscure.³⁴⁷ The 1982 citizenship law validates 8 major national ethnic groups in Myanmar which are Bamar, Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Mon, Rakhine and Shan.³⁴⁸ These are further subdivided into 135 recognized national ethnic groups which does not include Rohingyas.³⁴⁹

The military started replacing the National Registration Cards (NRCs) with color-coded citizenship cards in 1989: pink cards implied full citizenship, blue for associate citizenship, and green for naturalized citizenship.³⁵⁰ However, in 1995, the regime stopped issuing the “pink cards” which were the citizenship cards to the Rohingyas and instead supplied them with “white cards” which were Temporary Registration Cards (TRCs).³⁵¹ In the much recent past, even the Temporary Residence Cards were invalidated by the authorities making the entire Rohingya population vulnerable to denial of basic human rights and freedoms, ultimately denying them voting rights in 2015.³⁵²

Burma attained independence from the commonwealth in 1948, as an independent republic with U Nu as its first prime minister.³⁵³ U Nu’s government pursued a relatively more accommodating policy toward the Rohingya as they were issued National Registration Cards along with being allowed to vote and stand in state elections.³⁵⁴ Through a coup, General Ne Win overtook the government under military rule from 1962 to 1988, self-appointing himself as the president.³⁵⁵ His rule was characterized by nationalization of trade and acute xenophobia

³⁴⁵Ibid: 19.

³⁴⁶Islam, 2021: 20.

³⁴⁷Ansar, 2020: 449.

³⁴⁸Alam, 2018: 188.

³⁴⁹Ibid.

³⁵⁰Ullah, 2011: 141-143.

³⁵¹Islam, 2021: 21.

³⁵²Ibid.

³⁵³Ullah, 2011: 141.

³⁵⁴Ansar, 2020: 448.

³⁵⁵Ullah, 2011: 141.

as he dispossessed hundreds of Chinese, Pakistani and Indian people in Myanmar condemning them as the cause of Myanmar's economic troubles and forcefully pushing them out to their "country of origin".³⁵⁶ Further, he commenced the operation *Nagamin* under which a series of military crackdowns were conducted targeting the so perceived illegal immigrants.³⁵⁷ In 1990, legislative elections were held which resulted in a landslide victory of the National League for Democracy. The military junta however, rescinded the election results diminishing further the chances of Myanmar experiencing true democracy.³⁵⁸

Similar requests of establishing an autonomous Muslim zone were made by Jam'iyyat ul-Ulama in 1948 claiming that they are an indigenous group and also due to a volatile equation with co-habiting Arakenese Buddhists. Such an incident promoted a separatist image of the North Arakan Muslim communist in the minds of the residing Buddhists.³⁵⁹

In the beginning of 1978, the government initiated a campaign for the arrest of illegal migrants which resulted in widespread anxiety in the North Arakan area which further led to around 200,000 people fleeing to Bangladesh in panic.³⁶⁰ The deep-rooted fears and suspicions amongst the Buddhist and Muslim communities against each other, especially in the Arakan region made them more vulnerable to be exploited by the state authorities.³⁶¹

Then in the early 1990s, the State Peace and Development Council (SDPC) established its presence in the border regions, leading to land confiscations, relocations and resettlement of the Burmese colonizers amongst the majority-Muslim population which again resulted in a mass exodus of Rohingyas.³⁶² The 1990s were a period characterized by policies of persecution enforced by the police and security forces through restricting the freedom of movement, restricting marriage and birth rights, denial of religious freedoms, enforcing Buddhist settlement in Arakan on top of meagre investments in economic development and infrastructure.³⁶³

³⁵⁶ Ansar, 2020: 448.

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ Ullah, 2011: 141.

³⁵⁹ Leider, 2018: 8.

³⁶⁰ Ibid: 15.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² Ibid: 16.

³⁶³ Ibid.

The ethnic minorities in Myanmar face even more challenges due to a long tumultuous legacy of colonial rule, oppressive military regimes, dodgy civil liberties and an elusive state of democracy.³⁶⁴

³⁶⁴Ansar, 2020: 442.

5 Concluding Remarks

The understanding of the multi-layered situation of Rohingya in Myanmar leads to the story of Myanmar which emerges from the shadow of destructive era of colonialisms and dictatorships. Understanding the complex situation of Rohingya mandatorily requires a deep dive into the various facets of Myanmar's fragile democracy, composite ethno-religious components and an exploration of its history. The grim situation of Rohingya ominously warns of the situation of Myanmar as a country, as historian Thant Myint-U says "Burma is also a warning". Exactly a hundred years ago, modern politics in Burma were born as what we might today call an anti-immigration, anti-globalization movement. The country was gripped by a kind of identity politics."³⁶⁵

This thesis attempted to present the account of Rohingyas, a persecuted minority in Myanmar, which has become the subject of one of the gravest humanitarian crises in the world. Although this crisis has garnered mass international attention in the last decade, it often suffers being reduced to a simplistic victim-minority and perpetrator-state narrative that ignores the value in its complex and painful history and the influence of the various narratives and actors involved. Bringing these aspects to light is precisely the objective of this thesis. Additionally, it is to establish that although the mass attention to the issue might be only centred in the last decade, the roots of the crisis go way back to Myanmar's colonial history. The thesis is primarily composed of three parts, the first part attempted to establish a backdrop of the situation of Rohingyas and the events associated that draw attention to the problem. This part explained the associated conflicts and humanitarian tragedies that happened in the last decade with respect to the Rohingya community. The second part of the thesis, truly scratches below the surface of the issue, to reveal the complexities of the involved actors and narratives. The third part attempts to take us back to the historical roots of the conflict, to better understand the complexities behind the situation, to escape a simplistic and superficial approach. Finally, I take the discussion forward by including an epilogue further which ties the complete analysis with contemporary events of highly impactful nature that affect the situation of Rohingyas

³⁶⁵Thant Myint-U. Introduction. In *The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism, and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century*, 17–26. London: Atlantic Books, 2021.

Further from here, a lot of discussion around the resolution of the plight of Rohingyas emerges. Even though the Myanmar government time and again due to international pressure has committed to implement programs to alleviate the lives of the affected populations of both ethnic Rakhine and Rohingya people, without a political solution the effects would be only transient at best and not actually resolving the situation. Any kind of political integration might also not enough to bring long term stability in Rakhine, given the deep roots of the crisis along with addressing and understanding various nuances and actors entangled in the conflict.³⁶⁶

A grave consequence of the crisis is how it directly hinders the growth of the country as the government's attention and means remain centered on the Rakhine state, several other parts of the country go neglected.³⁶⁷ As one of the long-term measures to ameliorate the situation within Myanmar would require for the state authorities and leaders to reduce the ethnic tensions amongst the peoples through the use of media and education, realistically this could come at the cost of the popular policies and sentiments and political sacrifices.³⁶⁸

The threat to global security could be alleviated by including safeguarding the religious freedoms of the Rohingya as well as other Burmese Muslim communities.³⁶⁹ Increased religious freedom may facilitate to “moderate, contain, counteract, or prevent the origin or spread of violent religious extremism”.³⁷⁰ As a more immediate step, providing regional and financial support to Bangladesh based on an organized program for the movement of Rohingya to the apt neighboring Asian countries could set a fruitful example of global responsibility sharing.³⁷¹

Long-term resolutions shaped around justice and accountability measures may take upto many years to be effective. Whatever efforts are taken in this respect would require for Rohingya refugees to be consulted and their opinions taken into consideration to be come up with durable and acceptable solutions.³⁷² The Rohingya peoples scattered over different regions and in all their diversity need to be included in any designing any solutions that impact them.³⁷³

³⁶⁶Kipgen, 2013: 308.

³⁶⁷Selth, 2021: 433.

³⁶⁸Haque & chambers, 2021: 9.

³⁶⁹Abdelkader, 2014: 117.

³⁷⁰Ibid.

³⁷¹Gorlick, 2019: 22.

³⁷²Gorlick, 2019: 1.

³⁷³Ibid: 28.

Establishment of truth and reconciliation commissions may be effective in the path of accountability, justice and healing.³⁷⁴

Directly discussing the resolution and reconciliation of the situation of Rohingyas is however, not one of the aims of this thesis and such an attempt can be another paper in itself. Establishing a concrete and true understanding behind the situation is however one of the aims, which can be recognized as the most crucial step before talking resolution.

³⁷⁴Ibid: 26.

6 Epilogue: Myanmar, a dystopia

The complexity of the crisis associated with the Rohingya community best manifests with the fact that while in the process of working upon this thesis, there were some massive developments in Myanmar that undeniably affected the crisis. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world with a storm, Myanmar also did not remain unscathed. This was already a huge blow to a conflict-ridden country, with a weakening socio-economic structure, when a few months following the 2020 democratic elections, the military overtook the country by a coup in 2021. A country already housing a humanitarian tragedy is shook by these highly testing events, and if this thesis is so far a testament to the intricate difficulties of the situation of the Rohingyas and the associated crisis, adding these two further elements produces a picture as complex as it gets. Since the subject of this thesis is a presently developing situation, I chose to include this longer epilogue to demonstrate that a crisis like this keeps evolving in a multifaceted fashion. Thus, before any discussions on resolution and reconciliation are made, it is important to keep up with the evolving threats and factors which keep us looking ahead.

6.1 Rohingyas in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Throughout human history various epidemics and contagious diseases claimed millions of lives, coronavirus is now one of those. The COVID-19 pandemic hit the humanity such that “we slept in one world and woke up in another”.³⁷⁵ The displaced, the stateless, migrants, persecuted in their own countries are amongst the most severely impacted and exposed in these outbreaks. The highly infectious COVID-19 virus which is said to have originated in Wuhan, China, spread amongst 210 countries very fast, killing and affecting millions and millions all over the world.³⁷⁶ While vaccinations are being administered to lessen the impact of the pandemic, measures such as maintaining social distances, quarantines and isolation as recommended by WHO are the only concrete steps known to combat the virus.³⁷⁷

In such a context, maintaining social distance for those living in cramped spaces is almost impossible, such as for the largest refugee camp in the world, the Rohingyas in Bangladesh’s Cox Bazar which hosts more than a million.³⁷⁸ While there are self-isolation centers reserved

³⁷⁵Diotima Chatteraj, Mallik Akram Hossain, and AKM Ahsan Ullah, “COVID-19 and Rohingya Refugee Camps in Bangladesh,” *Intellectual Discourse* 28, no. 2 (2020): pp. 793.

³⁷⁶*Ibid.*: 794.

³⁷⁷*Ibid.*

³⁷⁸*Ibid.*

only for severe cases, social distancing becomes an enigma in place such as the Kutupalong camp where most of the paths are only two meters wide.³⁷⁹

The conditions in the camps generally poor, appear much severe in the context of pandemic, with social distancing virtually an impossible ask due to the congested situation in camps (approx. 40,000 people within a square kilometer).³⁸⁰ All the other services, such as groceries, schools and health centers are all located within the camps, making congestion worse.³⁸¹ People queue up in the shared and limited toilets, tube wells and bath facilities, in turn creating transmission hotspots.³⁸² The camp dwellers live in dilapidated housing, with overflowing toilets and shortage of food and water becoming some of the more widespread complaints.³⁸³ Additionally, the pandemic initiated an economic crisis which worsened food insecurity, hunger and vulnerabilities of the families, creating conditions where families even send their young children to work to survive.³⁸⁴ Due to the shortage of proper medical equipment, the health care workers themselves were at an extremely high risk of getting the COVID-19 infection.³⁸⁵ Further the lack of isolation and quarantine hubs, limited beds and ill-equipped ICUs forced Rohingya patients to be admitted to the Cox Bazar district hospital which is already overburdened by the patients from the host communities.³⁸⁶

At the beginning, Bangladesh government had to significantly reduce the relief operations to lessen humanitarian contact by 80 percent.³⁸⁷ The aid agencies had to reduce their assistance to absolutely essential only.³⁸⁸ Rohingya refugee and host community volunteers play a majorly significant role in helping contain the spread of the virus in camps.³⁸⁹ As reported by UNHCR, during August 2021 around 4000 and more Rohingyas had received their first COVID-19

³⁷⁹Ibid: 798.

³⁸⁰“Four Things to Know about Covid in the World's Largest Refugee Camp,” Oxfam International, March 11, 2021, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/blogs/four-things-know-about-covid-worlds-largest-refugee-camp>.

³⁸¹Chattoraj, Hossain, and Ullah, 2020: 794.

³⁸²Salma Akter et al., “Investigating the Resilience of Refugee Camps to Covid-19: A Case of Rohingya Settlements in Bangladesh,” *Journal of Migration and Health* 4 (2021): 8.

³⁸³Chattoraj, Hossain, and Ullah, 2020: 801.

³⁸⁴Oxfam International, 2021.

³⁸⁵Rajon Banik et al., “Covid-19 Pandemic and Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh: What Are the Major Concerns?,” *Global Public Health* 15, no. 10 (2020): pp. 1579.

³⁸⁶Akter et al., 2021: 6.

³⁸⁷United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Flooding, Fires and Covid Bring Fresh Challenges for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh,” UNHCR, September 3, 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2021/9/6130c4124/flooding-fires-covid-bring-fresh-challenges-rohingya-refugees-bangladesh.html>.

³⁸⁸Chattoraj, Hossain, and Ullah, 2020: 801.

³⁸⁹“Flooding, Fires and Covid Bring Fresh Challenges for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh,” UNHCR, September 3, 2021.

vaccination inoculations.³⁹⁰ The vaccination drive was organized by Bangladeshi authorities together with the technical expertise offered by UNHCR, WHO and other such humanitarian agencies.³⁹¹ These vaccinations took place after the ruinous monsoon rains ravaged the Cox Bazaar district which lead to multiple casualties as well as severe destruction of thousands of general and medical facilities, further hindering humanitarian aid.³⁹²

In the beginning of the pandemic, there was ample fear and rumors circulating around the camps which caused confusion and apprehensiveness for the Rohingyas.³⁹³ Restricted mobility ensures that Rohingya population is unable to access health services provided by INGOs when they require it the most.³⁹⁴ Further, the lack of internet connection since September 2019 for the Rohingya refugees meant that they could not avail urgent medical care and were either misinformed or uninformed about the COVID-19 threats.³⁹⁵ This was overcome by creating awareness and education through leaflets and digital means by aid workers and community volunteers.³⁹⁶ Mediums such as radio and NGO workers were however found to be the more reliable sources of COVID-19 information amongst the population.³⁹⁷

A gender analysis conducted by Oxfam revealed a worsened condition of women in camps as a result of increased intimate partner violence and domestic violence. They also became vulnerable to other crimes such as sexual harassment and kidnappings as the security became feeble.³⁹⁸ Other factors that made the situation of women more precarious but go unnoticed are that women were severely burdened by unpaid work and household chores, especially the tasks associated with washing and cleaning during the pandemic.³⁹⁹ Additionally, the absence of strategies such as women-friendly spaces and complaint mechanisms, does not ensure that the female population of the Rohingya refugees participates in awareness programs regarding

³⁹⁰Ibid.

³⁹¹“Flooding, Fires and Covid Bring Fresh Challenges for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh,” UNHCR, September 3, 2021.

³⁹²“Rohingya Refugees Receive First Covid Vaccinations in Bangladesh | UN News,” United Nations (United Nations, August 11, 2021), <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/08/1097592>.

³⁹³“Flooding, Fires and Covid Bring Fresh Challenges for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh,” UNHCR, September 3, 2021.

³⁹⁴Chattoraj, Hossain, and Ullah, 2020: 796.

³⁹⁵Rajon Banik et al., “Covid-19 Pandemic and Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh: What Are the Major Concerns?,” *Global Public Health* 15, no. 10 (2020): pp. 1579.

³⁹⁶“Flooding, Fires and Covid Bring Fresh Challenges for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh,” UNHCR, September 3, 2021.

³⁹⁷Akter et al., 2021: 9.

³⁹⁸ “Four Things to Know about Covid in the World's Largest Refugee Camp,” Oxfam International, March 11, 2021.

³⁹⁹Ibid.

COVID-19.⁴⁰⁰ The mental trauma and humiliation experienced by the Rohingya women in their lives back home and in the present also makes them skeptical towards COVID-19 prevention programs and vaccinations.⁴⁰¹

People residing in camp and such settings face discrimination and neglect on a regular basis along with the added stigmatization by the society as well as healthcare workers.⁴⁰² Subjection to such adversities worsen their mental health, increasing PTSD and general anxiety, fear and mistrust which in turn affects their healthcare seeking behavior, therefore further hindering prevention from COVID-19.⁴⁰³ Often, negligence by health care providers in not considering the past socio-psychological traumas of the refugees and forcing them to adopt local means, creates disrespect and mistrust amongst the refugees.⁴⁰⁴ Moreover, differences in language and culture create a communication gap between the refugees and the host communities.⁴⁰⁵ Religious and cultural beliefs often dictate the knowledge and the awareness of COVID-19 in the camp, for example people believed that communal prayer would protect them from the deadly virus.⁴⁰⁶

Borders become more and more conspicuous and in the age of the COVID-19 pandemic, as caring for their own citizens becomes a priority for the nations and is used as a justification to close borders for non-nationals.⁴⁰⁷ Border controls become more prominent as protecting public health from the pandemic becomes a national security concern. Malaysia resorted to tightening its maritime borders and turning back boats as Rohingyas permeating it become a serious concern for the authorities. Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin quoted economic hardships and lacks of resources due to the pandemic as primary reasons for these moves.⁴⁰⁸ Bangladesh revived the proposal to send the incoming refugees and already residing

⁴⁰⁰Akter et al., 2021: 7.

⁴⁰¹Ibid: 10.

⁴⁰²IASC. Interim Guidance Scaling-up COVID-19 Outbreak Readiness and Response Operations in Humanitarian Situations including Camps and Camp-Like Settings. 2020;(March):1–8. Available from: [https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2020-04/IASC Interim Guidance on COVID-19 for Outbreak Readiness and Response Operations - Camps and Camp-like Settings.pdf](https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2020-04/IASC%20Interim%20Guidance%20on%20COVID-19%20for%20Outbreak%20Readiness%20and%20Response%20Operations%20-%20Camps%20and%20Camp-like%20Settings.pdf).

⁴⁰³A K Tay et al. “The culture, mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of Rohingya refugees: a systematic review.” *Epidemiology and psychiatric sciences* vol. 28,5 (2019): 489-494.

⁴⁰⁴Akter et al., 2021: 7.12

⁴⁰⁵Ibid: 10

⁴⁰⁶Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷Tejal Khanna, “Addressing Covid-Infected Maritime Migration in the Bay of Bengal: The Case of Stateless Rohingya Boat People,” *Australian Journal of Maritime & Ocean Affairs* 12, no. 3 (February 2020): pp. 184.

⁴⁰⁸Ibid: 181-182.

refugees in congested camps to the Bhasan Char Island. This proposal earlier coined by Bangladesh was polemic and rejected as the island is prone to persistent natural disasters and flooding, but in the face of the pandemic seeks new justification.⁴⁰⁹

Back in Myanmar, in May 2020, the Myanmar military took a decision to implement ceasefire till the end of August in order to carry out COVID-19 prevention and treatment operations “effectively and rapidly”.⁴¹⁰ The conditional ceasefire however, applied to “all areas except where terrorist groups declared by the government take positions” which refers specifically to the Arakan army.⁴¹¹ Myanmar was slow to detect the risk of the pandemic and implement prevention procedures timely. After WHO declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic, Myanmar government created a committee chaired by state counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi.⁴¹² When the pandemic hit, Myanmar still had a complicated “mixed” form of power divided between the government and the military, next to a fragile health care system, the pandemic posed as a gravely debilitating force, complicating the ability to prepare and respond aptly to the pandemic.⁴¹³ An effective response against the pandemic which covered the entire country entailed an unparalleled coordination and support amongst the government, ethnic armed groups and the military along a wide range of activities such as information dispersal, prevention and surveillance.⁴¹⁴

In April 2020, the president’s office formed a committee to facilitate coordination with ethnic armed groups in terms of information sharing, returning migrant workers, suspected cases, treatment and contact tracing.⁴¹⁵ In this respect, government’s position seemed evolved from March to late April, where in the beginning Ministry of Health’s COVID-19 response substantially excluded the ethnic health providers, the revised plan emphasized for a “unified response” and “inclusive mechanisms that encourage coordination”.⁴¹⁶

The Rakhine state however seemed devoid of such a cooperation where the conflict between the military and Arakan army continued.⁴¹⁷ Even though declaration of a national ceasefire

⁴⁰⁹Ibid: 182.

⁴¹⁰International Crisis Group. “Conflict, Health Cooperation and COVID-19 in Myanmar.” International Crisis Group, 2020: 4.

⁴¹¹Ibid.

⁴¹²Ibid: 7.

⁴¹³Ibid: 5-6.

⁴¹⁴Ibid: 7.

⁴¹⁵Ibid: 8.

⁴¹⁶Ibid: 9.

⁴¹⁷Ibid: 11.

itself could be considered a constructive move, if the military's interests were deemed threatened by it due to certain aspects of the increasing cooperation, there remained a risk that the military sabotages progress made.⁴¹⁸

6.2 2021 Coup d'état

On the 73rd session of the United Nation General Assembly, the Union Minister for the office of the state Counsellor and Chairman of the delegation of the republic of the Union of Myanmar, U Kyaw Tint Swe delivered a statement emphasizing the importance of Myanmar to translate into a true democracy:

"We are convinced that ethnic strife and armed conflicts in Myanmar can only be ended through political means. Lasting peace will become a reality only when the democratic federal union to which our people aspired is established.

*Resolving the issue in Rakhine is an important component of our democratic process. [...]"*⁴¹⁹

On February 1st 2021, the Myanmar military detained State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as well as President U Win Myint, forcibly taking control of the country on grounds of alleged electoral fraud in the election of November 2020.⁴²⁰

Myanmar's general election was held on November 8, 2020 despite the appeals of postponement from several political parties and an even greater cause, the global pandemic.⁴²¹ This second election was after the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) exited the government in 2015 and once again clearly indicated win in favor of Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) for another five-year term.⁴²² Post staging the coup and seizing control of the state, the military cited the reasons for the overthrow to have

⁴¹⁸Ibid: 9.

⁴¹⁹"Statement by H.E U Kyaw Tint Swe, Union Minister for the office of the State Counsellor and Chairman of the delegation of the Republic of Union of Myanmar, at the general debate of the 73rd session of the United Nation General Assembly, "(Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Myanmar, September 28, 2018), <https://www.mofa.gov.mm/statement-by-h-e-u-kyaw-tint-swe-union-minister-for-the-office-of-the-state-counsellor-and-chairman-of-the-delegation-of-the-republic-o>.

⁴²⁰Vandana Sharma et al., "Covid-19 and a Coup: Blockage of Internet and Social Media Access Further Exacerbate Gender-Based Violence Risks for Women in Myanmar," *BMJ Global Health* 6, no. 6 (2021): 1.

⁴²¹Nehginpao Kipgen (2021) The 2020 Myanmar election and the 2021 coup: deepening democracy or widening division?, *Asian Affairs*, 52:1, 1.

⁴²²Ibid.

been essential due to election commission's inability to address election fraud, protest from people unhappy with the election results and the refusal for postponement of the new parliament session.⁴²³ State counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi has been detained since the coup and faces multiple charges that could lead to a long prison sentence along with military appointed election commission suggestions to dissolve her party.⁴²⁴

The coup further triggered widespread public uprising in Myanmar with the citizens fashioning a civil disobedience movement to protest the military takeover and urging for the restoration of democracy.⁴²⁵ In response of the protests, the security forces resorted to violence not only against the protestors but later also against the general population to suppress the people into accepting the military rule.⁴²⁶

Over the span of 60 years, Myanmar military attempted to suppress every other ethnic minority or entity that strived to gain political representation.⁴²⁷ Myanmar's most recent coup reflects the constitutional crisis, grave internal conflicts and setbacks in concrete democratization.⁴²⁸ Precisely six months after the coup, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing announced the creation of a caretaker government with him as the Prime Minister taking place temporarily with the plan of holding elections again in 2023 and facilitating a transfer of power (in hopes of him becoming the civilian president). However, a few weeks later the name of the temporary caretaker government was switched to a more standard usage in Myanmar to that of a Union government, without any further reasoning.⁴²⁹ The ensuing violence on top of a brutal seizure of power however does not indicate a smooth end of the military rule and follow up with the said political program in the near future.⁴³⁰

Post the coup, amidst widespread violence that spread to most cities and towns and even rural areas, Myanmar spiraled into an economic crisis where the banking system is barely

⁴²³Ibid: 12.

⁴²⁴Su Myat Han et al., "Military Coup during Covid-19 Pandemic and Health Crisis in Myanmar," *BMJ Global Health* 6, no. 4 (2021): 10.

⁴²⁵International Crisis Group. "The Cost of the Coup: Myanmar Edges Toward State Collapse." International Crisis Group, 2021 :1.

⁴²⁶Ibid.

⁴²⁷Seinenu M. Thein-Lemelson, "'Politicide' and the Myanmar Coup," *Anthropology Today* 37, no. 2 (2021): pp: 5.

⁴²⁸Ibid: 3.

⁴²⁹International Crisis Group. "The Deadly Stalemate in Post-Coup Myanmar." International Crisis Group, 2021: 9-10.

⁴³⁰"The Cost of the Coup: Myanmar Edges Toward State Collapse." International Crisis Group, 2021: 15.

functioning, transportation and logistics paralyzed, and ports become impaired.⁴³¹ Basic ministry operations, buses, trains, hospitals and local administration all bore the brunt of aftermath of the coup.

The coup fails to remain an internal disturbance but becomes a security challenge for the entire region. A really immense rupture as a result of the coup and crippling democracy is the situation of the Rohingya community as well as the conflict in Rakhine state, the resolution of which becomes a question mark in an already severe situation.⁴³² The escalation of violence indicates an even stronger refugee flow into neighboring countries.⁴³³ Additionally, the chances of repatriation of the refugees residing in Bangladesh camps diminishes.⁴³⁴

Other than an escalation of violence, the minorities persecution worsened further and additionally several groups of protesters and communities started forming militias as means of protection and retaliation.⁴³⁵ Some of which started consorting with ethnic armed groups for training.⁴³⁶ While the rest of the world fights the global pandemic, Myanmar citizens suffer a multifold weight of internal conflict and fighting for their democracy while not catching respite from COVID-19 as the humanitarian access also faces hindrance.⁴³⁷ The planned COVID-19 vaccination program in 2021 was also disrupted.⁴³⁸ Medical staff, doctors and nurses have been part of protests and strikes as part of the Civil Disobedience Movement.⁴³⁹ Myanmar's health care system was shattered, unable to bear the brunt of disruptions created by the Military takeover on top of an intense COVID-19 wave in Myanmar which claimed thousands.⁴⁴⁰

The coup points to the military's aspirations of power, control and the personal ambition of the leaders more than profits.⁴⁴¹ On March 27, while the troops shot dead hundreds of unarmed civilians, the military celebrated the Armed Forces Day by holding lavish parades of troops

⁴³¹Ibid: 2.

⁴³²Ibid: 3.

⁴³³Ibid.

⁴³⁴Ibid: 15.

⁴³⁵"The Deadly Stalemate in Post-Coup Myanmar." International Crisis Group, 2021: 5.

⁴³⁶Ibid.

⁴³⁷Su Myat Han et al., (2021): 1.

⁴³⁸Ibid.

⁴³⁹"The Deadly Stalemate in Post-Coup Myanmar." International Crisis Group, 2021: 9.

⁴⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴⁴¹"Responding to the Myanmar Coup." International Crisis Group, 2021: 18.

and weapons. In this event, the officials from all of Myanmar's neighbors- China, India, Bangladesh, Thailand and Laos as well as from Pakistan, Russia and Vietnam were present.⁴⁴²

Although the military leaders seem not easily deterred by criticism from outside actors anymore, it is important that they do not validate or legitimize the military regime and its use of brutal force on its people.⁴⁴³ International actors in this situation need to form a tricky balance to not legitimize the rule while keeping the channels for diplomacy, communication and humanitarian aid open.⁴⁴⁴ Outside actors, neighboring countries, ASEAN members are however also motivated by their own political and economic interests. Where ASEAN has been considered best placed for diplomatic communication, the discord amongst its member driven by self-interest could be counterproductive.

A possibility in the long run out of the post-coup crisis could be that it brings an empathetic understanding between the Burman majority and ethnic minorities together with a political readjustment that aids a lasting reconciliation to century-old resentments, this all being contingent on when the democracy is restored.⁴⁴⁵ For now, the Rohingyas of Myanmar remain stateless, persecuted and scattered while Myanmar struggles with political turmoil in a backdrop of ethnic violence, worsening economic crisis, rising food insecurity, poverty collapsing health system reeling from a grave COVID-19 outbreak.⁴⁴⁶

The ongoing pandemic has been that challenging event that is shared by everyone globally. However, the impacts of it are felt differently all over the world and are felt especially severely by the most vulnerable populations. The Rohingya community becomes a prime example, with a stateless status that prevents them from being considered to be protected back home where they remain a persecuted minority and scattered outside of Myanmar in meagre conditions in dilapidated camps. In the meanwhile, the democratic fabric of Myanmar which was already fragile, crumbles further with the coup. When the Rohingyas could not be protected in a democratic Myanmar, the chances for the alleviation of their situation worsen more under an autocratic Military rule, where the military leaves no stone unturned to violently suppress the

⁴⁴²Thein-Lemelson, 2021: 2.

⁴⁴³ "The Cost of the Coup: Myanmar Edges Toward State Collapse." International Crisis Group, 2021: 3.

⁴⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁴⁵The Cost of the Coup: Myanmar Edges Toward State Collapse." International Crisis Group, 2021:12.

⁴⁴⁶"The Deadly Stalemate in Post-Coup Myanmar." International Crisis Group, 2021: 8.

general population, let alone a persecuted minority. What happens forward for Rohingyas is still a long road down but for now understanding the complexity of their situation and the gravity of their suffering in a crisis that continuously steps into uncharted territory, becomes a solid ground to begin.

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