

Statelessness and Ethnic Cleansing of the Rohingyas in Myanmar: Time for Serious International Intervention

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Abstract: *This article critically examines the decades-long statelessness and systematic persecution of the Rohingyas, a Muslim minority in the predominantly Buddhist country of Myanmar. Lately, direct perpetrators behind many of the mass atrocities against this group have included members of the military, police, and ultra-nationalists, while Buddhist monks vowing to “cleanse” Myanmar of Muslims have served as deadly instigators. The Rohingyas’ helplessness and misery in the face of state-endorsed ethnic cleansing have largely gone unheeded by the world community, and are exemplified by the staggering numbers in human casualty, loss of property, and homelessness. The increased flow of refugees fleeing the violence has also created a humanitarian crisis, that if left unaddressed, would likely lead to the potential destabilization of the region. In view of the Myanmar state’s reluctance to protect the Rohingyas, any effort in resolution must be initiated in collaboration with international government and non-government organizations capable and genuine in warranting the viability and success of such a process.*

1. Introduction

Located in Southeast Asia, Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) is one of the world’s poorest countries. Its Gross Domestic Product

of US\$65 billion in 2015 was ranked 208 out of 227 countries, placing it among the world's lower income countries (World Bank, 2015). Having recently emerged from 50 years of military rule however, Myanmar is now undergoing a series of political and social reforms that have included the release of political prisoners, the granting of operating rights to privately-owned newspapers, and the holding of its first post-junta elections in 2015. Although key institutions are still held by the military, the recent general elections saw the victory of the opposition National Democratic League (NDL), led by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

However, not all groups have benefited from Myanmar's democratization. Missing out on the country's new political openness are the Rohingyas, an ethnic Muslim minority living in the western state of Rakhine. Deprived of citizenship, the Rohingyas have no access to jobs, healthcare, education, or freedom of movement inside the country. The situation has worsened in recent years as their persistent discrimination and exclusion have been increasingly accompanied by hate-fueled and systematic violence in incidents akin to ethnic cleansing. To date, thousands of Rohingyas have perished, while hundreds of thousands more have sought refuge in squalid camps within Myanmar and neighboring countries. What has ensued is a humanitarian crisis of grave proportion, which if allowed to spread, will result in serious social and political problems not only in Myanmar but also throughout the region.

2. Identity, Statelessness, and Ethnic Cleansing

For societies that had undergone European colonization, ethnic minority identity tends to be expressed and contextualized through the processes of modern state formation (Tajuddin, 2012: 6-8). Although the development of such identity usually precedes the

formation of a country's larger national identity, in new multiethnic settings, it often ends up socially and politically subordinated to that of an emergent dominant group identity. This is especially so when the dominant group has the power to articulate the national character of the country based on the primordial elements of its own culture and versions of history (Esman, 2004: 30-2).

This means that the process of national identity formation simultaneously involves subtle references of certain minorities and their cultures as inferior to and thus incompatible with the national culture and its accompanying characteristics (Triandafylliadou, 1989: 596-99). The deliberate depiction of a minority's identity as marginal, divergent, and sub-standard enables the dominant group to justify social distances between itself and the minority group, and thereby maintain control over them. Ultimately, the minority's low social status as well as distinct ethnic, racial and cultural identity serves to validate their marginalization and unequal standing within the country's political, social, and economic structure. The more contrasting the identity, the more perceivably "unfit" the minority is deemed to be as members of that neighborhood, region, or country (Macionis and Parillo, 2004: 47-48). When discriminatory and exclusionary actions become more explicit and intense, a vicious cycle emerges that subjects the group to conditions of unending powerlessness, isolation, and politically damaging consequences (Esman, 2004:120-25). This includes denying the minority group full access to resources or even excluding them altogether from legal recognition of their rights through non-citizenship.

Despite the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 15:2) stating that "everyone has the right to a nationality," many countries continue to refuse citizenship to certain ethnic groups within their populations. In her study of Korean and migrant minority groups in Japan, Chen Tien-Shi (2012: 74-5) mentioned

that nearly 10,000 children in that country are still “stateless” since they are not considered Japanese and therefore not eligible for citizenship under the country’s *jus sanguinis* nationality laws. Similarly, these children are often technically unable to also obtain formal citizenship in their parents’ countries of origins. This has reduced their lives in Japan to resemble a form of indefinite detention as they become trapped in long-term deprivation of basic rights to higher education, healthcare, and freedom of travel.

Similarly, Barany’s (2002: 44) study of the Roma (Gypsies) highlights how European governments have shown reluctance to confer citizenship and full rights to this traditionally outcast group. A large part of this is attributed to the European historical perception of the Romas as a dreaded and menacing minority. Lacking security and protection, Romas have often been targeted and scapegoated for problems affecting their host countries, especially during periods of crisis and instability. As recently as 2010, a troubled France under Nicolas Sarkozy saw the deportation of thousands of Romas to Romania, which ironically also happened to be a member of the European Union (Saltmarsh, 2010). This shows that as stateless people, the Romas are often not given the same rights nor equal treatment as other European Union citizens.

The causal link between ethnic or racial identity, statelessness, and ethnic cleansing is not necessarily direct or inevitable. The final outcome is very much contingent upon the degree of social-economic differences and distances separating the identities of the dominant group, represented by the state, and the minority group. In the examples of Uganda under Idi Amin and Serbia under Slobodan Milosevic, these differences were visibly salient and exploited by elites as a means to consolidate their power at the expense of vulnerable minorities, leading to their mass expulsion and ethnic

cleansing (Esman, 1994: 40-41). In many cases too, as illustrated in Tajuddin & Stern's (2015) study of the Dutch-Indonesian hybrid minority in the aftermath of the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies, the level and context of political, economic, or cultural threat that the minority seemingly poses to the dominant group, whether immediate or impending, real or perceived, can render co-existence between different identities rather challenging and difficult. In such cases, severe deprivation of minority rights can lead to very disastrous consequences for the group.

The solution to the problem can only be made possible in third party collaborative intervention. As Steiner (2009: 70) notes, third party assistance in the form of a single neighboring country is often inadequate and temporary due to the lack of resources many such countries face. What is needed instead is the unaffected collaboration of influential countries and groups across the globe, who are able to concertedly persuade, incentivize, or threaten the aggressing party into permanently halting its actions. At the core of these efforts include the stakes and interests each party has and could bring to the table to quickly end the conflict. The example of East Timor from 1997 to 2002 illustrated this. Then, western non-government organizations, in collaboration with local Indonesian civic groups, were able to convince their governments the political benefits in pressuring the Indonesian state to end its suppression of the Timorese minority (Rolls 2003, p. 178). The effort was successful and resulted in the eventual granting of Timorese independence.

In a world system of states, each country is recognized with total sovereignty over the implementation of their nationality laws. Unfortunately, in times of heightened ethnic tensions, minorities who are stateless and socially disparaged often find themselves the least shielded against not only discriminatory state policies but also citizen-led xenophobia and violence (Bernstein, 2006: 45-50).

Without the intervention of third parties, the dominant group, through the use of the state, often becomes unrestrained in taking the harshest measure in resolving their “minority problem.”

3. The Rohingyas as Stateless People

The story of the Rohingya in western Myanmar illustrates how the extreme “othering” of a minority’s identity has led to its long-term marginalization and eventual inability to gain formal citizenship. To the Arakan Buddhists, the Rohingyas are seen as racially, religiously, and culturally distinct from the Burmese, and whose identity is looked at as more similar to groups from the Indian sub-continent. Such reductive perception is just too simplistic, of course. The Rohingya identity, has in fact, been historically diverse. As early as the ninth century, Muslim settlements had already been well placed along the western shores of what is now Myanmar. Later in the fifteenth century, a Burmese King, Min Saw Mon, ascended the Burmese throne through the help of the Muslim Sultan of Bengal. After conquering Arakan (Rakhine), he rewarded his Bengal attendants with parts of the region. This not only expanded the Muslim population there, but it also further diversified their cultural characteristics (Chan, 2005: 388-89). By the end of the eighteenth century, the name “Rooingya” had been documented by the British as reference to the mix of Muslim populations in western Burma (Ibrahim and Nordin, 2015: 4).

Britain’s colonization of Burma in 1824 further transformed the demographics of the Arakan region. Burma’s absorption into the larger British Indian Empire created a porous border between the adjacent regions of Chittagong in Bengal and Arakan in Burma that fostered unrestricted movements of people and goods across these territories. The British especially, were responsible for bringing

various Bengali-speaking groups to serve as market intermediaries as well as manual labor for the burgeoning colonial economy in Burma. Over the years, Buddhist resentment against Muslims and Indians often culminated in intermittent riots that left substantial casualties among the Rohingyas (Yegar, 2008: 29-31). It worsened under the Japanese occupation and the ensuing decolonization of India, Pakistan, and Burma when the fervor of ethno-nationalist sentiments ran exceptionally high.

With the creation of a newly-independent Union of Burma in 1948, Muslims who had been in Rakhine for generations were only accorded resident status by the state. Realizing their marginalized treatment as interminable, Arakanese Muslims began demanding for separate statehood. While several civic and student groups were able to generate substantial following from among the more educated segments of the community, it was the *Mujahid* which effectively forged a secessionist movement under a formal Rohingya identity. Through the use of arms, the *Mujahid* were able to carry out a limited but relatively well-organized insurrection against the Burmese government. It was effectively stifled however, when in 1954, a United Nations-brokered negotiation resulted in Pakistan arresting and jailing the movement's leader (Yegar, 2002: 53).¹ The gradual disbanding of the *Mujahid* allowed the Burmese army to deepen its raids into Rohingya hamlets and villages on the pretense of flushing out remnants of the insurgency. This was the beginning of state initiated violence against the minority group.

In 1962, General Ne Win swept into power in Burma through a military coup. His *Burmese Way* policy included the nationalizing of all private enterprises, which effectively drove many ethnic Indian and Muslim traders out of the country (Chan, 2005: 413). The

¹ Bangladesh, which borders Burma, was at the time East Pakistan.

majority of Muslims in Arakan, however, were mostly farmers who had nowhere to go and did not feel as threatened by the policy. This did not mean that they were exempted from state discriminatory actions, however. In 1982, a Citizenship Law virtually stripped many Rohingyas of legal residency and the chance to apply for a more permanent national status. The new law enabled the state to forcefully scrutinize citizenship through the issuance of three categories of color-coded cards; pink cards for full citizens, blue for associate citizenship, and green for naturalized. The law however, stipulated that the Rohingyas were not a recognized ethnic group in Myanmar, and therefore could not qualify for any of those cards (Azad, 2017).

Today, there are approximately 1.33 million Rohingyas, or 2.6 percent of Myanmar's total population. The majority is mostly found in the northern part of Rakhine state, in and around the three townships of Maungdaw, Buthidaung, and Ruthidaung, which are among the poorest localities in an already impoverished region. For the Rohingyas, the systematic discrimination and statelessness over the last seventy years has left them in dismal need of the basic means of sustaining their families. More importantly, the Rohingyas' overwhelming poverty and preclusion from any possibility of citizenship have affected the life-chances of their children. As it stands, public resources such as healthcare and education are reserved only for citizens. Additionally, Rohingyas are also barred from any government employment, closing them off from occupations in schools, the health sector, and military (Southwick, 2015: 139). Worse, the absence of state protection has left the Rohingyas helpless against the ruthless actions of government forces, whose "security" campaigns have killed hundreds of people. It is also not uncommon for the military to randomly confiscate properties

belonging to the Rohingyas as well as recruit men, women, and even children into forced labor (Lallah, 2000: 10).

Buddhist resentment against the Rohingya has largely been two-fold; one, is the insistence that the latter are first and foremost “outsiders,” and second, that they present a serious and unnecessary strain on the already scarce resources in the state, where the poverty rate is 80 percent (UN Population Fund, 2014). Although economic backwardness in Rakhine had more to do with Myanmar’s decades-long isolationist policy, there is a long-held belief among Arakan Buddhists that the Rohingyas have been siphoning away local resources and thus responsible for the indigent conditions afflicting the state (Aung-Thwin, 2014: 210). There is also an erroneous and exaggerated perception of a huge and exploding Rohingya population that would soon outnumber Buddhists. Thus in some areas, a two-child policy is enforced on Rohingya families, the failure to abide by which can result in hefty fines or even incarceration.

Hence, denying the Rohingyas legal presence serves to sustain their identity and status as foreigners, and along with it, their continuing exclusion and disempowerment. This explains why even the name “Rohingya” is banned in official broadcasts and narratives since the term denotes the group’s historical connection to Burma (Solomon, 2016). In this regard, the state has often pandered to majority Buddhist sentiments as a way to gain support for and legitimize its own dictatorial authority. When the new democratically-elected NDL government came to power, the same political posture was maintained in order to not further upset the ethnic Arakans who had overwhelmingly voted for their own hardline Arakan Nationalist Party in the last elections. Thus, when the government carried out its first census in thirty years in 2014, the state made sure to appease Buddhist wishes in Arakan by mandating Rohingyas to register themselves as “Bengalis,” a term historically

used to refer and implicate them as interlopers from Bangladesh. The contention that the Rohingyas do not officially exist in Myanmar was recently reaffirmed by Armed forces chief Min Aung Hlain who bragged during a formal event that: “We have already let the world know that we don’t have Rohingya in our country” (Murdoch, 2017).

4. Ethnic Cleansing Amidst Reform

The international sanctions imposed on Myanmar over its repressive military rule had begun to noticeably impact the country’s economy, whose rising unemployment and inflation were stirring concerns within the state about possible civil unrests (Southwick, 2015: 142). This was a one of the main reasons behind the state’s 2010 constitutional reforms, which included the eventual holding of elections and negotiations for an end to major conflicts with various ethnic rebels in the states of Kachin and Shan. The European Union and the United States—delighted that a more open Myanmar meant access to markets, investments, and untapped resources in that country—began lifting their embargos to further incentivize the state toward greater political and economic liberalization.

However, Myanmar’s nascent reforms have not included conferring rights to the Rohingyas, and have done little to alleviate the continuing violence and persecution against them. In fact, the reform has permitted new forms of free speech that are grounded on intolerance toward Muslims. The last few years saw an increase of these coming primarily from Buddhist monks, who have exploited the new freedom of expression to incite hatred against Muslims. Among the notorious ones has been Ashin Wirathu, an Abbott of the Maoeyein monastery in Mandalay, who also heads the ultra-nationalist *Ba Ma Tha* (Protection of Race and Religion) organization. In many of his incendiary sermons, Wirathu

consistently refers to Muslims as “bad people” and that Buddhists must “now rise up, to make your blood boil” (Beech, 2013). His racist vitriol has been connected to numerous violent attacks on Muslims in Rakhine state as well as other parts of Myanmar that have left hundreds dead and thousands more homeless. Explicit in his loathing of Rohingyas and Muslims, Wirathu once responded to allegations of sexual assaults on Rohingya women by saying: “Impossible...their bodies are too disgusting” (Oppenheim, 2017).

The *Ba Ma Tha* already has branches in 250 of Myanmar’s 330 townships and a massive following of millions of ordinary citizens (Thin, 2014). A traditional reverence for the clergy as well as fear of reprisals has refrained those who disagree with his ideas from publicly criticizing him and his organization. However, there is also a general sentiment running deep in Burmese society that the Rohingyas are cultural outsiders who are also racially inferior and do not deserve a place in Burmese society. Thus the majority in Myanmar silently agree that the Rohingyas are inassimilable and therefore ineligible for citizenship (Aung-Thwin, 2014: 211).

The United Nations, the Human Rights Watch, and several world aid organizations have also provided evidence of systematic torture, beatings, and killings of Rohingya villagers by the military during its “clearing operations.” In retaliation against the killing of nine border guards, two major assaults on Rohingya villages in 2016 resulted in 192 people dead and 146,000 uprooted from their homes. According to a United Nations Commission of Human Rights (UNCHR) report (2017), assaults, detentions, and summary executions by armed men have been quite rampant, in which victims’ ages ranged anywhere from 2 to 70 years (UNCHR, 2017:13-18). Meanwhile, many young girls and women have been sexually assaulted and gang-raped by members of the military, often in front of family members. It is also not uncommon for security forces to torch whole villages to the

ground, along with their crops, forcing survivors to flee to camps as internally displaced people (UNCHR, 2017: 32-33).

For the Myanmar state, these camps conveniently serve to collectively trap and isolate Rohingyas from the rest of the population, preparing them perhaps for gradual expulsion. But for the Rohingyas, the living conditions in these camps are fetid at best. Resembling open-air ghettos, detainees languish in filthy surroundings, where the ratio of people to make-shift latrines is around two-hundred to one. Their futures here have been uncertain and unsafe. With nowhere to go and movements out of the camps made possible only through issuance of permits, many often fall prey to extortion and robbery. More significantly, without adequate medicinal supplies, running water, and sanitation, the health situation of the Rohingyas is also in urgent need of aid. Thus far, the international organization *Mèdecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) provides the primary medical services for the Rohingya community. Working under strict state surveillance, MSF clinics service around 750,000 people (Dizard, 2015). Without the MSF, Rohingyas would be left without any lifeline to the most rudimentary healthcare. Their infant mortality rate is around 135 out of 100,000 live births, compared to the national average of 77. Since more than 50 percent of households have no reliable access to basic foods, acute malnutrition rates range from 15 to 19 percent of the population, while that of severe acute malnutrition is about 5 percent (World Food Program, 2011: 11). Despite this, MSF was temporarily expelled from Myanmar in 2014 after Buddhist residents complained that the organization had shown too much favoritism toward Muslims. Along with this was the raiding of other agencies including the Red Cross, resulting in the evacuation of around 700 international aid workers. These agencies were only allowed to reenter the country after agreeing to grant Buddhists logistical control of medicinal supplies and treatments (Kuntz, 2015).

Rohingyas who have been able to voluntarily leave Myanmar have done exactly that. Most have sold all their possessions or borrowed large sums of money to illegally migrate and settle in other countries. Among them, there are an estimated 200,000 in Saudi Arabia, 350,000 in Pakistan, and about 14,000 in the United Arab Emirates. Despite being away from their country, many across the diaspora have endured a similarly precarious existence since none of these countries intends to extend to them any form of citizenship. Even neighboring Bangladesh, which has currently received over 500,000 Rohingyas, is hesitant in recognizing them as “Bengalis.” As an overpopulated and impoverished country, Bangladesh prefers to contain newer refugees in makeshift camps, whose shacks are so rickety that when a cyclone hit the area in May 2017, all of them were virtually destroyed (Najar & Sattar, 2017). Since many of the camps are also located along a picturesque stretch of Bangladesh’s touristy beaches, plans are being made to move them out of the area onto an alluvial and flood-prone island further north.

The primary destination for many Rohingyas however, has been Malaysia. Thousands have made their perilous journeys to this predominantly Muslim and prosperous country, where local charities have provided temporary housing, medical services, and schooling for an increasingly emergent refugee community. As it stands, there are around 150,000 Rohingyas here, where many make their living inside the country’s invisible economy as lowly-paid laborers. Malaysia has, however, recently made some progress in further accommodating the Rohingyas in the form of a pilot program that officially allows refugees to work in certain plantation and manufacturing sectors where cheap manual labor is urgently needed (Goh, 2017). Despite this, Rohingyas are still ineligible for citizenship and will continue to live amidst the growing uneasiness and suspicion of the local population.

Unfortunately, those fleeing to Thailand have fared worse as many often end up trafficked into forced labor or simply abandoned at sea by profiteers and smugglers. The Thai state has not generally been sympathetic to the plight of the refugees. Between 2013 and 2014 it deported nearly 1,500 Rohingyas to Myanmar. But recent discovery of mass graves containing bodies of Rohingya refugees in southern Thailand has prompted authorities to become a little more transparent in addressing the human trafficking problem, although with little success. Today, instead of deportation, neighboring countries often process Rohingyas for resettlement elsewhere in Europe, Australia, or North America. Notwithstanding this, third countries have shown very little or no willingness at all to permanently accept them. For years now, refugees continue to wait indeterminately in detention centers, where abuse has become increasingly widespread (Kingsley, 2016).

The deteriorating conditions of the Rohingyas have some experts fear of an impending genocide erupting in Rakhine (Southwick, 2015: 143). According to genocide expert Daniel Feierstein (2014), there are six empirical stages that an ethnic group goes through in the process of undergoing genocide. They are stigmatization and dehumanization; harassment, violence and terror; isolation and segregation; systematic weakening; mass annihilation; and removal from collective history. In applying this theory, the International State Crime Initiative (ISCI) at the Queen Mary University of London reports that the Rohingyas are on the verge of the fifth stage, which is mass annihilation (Iyengar, 2015). This conclusion was based on compelling evidence that much of the attacks, including *en masse* killings, have been premeditated and organized by local authorities to ultimately expel Rohingyas from Myanmar (Kiersons, 2015). Special reports by the United Nations seem to corroborate the

argument that the palpable persecution, expulsion, and massacres have been part of a larger plan to sequester the new generation of Rohingyas from national life, and thus bring the whole group nearer to physical displacement and cultural annihilation (UNCHR, 2017:40-43).

One would be forgiven to assume that the recent democratization in Myanmar would have introduced policies aimed at ending ethnic persecution in Rakhine. This is especially so with the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, who had spent more than twenty years under house arrest during military rule and was responsible for helping the NDL to victory in Myanmar's 2015 elections. Instead of aiding the plight of the suppressed minority, Suu Kyi often goes beyond giving measured responses when asked about the crisis. Having excluded Muslim candidates to run for office in the recent elections, Suu Kyi has flatly denied any crime being inflicted against Muslims. On other occasions, she has consistently alluded the problem in Rakhine to an "illegal immigration issue" (Ross, 2017). Such statements reflect the official stance of the state, which has adamantly refused to allow the Rohingya issue become a discussion point in any negotiations involving economic aid or political relations. So far, it has had its way, seeing that foreign direct investments from 2013 to 2016 more than doubled from US\$4.1 billion to US\$9.8 billion (Business News, 2016). Similarly, tourism has now become a major driving force of the local economy, which rose from mere 800,000 visitors in 2010 to 4.7million in 2015 (Foxe, 2016).

The general apathy by the international community of states toward the Rohingyas stems mainly from the projected economic benefits acquired from maintaining good relations with the Myanmar government. At the core of this relationship is non-interference in its internal affairs. This approach in international relations however,

places the international community in tacit complicity with the Myanmar state. It not only goes against the spirit of civilizational morality, but can also become increasingly unsustainable in long-term social, political, and economic costs. The next sections will discuss the various reasons the Rohingya crisis needs to be resolved and the possible ways it can be attained.

5. Time for Serious International Intervention

There are several pressing reasons why the international community should seriously intervene in the Rohingya crisis. First and foremost, the mass atrocities inflicted against the Rohingyas are clear crimes against humanity. Members of the civilized world, represented by the international community, must utilize every institutional instrument available to prevent a full-blown genocide from occurring. While the Bosnian and Rwandan tragedies in the 1990s stand to remind the international community how their inaction had led to the additional loss of tens of thousands of lives, it was not until 2005 that a formal collective response came to fruition. At the World Summit that year, member countries of the United Nations overwhelmingly endorsed the principle of *Responsibility to Protect* (RtoP), which obliges each country to do all it can to protect its people from any form of ethnic cleansing and thereby prevent any likelihood of genocide. It goes on to mention that where the state is unwilling or incapable of fulfilling this responsibility, then the onus shifts to the broader international community to collaboratively act, first through the use of non-violent means and diplomacy, and then if need be, through the deployment of international forces (United Nations, 2017).

The use of the RtoP principle is inarguably applicable to the Rohingyas. Yet, despite the numerous propositional reports submitted by the various corollary committees of the UN, there has

been little in the way of substantive action on the part of the larger organization itself to intervene in Myanmar. The body's Security Council, for example, has not yet referred any of the findings to the International Criminal Court (Southwick, 2015:148). This has resulted in the effectual impunity of individuals and groups involved in the atrocities and their potential ability to strike again without fear of reprisal or arrest. As often the case, what becomes prioritized in terms of policy action by the UN is contingent upon what is considered politically and economically important to the interests of the upper tier countries within the organization. The near-genocide of the Rohingyas do not seem to be among their primary areas of interest.

The wider international community as articulated in the RtoP also includes neighboring countries and regional blocs. In Southeast Asia, ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) has assumed the primary forum for discussing and promoting the region's social, economic, and security interests. In 1997, Myanmar was admitted as a full member of ASEAN. Neither the ruthlessness of its military regime nor the ensuing atrocities perpetrated by the state against the Rohingyas elicited any admonishment from Myanmar's ASEAN colleagues. This is hardly surprising considering that the organization takes on an insistently "neutral" and non-interventionist stand with regards to the internal policies of other member states. Furthermore, none of the other member countries themselves have ever been thought of as full democracies. For instance, Thailand and the Philippines too have historically oppressed their own Muslim minorities, who in turn have waged persistent and often bitter secessionist wars against their respective states.

In recent years however, both the UN and ASEAN have become more manifestly assertive in addressing the Rohingya issue. For instance, the 47-member UN Human Rights Council has recently

approved an inaugural multi-national fact-finding team to formally investigate the increased crackdown on the Rohingya community by government troops in Rakhine (Cumming-Bruce, 2017). The success of this mission has yet to be seen, and is very much dependent on the cooperation of the Myanmar state. As it stands now however, the state has rejected the planned investigation as unacceptable. Already in January 2017, ethnic Rakhine Members of Parliament from the Arakan National Party had refused to meet UN special rapporteur Yanghee Li when the latter arrived in Sittwe, the state capital, for a special probe into the killing of Rohingyas by the military (Kyaw, 2017).

Meanwhile, ASEAN's two largest Muslim member-countries, Malaysia and Indonesia, have also publicly voiced their concerns about the situation in Myanmar. In an unprecedented response to the 2016 Rohingya massacre, Prime Minister Najib Razak called for the UN to "do something" about the situation in Rakhine because "the world cannot sit by and watch genocide taking place" (Ng, 2016). Later, Malaysia also hosted a special meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to discuss the current Rohingya crisis with other Muslim countries. At the same time, Indonesian President Joko Widodo met with Aung San Suu Kyi to express his worries about the persecution of Muslims in Myanmar. Notwithstanding this, the Rohingya issue did not make its way into the official agenda of the 30th ASEAN Summit held in Manila in April, 2017.

Admittedly, international government organizations lack the capacity to directly intervene in a national crisis since they are often hampered not only by the absence of a supra-governmental jurisdiction, but also by the contesting interests of individual member-countries. As conditions for Rohingyas in Rakhine deteriorate, the urgency for these groups and their member states to

extend their responsibilities beyond their primary associational goals and national interests will become more apparent. Failure to act and prevent further violence and persecution against the Rohingyas would entail catastrophic social, political, and economic costs at both the regional and national levels. In the long term, these costs could outweigh any short-term advantages in remaining silent and oblivious to the problem.

For ASEAN in particular, passing off events in Rakhine as an “internal matter” could soon backfire. Its member countries are the largest investors in Myanmar. While doing business as usual there may generate short-term profits for many ASEAN businesses, the social and political ramifications of the unending humanitarian crisis may offset the economic benefits derived from market expansions into the country. With coverage of the crisis incrementally expanding, there is likelihood that influential international civic organizations and charities could soon take note and petition their respective governments to impose some form of economic censures on Myanmar. Even if these efforts fail to yield the desired results, the mere exposure of the social and political turbulence surrounding the Rohingyas could trigger a sense of uneasiness among investors about a looming boycott or embargo. According to the Nikkei Asian Review, there are signs of this already occurring (Robinson, 2017).

It is for this reason, that despite the present limitations, the initiative for resolution must come from ASEAN. Spiraling violence in Myanmar could consequently bring about possible trade disruptions throughout the whole country, which could ultimately lead to decreased confidence and plunging returns on investments. At home, the continuing flood of refugees could exert tremendous resources in the form of aid, education, and welfare services. The social costs of unemployment and marginalization of refugee communities could also lead to recruitments of the desperate among

them into vice-related activities involving street gangs and human trafficking. As crime rises, the demand for resources to combat it would also likely increase. This can generate massive disinvestments and commercial flights in both Myanmar and neighboring ASEAN countries, leading to inevitable economic destabilization for the whole region.

Finally, violence begets violence. Today's high-technology communications and media have allowed Islamic radicals around the world to follow the developments in Myanmar. Incensed at the treatment of their fellow Muslims, and convinced that the international community's insensitivity to the Rohingyas mirrors its prejudice against Muslims, many have called for armed retaliatory campaigns against the "Buddhist oppressors" (Chowdhury, 2017). Today, a new insurgent movement against the Myanmar state has emerged. Calling itself *Haraqah Al-Yaqin* (Faith Movement), it comprises mainly Saudi-educated Rohingya clergies living as refugees abroad. Through its armed wing in Rakhine, *Al-Yaqin* has managed to mobilize a fledgling group of a few hundred well-trained guerilla fighters. Between October and November 2016, the group managed to launch daring attacks on several police stations, a security installation, and an armory, killing a handful of officers in the process. The state's heavy-handed response has not stymied the insurgents or their cause. For now, the majority of Rohingyas have been a peaceful community who have publicly eschewed violence as a means of resolve. This may soon change. The Myanmar government's indiscriminate killings and continuing persecution could cause many to lean toward their despair and gradually take on the side of the insurgents (Johnston and Neelakantan, 2016). If the Myanmar government in any way further mishandles the crisis, there is the possibility of the violence in Rakhine intensifying to a higher level, this time involving civilians on both sides.

There has also been mounting concern outside of Myanmar that the continuing cycle of violence could be exploited by transnational terrorist networks such as ISIL. There have been rising tensions amongst Muslims communities in Bangladesh and Malaysia, where politicians have been forced to publicly incorporate the issue within their political platforms. Across Asia, numerous demonstrations have been organized to pressure governments and international agencies to do more. There is also evidence that radicals in several ASEAN countries have taken up the call of aiding their Rohingya brothers and sisters by either joining terrorist groups or planning their own acts of violence (The Guardian, 2017). So far, one major incident has stood out. Between 2014 and 2016, Indonesian police arrested several members of the *Jammah Ansharut Daulah*, a group that had increasingly become supportive of ISIL, and who were later found guilty by a court of planning a bomb attack on the Myanmar embassy in Jakarta (Deutsch Welle, 2016). While this potential terrorist attack may have been averted, there is no telling how many more of such groups and individuals throughout ASEAN, or the rest of the world for that matter, who could be much more elusive and successful in their planning and operations. In this regard, the scope of the Rohingya crisis is no longer national or regional. Rather, it has become global. It would serve world leaders well to seriously heed the warning signs now rather than later.

6. Conclusion

There is no easy solution to the Rohingya crisis. There are however, important steps and procedures that may offer as useful options for deliberative proposals. At the core of any proposal is the recognition that the ethnic cleansing in Myanmar has reached the threshold of genocide. The longer the world neglects the problem, the dire the situation will become for the Rohingyas. Allowing a

Rohingya holocaust will only serve to repeat the similar tragedies in Bosnia and Rwanda, during which the international community's inactions and disinterest helped generate catastrophic losses in human life and property.

Importantly, the key to resolving the humanitarian crisis in Rakhine lies in dismantling the systemic structures responsible for the ongoing persecution of Rohingyas. Here, the state must be made to acknowledge that its policy actions not only transgress the various international laws and conventions on human rights but also counter the progress made in democratization efforts. Any proposal to pressure the state into ceasing its discriminatory treatment of Rohingyas must therefore include a set of incentivizing and punitive measures. As it currently stands, major powers of the world have been rewarding the Myanmar state for its democratization efforts, but little in the way of reproving its oppressive treatment of the Rohingyas. This needs to change, and the initiative should emerge from within ASEAN. In 2015, its member countries formed the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community with the aim of putting together a common identity based on a "people-centered" and "people-oriented" regional society. Although yet to be fully implemented, this principle can be used to propel the incorporation of human rights into the association's larger policy-making processes. This will require Myanmar (and other member countries for that matter) to observe the requirements of equal treatment of all minority groups if it wishes to participate within ASEAN as a full member with privileges. Likewise, if Myanmar refuses to obligate itself to meeting the principle, it should be made to face sanction-type consequences culminating in its expulsion from the Association. This is where ASEAN members must fully commit themselves to fulfilling this expectation by examining the stability of the region with respect to long term security as well as the legitimacy of the organization itself.

Additionally, if national politicians and international businesses beyond ASEAN choose to sustain the status quo because of short term economic gains, then the source of change must come from other actors. These include non-state entities, including famous celebrities and organizations, that promote the cause of justice and equality. Just like the case of Timor Leste during the Indonesian occupation, influential charities and non-government organizations should play a role in highlighting the injustices done upon the Rohingyas by the Myanmar state. Moderate Rohingya leaders living in exile must also be given a global platform in order to legitimize the political struggle of the community. Pressure by these organizations must also be directed against their respective governments in the global north to desist from furthering diplomatic and economic relations with Myanmar. The Committee of the Nobel Peace Prize, for example, should also consider withdrawing the award given to Aung San Suu Kyi, whereas leaderships from the powerful north should oblige her as the *de facto* leader of Myanmar to begin discussions on stopping the carnage against the Rohingyas.

Ultimately, the end-result for Rohingyas must lie either in their inclusion as full-fledged citizens of Myanmar or in conferring them a separate homeland in northern Rakhine. The deliberation of these choices must be weighed in with the participative complicity of all parties, including the state, citizen groups, and the international community of states and organizations. All must also reach some consensus that the narratives of race, ethnicity, and identity are transitional and non-static, and that Myanmarese nationality itself is nothing concrete and pure. In this respect, progressive voices within Myanmar must also consolidate their forces and influence, working in tandem with external agencies, to bring the country in line with the social-political standards of the twenty-first century.

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