

The Roots of Discrimination and Expulsion against Rohingya in Myanmar : A Historical Analysis

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Abstract

The atrocities on Rohingya people perpetrated by the Myanmar authority have captured huge international attention due to its inhumaneness. At present, the Rohingyas are one of the most ill-treated and oppressed refugee groups in the world. Over the years they have been facing all kinds of state-sponsored discrimination and oppressive policy in Myanmar which induces severe sufferings to the Rohingya people. In this perspective, the paper is intended to focus on exploring the roots and extent of Rohingyas discrimination and expulsion in Myanmar. To understand the Rohingya crisis it is imperative to provide a proper context to the existing Rohingya refugee problem. To conduct the study, the data has been collected from the secondary and open sources like books, newspapers, international organizations reports, government reports, research articles and the data have been analyzed in a qualitative and descriptive manner. The research finds that the root of discrimination goes back to the pre-colonial period of the country when the Burmese king Bodawpaya conquered Arakan. The king maintained oppressive policy to gain control in the kingdom. After that the Muslim militancy following the creation of an independent Muslim area raised suspicion among the Burmese rulers and the Burma authority marked the Rohingyas as enemy of Burma. In the 1980s, the loss of citizenship of the Rohingyas has increased their vulnerability. They were deprived of basic rights like health service, education and employment. But unfortunately, no unified response from the international community has been noticed yet which facilitated the extent of repression and expulsion against Rohingyas.

Introduction

Myanmar is the largest country in Southeast Asia which is located among three regions- South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia. It shares border with Bangladesh, China, India, Laos and Thailand. It was a part of British India until 1937. It became independent from the British rule in January 1948 and followed parliamentary form of government which lasted for only 14 years (Maung5). The country is a land of ethnic and geo-graphic diversity. There are 135 diverse ethnic groups like Burmans, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Rakhine, Mon, Shan, Kaman etc. Though the Rohingyas are one of them but they were not given citizenship rights by the Burmese governments. It is mentionable that the first constitution of Myanmar recognized Rohingyas and they were provided identification and jobs in the various government sectors, but after the military coup in 1962, the situation began to change dramatically. The Burmese Army Ne Win took different discriminatory policies like, Nagamin operation, 1982 Citizenship law through which the Rohingyas have been declared as stateless people. Afterwards all the Burmese rulers took same discriminatory policies towards Rohingya through which the Rohingyas were denied basic human rights. Recently, following border post attacks by rebel group on 25 August 2017, the Myanmar military has launched an ethnic cleansing operation against the Rohingya Muslims of Rakhine State including mass civilian killings, torture, rape, burning villages which are termed by the United Nations as “textbook example of ethnic cleansing.” In this context the paper intends to explore the roots and extents of

Rohingya's discriminations in Myanmar. The study offers that the persecution and discrimination of Rohingya is associated with the pre-colonial period of Burma when the Burmese king Bodawpaya conquered Arakan in 1784. During the four decades of Burmese rule (1784-1824), many Arakanese Muslims fled to British Bengal following brutal oppression of the Burmese king. At the colonial period the pro-British stance of the Rohingyas added miseries to the Rohingyas. After the independence of Burma, the Rohingyas have been systematically denied the basic human rights through the authoritarian regimes of Myanmar which hastened Rohingyas exodus from Myanmar.

The significance of the paper lies in the fact that the study will contribute to the existing Rohingya problem through exploring proper context of the Rohingya issue.

Objectives of the Study

The study is aimed to discover the roots and extents of Rohingya's discriminations in Myanmar. The other objectives are-

- a) To discuss the origin and development of Rohingyas in Myanmar;
- b) To highlight the context of Rohingya's persecution in Myanmar.

Methodology of the Study

The study is qualitative in nature based on historical approach. The paper is mostly dependent on the secondary data. Most of the data has been collected from the secondary sources like books, newspapers, e-journals, articles, thesis papers, international organizations reports, government reports. And the data has been analyzed in a qualitative and descriptive manner.

Literature Review

There are a lot of researches covering the origin and persecution of Rohingyas. Different scholars have examined Rohingya crisis in different ways. There are some differences on perceptions and ideas among the scholars regarding the origin of Rohingya's and the roots of discriminations against Rohingyas.

According to Siegfried Wolf, Rohingya's persecution has been motivated by politico-economic and religious conflict (5). He suggests that state-supported Buddhist religious extremism hastened religious conflict and the armed violence, conflict with resource circulation and state-society hostility added the miserable conditions of Rohingyas in Myanmar (Wolf 2-3). K. M. Atikur Rahman identified that the Rohingya conflict aroused due to the refutation of distinct characteristics and rejection of Rohingya citizenship (292). Mahalia Gaskin McDaniel (46-49) has addressed a gap of understanding of the persecuted Rohingya minority in Myanmar compared to the Kachin and Wa. Aye Chan opined that at the beginning the Muslims of Arakan adopted the policy of joining with Pakistan and after being refused they demanded separate autonomous region which were overlooked by the Burmese authorities (398). Although they have presented the collective political interest but their political and social rights were not acknowledged by the Burmese authority as well as the Rohingyas failed to get support from other Muslims of Arakan State. Prominent scholar Shwe Lu Maung (66-68) identified 'military's racism' as the prime cause of Rohingya's discriminations.

There is little attention on the roots of Rohingya's discrimination in the existing literatures. Some analysts discoursed that Rohingyas are being discriminated since 1948 when the country Myanmar gained independence from the British (Ullah 550).

The study explores that the persecution and discrimination of Rohingya is associated with the pre-colonial (1784-1824) period of Burma. The study illustrates that since the eighteenth century the Burmese King maintained oppressive policy to gain control in Arakan. During the colonial period the pro-British attitude of the Rohingyas increased miseries to the community. After that the Rohingyas have been systematically denied the social and political rights through the authoritarian regimes of Myanmar which hastened Rohingyas exodus from Myanmar.

The Origin and Development of Rohingyas in Arakan

Arakan province is situated along Myanmar's coastline in the Bay of Bengal. Historian Phayre (1884) opined that Arakan was a self-governing kingdom until the occupation of Burma by Burmese king- BadawPaya in 1784 AD. For the first few hundred years, Arakan was separated into two kingdoms-South Arakan of Sundoway and North Arakan of Arakan proper. In the late 13th century the two parts were unified and a strong Arakanese Empire named Maruk-U-Empire had been established in the 15th century. The Rohingyas are considered as a part of the Mrauk-U (Mrohaung) kingdom who have been living in the Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships of the northwestern part of the Arakan State. This area is also known as the Mayu region, which is contiguous to the Naf River as boundary from Bangladesh (Nemoto, 2017). The term "Rohingya" has been derived from the word "Rohang" which is the former name of the Arakan Province. It refers to a distinct ethnic group who lives in the Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships of the northwestern part of the Arakan State, Burma. They speak Rohingya or Ruaingga, a dialect combining Arakanese language, Bengali and Urdu that is different from others in Myanmar. The majority of Rohingyas are Muslims and the rest are Hindus. The origin of the Rohingyas in Arakan has been developed through three phases of Muslim settlement.

1. The first Muslim settlement goes back to the early 7th century when the Arab merchants or the Muslim traders came to the area and started living in Rambee island of Arakan by taking permission of the king (Ahmed 13).
2. The second Muslim settlement was boosted in the 15th century during the rule of King Min Saw Mon of Maruk U Kingdom who regained the Arakanese throne with the help of Muslim Army of Bengal. From this time the Arakanese kings began to use Mohamedan titles (Chan 398).
3. The last Muslim settlement took place in Arakan in the 17th century when northern Arakan was taken under the control of Mughal administration by Shaista khan (Ullah, 2016).

Rohingyas in Pre-Colonial Period

In the pre-colonial period Burma was divided into many independent kingdoms and Arakan was one of them. The Rohingya was the major Muslim community of this land. In 1684 after the death of King Sri Chandrasudharma, the political situation of Arakan was not stable. From 1684 to 1784 the Arakanese Muslims had a great influence to oust and appoint the kings of Arakan (Hall 62). In 1784, when the Burmese king Bodawpaya conquered Arakan, a long guerilla war had been raised following the annexation by the Burmese king Bodawpaya. In return, the Burmese king committed massacres on the Arakanese. A large number of men were murdered and women prisoners were sent to Burma. In 1791 and 1799 two unsuccessful attempts were made to oust the king which increased the atrocities of the Arakanese by the Burmese king. It is estimated that a total of about 200, 000 Arakanese were murdered and two-thirds of the population of Arakan, mostly the Rohingyas and Heins left Arakan for the Chittagong area of Bengal (Charney

265). Chan (399) illustrates that during the four decades of Burmese rule (1784-1824), many Arakanese Muslims fled to British Bengal following brutal oppression of the Burmese king. According to a record of British East India Company, “there were about thirty-five thousand Arakanese who had fled to Chittagong District in British India to seek protection in 1799”(Charney 265). This marked the beginning of Rohingya persecution in Burma

Rohingyas in Colonial Period

Burmese King BodawPaya ruled the country for about 40 years and his regime was marked by uprising and disintegration of the Arakanese (Razzak and Haque 15-18). Through the First Anglo-Burmese war (1824-1826), the British occupation ended Bhamo domination and gave an opportunity to smaller ethnic groups to revive their social, cultural, educational and economic institutions. But the British followed divide and rule policy which divided Burma into-Burma proper and Frontier areas (Dautremer 111). The British followed direct rule in the Burma proper where the majority Mon and Burmese speakers lived whereas in the Frontiers areas they followed the common “British colonial model of indirect rule” by local traditional rulers (South 2008, 10). Many historians claim that this divide and rule policy of the British is responsible for today’s mistrust among the Burmese and the minorities of Burma (Steinberg 20). Besides, the British policy was to encourage the Bengali inhabitants from the adjacent areas to migrate into fertile valleys in Arakan as agriculturalists. During the colonial period (1825-1937) Burma especially Arakan was occupied with immigrants like Tamil, Telegu and other Bengali peoples from various parts of India. And due to the increased number of settlers, an anti-Indian idea developed among all communities which led to racial tension. Furthermore, the British preferred Indians to recruit in the colonial civil service (Yegar 29). In 1930, anti-Indian riots spread throughout Burma, targeting Indians and Muslims following labour issue. The Burmese workers blamed Indian workers for losing their jobs. In that riot at least 200 Indian workers were massacred and dumped into the river and another 2, 000 were injured (Yegar 35). In 1938, again anti-Muslim riots broke out in Burma because the Muslim Rohingyas and the Christian Karen were loyal to the British (Yegar 35).

However, the ethnic violence between Arakanese Buddhists and Muslims brought a great deal of bloodshed to Arakan during the World War II. At the time, the Arakanese communities were divided in their loyalties - the Rohingyas were loyal to the British whereas the Rakhine Buddhists took the side of the Japanese. As a result, the Japanese occupation of Arakan led to the exodus of thousands of Indians from Burma and especially Muslims from Arakan. It is estimated that some 22, 000 Rohingyas were forced to take refuge in adjoining British Indian territories, i.e. Cox's Bazar, Teknaf, Ukhia and Ramu following communal riots between the communities (Yegar 95).

Burma’s Independence and the Position of Rohingya

After celebrating the independence of Burma on 4 January 1948, the ethnic conflict revived in the rural areas of the Mayu frontier area. Although the British assured the Arakanese Muslims to provide autonomy in a Muslim National Area comprising Maungdaw, Buthidaung, and the part of Rathedaung bordering East Bengal, the British did not uphold this later (Yegar 96). When the Burmese administration came into power in Arakan the Muslim's sense of disaffection and disloyalty raised. The Arakanese Muslims planned to form the North Arakan Muslim League in Akyab taking Mr. Jinnah's support. But Mr. Jinnah did not support the plan. In return, in 1948 an armed rebellion took place which is also known as Mujahid rebellion with the aim of creating an

independent Muslim state between the rivers- Kaladan and Mayu. This Muslim militancy raised suspicion among the Burmese rulers. Consequently, the Muslim civil servants, policemen and headmen were barred from military service and replaced by Rakhines. Restrictions were imposed on the movements of Muslims from Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung to Akyab and illogical arrests were rampant. Muslims returnees were not permitted to settle in their original habitation and the properties of returnees were seized. Besides, the Muslim returnees were termed as illegal Pakistani immigrants. Consequently, there were many reprisals and counter-reprisals between the government army units and the Mujahids. In 1954, the government succeeded in abolishing rebel centers and killing rebel leaders through launching a major invasive operation named Operation Monsoon. After that in the same year Prime Minister U Nu identified Rohingya as a native race of Burma, like Kachin, Kayah, Mon, Rakhine and Shan. In 1961, a survey was conducted which presented the Muslims of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung in the Mayu region as “Rohongya”. A separate administrative zone was also established named the Mayu frontier administration including the provinces of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and the western portion of Rathedaung under the U Nu government.¹ But the zone was suspended by General Ne Win who seized power through a coup d’etat in 1962.

Military Regimes of Burma (1962-2010)

After assuming power by General Ne Win, the military ruler dissolved the Mayu frontier administration and it is incorporated into the Arakanese administration. The Rohingya violence was revitalized following the suspension of the Mayu Frontier which led to the formation of a new association, the Rohingya Patriotic Front.

The first step of Ne Win’s Burmese way to Socialism was the nationalization of the private enterprises in 1964 and following the policy many Indian and Pakistani business people left Burma. But the Muslims of Northern Arakan, having the National Registration Cards (NRC) issued by the Department of National Registration in the post-war decade, remained in the frontier areas. In 1973, Ne Win’s Revolutionary Council hunted public opinion to endorse a new constitution and the Muslims from the Mayu Frontier made a proposal to the Constitution Commission demanding separate Muslim state or a division for them. But the proposal was again curved in the 1973 constitution which was approved in a referendum (Taylor 269). Moreover, the Bengali Muslims from the Mayu Frontier Area were banned to elect their representatives to the “PyithuHlut-taw” (People’s Congress) in the 1974 Burmese general election. Afterwards two major acts were executed to refute the rights of Rohingyas –

- a) The 1974 Emergency Immigration Act and
- b) The 1982 Burmese Citizenship Law.

The 1974 Emergency Immigration Act made compulsory for all citizens to convey an identity card called National Registration Certificate. The Rohingyas were not eligible for the card. They were provided Foreign Registration Card which rendered them as foreigners. Furthermore, in 1977 the central government of Burma started a campaign to scrutinize separately the population in the state and to label residents and outsiders in accordance with the Act. Following that at the beginning of 1978, a brutal military operation called ‘Nagamin Operation’ or ‘Dragon King Operation’ was conducted by the armed forces and immigration officials of then Burma in the Kachin and Arakan states, to register citizens in the States and to oust alleged immigrants from the area before national census. As a result, in the years 1977- 1978, a large number of Rohingyas entered

Bangladesh to escape arbitrary arrest which was the first exodus of Rohingyas in independent Bangladesh. The Bangladesh government claimed that more than 200, 000 persons took refuge in Bangladesh, whereas the government of Myanmar stated that 143, 900 persons entered Bangladesh to escape the Nagmin Project (Ahmed 99). In July 1978, through the repatriation agreement between Bangladesh and Myanmar, the Rohingyas were returned to their homes. But the situation of the Rohingyas in Burma had not improved. The Rohingyas enjoyed certain rights with discrimination until 1982. But the 1982 Burmese Citizenship Law stripped the Rohingyas of their nationality. The law created three levels of citizenship- Ordinary, Associate and Naturalized Citizenship.² The Rohingyas were excluded from all levels and they were not included in the nation's 135 official ethnic groups. The 1982 Citizenship Law that allowed those ethnic groups as the citizens of the country who had lived in Burma before the First Anglo-Burmese War began in 1824. In 1988 following the popular pro- democracy protest which is known as the 8-8-88 Uprisings, Ne Win resigned in July 1988 and appointed General SeinLwin to lead the Government. In 18 September, General Saw took the power of the country through another military coup who annulled the 1974 Constitution and established the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). During the crisis, Aung San SuuKyi emerged as a national icon who achieved 392 seats out of 492 in the general election of 1990 (South38). The Military ruler refused the election and continued the ruling by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) until 2010.

In the early 1990, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) regime increased the Army's presence in northwestern Arakan and started to settle the Buddhist Arakans into the Townships of Buthidaung and Maungdaw. Unavoidably, conflicts arose between the Muslims and the Buddhists communities in those townships and the Burmese Army supported the Buddhists by committing robbery, rape, killing against the Muslims and the burning of mosques which induced Rohingya exodus between April 1991 and May 1992. At this time around 250, 000 Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh to escape military atrocities (Yegar 263). Around 20 refugee camps were built in Cox's bazar and Bandarban district to accommodate the Rohingyas in Bangladesh. On 28 April 1992 both Bangladesh and Myanmar signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to resolve the crisis. In 1992 the repatriation process started with an average of 15, 000 people per month with support and monitoring of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and government of Bangladesh (Yesmin 78).

But, the verification dealings of the Burmese authorities were not smooth. As a result, the repatriation process decelerated after 1997 and ended in 2005. Two official Rohingya camps with more than 30, 000 people existed in Bangladesh.

In sum, throughout the 1990s, the provocation policy of the Nasaka, a diverse unit of police, intelligence, and customs officers, created persecutions for the Muslim population.

Military Backed Civilian Regimes (2011-Present)

In November 2010, Military rule was substituted by a new quasi-civilian government- the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) through the general election. Thein Sein took oath as president of the civilian government. It was interesting that despite the disentanglement of Muslims, state authorities promised full citizenship towards the white-card holders of Rohingya following the 2008 constitutional referendum and the 2010 general elections. In the election, three Rohingya members were elected from Rakhine and they were allied with the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) from

2010 to 2015 (Leider 15). But through the 2014 census the Rohingyas were removed from the electoral register and they were forced to register either as “Bengalis” or be excluded. In the 2015 election no Muslim candidate from Rakhine contested for the election.(Ibrahim 35).

In June 2012, following a rape and murdered case of a young Buddhist women communal violence between the Rohingyas and Rakhine Buddhist took place across the country of Myanmar. President TheinSein declared a state of emergency In Rakhine and allowed military administration which increased the unrest in Rakhine. In the conflict 650 Rohingyas were killed with more than 80, 000 were displaced. It is reported that after the sectarian violence, more than 100, 00 Rohingyas were confined to IDP camps which lacked food, water, sanitation and medical care. The military swiped the massive areas, Rohingya men were arrested and women were raped by the military and the Rakhines (Rahman et al. 2018). In recent years following border post attacks on 25 August 2017, the Myanmar’s army had launched clearance operations against the Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State including killing, rape, burning the villages. It is estimated that since 25 August 2017, a total of about 700, 000 Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh following the brutal military campaign of Myanmar. At present about 1.1 million Rohingyas are living in Bangladesh including 300, 000 other Rohingyas who entered Bangladesh in the previous years³ (*The Daily Star*, 2018, February 17).

Conclusion

The paper is an attempt to discover the roots and patterns of Rohingyas discrimination and exclusion in Myanmar. The study finds that the problems with the Muslims especially Rohingyas had existed in the pre-colonial period. when Burmese king invaded Arakan kingdom in 1784, the Arakanese Muslims raised long guerellia warfare to oust the king. After that the pro-British approach of the Rohingyas and the demand of statehood for Arakan state following the independence of Burma hastened distrust between the Burmese authority and the Rohingyas. Just after the independence of Burma though the democratic period of U Nu (1948-1962) recognized the Rohingya as an ethnic group of Myanmar and established a separate administrative zone covering the provinces of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and the western portion of Rathedaung, the zone was suspended by General Ne Win in 1962.

After that the discriminatory policy of Myanmar’s military like Immigration Act of 1974 and the 1982 citizenship law escalated Rohingyas repression and exclusion in Myanmar. In the 1990s various restrictions were imposed on Rohingyas regarding marriage, education, movement and land holdings. Furthermore, the new civilian government also continued discriminatory attitude towards Rohingyas. The 2014 census following the 2015 general election removed the Rohingyas from the electoral register and they were forced to register either as “Bengalis” or be excluded. Thus the Rohingyas were systematically denied from civic, political and human rights in Myanmar. At last following border post attacks by Rohingya radical group, the Myanmar government has launched ethnic cleansing operation to drive out the Rohingyas from Myanmar which is termed by the United Nations as “ textbook example of ethnic cleansing.”

The study concludes with this policy recommendation that Rohingya crisis is not only a problem for the community and Myanmar; it has become a humanitarian crisis. Because, a large number of Rohingyas have fled Myanmar to escape persecution and took refuge in Bangladesh. Though both Bangladesh and Myanmar have negotiated three bilateral deals for Rohingya repatriation but the repatriation is yet launched. In the respect the

international community should create pressure on Myanmar to amend the citizenship Act of Myanmar and to uphold the suggestions of Annan Commission for the peaceful solution of the crisis. Besides, Bangladesh should continue all kinds of diplomatic efforts to motivate the government of Myanmar to accept the Rohingyas as their national community as well as pressurize the international community to take action against the perpetrators for genocidal crimes against Rohingya.

Pointers of Discrimination	Roots and Patterns of Discrimination			
	Pre-colonial Period (1784-1824)	Colonial Period (1824-1948)	Post-Independence Period(1948-1962)	Military and Military backed Civilian Regimes (1962-Present)
Citizenship	At the time Arakan was a sovereign Since 1784 the Burmese King started atrocities on the Rohingyas to take revenge against the guerilla war. The houses and Mosques of the Arakanese Muslims were destroyed and many Arakanese Muslims were murdered by the Burmese King.(Charney 265)	At the period the anti-British and anti-Muslim sentiments among the majority Buddhist communities turned into racial conflict in Arakan. The ethnic violence between Arakanese Buddhists and Muslims brought a great deal of bloodshed in Arakan during the World War II. The Japanese stared massacres against Rohingyas for their pro- British position. Many villages were destructed and thousands of Rohingyas were murdered by the Japanese.	After the Independence the petition of some Arakanese Muslims for the integration of Northern Arakan into East Pakistan created suspicion to the Burma authority (Christie 1998). The new authority of Burma stared to recognize them as enemy of the state and tried to demolish Rohingya identity from this land.	After 1962 the Military ruler Ne Win took the policy of oppressing and ousting the Rohingyas from the country. All socio-cultural organizations of Rohingyas were banned and the education and job opportunities were restricted through the Emergency Immigration Act 1974. Subsequently, by the 1982 Citizenship law the Rohingyas were denied citizenship and they were deprived of all basic human rights like accomodation, movement, health service, education and employment. Thus years of military autocracy have resulted massive internal dislocation and exodus of Rohingyas from Myanmar.
Housing				
Freedom of Movement				
Education				
Employment				
Marriage and Family				
Practicing Religion				

Table 1: Summery of the Origin and Patterns of Rohingyas Discrimination

Source : Made by the Author

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1. Constituent Assembly 1947 'The Constitution of the Union of Burma'. Rangoon: Foreign Office; FIDH 2000.
 2. The first category- Ordinary citizens belongs to such ethnic groups who were present in Burma before 1823. The second category- Associate citizens belongs to the people who attained the Burmese citizenship according to the 1948 Union Citizenship Act, which was active for only two years (1948-50). The third category-Naturalized citizens belongs to those persons who have been enfranchised after the abolition of the 1948 Union Citizenship Act. (Razzaqand Haque196-208).
 3. The Prime Minister of Bangladesh has addressed the number in her speech during the 73rd UN General Assembly on 27 September 2018 which was quoted in the *The Daily Star*, 29 September 2018.