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JUNE 2013

MINORITY REPORT

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THE ROHINGYA
QUESTION
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ETHNIC VIOLENCE

"WE ARE THE MIDDLE EAST"

Arakanese nationalism, the Rohingya question and ethnic cleansing in northwestern Myanmar

By Daniel Otis

Sittwe, Myanmar – Sinewy, stern and draped in a saffron robe, U Sa King Da sits at the foot of a towering white and gold Buddha. The icon's head is illuminated in a technicolour LED halo. U Sa King Da's face is obscured by the darkness enveloping the monastery.

"The so-called Rohingya want to take over Rakhine state," U Sa King Da says. "Our culture and religion are at risk."

He clears his throat, and punctuates his sentences by splattering streams of thick betel juice into the plastic bucket at his side. Earlier in the day, a foreign aid worker described the 38-year-old monk as a "fascist". The leader of the 200-strong Young Monks' Association, U Sa King Da regularly

Photos: Narong Sangnak, EPA

Flames of discontent: a t-shirt featuring an image of Myanmar democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi burns during a protest by ethnic Rohingya Muslim refugees at Myanmar's embassy in Bangkok, April 2013

visits every humanitarian agency office in the state capital, making sure that things are “fair” – that is, that international aid is distributed equally to the area’s Buddhists and Muslims.

“Most humanitarian aid goes to the Muslim side,” he says. “International organisations don’t realise how bad the situation is for us.”

A middle-aged sycophant mumbles his agreement. U Sa King Da silences him with a scowl. “It’s like this: You are the host, and a guest comes to visit. This guest then declares that it is his house, that your possessions are his. Is it possible to continue living with someone like this?”

He begins ranting about the moral degeneracy of the state’s Muslims. They’re polygamous, he says. Incestuous, too. They deliberately contract diseases to get free medication. Some, U Sa King Da says, even set fire to their own homes to vilify the area’s Buddhists and garner sympathy from the international community.

“My goal is to educate people so we can solve this problem peacefully,” he added.

* * *

Since June 2012, international media have been describing the plight of the Rohingya – a group of approximately one million Muslims from Myanmar’s northwestern Rakhine state that has been called “one of the world’s most persecuted minorities”. They have been persecuted, it is claimed, by the government of Myanmar and the Rakhine – also known as the Arakanese – the ethnic majority in their eponymous state. The Rakhine are increasingly nationalistic progeny of a Buddhist kingdom that thrived in the area from the dawn of the Common Era before being conquered by the neighbouring Burmese in 1785.

While the two communities were never completely integrated, Rakhine Muslims and the Arakanese had been mingling in schools, tea shops and marketplaces for decades. This changed, the Arakanese say, after a group of Muslim men gang raped and murdered an Arakanese woman on May 28, 2012. On June 3,



Red rage: Buddhist monks protest against the Rohingya from Rakhine state in September 2012



Photos: Man Than Lay/EPA/Soe Than Win/AP/FP; Gregg Constantine

Communal violence: an aerial view shows burned houses at a village near Myaebon, western Rakhine state, November 2012



U Sa King Da,
Young Monks'
Association

You are the host, and a guest comes to visit. This guest then declares that it is his house, that your possessions are his. Is it possible to continue living with someone like this?

AN ISSUE OF IDENTITY AND LAND

The ‘Rohingya question’ lies at the heart of the issue in Rakhine state. Groups such as the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP) state that the moniker was adopted by Bangladeshi immigrants in the 1950s. Rakhine state’s Muslims claim that they have lived in the region and called themselves Rohingya for centuries. The vehemence with which the Arakanese deny the existence of the Rohingya ethnicity – and with which Rakhine state’s Muslims cling to the term – seems, now more than ever, a matter of political necessity. For the Rohingya, it is also perhaps something of a catch-22.

While Muslims have lived in Arakan since at least the 15th century (and perhaps earlier), their numbers began to grow exponentially under British rule (1824 - 1948) as agricultural labourers were brought to the region from neighbouring Bangladesh. Although a 1799 report by Scottish physician and orientalist Dr Francis Buchanan describes “Mohammedans, who have long settled in Arakan, and who call themselves Rooinga, or natives of Arakan,” most of the people claiming to be Rohingya today likely descend from the British-brought community.

Rakhine state’s Muslims need to posit their Rohingya identity in order to stake a legitimate claim to being a longstanding part of Myanmar’s diverse ethnic tapestry, thus making them eligible for full citizenship rights. Likewise, were the Arakanese to acknowledge the Rohingya, they would be resigning themselves to sharing their ancient homeland with a group that makes up more than a quarter of their state’s 3.8 million inhabitants – a dangerous proposition come election time in this fledgling democracy.

Nevertheless, so long as they cling to the Rohingya name, Rakhine state’s Muslims will continue to alienate themselves from the Arakanese, Myanmar’s government, and even the historically pro-human rights National League for Democracy (see boxed text page 27). Were they to suddenly drop the label, they would essentially be declaring themselves illegal immigrants, thus dooming their community to continued confinement, potential deportation and perhaps annihilation.

Myanmar’s government denies the Rohingya official ethnic status and citizenship. With roots that span several generations, however, many are legally eligible to become naturalised citizens under the 1982 Citizenship Law, if they are able to



provide documents that prove their family history. Some Rakhine Muslims have presented such documents.

Many others claim that theirs were destroyed in the fires that ravaged their communities. Others simply never bothered or were not allowed to register with authorities.

Western media, international NGOs and several Islamic states have tried to champion the Rohingya’s cause, but their involvement only seems to anger Arakanese and Burmese authorities, thus exacerbating the conflict. Western democracies have mostly stayed silent.

Ultimately, the Rohingya question that is obsessing so many in Myanmar is entirely beside the point. The current state of affairs – despite any historical antecedents (see boxed text page 28) – constitutes ethnic cleansing, perpetuated by Arakanese nationalists and government authorities. With few supporters, the coming rainy season, persistent rumours of a third wave of violence and growing anti-Muslim sentiment throughout the country, it is hard to imagine that the Rohingya’s future will be anything but grim.

an Arakanese mob retaliated, beating ten Muslims to death on a bus. Five days later, the state descended into an orgy of fire and blood as Muslim mobs attacked their Buddhist neighbours, and vice versa. Between October 21 and 24, a second, more organised wave of violence took place – this one orchestrated by the Arakanese. State security forces either watched or participated.

In the past year, more than 7,700 homes have been destroyed in Rakhine state and, officially, 211 people have been killed. Observers say the real number of deaths is likely much higher. Nearly 140,000 people are now displaced, the vast majority of them – some 94% – Muslim. Most of these people live in internally displaced person (IDP) camps. Thousands of other Rakhine



Stateless: a displaced elderly Muslim Rohingya

Muslims have pushed off in boats. Many have been turned away by Bangladesh and Thailand, and hundreds are thought to have been lost at sea. Meanwhile, throughout the state, Muslim villages and quarters have been sealed off by security forces, allegedly to protect their inhabitants from further attacks, but essentially creating ethnic ghettos that lack access to food, water, and medical supplies. Moreover, whereas Muslims once constituted nearly half of the bustling state capital's 180,000 inhabitants, the streets of Sittwe are now entirely Muslim-free.

* * *

Crumbling along Sittwe's main boulevard are the domes and elegantly imposing spires of the 154-year-old Jama Mosque.



Nearly 140,000 people are now displaced, the vast majority of them Muslim

The tangle of an overgrown garden peaks above high, once-white walls that are now grey, green and black from lichen, moss and flames. Two police officers guard the mosque's entrance – one with a new Chinese assault rifle, the other with a battered carbine that looks like it could date from the Second World War. No one, they tell me, is allowed inside.

Past shops, guesthouses and banks – many of which fly the red, white

A LONG, LOUD SILENCE



Myanmar's voice of democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi, has been decidedly silent about human rights abuses since winning a seat in parliament last year. She was criticised in March for backing the expansion of a Chinese-financed copper mine that would lead to the forced eviction of 50 families. Earlier, when asked if the Rohingya are citizens of Myanmar, she reluctantly replied that she did not know and that the issue should be decided by the law.

"I want to work toward reconciliation between these two communities," the Nobel laureate was quoted as saying in November. "I am not going to be able to do that if I take sides." In such an imbalanced conflict, however, silence can be incredibly partisan.

In a recent interview, former political prisoner and National League for Democracy MP Phyo Min Thein was more frank about the topic. "History doesn't lie," he told *Southeast Asia Globe*, "and historically, there is no such thing as 'Rohingya'. These people are from Bangladesh. Citizenship for them is possible [if they are eligible under the law], but being defined as a distinct ethnic group is not."

After years of being persecuted and standing up for Myanmar's disenfranchised, the NLD, it seems,

is finally playing politics by courting the ruling party, the military and Myanmar's increasingly Islamophobic majority.

Myanmar's government, on the other hand, has several things to gain from the violence in Rakhine state. It can ensure a continued military presence in the strategically vital region (a new deep water port and an oil pipeline to China are being built in the resource-rich state), and it has been given, if necessary, a

handy excuse to slow

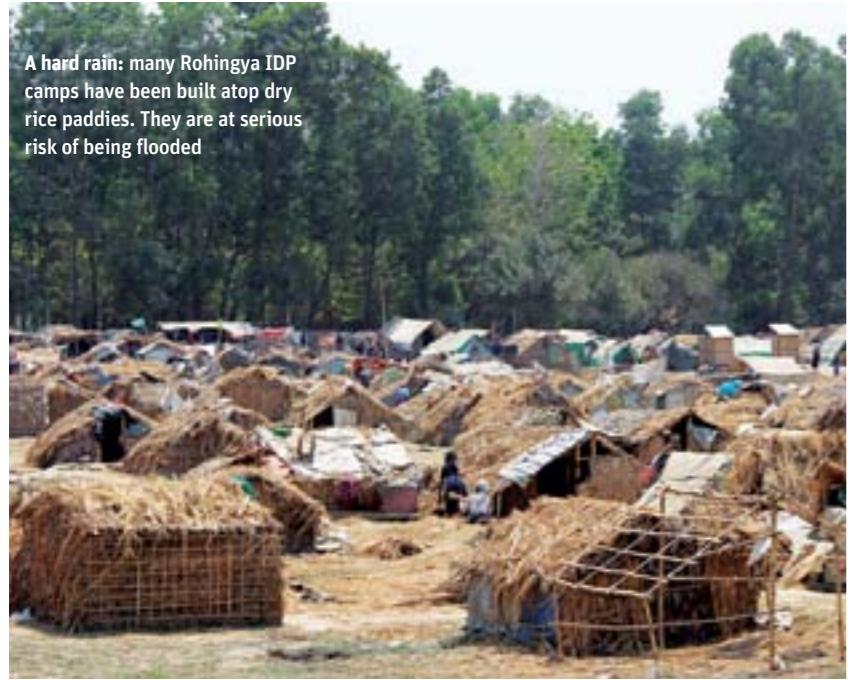
the pace of democratic reform. With the 2015 election in mind, it could also be seeking to garner support from the Arakanese – or at the very least, ensure the subservience of the

Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP). By supporting the Rohingya – who voted

overwhelmingly for the ruling party in the widely-condemned 2010 election – despite not having citizenship papers – they would gain nothing but an angry electorate, and perhaps an Arakanese insurgency.

Atrocities that would have sparked global condemnation five years ago are now going mostly unheeded. With sanctions being lifted and barriers to trade being removed, it seems that Western democracies wouldn't want to jeopardise business for something as trivial as human rights.

Myanmar's government has several things to gain from the violence in Rakhine state



A hard rain: many Rohingya IDP camps have been built atop dry rice paddies. They are at serious risk of being flooded

and blue Rakhine state flag – towards the passenger jetty on the left-hand side of the road is the weather-stained, wood-slat house that serves as the headquarters of the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party, or the RNDP. The RNDP is a political party that won 35 seats in Myanmar's 2010 general election, making it the dominant political force in the state. Rakhine Muslims and groups such as Human Rights Watch claim that through pamphlets, speeches and demonstrations, the RNDP (abetted by Myanmar's government and local monastic associations) is driving Rakhine state's anti-Rohingya campaign.

"Our objective is the development of the Rakhine people," says 60-year-old Khin Maung Gree, a central committee member of the RNDP. "Muslims try to dominate society with their population – that is our biggest danger."

He says that the state's Muslims are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh – extremists intent on conquering the Arakanese homeland through their "high birth rate". Claiming that 'Rohingya' is an invented term, Khin Maung Gree pejoratively refers to these people as "Bengali" and "Kalar".

"We want the government to take them to a third country," Khin Maung Gree says. "While we can accept those that have citizenship papers, they need to be given their own, separate places to live."

When asked him if he sees parallels with the Israel-Palestine conflict, he laughs.

"We are the Middle East."

* * *

Out of Sittwe, there are neighbourhoods – both Arakanese and Muslim – that have been reduced to rubble, litter and ash. Through the military checkpoint is a world cloaked in dust; with men in topi caps, women with covered heads, and an overwhelming aura of destitution and despair.

The IDP camps, many of which were hastily constructed atop dry coastal rice paddies, are in serious danger of being flooded in the rainy season that begins this month. If the IDPs manage to survive being inundated, they'll face malaria and diseases borne from the camps' already-taxed septic systems. While permanent shelter has been constructed for the 7,300 Buddhists

A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

The Burmese conquest of Arakan in 1784 led to the death and displacement of thousands of ethnic Arakanese. In 1824, a British invasion caused even more carnage. Under both Burmese and British rule, the Arakanese remained resentful and rebellious.

As the Imperial Japanese Army advanced into Burma during the Second World War, British forces armed Rakhine state's Muslims before retreating to India. In 1942, sectarian violence broke out between the Rohingya and Arakanese. Tens of thousands – the majority of them Arakanese – are believed to have perished.

In 1947, a year before Burmese independence, a small Mujahedeen movement formed in Arakan, hoping to create an Islamic state along the Bangladeshi frontier. The movement was quashed by the Burmese military in 1961. As Bangladesh descended into civil war in 1971, a renewed Islamic insurgency developed in Rakhine state. In 1978, the Burmese military killed countless Rohingya during Operation King Dragon. More than 200,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh.

Small-scale fighting continued well into the 2000s, with the majority of atrocities now being committed by the Nasaka – Burma's notoriously brutal frontier police. Despite receiving some training from Al Qaeda in the 1990s and early 2000s, the Rohingya insurgents never mounted another serious offensive. Their Al Qaeda connections, however, have provided Burmese authorities with the perfect excuse to continue its war against the Rohingya.

At times, the Arakanese have waged their own insurgencies. Since 1968, the Arakan Liberation Party's military wing has fought a small-scale guerrilla war against Burmese authorities and the Rohingya. Much like the RNDP, it is striving for the independence of the state.

In Bangladesh and India's eastern states, there are some 230,000 ethnic Arakanese – remnants of the Arakan kingdom's dominion over the area in the 16th century. In 2012, Muslim mobs destroyed a dozen Buddhist temples in Bangladesh. If the persecution of Rakhine state's Muslims continues, one can only imagine what will become of these isolated Buddhist communities.

Photos: Daniel Otis



Papers on hand: displaced Rohingya activist U Kyaw Hla Aung, 73, shows his National Registration Card, which establishes his citizenship

"We can worry about identification later," Sayed Hussein replies. "Right now, our priority is to just live peacefully."

who lost their homes during the June and October riots, so far, and despite mounting international pressure, no attempts have been made by Myanmar's government to move the state's 130,000 Muslim IDPs to higher ground. If nothing is done soon, this inaction will lead to a grave humanitarian disaster. Meanwhile, the government and Arakanese routinely block the delivery of international aid.

Sayed Hussein, 33, has been living in an IDP camp for five months. He shares a tiny bamboo and thatch shack with his wife and two children. Hussein apologises for the stench: with overflowing toilets, the area reeks of human waste.

Because he settled in the camp after October, he lives in an 'unregistered' camp. He has had to build his own shelter and he receives no outside assistance. He has no idea what they will do in the rainy season. ▶

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"If someone donated tarpaulins, maybe we could live here," he says naively. He does not want to return to the home he abandoned. "We are afraid of the Arakanese."

When asked if he considers himself Rohingya, Hussein replies that they can worry about identification later. "Right now, our priority is to just live peacefully."

Nearby, Fatay Makhatu, 57, has lived with her family of six in a three-by-three metre room in a ten-unit longhouse since August. As a registered IDP, she receives a small ration of rice from the government.

"A police battalion fired on us, then forced us from our house," she says. As far as she knows, her house still stands.

Waiting for the flood: Sayed Hussein (in white) has begun constructing an earthen wall around his hut in anticipation of this month's rains



NO RESPITE

Fleeing persecution in Myanmar, one Rohingya Muslim found himself subjected to further abuse at the hands of the Thai Navy

By Himaya Quasem

Down a narrow, damp alley in the heart of the bustling tourist hotspot of Phuket sits a row of tin-roofed shacks. Hidden from view, they house Rohingya Muslims who have fled Myanmar's sectarian bloodshed.

Although Myanmar has been widely praised for adopting democratic reforms after years of isolation, a spate of ethnic violence has raised concerns about stability.

In April, Buddhist mobs were locked in deadly clashes with Muslims in the country's central region. The carnage followed similar sectarian violence between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in western Myanmar last year.

Denied citizenship, some of the stateless Rohingya risk their lives to seek sanctuary in neighbouring countries. Some end up in parts of Thailand including Phuket, better known for its sun-drenched beaches and raucous nightlife.

The Thai navy captured [Ismail] and sold [him] to people smugglers

he witnessed during the violence in Rakhine state. "People were being shot and stabbed. I saw a small child hacked down like a sapling."

The conflict erupted in June last year amid reports that Rohingya men had

sitting cross-legged on the floor of a shack on the outskirts of Phuket town, Ismail – not his real name – tells a story of suffering and abuse that is a far cry from the carefree domain of the happy holidaymaker.

"I saw my neighbours' house burnt to the ground," said the 47-year-old fisherman, recalling gruesome scenes

murdered a young Rakhine Buddhist woman. As retaliatory attacks spiralled out of control, entire villages were razed, leaving an estimated 125,000 people homeless, mostly Rohingya.

A state of emergency was declared, which briefly stemmed the bloodshed, but a fresh wave of violence broke out in October.

Human rights groups have accused government security forces of tacitly supporting Rakhine Buddhist outrages against Rohingya, as part of a policy to drive them out of the country.

The bloodletting certainly prompted Ismail to leave. His fishing boat was destroyed in the rioting and he could no longer feed his family, so he decided to find work abroad.

Along with 63 others he boarded a rickety boat that sailed for 12 days, sometimes through storms, before nearing the Thai coast. Ismail said the Thai navy

captured them and sold them to people smugglers, who took them by truck to a camp in southern Thailand.

"We were stuffed into a small house like cattle. I had no idea where I was."

He and other captives lived on mouthfuls of rice scooped from a single large bowl and slept in a cramped room next to the only toilet – a fetid pit.

But those were the least of Ismail's worries. The smugglers demanded a \$1,395 "fee" for entering Thailand. "Some days, they would grab me, tie my arms and legs and lay me flat on my stomach," he said. "Then, they started hitting me on my back and legs with heated metal rods and rope. After three or four blows I would pass out."

Ismail understood that unless he could produce the money, the beatings would not stop. His captors let him contact a fellow Rohingya living in Phuket, who managed to raise some funds.

After 24 days in the camp, his ordeal ended and he was sent by bus to Phuket, where he now lives illegally.

Although Thailand has provided temporary protection to Rohingya, the government does not register them as refugees. Instead, it has a policy of

Arakanese IDP camp. Unlike the state's Muslim IDPs, he's able to travel where he pleases. He claims that his Muslim neighbours, people he recognised, were part of the mob that torched his community.

"Some Muslims are moderate, but they always defer to their leaders," he says. "In their religion, it's okay to kill cows. The Arakanese people won't even kill chickens. So, if they can kill big animals like that, what about people?"

The man's textile business has folded since the violence, showing that the Arakanese have also been affected by the recent segregation – albeit to a much lesser degree than Muslims. Previously, Rakhine state's Muslims formed a sort of economic underclass,

working as maids, porters, butchers and agricultural labourers for the Arakanese. With their workers gone, the Arakanese are currently experiencing an economic downturn, and with fewer people tending to their fields and providing meat, they may face a food crisis in the coming year.

Despite this, dozens of interviews in and around Sittwe revealed not a single Arakanese person hoping for immediate reconciliation.

"No one wants to live with the Rohingya again – including me," says *South-east Asia Globe*'s young Arakanese interpreter, a self-described moderate.

"We can live with Christians and Hindus, but not Muslims... we can't let Rakhine become a Muslim state." ■

"helping" boat people on to a third destination by providing them with food, water and assistance to continue their perilous journey.

The Thai Navy has been accused of abuses, like the ones Ismail describes. The Thai government has said it will look into



A permanent reminder: people smugglers in Thailand repeatedly beat Ismail until he scraped together a \$1,395 'immigration' fee

the allegations. Back in Myanmar, tens of thousands of displaced Rohingya living in overcrowded camps face food shortages and the threat of disease because the government has restricted the flow of aid, said Human Rights Watch deputy Asia director Phil Robertson.

There is little public support for the estimated 800,000 Rohingya living in Myanmar, said Chris Lewa, head of human rights organisation the Arakan Project, which specialises in the Rohingya minority group.

"One key reason is religion," she added. "There's a strong anti-Muslim discourse here."

Dr Akbar Ahmed, Ibn Khaldun chair of Islamic Studies at American University in Washington, DC, said the Rohingya – many of whom have lived in Myanmar for generations – should be granted citizenship. Such a move would bolster Myanmar's democratic "legitimacy", added Dr Ahmed, who researched the Rohingya for his book *The Thistle and the Drone*.

"Whether [the Burmese] can rise above issues of race and religion to be a united and democratic Burma," said Ahmed, "will be their first and most important test." ■