



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات
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Report

The Rohingya: The Latest Massacre in a Violence-Filled History

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Since 25 August, a staggering 400,000 Rohingya have been displaced from the Northern Rakhine province into neighbouring Bangladesh [Getty Images]

Introduction

Since 25 August, a staggering 400,000 Rohingya have been displaced from the Northern Rakhine province into neighbouring Bangladesh.⁽¹⁾ Close to 40% of the villages where the Rohingya previously resided have been vacated. "The situation seems a textbook example of ethnic cleansing," said Zeid Ra'ad al-Husseini, the United Nations Chief of Human Rights at a recent address in Geneva regarding the crisis facing the Rohingya Muslim in Burma.⁽²⁾ President Emmanuel Macron of France likened the situation to a genocide.⁽³⁾

Anger across the globe has been unanimous. Fellow Nobel Laureate and child education activist Malala Yousafzai demanded that Burmese state counsellor and de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi speak up and bring an end to the violence that has left hundreds of Rohingya people dead. So far, Suu Kyi has remained steadfast in defending her government. The counsellor claimed days after the crisis began that "terrorists" were to blame for the recent upheaval for spreading "a huge iceberg of misinformation".⁽⁴⁾ While this remains the official narrative of the government, history speaks differently of what has transpired against the Rohingya; including the overtly racist and xenophobic policies that have led to the UN to claim the Rohingya as one of the most persecuted minorities in the world.

This report will explore the history of the Rohingya crisis to explain how it has culminated into this recent spat of violence. What has been the reaction at the regional and international level will also be discussed. Finally, what the future holds for the Rohingya and their future in Burma will be briefly outlined.

Roots of the Rohingya Crisis

The Rohingya are not included in the 135 ethnic groups recognised by the Burmese government. The group is considered an illegal entity, accused by the government of being foreigners from neighbouring Bangladesh, referring to them as 'Bengalis', which is used as a pejorative to deny the existence of any indigenous Rohingya population in the country.

To the contrary, extensive evidence exists of the Rohingya's presence in the Rakhine area as early as the 16th century.⁽⁵⁾ In the 1800s, civil strife between local Buddhists and the Rohingya began with the advent of colonial powers bringing an influx of Rohingya workers into areas now part of modern day Burma.

While throughout the first half of the 20th century issues between the Buddhists and the Rohingya Muslims continued, matters for the Rohingya worsened with the arrival of the military junta in 1962. In 1982, a law stripping the Rohingya of citizenship was passed, disenfranchising them of basic civil, labour and reproductive rights that they continue to lack in the post-military era.⁽⁶⁾

In the past five years, the Rohingya have managed to capture world headlines as a xenophobic campaign against them led by an ardent anti-Muslim group of monks intensified. One of the main groups leading the charge, the Ma Ba Tha, has a largely singular goal of eradicating Muslim influence in the country, perceived as a threat to the Buddhist identity of the state, despite only being 4% of the population.⁽⁷⁾ Ashin Wirathu, the most prominent leader of the group, has gained worldwide notoriety for his overt Islamophobic propositions against the Rohingya and Muslims. Wirathu has advocated for the boycott of Muslim businesses in the country and put a proposal to the government to prevent Buddhist women from marrying Muslim men, at least not without the consent of their parents and that of local authorities.⁽⁸⁾

While the group claims to be a non-violent grassroots movement, it has supported every military action to rid the Rohingya from Rakhine. On 30 August, during this latest crisis, Wirathu told a group of protestors in the capital Yangon that, "Only the military's commander-in-chief can protect the lives and the properties of the people...The military is the only one that can give a lesson to tame the Bengali terrorists".⁽⁹⁾ Last May in an interview with The Guardian, when asked about military abuses including the rape of Rohingya women, Wirathu responded, "Impossible. Their bodies are too disgusting".⁽¹⁰⁾

Recent escalation and the role of the Burmese state.

On 25 August 2017, several Burmese police check posts were attacked in Rakhine, according to the Burmese military, by a group called the Arakan Rohingya Salvation

Army (ARSA), a group of Rohingya militants, that according to the Burmese government left 12 police officers dead.(11)

Over the next few weeks, the military has been heavily involved in what is called clearance operations, which have encompassed burning down entire Rohingya villages and businesses and shooting at unarmed civilians including women and children. Based on satellite imaging data, Human Rights Watch reported that some 200 Rohingya villages have been burnt to the ground. The last major operation of this nature was last year in October 2016, where under similar circumstances of fighting between Burmese security forces and Rohingya resistance fighters, approximately 100,000 people fled the region into Bangladesh.(12)

For the time being, both the civilian government and the military forces are aligned in their tactics towards the Rohingya. State counsellor and de facto leader of the country Aung San Suu Kyi has backed the Burmese armed forces to conduct their armed raids in Rohingya dominated areas, failing to acknowledge any crimes committed by her country's military.

In a national speech made in English in Yangon on 19 September meant to calm international public outrage, Suu Kyi claimed that it wasn't clear why the exodus from Rakhine was taking place, a comment many view as a cover to protect the military from scrutiny.(13) Although she was once hailed as a champion of democracy and human rights by much of the world, the Rohingya crisis has tarnished her iconic status, now seen largely as an obstacle rather than an arbiter to resolving the crisis.

In the run up to the October 2015 election that brought her party to power, she refused any Muslim to contest the election from the NLD platform(14). Last year she banned the use of the word Rohingya by government officials, a move largely seen to appease Buddhist extremists in Rakhine. The Burmese Information ministry instructed their officials to refer to the Rohingya as "people who believe in Islam in Rakhine state"(15).

These decisions are reflective of the near absolute control of the military over the country's Rohingya policy. The chief of the armed forces, remains free of scrutiny from the civilian government and even a world-renowned leader like Suu Kyi. Aaron Connelly, a research fellow in the East Asia Program at the Lowy Institute in Sydney told CNN, that according to the Burmese constitution, "the commander-in-chief (of Myanmar's Armed Forces) is his own boss, he doesn't report to Aung San Suu Kyi. He can't be fired"(16).

The 2008 Burmese constitution, drafted by the former regime, guarantees the military 25% of the seats in parliament, electing key cabinet posts like the defense and border ministries, and setting its own budget with no civilian oversight; and hence giving former

generals and the armed forces flexibility in charting the course of Burma's security policies, especially over the Rohingya(17). In March of this year, Burmese Army Chief General Min Aung Hlaing outlined his country's said: "We have already let the world know that we don't have Rohingya in our country...The Bengalis in Rakhine state are not Myanmar citizens and they are just people who come and stay in the country"(18).

Around the same time Hlaing rebuked any talk that the Rohingya could be provided citizenship making clear that the army's resolution to the conflict; and hence the obvious strategy as is being played out today is of continued physical cleansing the Rohingya in the Rakhine province.

Rohingya reaction

The Rohingya in the face of an excruciating tragedy have been overwhelmingly peaceful. The only form of resistance that exists is that in the form of small armed groups like the ARSA, whose only targets have been the military installations around Rakhine.

The ARSA which pertubs to have now existed for three odd years, has cited the incitement of the Burmese state as justified reason for their attacks. In a video statement uploaded on August 15th, days before the conflict began, the ARSA asserted that they had been in Rakhine for three years and "has not brought any harm or destruction to the life and properties of the Rakhine people and Rohingya"(19).

Despite the government's prolonged accusations of the group being affiliates of already well-established terror groups from the Middle East or South Asia, the ARSA has outright rejected the allegations. The group in a statement posted on September 14th that they "no links with al-Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), Lashkar-e-Taiba or any other transnational terrorist group"(20).

Dr. Maung Zarni, a long-time Burmese activist and scholar called the ARSA in an interview with Al Jazeera a group of "hopeless men who decided to form some kind of self-defence group and protect their people who are living in conditions akin to a Nazi concentration camp"(21). Regardless of the governments assertions that groups like ARSA present an existential threat to the state, their ability to fight is very limited, often relying on sticks, knives and a few stolen rifles.

Regional and International response

On the regional and international level, the crisis has sparked public outrage across the world. With the rise of social media, billions have witnessed the horrific images coming from Rakhine of hapless Rohingya refugees fleeing the country, navigating through dangerous trails and jungles to reach safety. Massive rallies from Canada to Malaysia have seen a rise in the profile of the Rohingya issue, with many political leaders taking a more vocal role in the conflict than in previous incidents.

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak, whose country has also had an influx of Rohingya escaping violence, on 9 September said, "Based on the reports we have received, [the Rohingya] are discriminated and no mercy is accorded to them...Actually, it is done in a planned manner so that they are tortured, discriminated, killed and raped".(22)

Undoubtedly, the most affected by the crisis has been Burma's northern neighbour, Bangladesh, where most of the hundreds and thousands of refugees have fled. The United Nations recently described the scenes at the border between the two countries as chaotic and held that "massive international assistance" was needed to provide for the Rohingya.(23) The government's response in this current crisis has fared much better than that of last year in October where human rights groups alleged that the Bangladeshi government was resisting the influx of refugees.(24)

The United States, one of Suu Kyi's closest allies, has also condemned the violence. At a UN peacekeeping meeting on 20 September, US Vice President Mike Pence pointed out the "terrible savagery" committed by the Burmese army against the Rohingya. "The images of the violence and its victims have shocked the American people, and decent people all over the world", he maintained.(25)

However, Pence fell short of calling out Suu Kyi's government, a cautious move, based on historical American-Burmese relations, and therefore not surprising. Suu Kyi's close relations with previous White House administrations who strongly backed her struggles have sometimes kept the US government from taking a sterner line against her government. Former Secretary of State Hilary Clinton praised the role of the US and her own efforts for Suu Kyi's success in the November 2015 election calling it "an affirmation of the indispensable role the United States can and should play in the world as a champion of peace and progress".(26)

Of its few supporters, China has been the only state that has fully backed the Myanmar government since the crisis began. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said in a meeting with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres that Myanmar had the right to protect its country against violent threats.(27) China has had a close relationship with the Burmese military since the days of the military, to whom the former supplied generous amounts of arms and established military installations in the country that helped the military regime consolidate its power over the country.(28)

Response from the Indian government, which is also a close ally of the Burmese government, has been rather dismissive, with fears being pushed by the Indian mainstream media and government ministers that there was potential of Rohingya terrorists entering the country. A court case in the Indian supreme court is currently deciding the fate of 40,000 Rohingya that the government has said it would deport.(29)

Nevertheless, noticing the gravity of the situation and public outrage across the globe, India also has recently softened its stance and called on the government to end persecution of the Rohingya.(30) China as well has asked for a diplomatic resolution to the conflict, and has recently promised to relay the concerns of the Bangladeshi government vis-à-vis the Rohingya to the Myanmar government.(31)

While the Rohingya as a community have close to no political or material resources in their homeland or in diaspora to advocate for their cause; the increase in public awareness around the issue, which was lacking in previous years, is arguably the only silver lining in the overall catastrophic situation.

The future of the crisis

In the past, while the flare up against the Rohingya would garner headlines in the mainstream press, the momentum around the issue would eventually dissipate, with international bodies occupied with wars largely in the Middle East, particularly Iraq and Syria.

However, with this latest conflict, evidently more heightened in its extremities than previous years, the Rohingya issue is likely to become a permanent fixture on a list of international crises that must be addressed urgently. Yet considering the geopolitical underpinnings of the conflict that include heavyweights like China firmly siding with the Burmese government, charting out consensual agreement on the issue will be difficult.

The prospects of a successful armed resistance are highly unlikely as the Rohingya will be unable to match the military resources of the Myanmar government – though with increasing violence committed against the community, Rohingya led struggles targeting the Burmese military will continue grow.

The Rohingyas' best option at forcing the hand of the Suu Kyi-led government to halt its violent outbreaks rests with the worldwide public support, now firmly in their corner, and hoping that it harnesses into meaningful action by foreign governments and international institutions that hold the Myanmar government accountable for its transgressions against their community.

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