

“Myanmar has consolidated its impunity, making its crimes a *fait accompli*. To do so, it first destabilized the legitimacy of the Rohingya as a group . . . ”

The Making of the Rohingya Genocide and Myanmar’s Impunity

C. CHRISTINE FAIR

In the district of Cox’s Bazar on Bangladesh’s southeast coast, as far as the eye can see, the Rohingyas’ immiseration stretches across a sea of camps consisting of fragile huts protected by tarps. These refugees from Myanmar stand in endless lines for the most basic of rations, like water. Men and women, young and old, healthy and infirm alike carry as much of this precious cargo on their backs as they can over long distances, walking in flip-flops or on bare feet. Their bodies bear the signs of malnourishment and exhaustion. Electricity is provided by small sets of portable solar panels that have sprung up to charge cell phones or car batteries, which in turn fuel modest lights after dark. Children work or languish near their mothers, who take care of the tasks necessary for survival.

The United Nations has said it needs some \$920 million in the coming year for the 900,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh—most of it for critical aid such as food, water, shelter, and sanitation. The remainder is for health care, children’s protection, and camp maintenance. But few donors are coughing up the cash.

While the world appears indifferent to this man-made tragedy, the Rohingya survivors of Myanmar’s ethnic cleansing wait in Bangladesh for some resolution of their fate. Will they be able to return to their homes and live safely? Will they have to stay in Bangladesh forever? Is there a third option yet to materialize?

They have weathered monsoon flooding, ungodly heat, and global apathy while Bangladesh begrudgingly shoulders the burden of sheltering them and the international community struggles

to pay the bills. Myanmar has evaded responsibility for the ethnic cleansing done thus far, even as it continues to carry out a genocide against the 200,000 or so Rohingya who remain in the country, denying them life-saving aid and pressing on with military operations that snuff out their villages.

As time passes, Myanmar has consolidated its impunity, making its crimes a *fait accompli*. To do so, it first destabilized the legitimacy of the Rohingya as a group with a long history in the country. Second, it has taken advantage of global Islamophobia to characterize the Rohingya as Islamists and terrorists, and has allied with countries that share this antipathy toward Muslims for domestic political reasons. Finally, it has capitalized on regional rivalries to render the Rohingya the quarry of the newest Great Game in the East.

The result of all this is that Bangladesh—one of the most densely populated countries in the world—will likely be hosting the largest Rohingya refugee population for the foreseeable future. And this will send a terrible message to aspiring genocidal regimes: Under the right conditions, you can get away with mass murder.

HISTORY DENIED

Utter the word “Rohingya” in Myanmar and you quickly learn that it rankles even those with the slightest sympathy for the people known by that name. The Buddhist majority avers that this appellation is a neologism deployed by an interloper group—whom they prefer to call “Bengalis”—to establish a unique ethnic identity as well as a historical lineage within Myanmar which Buddhists reject. At the same time, Bangladeshis reject the notion that the Rohingyas are fellow Bengalis and are equally adamant that these people—by whatever name—belong in Myanmar. While I have no

C. CHRISTINE FAIR is an associate professor of security studies at Georgetown University and a Current History contributing editor.

interest in resolving this debate, I do want to draw out the elements that are relevant to recent developments.

As the historian Jacques Leider (who is considered controversial in some circles due to his alleged consulting work for the Myanmar government) has explained, “Rohingya” is an Indianized expression that denotes the territory of Rakhine, in the north of Myanmar, where these people lived until they were recently driven out by what the United Nations has called genocide. Thus “Rohingya” simply means “of Rakhine,” which is a geographical rather than an ethnic reference. There is only one known precolonial use of the word in print (in the variant of “Roonga”), which appears in a 1799 article about comparative vocabularies of spoken languages in the Burmese Empire.

The Rohingyas’s Muslim ancestors began arriving in Rakhine from Chittagong (in contemporary Bangladesh) in the nineteenth century. For this reason, they tended to be known as “Chittagonian Muslims.” As Leider has noted, the term “Rohingya” came into common usage after 1942, when the Japanese invaded Burma. After the resulting collapse of the British administration in Arakan (the old name for Rakhine), Arakanese or “Chittagonian” Muslims who sided with the British began attacking pro-Japanese Buddhists in the districts of Maungdaw and Buthidaung, essentially cleansing the townships of Buddhist residents. This communal violence caused the dispersal between what became a Muslim north and a Buddhist south in Rakhine state.

The Buddhists eventually switched sides and helped defeat the Japanese in Burma and bring about the return of British rule. The main Muslim political body in Rakhine, the Jamiat ul-Ulama (Association of Islamic Scholars), tried to persuade the British that its people’s disproportionate sacrifices and unstinting loyalty in the war warranted the creation of an autonomous Muslim zone in northern Rakhine. The British rejected this demand.

Until 1947, Rakhine Muslims had not been deeply engaged in politics, likely because their interests were protected by the British, who created various opportunities for their advancement in recompense for their loyalty in the war. This created further discontent among the ethnic Burman majority, already chafing under the presence of Indians who had sought their fortunes in Burma after the British annexed it in 1886, following the third and final Anglo-Burmese war.

When the Suez Canal opened, the British were eager to export Burma’s agricultural products. To ramp up production, they imported labor from British India, principally from what is now Bengal. As economic competition increased resentment over Indian migration, the Burmese demanded to be split off from the Raj, which finally happened in 1937. As the scholars Renaud Egret and Nyi Nyi Kyaw have argued, the pervasive Islamophobia in Myanmar likely is rooted in this period, when “Muslim” became synonymous with “Bengali” or “Indian.”

As Indian and Pakistani independence neared, several Rakhine Muslim leaders met in Dhaka with Muhammad Ali Jinnah (the leader of the All-India Muslim League and chief proponent of Pakistani nationhood) in July 1947 to discuss the possibility of incorporating the predominantly Muslim areas of northern Rakhine into what would become Bengali-dominated East Pakistan. Jinnah declined, and to avoid hostility between their new nations, he reassured General Aung San (known as the father both of Burmese independence and of Aung San Suu Kyi, currently Myanmar’s de facto head of government) that he supported the integration of those areas into Burma. Jinnah died shortly after Pakistan’s founding and the issue never arose again.

As Burma’s independence loomed, several thousand Muslim guerrillas calling themselves “mujahids” coalesced into a fighting force in March 1946. They were led by Jafar Husayn Kawal until he was assassinated in October 1950. After several military operations between 1951 and 1954, the nascent Burmese state quelled the rebellion.

Myanmar’s Buddhist majority points to this history to assert that the hundreds of thousands of people its government has killed or displaced through ethnic cleansing never belonged in Myanmar to begin with. Those writers who have taken a more sympathetic position insist on calling them “Rohingya” and on recognizing their ties to Rakhine through numerous generations that were born and raised there.

TOWARD THE BREAKING POINT

When Burma became independent in 1948 and promulgated its first constitution, the Muslims of Rakhine were subject to the same laws as others with respect to citizenship and voting rights. After nearly two years under General Ne Win’s interim military administration, political parties courted both Muslims and Buddhists in Rakhine during

the 1960 election campaign. To appeal to Buddhists, former Prime Minister U Nu promised that Rakhine would be granted the status of an ethnic state, which other major ethnic areas had received under the first constitution. But he also pledged to create an autonomous zone within Rakhine, in an appeal to Muslim voters.

The plan to grant statehood to Rakhine was aborted by a 1962 coup but surfaced again in 1973, when the junta convened consultations on a new constitution. It ultimately made Rakhine a separate state, but without any autonomous area for the Mayu frontier and its Muslim residents.

The Muslims of Rakhine subsequently came under various forms of renewed pressure. During the 1971 war in East Pakistan, many Bengalis sought refuge in Myanmar. While most (17,000) returned home after the war to a newly independent Bangladesh, some remained. This exacerbated concerns about growing Muslim clout in the Buddhist-majority state.

The new military junta viewed Muslims with suspicion—and with electoral politics suspended, there was no need to consider their sentiments. A brutal 1977 operation called “Dragon King,” targeting illegal immigration in Rakhine, precipitated bouts of communal violence that forced some 200,000 Rakhine Muslims to flee to Bangladesh. Under pressure from the military dictatorship in Bangladesh, most returned within a year.

The junta in Myanmar enacted a new citizenship law in 1982, which further vitiated Muslims’ legal rights in Rakhine and beyond—as did another military coup, in 1988. In 1991, the junta deployed troops to northern Rakhine and confiscated Muslim agricultural land to feed its troops and establish encampments. Forced labor and arbitrary taxes were imposed. Under these draconian conditions, nearly a quarter of a million Muslims once again fled to crowded camps in Bangladesh.

During parts of this history, there were some Rohingya who fought back. In 1974, ostensibly inspired by Islamist movements elsewhere in the world, the Rohingya Patriotic Front formed but soon split into several ineffective factions. Perhaps its most important and well-known successor was the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), which formed in 1982 but split in 1986, giving rise to the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF). The RSO and the ARIF formed a loose alliance in 1998,

known as the Arakan Rohingya National Organization.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, RSO maintained bases in Bangladesh along the border but had no presence in Myanmar itself. In what may have been its deadliest attack, in April 1994, several dozen fighters infiltrated Maungdaw township from Bangladesh and detonated several bombs that killed many civilians. The RSO never enjoyed much support within Myanmar and was largely defunct by the end of the twentieth century, though it retained some organizational structure in Bangladesh and remained capable of occasional small-scale attacks on Myanmar’s security forces.

A restless peace perdured in Rakhine, with notable exceptions of anti-Muslim violence in 2001. However, things changed in 2010. Buddhists were enraged by a pledge made by the junta’s Union Solidarity and Development Party to grant Rakhine Muslims citizenship ahead of multiparty elections in which they would be allowed to vote.

The communal tensions were pushed to the breaking point in May 2012 when several Muslim men raped and killed a Buddhist woman. The crime catalyzed violence in the northern part of the state and in and around the provincial capital of Sittwe. Later that June, ten Muslims were murdered by a mob in central Myanmar after an anonymous campaign of inflammatory anti-Muslim flyers.

As violence spread, including some attacks perpetrated by Muslims against Buddhists, the government declared a state of emergency and deployed additional troops to enforce it. A modicum of order obtained for a few months. Still, according to government figures, several hundred people were killed or injured; more than 5,000 homes, mostly belonging to Rohingya, were destroyed; and 75,000 people—again mostly Rohingya—were displaced.

Another wave of widespread violence occurred in October 2012, with well-coordinated and targeted assaults on Muslims in general, including the ethnic Kaman group. Again, the vast majority of the 32,000 displaced persons were Muslims, compared with a few hundred Rakhine Buddhists. Following these assaults, some 140,000 people were placed in overcrowded camps in Rakhine while others were subject to harsh rules that denied them free movement.

*During parts of this history,
there were some Rohingya
who fought back.*

The United Nations reported that as of December 31, 2018, there were some 128,000 Rohingya living in 24 camps across Rakhine, mostly near Sittwe. This is in addition to a ghetto known as Aung Mingalar where some 4,000 Muslims live inside Sittwe itself. Unable to leave to find jobs, food, or medicine, they are completely dependent on the international community—which Myanmar occasionally grants access, according to its whim.

CONJURING A JIHADIST MENACE

Some contemporary writers point to the 1940s, when some Rakhine Muslims used the title of “mujahid” and even sought incorporation into Pakistan, for evidence of long-standing Islamist tendencies in Rohingya politics. This is an ahistorical and selective reading of events. While fighters used the “mujahid” appellation, that was not atypical of the colonial period. The guerrillas used this term simply to describe their own Muslim identity. At no point did they seek to install an Islamist regime.

Numerous Muslim Rohingya leaders demanded that the rebels lay down their arms, arguing that there was no justification for jihad (from which the word mujahid derives) and claiming that the majority of the Rohingya were themselves victims of the guerrillas. Some Rohingya leaders appealed to the government of Burma (in 1948, 1950, and 1951) for arms to fight the rebels, but were rebuffed. Due to the government’s enervated response, many of the Rohingya were forced to aid the rebels against their will.

The uprising ended in 1961, after cease-fires and the eventual defeat of the 300 or so surviving rebels. To preclude future insurrections, the government established the Mayu Frontier Administration in 1961 and put northern Arakan under direct military control. The army retained this administrative control over the Rohingya after the military coup in 1962.

While the Muslims of Rakhine state have long been rendered stateless and subject to deprivation of basic human—not to mention civil—rights, what has generally been noted is that they refrained from violent mobilization, with the exception of such small-scale and ineffectual uprisings. This appeared to change in October 2016, when a previously unheard-of group, Harakah al-Yaqin (Movement of Faith), conducted several high-

profile attacks against Myanmar’s Border Guard Police headquarters and two other bases. The military responded by launching brutal counter-insurgency operations. Tens of thousands of Rohingya again fled to Bangladesh and elsewhere, after which security forces burned their homes.

The insurgent organization subsequently rebranded itself as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), dropping the Islamist connotations of its old name. Whereas previous Rohingya militias were based in the hills along the border and launched hit-and-run attacks from sanctuaries in Bangladesh, ARSA was based in Rohingya villages within Myanmar and had a cellular structure led by local religious leaders (*maulvis*).

In August 2017, ARSA set the stage for today’s tragedy when it executed a complex attack on 30 police posts and an army base in Rakhine, which resulted in the deaths of at least 59 insurgents and 12 security forces personnel. In response, the military mobilized to conduct mass atrocities that the United Nations has declared to be tantamount

to genocide. (Amnesty International also asserts that ARSA carried out at least one and possibly two massacres of nearly 100 Hindu women, men, and children as well as other atrocities in August 2017.)

ARSA’s most recent attack occurred on January 5, 2018, when the group targeted a vehicle with a remote-controlled mine and then staged an ambush; six soldiers and one civilian driver were injured. It has been quiescent since then.

ARSA’s leader, Atta Ullah, is a Rohingya Muslim born in Karachi, the Pakistani port city, to a Rohingya migrant father. When he was a young boy, his family moved to Mecca, where he studied in an Islamic school. Little is known about his subsequent path, but he seems to have departed Saudi Arabia in 2012 shortly after violence erupted in Rakhine.

While ARSA has had no discernible religious motivations, it legitimized its violence against the security forces in the name of Islam. It encouraged senior Rohingya and foreign clerics to issue fatwas declaring its campaign legal, in light of the state’s ongoing persecution of Muslims in Rakhine.

Myanmar contends, with scant evidence, that ARSA is an Islamist militant group that aims to undermine the Buddhist nature of the state. Some journalists and scholars have also warned that the

*The military junta
viewed Muslims
with suspicion.*

group could be the next jihadist menace. Dilating on Atta Ullah's ties to Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, they assert that he is close to terrorist groups like Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). Some have attempted to link him to Abdus Qadoos Burmi—a Pakistani of Rohingya descent, based in Karachi and linked to LeT, who has appeared in videos calling for jihad in Myanmar.

But analysts who allege that ARSA is an Islamist organization with ties to Pakistani and other international terrorists have failed to produce evidence beyond citing anonymous "intelligence sources," most of whom are said to be officials within the current Indian government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP is a Hindu chauvinist party with a long history of condoning discrimination against Muslims in India. The BJP's supporters—much like the Buddhist majority in Myanmar—allege that Muslims have a long-term plan to replace Hindus as the Indian majority. The BJP government has pledged to deport all Rohingya in India back to Myanmar, where they will face near-certain human rights abuses.

ARSA has consistently asserted that it is not seeking a separate state or the imposition of sharia law. In September 2017, the group said it wanted to "make it clear" that it had no "links to al-Qaeda, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, Lashkar-e-Taiba, or any transnational terrorist group."

Indeed, ARSA has nothing to gain and everything to lose by associating itself with any Islamist movement. Problematically for the group's messaging, though, its flag depicts all of Rakhine state. This makes Buddhists suspect that ARSA's agenda is not limited to securing the political conditions for the Rohingya to safely return, but that it conceals larger ambitions to gain dominance over the Buddhist-majority state.

Myanmar's claims about a potential Rohingya jihadist threat have been embraced by Russia and China, which have concerns about their own Muslim populations and appalling records of subjecting them to internment, torture, violence, and ethnic cleansing. At the level of global public opinion, there may be a certain reluctance to rec-

ognize Muslims as victims due to the wave of Islamophobia that has washed over the world since the events of 9/11 and, more recently, the rise of the Islamic State.

GETTING AWAY WITH MURDER

In the end, Myanmar has seemingly gotten away with genocide. It has profited from burgeoning international interest in the country as a consequence of the ruling junta's 2011 decision to make way for a modicum of civilian government, which led to the release of hundreds of political prisoners including the long-time opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. Having recently lifted sanctions on Myanmar, the international community is not inclined to reinstate them. Even the United States, which has been the toughest on Myanmar, now has little appetite for sanctions, given the evolving economic and strategic high stakes in the country and the region. Myanmar's neighbors China and India are vying for access for their ambitious and competing connectivity projects, which include roads and pipelines.

Both Russia and China prize Myanmar as an important destination for weapons sales. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, China is the largest supplier of arms to Myanmar; Russia is second. But Myanmar's military is wary of Chinese weapons because China also arms most of the other ethnic insurgencies challenging the writ of the government.

These geopolitical realities offer an important lesson for aspiring genocidal regimes: make sure your friends are important. With major stakeholders intent on their strategic interests, Myanmar has been able to escape accountability for the crimes committed thus far and to continue its campaign of ethnic cleansing. For Bangladesh, this effectively means that there will be no exit for the Rohingya. If the international community cannot muster the fortitude to compel Myanmar to alter its course and create the conditions for a safe and voluntary return of the refugees, it could at least have the decency to pick up the tab for sheltering them in the camps at Cox's Bazar. ■