

Nationalist Ethnicities as Religious Identities: Islam, Buddhism, and Citizenship in Myanmar

Imtiyaz Yusuf

Preliminary Statement: An Overview of Muslim-Buddhist Relations

For centuries, the Rohingya have been living within the borders of the country established in 1948 as Burma/Myanmar. Today left stateless, having been gradually stripped of their citizenship rights, they are described by the United Nations as one of the most persecuted minorities in the world. In order to understand the complexity of this conflict, one must consider how Burma is politically transitioning from military to democratic rule, a process that is open (much as was Afghanistan) to competition for resources by international and regional players such as the United States, China, India, Israel, Japan, and Australia.¹ To be fair, the record of Southeast Asian Muslim countries with Buddhist minorities is also not outstanding. Buddhist minorities identified as ethnic groups have faced great discrimination in, among others, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei.²

Imtiyaz Yusuf is the director of the Center for Buddhist-Muslim Understanding, College of Religious Studies, Mahidol University, Salaya, Thailand. His recent publications are *A Planetary and Global Ethics for Climate Change and Sustainable Energy* (2016); "Muslim-Buddhist Relations Caught between Nalanda and Pattani," in *Ethnicity and Conflict in Buddhist Societies in South and Southeast Asia*, ed. K.M. de Silva (2015) and "Islam and Buddhism," in *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Cornille (2013). In addition to being a contributor to the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Islamic World* (2009), the *Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (2003), the *Encyclopedia of Qur'an* (2002), and the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Modern Islamic World* (1995), he was also the special editor of *The Muslim World: A Special Issue on Islam and Buddhism* 100, nos. 2-3 (April/July 2010). Dr. Yusuf often writes on Islam and comparative religion in Southeast Asia for the *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation* (Bangkok).

As Muslim nationalist causes, the Rohingya case may be compared to that of Palestine, Kashmir, the Moros, and the Pattani Malays. Muslims worldwide have been sympathetic and supportive of the Rohingya, but there is more to their plight than a conflict between Islam and Buddhism. I study the history of the relationship between Islam and Buddhism, world-views and traditions whose often cordial and sometimes tense relations extend from the early days of Islam. It is clear to me that contemporary Muslim-Buddhist tensions cannot be understood simply through the lenses of religion. This approach offers fodder for forms of Islamophobia with an Asian face, now with respect to coexisting religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Shintoism.

Early Muslims met Buddhists along Asian travel routes and accorded them the status of *ahl al-kitāb* (people of the book) long before European Christians came to know of Buddhism through the fourteenth-century travels of Marco Polo. Muslim scholars, whom I regard as pioneers of the phenomenological and comparative historical approaches to the study of religion – including al-Biruni, al-Shahrastani, Rashid-al-Din Hamadani, and the Mughal prince Dara Shikoh – wrote extensively about Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and other religions without religious inhibitions. In modern times, the famous Indian poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal paid glowing tributes to the Buddha's mission and message of the Buddha in his poems *Nanak* (in *Bang-e-Dra* 143) and *Taseen-e-Gautam* (*Gautam Budh Ki Taleemat*) (in *Javed Nama* 12).

The first comprehensive academic study of Buddhism from a Western Christian perspective, entitled *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme indien*, was written in 1844 by the great French scholar of Sanskrit Eugène Burnouf. Meanwhile, Muslims largely abandoned the study of Buddhism.³ It is sad to note that although Muslims and Buddhists make up the two largest religious communities of Southeast Asia (42 and 40 percent, respectively, out of a total population of about 568.3 million), and have coexisted for the last 900 years, there is not one Muslim scholar of Buddhism or one Buddhist scholar of Islam.

During and after the colonial era, Muslims, unlike their predecessors, abandoned the self-study of Buddhism and thus became dependent upon both the Orientalist and Christian interpretations of that religion. I am often surprised to hear Buddhist monks, when discussing Islamic monotheism, requesting pictorial or figurative illustrations of Allah similar to those of Jesus Christ. Apart from the recent excellent work on Buddhism by Reza Shah Kazemi,⁴ the works of Harun Yahya⁵ and Imran Nazar Ho-

sein⁶ are polemical, criticizing Buddhism from the perspective of Islamic monotheism, while the fact is that Islam and Buddhism are two different religious worldviews that are theologically and doctrinally incompatible and belong to two different geographic religions of Arabia and Asia, respectively. This is similar to the case of Zakir Naik and other Muslim preachers who conclusively construe that Prophet Muhammad is the *Maitreya* (the future Buddha) who, as per the Mahayana branch, is a *bodhisattva* residing in the Tushita heaven who will descend to preach anew the *dharma* (doctrine) when the teachings of Gautama Buddha have completely decayed. Since the institution of *nubūwwah* (prophethood) is a monotheistic institution and not an Indian religious classification, Buddhists feel offended by such attributions.

Such instances, along with the 2001 destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas which had survived 1,422 years of Muslim history, close all doors for building an understanding between Islam and Buddhism in the modern age.⁷ Meanwhile, the Buddhist-Christian-Jewish dialogue is flourishing.⁸ The main reason for this is that although Southeast Asian Muslims, being the only Muslims living in close proximity to the Buddhists, adopted Islam fervently and religiously; however, they did not continue the early Muslim tradition of studying their own religious Siva Hindu-Buddhist past concretely and constructively. They threw the baby out with the bath water.

Contemporary Muslim social scientists, even those trained in modern anthropological and sociological theories and methods, are largely unfamiliar with Asian religions. This has meant that academics and laypeople, politicians and monarchs, can at best offer charitable assistance to the Rohingya as the *fuqarā' wa al-masakīn* (the poor and needy) while accusing Myanmar and Burmese Buddhism of being anti-Muslim.⁹ Muslim social scientists are unable to offer any knowledge, planning, or strategies for how to engage the Myanmar government. Meanwhile, the country's leaders and Buddhist monks continue to grow in their animosity to Islam. While some international sources are calling the present (2017) phase of the Rohingya's expulsion genocide, Myanmar Army commander Sr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing has remarked that it is now time to complete the "unfinished business" of "clearing the Rohingya," a task that dates back to World War II.¹⁰

There is an urgent need for Muslim social scientists and academic institutions in Southeast Asia to revisit the history of Muslim-Buddhist relations and to come up with new approaches that are relevant to the age of Asia's rise. Neglect of this enterprise is already rendering Southeast Asian

Muslim minorities mere “consumers” who are irrelevant to shaping the development and progress of Buddhist countries from Myanmar to China and Japan.

Introduction

Myanmar is a hard and a difficult country, born out of the ashes of the murder of its freedom fighter General Aung San, who was assassinated on July 19, 1947, just a few months before the the country’s independence on January 4, 1948. His legacy of seeking integration, as well as the violence associated with his murder, continues to impact Myanmar.¹¹ Since its independence, Myanmar has adopted an isolationist position at the regional and international levels (e.g., it did not join the British Commonwealth). In its sixty-nine years of existence, the country has seen close and sometimes tense relations among the government, the army, and Buddhism: both in relation to the *Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee* (the ultimate authority for all ecclesiastical matters) and the Buddhist monastic associations (of which the anti-Muslim radical nationalist organization called Ma Ba Tha, or the 969 movement, is at the forefront).¹²

Just as Muslim radicals or nationalist Islam do not represent Islam, the ethnic versions of Buddhism in Myanmar do not represent the wisdom of the Buddha. In Myanmar, Buddhism has been interpreted in a way designed to Burmanize the country, to construct an “ethnocratic” nation. Burmanization means that the majority Bamar ethnic group maintains political, ethnic, religious, and cultural dominon over the nation. The 135 distinct groups officially divided into eight “major national ethnic races” (i.e., Bamar, Chin, Kachin, Kayin, Kayah, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan) and minorities, including the immigrant Muslim community (e.g., Indians, Chinese, the Zerbadee Muslims, those identified as *kalla*, or dark-skinned) must culturally assimilate into the Burman way of life.¹³ Meanwhile, the Burmans and other ethnic groups have a pathological, racialized hatred towards the Rohingya, those seen as sub-human, illegal migrants from Bangladesh, who are not welcome.¹⁴

Since 2015, thanks to global communications and social media, Muslims around the world have become aware of the presence of these Muslims who have been facing discrimination and violence in Myanmar. The media sensationalization of their condition evoked worldwide sympathy and support, as well as a flurry of relief activities (collecting large donations) and political and religious condemnations of the Buddhists. However, none of this activity

yielded a plan or strategy to resolve the situation. The response was not historically or politically based in knowledge of the Rohingya nor of Myanmar in the transforming geopolitics of Southeast Asia – and so it remains. It lacks strength and appeal to the region’s political players.

Since the beginning of the postcolonial era, Muslims have tended to respond to Muslim minority-related situations emotively rather than intelligently and strategically. This is as true for the situation of created minorities like the Palestinians as it is for native minorities, such as the Bosnians, Kashmiris, the Pattani Malays, the Moros of the Philippines, and Indian Muslims. With no available exit strategy nor plans for their future, such cases end up requiring constant financial donations and humanitarian relief, neither of which fundamentally alleviate their condition or lead to lasting change. This pattern also causes the non-Muslim majority of these countries to distrust the Muslim minority, resulting in the rise of new forms of Islamophobia.

I first heard about the case of the Arakan Muslims or the Rohingya some thirty years ago, well before the current media focus. The first well-documented research about the Rohingya, described politically as insurgents, was done by an Israeli diplomat named Moshe Yegar who was posted as the second secretary at the Israeli embassy in Rangoon (Yangon) in the 1960s. His two books, *Between Integration and Secession: The Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, and Western Burma/Myanmar* and *The Muslims in Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*,¹⁵ have become indispensable to the study of the Rohingya and Muslims of Burma (both of whom have different historical trajectories). Yegar analytically divided Myanmar’s Muslim community along racial and ethnic lines between the Zerbadee/Pathi (as Burmese) Muslims and the Indian, Chinese, and Arkanese (or Rohingya) Muslims. More about this below.

The Burman or Bamar practice Theravada Buddhism, which was established in Burma in 1020 by King Anaoyatazo as a syncretic religion combined with the ancient spirit-worship called *nats*.¹⁶ Burma and Sri Lanka (along with Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia) became the region’s important religious, political, and academic centers of Theravada Buddhism after its demise in India. (Vietnam, Korea, China, and Japan follow the Mahayana tradition, and Tibet the Vajrayana tradition.) The contemporary state of Islam-Buddhism relations in Southeast Asia is shaped and influenced by the ideologies of ethnic nationalism, socio-religious exclusivism, and cultural separation. The region’s entanglement of religion and violence must thus account for local histories and the ethno-political the-

ologies that have emerged in the age of nationalism and under the pressures of globalization.

Arjun Appadurai, a global theorist, writes that the divided majority creates a fear of the minority in order to keep itself in power and maintain its privilege. The invented “fear of small numbers” results in a “geography of anger” by suggesting that the minority will demographically take over the majority. This dynamic is clearly visible in Myanmar, where Burmese religious nationalists (in the name of protecting race and religion) allege that Rohingya and Burmese Muslims will overwhelm the nation. Such fears are scientifically false and demographically implausible. Appadurai has further developed conceptual tools important for analyzing developments connected with the rise of religion and violence in postcolonial states, where religious communalism and fundamentalism intersect with globalization. Anger and violence against minorities have led to the specter of “ethnocide” and “ideocide” across the world.¹⁷

The case of the Rohingya is not only about a conflict between Islam and Buddhism, as is made out by the media and conceded by both Muslims and Buddhists. The dimensions of their plight relate to geography and territoriality, precolonial political relations between Arakan and Bengal, race relations in British Burma, the violent legacy of the Burmese independence struggle, and the ethnoreligious violent conflicts in postcolonial Burma.

Islam in Myanmar

Myanmar is a non-secular, Buddhist-majority country. The majority of its peoples are Buddhist, including both ethnic Burmans and non-Burman ethnic minorities. Buddhists make up 89.8 percent of the population, Christians 6.3 percent, and Muslims 2.3 percent. In the contemporary climate, many Buddhists see Islam as a threat to Buddhism; they use Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Afghanistan as examples of how Islam takes over previously Buddhist-majority places. Islam is blamed for ending Buddhism in India and as the main enemy in Southeast Asia.¹⁸

The Burmese Muslim community is largely made up of traders and businesspeople who are financially well off but poor in terms of their human resources development. Two recent, helpful works about the Muslims of Burma are Jean A. Berlie’s *The Burmanization of Myanmar’s Muslims* and Melissa Crouch’s edited volume *Islam and the State in Myanmar: Muslim-Buddhist Relations and the Politics of Belonging*.¹⁹

The Muslims in Myanmar are divided into four groups:

1. Indian Muslims brought in by the British colonizers. They are largely based in Yangon and primarily economically well-off traders who engage in the gems trade and have owned real estate and major industries such as rice and sugar mills, tea plantations, and textile factories. It is held that in 1901, 56 percent of metropolitan Rangoon was comprised of Indian Muslims, where they owned 60 percent of the real estate in 1939.²⁰

The Indian Muslims, also known as Chulias, Kaka, and Pathans, speak Urdu and learn about Islam from the Barelwi and Deobandi theological seminaries. Their *maulvis* or imams dress like Indian Muslims. The parents prefer that their children acquire an Indian-style madrasa education with an emphasis on ritualistic practices and rote learning. The male graduates end up managing family businesses, and the women end up as housewives. In general, this community has formed an alliance of mutual support between the *maulvis* and the traders that legitimizing each other both financially and religiously. Myanmar witnessed anti-Indian riots in 1930 and 1938 (the latter explicitly against Muslims), in addition to the 1962 military coup in which General Ne Win expelled 300,000 Indians from Burma. His military government's policy of Burmanization emphasized the racial purity and supremacy of the Burmans of the Buddhist faith.²¹

The Indian form of Islamic practice obstructs the community's integration and development in Myanmar. Indian Muslims are viewed as outsiders, as a distinct demographic and religious threat due to their skin color and different language. The Ma Ba Tha, or 969 movement, led by the radical monk Ashin Wirathu, began as a protest against the Indian Muslim symbol of 786, a reference to the Qur'anic verse "In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful" displayed at Muslim businesses and on transaction slips. Ashin Wirathu and others contended that 786 represents evidence of a Muslim plot to conquer Burma in the twenty-first century (for 7 plus 8 plus 6 equals 21). They oppose this plot by displaying the symbol 969 written in Burmese numerals (၉၆၉), which represents the "three jewels" (the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha). Now a symbol of Burmese Buddhist Islamophobia, 969 is the basis of even a sticker campaign to oppose all Muslims in Myanmar since the 2012 Rakhine State riot involving the Rohingya.²²

In the last twenty years, Burmese Muslims have also come under the influence of puritan Wahhabi Islam through their financial donations and

their offering of academic scholarships for youth to study in Saudi Arabia. This makes the embattled minority even more vulnerable.

2. The Pathi or Zerbadee Muslims are the descendants of intermarriage between Persian and Indian Muslim men and Burman women. They see themselves as both racially and culturally different from other Muslim groups, and as closer to Burmese Buddhists. They distance themselves from the Indian Muslims, whose religious lives are influenced by the Barelwi and Deobandi theological schools.²³ Indian and Chinese Muslims are economically better-off than the Zerbadee Muslims, for their communal interests are directed toward India and China, whereas those of the Rohingya are directed toward Rakhine state and Bangladesh. Despite being locals, the Zerbadee face the same discrimination as meted out to other Muslim groups.

3. The Panthay or Hui Muslims of Chinese background engage in business and trade. They came from the southwestern Chinese province of Yunnan as far back as the thirteenth century, and are settled around the northern city of Mandalay.

4. The Rohingya, numbering around 1 million, are natives of Arakan state but are now declared to be illegal Bengali migrants from Bangladesh. Myanmar does not recognize them as native inhabitants on the basis of their dark skin color and being members of a South Asian race. The Rohingya Muslims are of Indo-Aryan descent from the ancient Buddhist kingdom of Arakan, which had close political relations with Bengal. They speak a Chittagonian dialect of a Bengali dialect. Geographically, Arakan state or western Burma (where they live) is located near Arakan Yoma mountain, which, as the barrier between Myanmar and the Indian subcontinent, marks the end of Aryan South Asia and the beginning of the Mongoloid Southeast Asian region.

The Rohingya language is a sub-branch of the Indo-Aryan language family, related to the Chittagonian language spoken in the southernmost part of Bangladesh bordering Burma. Rohingyas do not speak Burmese, which exacerbates the problems associated with integration. Rohingya scholars have shown that the Rohingya language is written using different scripts including Arabic, Hanifi, Urdu, Roman, and Burmese.

There is a need to distinguish between the Myanmar Muslims of the urban centers and the Rohingya, for these groups have different political narratives in the history of the country's formation.

Rohingya History in the Myanmar Narrative

The historical presence of the Arakan Muslims in contemporary Myanmar is rooted in the past, a time when state borders did not exist and there was free movement between Chittagong in Bengal and Arakan. Rohingya writers hold that the Rohingyas are descendants of mixed Asian and Arab identity and have been present in Arakan since the ninth century. Bertil Lintner, a Swedish journalist based in Yangon, and Jacques Leider, a French research scholar at the *École française d'Extrême-Orient*, Bangkok/Yangon, contest this claim to an independent non-Bengali identity. In their view, Rohingya is a political construct and not an ethnic identity. They hold that although some Muslims have lived in the Arakan kingdom since the ninth century, the majority of them who live there today are the descendants of immigrants from twentieth-century British Burma.²⁴

Rakhine Buddhist writers claim that the Buddha visited their territory (*Rakhine-pray*) several times, making it a land of sacred geography, and that the Rohingyas are descendants of Chittagonian migrants. Finally, Rakhine ultra-nationalist and Burman Buddhist nationalist writers view the Rohingyas as Bangladeshi immigrants who fled to Myanmar during the 1971 Bangladeshi war of independence, and who today seek to take over the land in Arakan.²⁵ Myanmar designates them as illegal Bengali immigrants brought into Rakhine after it was annexed by the British in 1826.

The Rohingya claim a presence in Burma dating back to the times of the Kingdom of Mrauk U (1430-1785), which ruled over much of present-day Bangladesh and Burma.²⁶ (The Burmese national historical narrative does not recognize the existence of the Mrauk U kingdom at all.) The founder of this kingdom was Naramikhla Min Saw Mon, a Buddhist also known as Suleiman Shah. He became king in 1404 and was driven out in 1406. After living as an exile in Bengal for twenty-four years, he regained his throne in 1430 with the military support of Sultan Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah of the Sultanate of Bengal. As a result, the Arakanese Buddhist kings came under strong Muslim influence, even adopting Muslim political titles (e.g., Shah).²⁷

From 1430 to 1531 Mrauk U was a protectorate of the Bengal Sultanate, a vassal state of the Buddhist kings of Arakan. Islamic gold dinar coins from Bengal were legal tender within the kingdom. King Naramikhla minted coins with Burmese characters on one side and with Persian characters on the other, embossed with the *kalimah* (the Islamic declaration of faith).

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Mrauk U was an important maritime port that could be reached by large trading ships in the Bay of Bengal. The Arakan kingdom “maintained sea-going craft with Chittagong seamen.”²⁸

In 1784, the Bamar king Bodawpaya invaded and conquered the Arakan kingdom and incorporated it into his kingdom. The British annexed Arakan in 1826 after the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26). The British colonial era was marked by a large influx of Indians into British Burma to assist in the administration as well as the business and labor sectors. Their descendants today are among Myanmar’s economic elites. The 1875 Census Report of British Burma (p. 30) says: “There is one more race which has been so long in the country that it may be called indigenous and that is the Arakanese Mussulman. These are descendants, partly of voluntary immigrants at different periods from the neighbouring province of Chittagong, and partly of captives carried off in the wars between the Burmese and their neighbors ... differing from Arakanese but little except in their religion and the social customs which their religion directs. It was annexed by the Burmese king Badowpaya 1785. Next it became the part of British Burma and present Burma.” The British encouraged paddy farmers from Bengal to move into Arakan, thereby causing ethnic tensions.

The British censuses of 1872 and 1911 recorded an increase in the Muslim population from 58,255 to 178,647 in Akyab District. In the 1942 Arakan massacres, the British recruited the Rohingya against the Buddhist Rakhine people, leading to separate ethnic identifications of the two communities. During the British Burma Campaign in World War II, the British established the V Force as a reconnaissance and intelligence-gathering organization against the Japanese; they recruited the Arakan Muslims to V force, while the Arakan Buddhists supported the Japanese. This caused permanent damage to the relationship between Arakan’s Buddhists and Muslims.

The Rohingya claim their rights to the land on the basis of being a recognized ethnic group during Burma’s democratic era (1948-62). Radio programs were even broadcast in the Rohingya language over Burmese radio, which the current Burma government steadily denies. Today, the Rohingya constitute approximately 1 million out of the 3 million people in the Rakhine state. An estimated 140,000 of them live in refugee camps as internally displaced people following the eruption of ethnoreligious clashes in 2012. An additional 1.5 million Rohingya live in exile in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, India, Malaysia, Thailand, the UK, the United States, and Australia.

In the 1940s, during the period of independence and separation of parts of India into East and West Pakistan, an insurgent group known as the Mujahids desired to join East Pakistan and separate from the Arakanese Buddhists and Burmans. They sought help from Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, who did not support their separation and discussed this matter with General Aung San, who assured their protection in new Burma.

Today Myanmar, a country of restive ethnic minorities, has a three-tiered citizenship system: full, associate, and naturalized – the latter two types are subject to revocation, as per the 1982 citizenship law. The Rohingyas are legally denied all three types of citizenship. Their delegitimization began during the 1970s military regime of General Ne Win. The promulgation of the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Myanmar and the Emergency Immigration Act, both in 1974, laid the basis for ethnic citizenship, which invalidated the National Registration Certificates issued to the Rohingyas as per 1947 legislation. This delegitimization culminated in the 1982 Burmese citizenship law (cited above), which prevented them from becoming Myanmar citizens by requiring that their ancestors must have settled in the country before 1823.

In June 1989, as per the “Adaptation of Expressions Law” (Law 15/89), the name of the state of Arakan was changed to “Rakhine state” and came to be identified as an exclusively Rakhine Buddhist state. In 1994, General Than Shew’s government stopped issuing Rohingya children with birth certificates. The final stroke of making the Rohingyas stateless came in 2015: Following the 2012-13 violence and under pressure from the 969 Burmese Buddhist nationalists, the Thein Sein government invalidated the White Cards identity held by the Rohingyas. It was on the basis of these household identification cards that 400,000 Rohingyas had voted in the 2008 constitutional referendum and the 2010 national elections.²⁹ They were summarily declared to be outsiders “Bengalis” from Bangladesh, making them the only stateless people in Southeast Asia.³⁰

Further complicating this case is that the Rohingyas have been infiltrated by Bangladeshis seeking economic opportunities. Because they have similar racial features and nearly the same language, it becomes difficult to distinguish native Rohingyas from migrant Bengalis. This confusion has facilitated Myanmar’s designation of all Rohingyas as Bengalis and thus cutting the ground from under their citizenship claims in terms of both *jus soli* (territorial) and *jus sanguinis* (parentage).

In my frank view, the Rohingyas will never obtain citizenship in Myanmar, no matter how much lip service leaders like Aung San Suu Kyi

pay to the need to change the citizenship law, or how much they speak (in response to foreign pressure) of “our efforts to solve the issues in a holistic manner.”³¹ The 2008 constitution establishes that the military holds a quarter of the seats in Parliament, and it will retain the power to veto any legal changes. Hence there is no chance of the Rohingya getting the right to citizenship.³²

The Status and Future of the Rohingya in the Democratic Era

Since its independence in 1948, Myanmar has failed to become a multicultural society of ethnoreligious equality and plurality. In 1998, the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) and Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF) jointly founded the Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO) and the Rohingya National Army (RNA). It is said that they have international jihadist connections.³³ The most recent Rohingya resistance group currently engaging with the Burmese army is the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), led by Ataulah Abu Amar Jununi, a Rohingya man born to a refugee family in Karachi and grew up in Makkah. Incensed by the suffering of fellow Rohingya, he gave up his affluent Saudi lifestyle to fight the Myanmar government for his people. ARSA has denied allegations of links with international jihadist groups,³⁴ which other sources also deny.

Apart from Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces), several Arakan Buddhist nationalist groups in Rakhine state view the Rohingya as illegal Bengali Muslim immigrants and a threat to their state: the Arakan National Party (ANP), the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP) and its Arakan Liberation Army (ALA), and the United League of Arakan (ULA) and its armed wing the Arakan Army (AA). Dr. Aye Maung, president of the ANP, a self-declaredly ethnocentric, xenophobic, and racist party, who is seeking to become the state’s chief minister, has been named one of the main instigators of the anti-Rohingya violence. The ANP and Rakhine Buddhist monks insist that the Rohingya are a threat to their state because of their Muslim faith.³⁵

In the ongoing crisis, and facing immense pressure from Muslim and other countries, the Myanmar government has announced that it will take back refugees who can provide “valid” proof of citizenship – which, per the 1982 Burmese Citizenship Law, requires evidence of a direct line to progenitors who lived in the country before 1823.³⁶ Yegar has commented that the largely illiterate Rohingya are unable to present such evidence.³⁷

In 2015, the 969 movement pressured the former military-led regime of President Thein Sein to pass the “Protection of Race and Religion” act that targets the country’s Muslim minority. The law imposes compulsory “birth spacing” for women, monogamy, marriage laws requiring Buddhist women to register their marriages in advance if marrying a non-Buddhist man, and a law regulating religious conversions. The group has also called for a ban on Islamic headscarves and the ritual slaughter of cows during the Eid al-Adha festival.³⁸

Two Myanmar organizations, the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), which claims to be the government-in-exile and is headquartered in Rockville, MD, and the National United Party of Arakan (NUPA), have aligned with ARNO to openly condemn attacks by Rakhine Buddhists on Rohingya Muslims.³⁹ In the face of strong Buddhist opposition, neither the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) nor Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD) party fielded Muslim candidates in the 2016 parliamentary elections. As a result, and for the first time, there is no Muslim member of Parliament. This development provides strong evidence that the Myanmar elite, irrespective of its members’ political affiliations, hold their state to be exclusively for Myanmar’s Buddhists. Minorities will have to adjust themselves to this political reality.⁴⁰ The gradual political exclusion of the country’s Muslims who live in the urban centers and the Rohingya as a religious group has now taken the form of collective discrimination against them as a whole.

The year 2015 witnessed a large Rohingya maritime exodus to Malaysia in hopes of finding a better future and to escape ethnoreligious persecution. They then fell victim to human traffickers and smugglers, some of whom were aligned with Thai state officials.⁴¹ They risked their lives at sea and subsequently become a burden for Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and for international organizations.⁴² Also in 2015, Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi’s NLD party won the historic Myanmar elections that followed fifty years of military rule. Following the formation of the new democratic government in April 2016, the new minister of religious affairs, Aung Ko, remarked that those who practice Islam are only associate citizens of Myanmar (this despite recognition of Muslim citizens in the 1947, 1974, and 2008 Burmese constitutions).⁴³ Two days later, he visited the ultranationalist monk U Wirathu, who calls himself the Bin Laden of Buddhism.⁴⁴ The rise of transnational Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand does not augur well for interreligious relations in these countries. Although

each of them have different political histories, they are under tremendous pressure from Buddhist nationalist monks to curb the status of Muslims and declare Islam a violent and dangerous religion.⁴⁵

After winning the 2015 Myanmar election with a landslide majority, State Counsellor Suu Kyi is the powerhouse behind the current Burmese political scenario. She recently declared that from now on the Rohingya will be referred to as the “Muslims in Rakhine state,” which distinguishes them from the majority (Buddhist) population.⁴⁶ She has also denied that there is any ethnic cleansing going on; advised the new American ambassador to stop using the term *Rohingya*; and denied visas to United Nations investigators focusing on allegations of killings, rape, and torture by security forces (on the pretext that doing so would hamper the government’s “efforts to solve the issues in a holistic manner”).⁴⁷

In 2016, this democratically elected government established an Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, led by the former UN secretary general Kofi Annan, with a mandate to examine the Rohingya issue and propose recommendations. The commission, however, was not mandated to “investigate specific cases of alleged human rights violations.” In its report, released on August 24, 2017, the commission recommended that Myanmar scrap the restrictions on the movement and citizenship of the persecuted Muslim Rohingya minority as a solution to avoid the conflict from spiraling into radicalization within both communities.⁴⁸

It is reported that in light of the recent large Rohingya exodus to Bangladesh, the Myanmar military plans to reduce the Muslim population in its northwestern towns to around 60 percent and that of the Buddhists to 40 percent. It will also resettle thousands of ethnic Rakhines and other Buddhists in Rakhine’s abandoned and burnout villages. This will create a new ethnic population balance, with fewer Muslims and more Buddhists, together living under the absolute control of the Myanmar military.⁴⁹ All this goes to show that in face of rising Burmese Buddhist nationalism, there is no clear solution to the Rohingya issue. In addition, there is no political will on the part of the government and no political mood on the part of Myanmar’s people to grant citizenship rights to the Rohingya as members of the Myanmar nation.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to trace the complex intertwining of religion and nationalism in the case of the Rohingya as part of a broader effort to address

human rights issues democratically (despite globalization and economic development). It is clear that Myanmar's discrimination against and expulsion of the Rohingya is rooted in ethnoreligious nationalism.⁵⁰ The contemporary rise of such religious extremist groups around the world, who claim to restore the imagined communities of ethnic and racial purity in the name of religion, represent the reduction of the Axial Age's world religions to ethnocentrism and racism.

Although the Dalai Lama has condemned the persecution of the Rohingya, Aung San Suu Kyi has said almost nothing beyond the statement that both sides are equally responsible for the violence. She went on to state that Burma faces a global Islamic threat, thereby validating the Burmese Buddhist extremist narrative.⁵¹ The Burmese continue to deny the Rohingya's claim to Myanmar. As the country enters a still-undefined democratic era, its future prosperity requires abandoning the notion of Burman superiority, for it is factually and historically impossible to deny that, for the most part, the Rohingya and other Muslim communities have been living peacefully within Southeast Asia's Buddhist polities for centuries. Ending the oppression of minorities and reconciling with non-Burmans are principles of democratic practice. The multicultural and multireligious pasts of ASEAN member countries are assets, not liabilities, to building harmonious socio-cultural community.

Alarming, on the regional front, there are media reports of the formation of a transnational Buddhist-Hindu anti-Muslim alliance comprised of Myanmar's Ma Ba Tha, Sri Lanka's Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), and India's Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Indian prime minister Narendra Modi is planning to expel 40,000 Rohingya "illegal immigrants" living in Jammu and Kashmir, Hyderabad, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, and Rajasthan.⁵² In light of these factors and some others – the geo-politics of global investors, the long history of the Rohingya-Burman conflict, growing Muslim-Buddhist fault lines in Southeast Asia, and the rise of vicious religious nationalisms – it is nearly impossible that the Rohingya will attain citizenship rights in Myanmar.

Manipulation of religion by radical Buddhist monks, Muslim clerics, politicians, and the media results in transforming religion from a source of happiness and peace-building into a source of promoting conflicts and violence. This development is largely an outcome of the modern mixing of nationalism and religion, which eclipses and reduces the universal messages and humanitarian examples of the religions' founders. Indeed, the founders of religions were no nationalists, for there was no nationalism during their

times. This is a methodological challenge for today's Muslim social scientists: to contribute anew to an academic understanding of Islam that is instrumental in building interreligious understanding, including between the Muslims and Buddhists living in today's volatile Southeast Asia.

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