

The Most Unwanted People in the World

Asia

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Abstract: Victims of long-standing persecution and ethnically charged violence in Myanmar, the Rohingya Muslims are targets of genocide enacted by Myanmar's military and permitted by the government. The state systematically rendered the Rohingya Muslims to be powerless actors under the 1982 Citizenship Law, making the Rohingya the largest population of stateless people in the world. The inter-state ethnic conflict reached new heights following the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) counterattack led by Rohingya men against the military in 2017. The military responded by burning Rohingya villages, gang-raping Muslim women, murdering Rohingya civilians, placing the Rohingya in internment camps, and causing Rohingya Muslims to flee to neighboring states.

Following the 2017 attack, the Myanmar military is committed to wiping Rohingya Muslims out of existence. The method of inquiry to research this paper was content analyses of journals and news articles about Myanmar's historical ethnic tensions and current genocidal events. The objective is to investigate the human rights and security violations of the Rohingya Muslims done by Myanmar's government backed by military force and the potential avenues of relief provided by foreign powers and international organizations. It concludes that intervention from States is needed to punish Myanmar for human rights and security violations.

In primarily Buddhist Myanmar, the Rohingya Muslims are victims of long-standing persecution and ethnically charged violence. The military has been enacting clearance operations and genocidal acts to deconstruct the Rohingya community and culture in Myanmar (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2019). The Myanmar military purposefully cuts all interaction between Muslims and Buddhist civilians to maintain approval from Buddhist citizens, contained Muslims in overcrowded internment camps, and made it impossible for humanitarian aid to reach the Rohingya (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2019). Myanmar's government backed by military force and civilian support are impeding on Rohingya Muslims' fundamental rights and security, intending to wipe away Rohingya Muslims from history altogether.

The Rohingya population occupied the Rakhine state in northwestern Myanmar dating back as early as the 8th century (Javaid 2018). The country fell under British colonial rule in 1824, where the British implemented their infamous divide and rule strategy by favoring Muslims: effectively breaking down the country's established power structure and heightening ethnic tensions (The News Today 2017). In World War II, the British enlisted their golden child, the Muslim population, to fight for the Allied powers while the Buddhist community openly supported the Axis powers in hopes Japan would liberate them (The News Today 2017). The end of World War II freed Myanmar, yet the British divide and rule strategy left Myanmar disjointed as tensions between Muslims and Buddhists sharpened. The Muslim population felt the Buddhists betrayed the colony by supporting the enemy, while the Buddhist community felt the Muslims betrayed all of Myanmar by

supporting the colonizer. In 1962, backed by the military junta, General Ne Win took control of Myanmar (BBC News 2018). Under his dictatorship, the military junta promoted Buddhist nationalism and identified Muslims as the common enemy under which Myanmar's citizen could unite (Wildman 2017). Another sixteen years later, the militant government initiated a violent crackdown called Operation King Dragon, which forced 200,000 Rohingya to seek refuge in Bangladesh (Wildman 2017). In 1982, the government passed the Citizenship Act, which relinquished the responsibility of the state to protect and provide for the Rohingya people by stripping the Rohingya of their citizenship (Javaid 2018). In effect, Myanmar's Muslims are now the world's largest population of stateless people, with 1.1 million Muslims residing illegally in Myanmar (Al Jazeera, 2018).

In response to becoming an increasingly isolated and vulnerable community, a group of mainly frustrated young, male Rohingya Muslims formed the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) meant to combat the Myanmar military. On August 25th, 2017, ARSA planned an attack against the border police as part of their campaign of regaining power back to the Rohingya, which left 12 police officers dead (Wildman 2017; BBC 2017). This proved to be the straw that broke the camel's back. Furious, Myanmar's military responded by burning Rohingya villages, raping Rohingya Muslim women, and mercilessly beating ARSA members and Muslim civilians (Wildman 2017). It is estimated that 60,000 Rohingya were murdered, and 18,000 women were raped by the military and Buddhist citizens (Paris 2019). The brutal attacks precipitated thousands of deaths and mass Rohingya exoduses to neighboring countries. The ARSA attempts to fight back

and reclaim Muslim human security solidified its place as the proximate cause of genocidal action headed by the state.

The term genocide is ambiguous. The definition swaps masks from region to region, and interpretation of genocide evolves alongside history. However, the word can generally be defined by article II of the 1948 Genocide Convention as:

[A]ny of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: killing members of the group, causing seriously bodily or mental harm to members of the group, deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part, imposing measures

intended to prevent births within the group, forcibly transferring children of the group to another group (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 1948)

The intention to erase Rohingya Muslims from existence deliberately violates human security. The United Nations defines human security as the freedom from want, freedom from fear, and freedom to live in dignity (United Nations System Staff College 2017). Seven types of security are then umbrellaed underneath the three kinds of freedoms which include: (1) environmental security; (2) food security; (3) health security; (4) economic security; (5) community security; (6) political security; and (7) personal security (Paris, 2001).

Myanmar's government and military violated all seven. By burning down Rohingya communities, the land is stripped of natural resources necessary for communities' survival and environmental security (Javaid, 2018). The scorched earth leaves little opportunity for the Rohingya to grow crops; government involvement only worsens the already fragile food insecurity by barring Muslims from receiving clean drinking water and sustainable food supply (Javaid, 2018). The World Food Program found that only 20% of Rohingya homes have an adequate food supply with a 53% food consumption deterioration in just one year (World Food Program, 2018). During the rainy seasons, the Médecins Sans Frontières clinics in the Rakhine state have more than 1200 children weekly who classify as severe or moderately malnourished (Mahmood et al. 2016). The destruction of Muslim neighborhoods and subpar nutrition forces the Rohingya to live

in unsanitary conditions that breed disease. Yet, the Rohingya are prevented from receiving proper healthcare within the state (Javaid 2018). Since Myanmar does not acknowledge the Rohingya, there is no official census data that provides a conclusive overview of the Rohingya population health status. Much of what is known about the health crisis is experienced in unsanitary refugee camps in neighboring countries. Rohingya refugee children in Bangladesh are ten-times more likely to experience diarrheal disease than Bangladeshi children (Teng and Zalilah 2011).

The Rohingya Muslim's economic security is manipulated by government officials to ensure the Rohingya remain in poverty. Almost half of the Rakhine state population lives in poverty, making it one of the poorest states in the nation (Mahmood et al. 2016). The Rohingya are denied access to higher learning, which guarantees they

cannot pursue high-paying careers beyond working-class, labor-intensive jobs (Javaid, 2018). The government further deteriorates the Rohingya population by targeting Rohingya teachers, Islamic religious leaders, and other cultural leaders to dismantle the Rohingya community (Beech 2017). By breaking down Rohingya community security, Myanmar's government isolates Rohingya from one another and weakens morale.

The seven security violations were made possible by stripping the Rohingya of their citizenship. The absence of political security allows the government to do as they please without the protection of civil rights and freedom from political oppression. The Rohingya are prohibited from owning land and forced to sign an agreement that Islamic families cannot have more than two children (Javaid 2018). The state also actively removes sharp tools Rohingya could use as self-defense, destroys fences around

Rohingya homes and villages to make future raids easier, and trains Rakhine Buddhist civilians in combat (Beech 2018). The biggest threat for Rohingya Muslims is personal insecurity. The Myanmar government subjects Rohingyas to forced labor by demanding Rohingya men to spend one day a week working on government projects and one night a week for sentry duty, thus essentially enslaving the Rohingya people (Javaid 2018). The militant government further suppresses the Rohingya Muslims by routinely gang-raping, murdering children in front of their parents, and placing Muslims in internment camps (Javaid 2018). Rape is a critical element of the military's genocidal campaign. The tactic is used to humiliate the entirety of the Rohingya community and suppress the Rohingya into silent submission (Siaci, 2019). The murdering of children is another way for the army to attack Rohingya morale. Forcing Rohingya parents to watch their

children die makes the Rohingya population feel helpless. By placing Muslims into internment camps, the Rohingya are separated by Buddhist citizens. Cutting interaction between Buddhists and Muslims makes it easier for the military to dehumanize Muslims and paint them as the enemy to civilians who will then continue to support the military. Myanmar's government and military look to make the Rohingya defenseless by attacking all angles of human security to effectively break-down Rohingya communities and ultimately make them disappear from Myanmar's history.

For years, neighboring countries have taken in 1 million Rohingya refugees and counting (Al Jazeera, 2018). Some states welcome Rohingya refugees with open arms like Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan; others are not as willing to accommodate like Malaysia, who adamantly refuses to grant Rohingyas legal status (Javaid 2018). Since Bangladesh shares a

border with the Rakhine state of Myanmar, Bangladesh receives the highest number of Rohingya refugees, with 900,000 living in Bangladesh refugee camps (World Vision, 2019). For years, the Bangladesh government provided healthcare, potable water, and food to newly settled Rohingya Muslims (Javaid 2018). The effort proved to be unsustainable as the Bangladeshi government announced it could not accommodate refugees anymore and even began deporting some Rohingya back to Myanmar (Javaid 2018).

Organizations such as Fortify Rights, Amnesty International, and the United Nations have been investigating human rights violations in Myanmar in late August 2017 following the military campaign that forced 740,000 Rohingya Muslims to flee for their lives (Beech 2018). With the use of satellite imagery, Amnesty International found Myanmar was "erasing evidence of crimes against humanity" by destroying the

remains of villages burnt down by the government (Amnesty International 2018). The Fortify Rights' investigation found twenty-two police officers and military personnel guilty of an ethnic cleansing campaign (Beech 2018). Following the Myanmar military's violent response to ARSA in August 2017, the United Nations officially labeled the violence in Myanmar as genocide (AFP News 2019; IBTimes 2019). The United Nations found, "hate rhetoric and specific speech by perpetrators and military commanders; policies of exclusion against Rohingya people; an "oppressive context; and the "level of organization indicating a plan for destruction" (Al-Ghamdi 2017). As a prominent global actor, the United Nations holds credibility with countries, meaning the organization is more likely to be supported by states. U.N. research has already been rewarded with action from prominent global actors such as the United States and the

European Union, which placed sanctions on some suspected military leaders (Al-Ghamdi 2017).

Conversely, internal efforts led by the Myanmar government itself have not been as successful. Initially, the government denied any human rights violations and, oddly enough, denied that the Rohingya population ever even existed (Beech 2017). As a Nobel Peace Prize winner, Suu Kyi appeared to be the hope Myanmar needed to champion human rights (Al-Ghamdi 2017). Yet, since she came into power, violence has not ceased but instead shifted from extremist Buddhist groups committing crimes to the army and police (Al-Ghamdi 2017). To appease the global community, Suu Kyi created the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State in September 2016 headed by the former U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan (Al-Ghamdi 2017). It is fair to say the commission is not doing much to relieve intercommunal conflict since its final report

in August 2017. The official website still names Kofi Annan as commissioner despite his passing in 2018 (Advisory Commission on Rakhine State 2016). The 2017 report is full of vague recommendations that provide no plan of action, such as, "The government should roll out a comprehensive state-wide program to combat malnutrition" (Advisory Commission on Rakhine State 2017).

In response to Amnesty International finding Myanmar responsible for destroying evidence of the army burning Rohingya villages, the chief coordinator of the Myanmar government body dedicated to solving the Rohingya crisis insisted that, "We are clearing the land to make it suitable for rebuilding for the refugees" (Beech and Nang 2018). The chief coordinator also affirms, "There is no ethnic cleansing or genocide in our country" (Beech and Nang 2018). Internal efforts prove to be useless, as the government continuously covers the wrongdoings committed by the military.

Contrary to international organizations' extensive research and Rohingya refugees' statements, the government finds that the government and the army have not violated any human rights and negate the presence of genocide within the state (Beech and Nang 2018).

A group of Rohingya refugees teamed up with Latin American human rights groups to file a lawsuit against specific military leaders and Suu Kyi in Argentina under "universal jurisdiction" (Agence France-Presse 2019). This asserts that atrocities committed in Myanmar are so horrific they can be tried anywhere, not just in the state the crimes were committed (Agence France-Presse 2019). The lawsuit condemns detaining Rohingya Muslims to internment camps, the subjection to forced labor, the government's laissez-faire attitude toward violent crimes implicitly targeting the Rohingya population, and the government's attempts to cover up crimes

(AFP News 2019). In the past, Argentinian courts took on Francoist Spain and the Falun Gong movement in China (Agence France-Presse 2019). While the Rohingya crisis case is still in the early stages, Argentina's familiarity with universal jurisdiction cases and backing from fierce Latin American human rights organizations like Abuela de Plaza de Mayo provide hope for justice.

On behalf of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Gambia is attempting to sue the entire country of Myanmar for violating the Genocide Convention before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague. The Gambia is heavily basing its right to sue Myanmar under Article 9 of the Genocide Convention of 1948, which asserts that member states must protect all humans from the threat of genocide (Thai News Service 2019). The Gambia may run into several issues with taking Myanmar to court. For one, the ICJ works very slowly as the ruling itself can

take months or even years. The Gambia and the ICJ may also face difficulty with getting Myanmar to comply. Should the ICJ decide to take on the Gambia's case, the ICJ's limited track record with genocide cases provides hope. When examining the Bosnia v Serbia case, the ruling had a significant effect on public opinion pertaining to Serbia's responsibility for committing genocide (Simons 2019). A similar finding for the Rohingya community would be monumental.

Since Myanmar's independence from the United Kingdom, brutal acts of violence against the Rohingya spelled out genocide. The state systematically tore away all power from the Rohingya through laws like the Citizenship Act of 1982 and through force like the countless raids that forced hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to seek refuge in foreign countries. The remaining 600,000 Rohingya living in internment camps across Myanmar are vulnerable to daily beatings,

murders, and rapes permitted and committed by the state to remove the entire Rohingya population from the face of the Earth (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2019). The hope of justice remains in the distant horizon with two lawsuits filed earlier this month by Argentina and Gambia to hold Myanmar and its leaders accountable for their crimes. Until there is a sufficient court ruling or collective action from nations to intervene and punish Myanmar for human rights and security violations, the Rohingya will remain known as the most unwanted people in the world (Javaid 2018).

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