
MYANMAR: A NATION TORN BETWEEN REFORM AND ETHNIC PERSECUTION OF ROHINGYA MUSLIMS.

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Abstract: Who are Rohingya Muslims?

“The United Nations describes Rohingya as a religious and linguistic minority from western Burma. It says the Rohingya are one of the most persecuted minorities in the world”.

Rohingyas, are an ethnic and suppressed Muslim minority in the Arakan, or Rakhine state of Burma or Myanmar; but how they had come to settle in Burma, is controversial: historians say that they have been living there for centuries, whereas other locals, including the present military installed government, say that they have been there for a few decades only, having moved there, from the Indian sub continental region, presumably Bangladesh, which is a borderless neighbouring country of Myanmar's Rakhine state. Consequently, the constitution of Burma, does not allow them citizenship, as they are a minority, hence treated as refugees and face torture, abuse and persecution! A vast majority of Rakhines, predominantly Buddhists, denounce the presence of close to a million Rohingyas, (there is no accurate estimate, which varies between eight hundred and fifty thousand to a million), who they view as Muslim people from another country and are ill-treated; whereas, the Rohingyas, feel they from Burma but the state, has disowned them.

Bangladesh, which is accused of having sent them across, claims that it has hosted several hundreds of thousands of Rohingya from Myanmar and feels that it has done its part on humanitarian grounds and can handle no more. Burma is emerging from the shadows of decades of military rule, with a civilian government from 2011, it needs to be seen as a stable state, by both the world community as well as the ASEAN, which prepares for an EU style integration in 2015, of which Burma will be the chair this year.

This paper aims to highlight the challenges faced by Burma, as it opens its doors to the world; having seen a surge in tourism over the past eighteen months, with a tremendous increase in FDI; with over a quarter of its population, not having seen democracy in their lives, this will pose to be a daunting task for the government as it grapples with many issues, including the handling of plenty of ethnic tribal and minority communities; the plight of the Rohingya refugees, also needs to be addressed, as it would otherwise lead the country to a massive humanitarian crisis.

Keywords: Burma, reforms, Rohingya, crisis

Introduction: What kind of threat does this pose for the Burmese state?

These increasing woes are being seen as a litmus test for Burma, which has a nominally elected civilian government, without the participation of Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party, elected in 2010 after the Junta's rule for decades. These clashes have caused concerns about Burma's democracy. President Thein Sein earlier had said that violence in Arakan, endangers the country's moves to democracy.

Myanmar needs to be seen as a being stable, as it must contend with the fact that it is one of Asia's most ethnically diverse countries; the world is watching to see how the government handles the now rising tensions between its many ethnic and linguistic minorities and communities. These Religious and ethnic tensions have surfaced in Burma three years after the end of military rule, albeit with deadly consequences.

From 2012, until today, violence has erupted in parts of Rakhine state, leaving over 250 dead and thousands homeless, causing the tensions to spread.

The nature of Myanmar's ethnic violence: Over the last two years, there have been major conflicts in Burma; in 2012 widespread and brutal clashes and arson between Muslims, mostly Rohingya and Rakhine Buddhists, ravaged parts of the western Rakhine state. The rape and murder of a young Buddhist woman in

May caused a deadly escalation of violence, Buddhists and Muslims attacking each other, leaving nearly 250 dead and displacing, thousands of Rohingyas, who fled and crossed the border with Bangladesh. A dispute at a gold shop owned by a Muslim, over the price escalated into a bitter fight, leaving a Buddhist monk dead, creating an assault on Muslim areas, by Buddhist fundamentalists began. Entire Muslim communities were set on fire, causing an estimated 12,000 Muslims to flee their homes, to safety, as the arson spread through.

How have the authorities handled the Rohingya unrest?: The government, was blasted, for its failure to act assertively, quickly during the outbreaks of violence. A state of emergency was eventually declared across the state, in June as a result of the violence in Rakhine, martial law was invoked, allowing the military a free hand to take over administrative control of the region. It was the first time the current government declared emergency anywhere in Burma and they had to do the same when violence erupted in Meiktila.

The government, has also been slammed, by Rights groups, for its failure to bring in to justice the perpetrators of violence in Rakhine. Nearly a year after the initial outbreak of violence, in April 2013, Human Rights Watch said that even though the state forces came to protect those fleeing Muslims, they were accused of fuelling the unrest either by standing by or

taking part in violence, of course all the allegations had been pooh-poohed by the government. collection of what he seems to refer as "evidence" of the evils of the Muslim community.

There has been a long history of communal mistrust in Myanmar, which has simmered, at times, it was exploited by the military. New found freedom seems to be spreading, causing more violent clashes with the hapless, stateless Rohingya. Rakhine state is very much off-limits to others, even to those from neighbouring states in Burma, so verifying reports is not easy; tensions are still ruling high; a lot of people are yet to return home; violence seems to be looming.

Is the violence, linked to Religion in any way?: In the Arakan region there has been a bitter and long-standing tension between the Rakhine Buddhists, who are the majority of the state's population and the Rohingya Muslims, a group claimed to have originated from Bangladesh. In the border areas of Burma-Bangladesh, where violence has often erupted, the population is mostly Muslims. Human rights groups say that the Rohingya have borne the brunt of these attacks and this has also to a large extent affected other Muslims living in Myanmar.

Meiktila's population has over 32 percent Muslims, who were key players in its commerce, owning many shops, which have hence been closed and a majority of them have been pushed into camps, which are guarded by armed policemen, where basic sanitation is said to be lacking. So what has been the main cause for this string of arson, hatred and violence? It is supposed to have originated at a Muslim's gold-shop downtown on March 20th where a Buddhist couple had gone to and a haggle over pricing had flared into a bigger feud, causing the attack on a Buddhist monk, who later died at the local hospital, which was enough to spark off a spate of coordinated attacks on all Muslims.

Views are differing on how the violence was, also if any outside, forces may have played a role; it is beyond dispute that the fear and bitterness of Muslims, were openly conveyed these days all over Burma. They refer to them with a disparaging term "kala". The most outstanding proponent of this view happens to be a 46 year old monk from Mandalay, called Ashin Wirathu, who was jailed in 2003 for instigating anti-Muslim violence, he was released last year as part of a broader amnesty for the country's prisoners.

Ashin Wirathu single handedly organised protests in support of Buddhists in Rakhine state, which was the main cause for communal riots in June; he also made speeches and distributed copies of it to the people by presenting a strongly xenophobic account of his country. His people revere him and are in awe of his knowledge and he radiates a lot of charm and has a known hostility towards the Rohingya Muslim minority, who make up 8% or 9% of the population in the Arakan region.

The Muslims - are good at business, they control the

transportation and construction business and are now taking over the political parties. If this goes on, we will end up like Afghanistan or Indonesia, he says, with a strong candid tone. Ashin Wirathu has amassed a He also accuses the Rohingya Muslim men of repeatedly raping Buddhist women, which he says is against the tenets of Buddhism and also is a fundamental violation of basic Human Rights.

They have also been charged for using their wealth to lure poor Buddhist women into marriage, then imprisoning them in their homes, sometimes without food or they are just prisoners with no freedom of movement, while they marry other women!

Buddhists shopkeepers have been told to identify themselves with stickers to help customers shop there, as against the Muslim shops, which is under a boycott of the locals, as told by the monks, clearly demonstrating religious persecution!

In July 2013, TIME magazine, ran a cover story entitled, Ashin Wirathu; "The face of Buddhist terror". The 47 year old monk, who is based in Myanmar's second largest city and the religious capital of Mandalay, has been denouncing Muslims to hundreds of thousands of Buddhists, who revere him, following his dictum, "now is the time to rise up, to make you blood boil"; a lot of blood has since boiled and there has been a lot of bloodshed, too, a sad commentary on the doctrines of Buddhism. The radicalist monk, has been vocal in his statements that the Rohingya Muslims, aim to take over their country of less than 60 million, even though they make up less than five percent of the populace.

Senior officials in Burma are also asking to implement a ban on the Rohingyas, in having over two children, something which had not been done in the long years of the junta; this feeling of religious animosity, has also spilled along the Kachin rebels, who are predominantly Christians, which has caused for some amount of friction with the local Buddhists.

This has also spread across to Sri Lanka, where again ethnic Buddhists, have indulged in rampaging both Christian and Muslim property, at the instigation of the monks; Thailand, another predominantly Buddhist country, also has had a fair share of communal violence, in the deep south, where more than six thousand people have been slain, in a decade long ethnic strife, in the trouble plagued provinces, involving Buddhists, who constitute the majority, with the minority Muslims, who identify themselves as Malays mostly; these Muslims are also alienated, as rebellion escalates, in an unending saga of communal violence.

In June 2013, Malaysia, also had its share of the communal violence, when Buddhist Burmese workers were targeted and killed in revenge for the happenings in Burma, as Malaysia, is host to hundreds of thousands of Burmese workers, at the lower levels.

IN the global spread of religious extremism, Buddhism, has largely been a non-player, where we have had Ultra Orthodox Jews, Fundamentalist Christians, Militant

Muslims and Hindu Nationalists, engaged in brutal killings of each other in the name of religion; it seems that it is now time the Buddhists are also in the wagon; it is hard to accept the fact that Buddhists can be a source of terror, as the tenets of Buddhism, advocate peace, love and nonviolence as its core values! The world community, needs to look more closely at the Rohingya migrants and find a more lasting solution to

their refugee status, as we live in a more connected and globalised world, religious persecution, in whatever form needs to be condemned; diverse as Burma is, with over one hundred and thirty five different ethnic groups, the Rohingyas need a chance to live a better life and protect their basic human rights, the world needs to find a solution to this crisis!

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