

**THE ROLE OF STATE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF
“OTHERNESS” IN MYANMAR:
THE CASE OF ROHINGYA MUSLIMS**

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Abstract**

In the last four years, Myanmar has been the focal point of South East Asian politics. The democratization process started after the election of 2015, and the sanctions have been lifted in 2016, however, the Rohingya remained excluded legally, socially, economically and politically from the nation by discriminatory legislation (imposed since 1982). The present paper examine the evolution of perception toward this ethno-religious minority which takes the shape of organized pogroms in which the Rohingya are seen as enemies of the nation, as “the others”. The paper question as well the impact of the democratic process in providing human security for Myanmar’s ethno-religious minorities, without the active involvement of an inter-faith approach and civil initiatives.

Key words: otherness, exclusion, human rights, Rohingya, Mynamar

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Background

In the last decade, violence systematically breaks out in Burma/Myanmar's¹ western Rakhine State between local Buddhists, who pretend to protect the nation state, and the representatives of the Muslim community, who are constantly threatened and marginalized. The violence occurred from a mixture of factors related to poverty, potential illegal immigration, and lack of political self-representation of the local Muslim community. As inter-religious violence spread outside of Rakhine State all over the country, the narratives of violence against Buddhists began to recur repeatedly in everyday discourse.² Since 2015, four laws – popularly referred to as “Laws for Protection of Race and Religion” – have passed through parliament and were signed by the president Thein Sein.³

“At the local level, the demand and support for the laws has been brought home to individuals through the sharing of inter-personal rumours of physical, often sexual, real or imagined threats of violence perpetrated by Muslim men. Th[e] Muslim men became the scapegoats of social suffering, the folk devils of a moral panic, created through rumours and political change”.⁴

In order to understand the present day situation, the paper will analyze the history of conflict and the present day situation.

There are currently 18 ongoing insurgencies and more than 130 ethnic minorities in Myanmar⁵ and nearly all of these conflicts are rooted in the uneven distribution of economic opportunities and civil rights, along

¹ The use of the formal term which is Myanmar or the informal term, referring to the colonial past and ethnic relations, which is Burma is still in debate. In the following article, I use “Myanmar” as the literary form, which is ceremonial and official and reeks of government, even though European and North American academics prefer Myanmar/Burma form.

² See Gerard McCarthy, Jacqueline Menager “Gendered Rumours and the Muslim Scapegoat in Myanmar’s Transition”, in *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 47:3, 2017, p. 396-340.

³ N. Ganesan, “The Myanmar Peace Center: Its Origins, Activities, and Aspirations”, in *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding*, 2 (1), 2014, pp. 127–141.

⁴ Gerard McCarthy, Jacqueline Menager, *op. cit.*, p. 397.

⁵ Andrew Selth, Adam Gallagher, “What’s in a name: Burma or Myanmar?”, in United States Institute of Peace, June, 21, 2018 [<https://www.usip.org/blog/2018/06/whats-name-burma-or-myanmar>], July 2019.

with the heavy-handed rule used to maintain it, leaving the country as a patchwork of ethnic groups and regional fighting. There have been reports on the Burmese political and civil control but without significant examination of the targeted repression which had been going on, and is continuing, against ethnic minority groups.⁶ The extensive program to ethnically cleanse the country's two million Rohingya Muslims represents an authoritarian state action that trade economical promises to the population. Recent evidences have shown that local officials help the military direct massacres under the assumed belief that it will bring them economical and political advantages.⁷ Extensive evidence of atrocities was denied by the government, which refused to allow independent investigators access to Rakhine State, and punished local journalists for reporting on military abuses⁸. The scale at which this ethnic group is suffering is immense and it has rapidly transformed into an indisputable internationalized ethnic cleansing.

The hypothesis of ethnic cleansing

Ethnic cleansing is “the expulsion of an ‘undesirable’ population from a given territory due to religious or ethnic discrimination, political, strategic or ideological considerations, or a combination of these.”⁹ The difference between genocide and ethnic cleansing is contested, with some arguing that the two terms can be distinguished by the intent of the perpetrator: while genocide seeks to destroy an ethnic, racial, or religious group, the main purpose of ethnic cleansing is the establishment of ethnically homogeneous lands, which may be achieved by various methods including genocide.

⁶ Martin Smith, “Ethnic Groups in Burma”, in *Development, Democracy and Human Rights*, A Report by Anti-Slavery International, No 8 in ASI's Human Rights Series, Published by Anti-Slavery International, 1994, p.9.

⁷ Jason Miklian, “The Dark Side of New Business: How International Economic Development in Myanmar Helped Accelerate One of the Most Vicious Ethnic Cleansing Campaigns of the Past 50 Years”, in *Harvard International Review*, 38/4, 2017, pp.20-21.

⁸ Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2019: Reversing Autocrats' Attacks on Rights*, January 2019 [<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/17/world-report-2019-reversing-autocrats-attacks-rights>], June 2019.

⁹ Andrew Bell-Fialkoff, “Revisiting the Sins of Antiquity, A Brief History of Ethnic Cleansing”, in *Foreign Affairs*, Council on Foreign Relations, Summer 1993.

The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court defines the crime of genocide as “any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group: killing members of the group; causing serious 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; [among others].”¹⁰

The situation in Myanmar, specifically at the tremendous human loss that has been inflicted on the Rohingya, one can understand the deeper links this conflict has with genocidal actions. Shedding light on how to perceive this ethnic massacre is very important, because the gravity of the situation brings about the difficulty of finding any solution to its end.

In pre-colonial times, identity was to a large extent conditioned by the inhabitation of contrasting environments: lowland people who practiced agriculture lived in states, while upland hunters and gatherers were stateless. European colonial élites started to use terms such as racial or ethnic minorities in the 18th and 19th centuries during the period of colonial conquest. By means of biological theories common of those times, the British and other Europeans concluded that certain groups of peoples and races shared physiological characteristics, which made some races superior than others.¹¹

Myanmar’s annexation was carried out in three wars between 1824 and 1886, resulting in its development as a British colony for over 60 years. During this period, the divide-and-rule separations of colonial government deeply aggravated historic ethnic tensions between the different communities.¹² Perhaps the most devastating aspect of the colonial period was the demise of the monarchy and the monkhood, the twin pillars of the society of Myanmar.

Rakhine is located in one of the poorest regions in Myanmar, a country believed to be the least developed in Southeast Asia. Its inhabitants,

¹⁰ UN General Assembly, Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, UN Doc. A/CONF.183/9 (1998).

¹¹ Ronald D. Renard, “Minorities in Burmese History”, in *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol. 2, No.2, Published by: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, August 1987, pp.257-267.

¹² See Martin Smith, *op. cit.*, p.22.

the Rohingya Muslims, represent a mixture of diverse ethnic groups, including Arabs, Moghuls, and Bengalis.¹³ The colonial years along with modern-day Myanmar’s refusal to recognize the existence of a people who have existed for thousands of years are two important determinants of their persecution story. Muslim settlers came to Arakan State, an independent coastal kingdom in what is now Myanmar, starting in the 1430s, and a small Muslim population lived here when it was conquered by the Burmese Empire in 1784. Britain conquered Burma in 1824 and ruled it as part of British India until 1948, allowing other Muslims from Bengal to enter Burma as migrant workers which resulted in tripling the country’s Muslim population. Although Muslims had lived in Burma for centuries, and though Britain promised the Rohingya an autonomous state in exchange for their help in WWII, it never followed through, and the Burmese people resented what they saw as an incursion of uninvited workers.¹⁴

The dynamic of persecutions

The Rohingyas, considered to be the most persecuted minority of our times¹⁵, have been suffering from the discriminatory policies of Myanmar’s government since the late 1970s. Hundreds of thousands of Muslim Rohingya were forced to flee their homes and most of them crossed by land into Bangladesh, while others have taken to the sea to reach Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand.¹⁶ They were denied citizenship in 1982, because they could not meet the requirement of proving their forefathers settled in Burma. The Burmese government still considers that the migration of other South Asian Muslims which took place during the period of British rule was illegal, and it is on this basis that they refuse citizenship to the majority of the Rohingya¹⁶

¹³ Haradhan Kumar Mohajan, “History of Rakhine State and the Origin of Rohingya Muslims”, in *IKAT The Indonesian Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, II/1, July 2018, p.20.

¹⁴ Haradhan Kumar Mohajan, *op. cit.*, pp.22-23.

¹⁵ UNHR, “Human Rights Council opens special session on the situation of human rights of the Rohingya and other minorities in Rakhine State in Myanmar”, OHCHR, 5 December 2017 [<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22491&LangID=E>], May 2019.

¹⁶ Eleanor Albert, Andrew Chatzky, “The Rohingya Crisis”, Council on Foreign Relations, December 5, 2018 [<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/rohingya-crisis>], July 2019.

They account for one in seven of the global population of stateless people and of the total million Rohingya people living in Myanmar and across Southeast Asia, only 82,000 have any legal protection obtained through UN-designated refugee status. They have been subject to government-sponsored discrimination, detention, violence, and torture, causing several waves of mass exodus to Bangladesh.¹⁷

They are denied legal identities, birth certificates, and even access to essential childhood vaccinations. They have been forcibly confined in Rakhine State due to restrictions on movement, requiring that those seeking work outside their village receive prior authorization from the government. Poverty rates in Rakhine, where the Rohingya constituted one-third of the population before the latest mass flight, is nearly twice that of the national average (43.5% of Rakhine population live below the poverty line, compared to 25.6% national average).¹⁸

In a conflict that seems mostly orchestrated from above, the participants are battling either for survival and recognition, or for constructing a uniform Buddhist country without any interference from Muslim intruders. In a 2017 Al Jazeera documentary, U Par Mount Kha, a Buddhist monk, revealed that: "I don't accept the Rohingya because they've never existed."¹⁹ He also calls the Islamic states of the world to action, to welcome back these people and take them away from Myanmar, so that "there will be no problems in our country at all."²⁰ The greatest of his fears is, if the Muslims are left alone, terrorist attacks will increase. The dichotomy in interpreting the very existence of the Rohingyas in the Rakhine region has brought much criticism for the government and the police forces which are continuously fueling the conflict. While the majoritarian Buddhist population sees the Rohingyas as

¹⁷ S. S. Mahmood, E. Wroe, A. Fuller, and J. Leaning, "The Rohingya people of Myanmar: Health, human rights, and identity, *Lancet* 389/10081, December 2017, pp. 1841–1850.

¹⁸ Department of Population, Myanmar Ministry of Immigration and Population, *The 2014 Myanmar population and housing census*, in *The Union Report: Occupation and Industry, Census Report, Volume 2-B, 2016* [<https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/2014-myanmar-population-and-housing-census-union-report-census-report-volume-2-b-enmy>], July 2019.

¹⁹ Al Jazeera English, *The Rohingya: Silent Abuse*, Filmmakers: Salam Hindawi, Ali Kishk, Harri Grace. Al Jazeera World. August, 13, 2017 [<https://www.Aljazeera.Com/Programmes/Aljazeeraworld/2017/07/Rohingya-Silent-Abuse-170730120336898.html>], June 2019.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

outsiders, outcasts who have settled on their land, the Muslim minority see themselves as citizens who rightfully reside in Myanmar. But the situation was not always conflictual, as Abdul Rasheed explains, as along with Burma’s independence in 1948, the Rohingyas were offered full citizenship rights. After the military coup in 1962, there was a continuous development of a hostile approach, until a law was adopted 20 years later restricting access to citizenship for Muslim people, in spite of their centuries-old presence on the Burmese lands. Although many statements and resolutions have been put forward by the UN, the US, the EU, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the situation keeps worsening.²¹ Prior to the 2016 installment of Aung San Suu Kyi as chief of government, many violent outbreaks against the Rohingya took place, forcing them to flee their homes and settle into camps strongly guarded by the army and fenced with barbed wire. In October 2016, a number of policemen were killed in Rakhine state by an armed group believed to be Muslim, an event representing the spark to the series of violent encounters which would follow. An exodus of Rohingya was triggered in 2017 by a new wave of violence, including rape, murder, and arson, elements of a governmental campaign for reinstating stability in the western region of the country.

The ethnic, religious and linguistic differences that exist between the majoritarian population and the Muslim one are key to the understanding of why and how this conflict emerged to such a large scale of suffering. The term Rohingya surfaced in the 1950s and provides the group with a collective political identity, despite their widespread perceived status of illegal immigrants. Although the etymological root of the word is disputed, the most widely accepted theory is that Rohang derives from the word “Arakan” in the Rohingya dialect and *ga* or *gya* means “from”, therefore tying the ethnic Muslim group to the land that was once under the control of the Arakan Kingdom.²²

At an ethnic level, the conflict takes place between citizens and illegal immigrants, or between historically-bound Burmese people and the foreign Rohingya. As Anthony Smith defines ethnic communities “named and self-defined human populations with myths of common origins, shared historical memories, elements of common culture, and a measure of

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² Eleanor Albert, Andrew Chatzky, *loc. cit.*

ethnic solidarity.”²³ The present Burmese state is of relatively recent creation and many ethnic groups reject the notion that they had ever been brought under the direct rule of any Burman government before the British annexation in the 19th century, with many local communities and societies in Burma being historically multi-ethnic. A two-tier system of administration was enacted by the British, with a Ministerial Burma, dominated by the Burman majority, and the Frontier Areas, where most ethnic minorities lived, a division which built very separate roads towards political and economic development for ethnic groups. As a territorial disadvantage, many ethnic minority lands were divided into different political districts, and none was administered on the basis of nationality. In the late 1930s, an improvement in inter-ethnic relations was springing up, but hopes for further progress were shattered by the Second World War, which is responsible for much of the ethnic hostility which erupted in Burma at independence. Japan was supported by Burma’s national liberation movement, led by Aung San, and the British saw loyalty from most minority peoples, including the Karen, Kachin and Muslims, which resulted in many bloody communal clashes and retaliatory killings during the war. The various nationalities were represented in the Parliament, but only for a short period of time, as a military government was installed and started the 26-year experiment with the “Burmese Way to Socialism”. What followed were decades of political repression under various leaderships, including the martial law installed at the end of the 1980s.²⁴ What developed in the 1990s and 2000s was just a worsening situation of the citizens’, especially ethnic minorities’ rights and wellbeing. Despite some trade liberalization and economic relief, there were few benefits that trickled down to the people in order to improve their daily live.

The cultural values of the ethnic Burmese are thought to be of utmost superiority and that they must be respected by any outsider who arrives with a different set of values. It is felt that the Rohingya support the interests of Bangladesh and that they came in Myanmar for economic reasons to work, the problem here being their continued residence and refusal to leave. This economic migration is not accepted and is not visualized as

²³ Anthony Smith, *The Cultural Foundations of Nations Hierarchy, Covenant, and Republic*, Blackwell Publishing, 2008, p. 31.

²⁴ Martin Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-25.

providing the same set of rights for everyone. However, Bengali language is not spoken by the Rohingya, as they are descendants of forefathers who had no ties to Bangladesh. A bold step forward was made in 2008 by the government, which issued “white cards” to allow the Rohingya to participate in the 2010 elections, but in 2015 the cards were no longer valid. This government move aimed at creating a new set of “cards” which categorized them as Bengali.²⁵

The religious dimension

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights reads that: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”²⁶ In Myanmar, however, there is no call to prayer and a deeply rooted stigma surrounds Islam, proving that Muslims cannot practice their religion openly. The Rohingyas who live in camps have no possibility to gather at a mosque to participate in traditional celebrations central to the Islamic faith, even during Ramadan. Moreover, all mosques in Rakhine have been either destroyed or shuttered after communal riots broke out between the local Buddhist population and Rohingya in 2012. To deepen this disaster, the government has also made it illegal to construct new mosques to replace those that have been destroyed or to make repairs or renovations. Engaging in spiritual pilgrimage to Islamic holy sites in other areas of the country and globe has been prohibited, as well as inviting Muslim religious leaders to visit mosques. To many Rohingya, this not only signifies a denial of their religiosity, but also of their humanity.²⁷

To try and generate a spirit of a national Burmese identity, successive governments have concentrated on the common historical and religious experiences of different ethnic groups in Myanmar. Much public emphasis

²⁵ Al Jazeera English, *op. cit.*

²⁶ United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights [https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html], October 2019.

²⁷ Cresa Pugh, I visited the Rohingya camps in Myanmar and here is what I saw, 2018, [https://theconversation.com/i-visited-the-rohingya-camps-in-myanmar-and-here-is-what-i-saw-94202], October, 2019.

has been placed on Theravada Buddhism, which is practised by 87% of the population, as opposed to the Muslim religion practised by only 4% of the people.²⁸ The 2014 census counted 1,147,495 Muslims, equal to 2.3 % of the population, with a further 1,090,000 (or another 2%) Muslims in Rakhine State not counted because they refused to be identified as “Bengali”. The Kaman are the only officially recognised Muslim group among the 135 ethnic nationalities, with the rest having adopted a variety of names, such as the Rohingya.²⁹

Nevertheless, most of the Burmese Muslims in central Myanmar have been able to live peacefully with their neighbours because they have embraced Burmese culture. Muslim author and teacher U Aung Aung Than, a Mandalay resident, said that Muslim communities in most parts of central Myanmar remain well integrated: “We upper Myanmar Muslims are Burmese Muslims. We love Burmese culture and at the same time we pray to Allah and follow the doctrines of the Quran.”³⁰

International perception of the conflict. The global response

The conflict in Myanmar represents a form of new war, which became more visible at the end of the Cold War, increasing civilian suffering, as measured by the ratio of military to civilian casualties and by the explosion of refugees and internally displaced persons. These wars are called internal or civil wars in order to distinguish them from intra-state or Clausewitzian war. Mary Kaldor explains: “The new wars are very difficult to contain and very difficult to end.”³¹ The author also argues that the civil society needs a framework of security and the pressure is growing for an international framework of law to be applied in local situations where the state unravels.³²

²⁸Encyclopaedia Britannica, Myanmar

[<https://www.britannica.com/place/Myanmar/Languages#ref52575>], October 2019.

²⁹ Mratt Kyaw Thu, *The Burmese Muslims of central Myanmar: No beards, no kurtas*, 2018 [<https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-burmese-muslims-of-central-myanmar-no-beards-no-kurtas>], October 2019.

³⁰ Mratt Kyaw Thu, *op. cit.*

³¹ Mary Kaldor, *Global Civil Society: An Answer to War*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003, pp.119-122.

³² *Ibid.* p.132.

The conflict is internationalized, with heavy attention being drawn towards the plight of the Rohingya and their many difficulties of survival. The first non-Burmese organization to raise issues of concern to Myanmar's ethnic minorities at the United Nations was Anti-Slavery International, in 1985.³³ As we already know, ethnic Burman and Buddhist history, culture and language are unquestionably the predominant social influences, but political repression and human rights abuses have also existed on the national agenda. The minorities have found themselves in a second class position in every field, whether it be language, culture, education or development. Rather than being acknowledged as equal partners, many indigenous peoples and minorities maintain that they have been pushed to the very fringes of Burmese society.³⁴

Nationals fear a possible territorial loss, because some Bengalis want to claim the area of Rakhine, especially the towns of Buthidaung and Maungdaw, as Muslim, which threatens ethnic Burmese people to flee. Even the fact that the Muslims have given themselves a name Rohingya seems to imply a connection to their desire of independent existence from Myanmar and this unsettles the balance against them. Despite numerous evidence and recordings of Burmese soldiers attacking Rohingya, the government still finds no real blame for the suffering and the killings.³⁵

Journalists have been banned from Rakhine State for a while and their access nowadays is still under authority control, as is their capacity to operate and investigate deep into the story of the region. The Rohingya in camps rely heavily on NGOs, their movement is restricted as well as their ability to marry, their educational opportunities, and their access to health care. The camps are managed jointly by the government and military, and receive substantial assistance from international NGOs and UN agencies. However, there have been times when even the humanitarian organizations have been barred from delivering food rations and other goods and services by the government and military.³⁶ “The current crisis in Rakhine, which at this moment in time is quite possibly the most acute human rights crisis in the world, may have been triggered by attacks by Muslim militants,”

³³ Martin Smith, *op. cit.*, p.9.

³⁴ *Idem*, pp. 35-36.

³⁵ Al Jazeera English, *op. cit.*

³⁶ Cresa Pugh, *op. cit.*

Andrew Gilmour, the U.N. assistant secretary-general told U.N. Security Council members about two years ago. "But it has been decades in the making, through the systematic discrimination against the Rohingya population."³⁷

Recent outcomes

In November, 2014, the UN launched a global campaign to end statelessness within 10 years.³⁸ This effort will require resolution of the crisis, as the Rohingya people account for more than one in every seven stateless individuals worldwide. Below is a summary of recent developments and events surrounding the crisis, from various sources.

In August 2018, a United Nations-mandated fact-finding mission found that the military abuses committed in Kachin, Rakhine, and Shan States since 2011 "undoubtedly amount to the gravest crimes under international law," and called for senior military officials, including Commander-in-Chief Sr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, to face investigation and prosecution for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. Refugees who arrived in Bangladesh in 2018 reported continuing abuses by Myanmar security forces, including killings, arson, enforced disappearances, extortion, severe restrictions on movement, and lack of food and health care. They also reported sexual violence and abductions of women and girls in villages and at checkpoints along the route to Bangladesh, and those who returned to Myanmar faced arrest and torture by authorities. Over 4,500 Rohingya remained stuck in the Bangladesh-Myanmar border "no-man's land," subject to harassment by Myanmar officials and regular threats via loudspeaker to induce them to cross into Bangladesh.³⁹

In March 2019, Bangladesh has told the UN Security Council it will stop accepting any more Rohingya Muslims who flee from Myanmar, with the Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haque accusing Myanmar of "hollow promises" during negotiations over returns. Despite a deal between Bangladesh and Myanmar in January 2018 to repatriate Rohingya refugees,

³⁷ Colum Lynch, For Years, U.N. Was Warned of Threat to Rohingya in Myanmar, 2017 [<https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/16/for-years-u-n-was-warned-of-threat-to-rohingya-in-myanmar/>], October 2019.

³⁸ United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees, UN refugee agency launches campaign to eliminate statelessness within 10 years. Geneva: United Nations News Centre, 2014.

³⁹ Human Rights Watch, *op. cit.*

Mr Haque said his country could not accept more of them: "Is Bangladesh paying the price for being responsive and responsible in showing empathy to a persecuted minority population of a neighbouring country?" In repatriating Rohingya, there are immense physical and psychological barriers.⁴⁰

There have been attempts at seeking solutions to the crisis, but the latest one coming from the UN brings up more question marks than answers. Human rights groups have reacted with horror to reports of UN draft plans to help relocate thousands of Rohingya refugees from Bangladeshi camps to a barren, flood-prone island in the Bay of Bengal. A document drawn up this year in March by the World Food Programme, the UN's food aid arm, and seen by Reuters, has revealed how the agency supplied the Bangladeshi government with detailed plans of how it could provide for thousands of Rohingya being transported to the island on a voluntary basis. Relocation to the uninhabited, remote island of Bhasan Char has been praised as a solution to chronic overcrowding, but many Rohingya are fearful to go and human rights experts warn that another crisis can emerge, as the island made of silt and vulnerable to frequent cyclones. "The UN has a long history of failing the Rohingya and it's happening again. Bhasan Char should be off the table. It's an ill-conceived proposal that's sure to lead to more human rights violations," said Matthew Smith, CEO of Fortify Rights.⁴¹ These plans seem to be an easy and quick escape that Bangladesh is willing to use, rather than looking out to provide better conditions in refugee camps and support the Rohingya.

Human rights violations seem to be here on the daily agenda and press freedom looks like a far-fetched fantasy, although it is customary for Myanmar authorities to free prisoners around the time of the traditional New Year, which began on April 17. At the beginning of May two journalists have been released after spending more than 500 days in jail in Myanmar for their reporting on the Rohingya crisis. Wa Lone, aged 33, and Kyaw Soe Oo, aged 29, were imprisoned last year and they became a symbol of press freedom with many calling for their release. The Myanmar Government

⁴⁰ BBC News, Rohingya crisis: Bangladesh will no longer take in Myanmar refugees, 2019 [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47412704], October 2019.

⁴¹ Nicola Smith, Human rights groups slam draft UN plans to send Rohingya to barren island, 2019 [https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/03/25/human-rights-groups-slam-draft-un-plans-send-rohingya-barren/].

released them as part of a mass amnesty.⁴² The two journalists were convicted in September of breaking the Official Secrets Act and sentenced to seven years in jail, in a case that raised questions about Myanmar's progress toward democracy and sparked an outcry from diplomats and human rights advocates.⁴³

On May 27, 2019, the final report by Reuters gathered testimonies from a range of participants, including Buddhist villagers who confessed to killing Rohingya Muslims and torching their homes. Accounts from paramilitary police also directly implicated the military. A group of Rohingya men seeking safety on a beach were singled out as their village was raided, the report said. Buddhist men from the village were then ordered to dig a grave and then the 10 men were killed, at least two hacked to death by the Buddhist villagers with the rest shot by the army. This was thought to be the first time soldiers had been implicated with photographic evidence and by fellow security personnel. The military eventually confirmed the massacre had taken place and in April 2018 and 10 soldiers were sentenced to prison for their involvement in the killings, looking to serve 10 years of hard labour for "contributing and participating in murder". The two journalists were arrested before their findings were published, after being handed documents by two policemen who they had met at a restaurant for the first time. They were charged with violating the country's Official Secrets Act. But a police witness testified during their trial that the restaurant meeting was a set-up to entrap the men. Aside from the Inn Din killings, the military exonerated itself of any wrongdoing in Rakhine, despite large amounts of testimony from Rohingya refugees describing atrocities.⁴⁴

Most recently, Bangladesh Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, has slammed Myanmar for delays in the repatriation of some 740,000 Rohingya who took shelter in fetid, overcrowded camps in Bangladesh. She explained that the country's patience is wearing thin and criticised international aid

⁴² BBC News, Jailed Reuters Journalists Freed, 2019 [<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47412704>], October 2019.

⁴³ Thu Thu Aung, Shoon Naing. Myanmar to release 6,500 prisoners in amnesty on Tuesday, 2019 [<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-journalists-amnesty/myanmar-to-release-6500-prisoners-in-a-mnesty-on-tuesday-president-idUSKCN1SD04A>], October 2019.

⁴⁴ BBC News, Rohingya massacre: Myanmar grants soldiers early release, 2019 [<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48419595>], October 2019.

agencies working in the refugee camps in the border district of Cox’s Bazar – who object to any forced relocations – saying they are not interested in ending the crisis.⁴⁵

Finding a humane solution to this crisis is of utmost importance not only for regional, but also for national and international peace-building developments. There still seems to be a hauntingly dark shadow of human rights abuses that refuses to leave the global scene, in part because some conflicts are deeply rooted and cannot easily be ended, but also due to the respective governments’ inability and sometimes unwillingness to act and stabilize the affected areas. The UN can also take part of the blame with its disconcerting connection to the crisis and lack of proper action or improper proposals. What can be done, I believe, is a reform of the governmental system in Myanmar and a reintroduction, reacceptance, of Rohingya as rightful citizens as proven by their ties to the land and their distinct ethnic features. Future developments will be under scrutiny and media attention, most of the times influenced by nationalistic desires to portray the outsiders as relentless people who do not deserve to live in Myanmar. As complicated as the story is, the journey of healing will be difficult for the Rohingya, if and when the conflict will see a peaceful closure. However, they remain devoted to their faith and this represents the spark that lights up their neverending battle for survival and recognition.

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⁴⁵ Frontier Myanmar, Bangladesh PM attacks Myanmar over Rohingya deadlock, [<https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/bangladesh-pm-attacks-myanmar-over-rohingya-deadlock>], June 2019.

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