

MUSLIM MINORITY IN MYANMAR (BURMA)

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Burma/Myanmar is situated next to Bangladesh with a population of 35,307,913 occupying an area of over 261,228 square miles according to the census 1983. The roots of the Muslims in Burma can be traced back to 18th century. Most of them migrated from British India over a long period of time. They lived there more or less peacefully until the early 1960 when some Buddhists targeted them. Some of them migrated to the East Pakistan. However, since 2013-2014 they faced intense violence by Buddhist groups. The state of Burma could not protect them. Myanmar had been faced an under year of military rule. The Muslims of Myanmar faced harassment and hate from the Myanmar. They faced intense difficulties there. They could not even repair or build mosques, they cannot travel and the most difficult situation is they could not even get the citizenship of Burma. The hateism against Muslims stated in 2001 and since then it has continuously been growing and now it has become out of control.

Keywords Rohingya Muslims, Myanmar, Burma, Rakhine State

Historical Background

In 1707, the Arab sailors in Syriam, Burma felt strong enough to capture the British vessel “Friendship”, belonging to the East India Company. The Company complained to the Burmese authorities in Syriam about the incident. The use of steamship by the British put an end to the Muslim sea traffic to Burma. They focused entirely on Europe. However the Muslim vessels continued a limited coastal trade between Indian and Burmese ports.

Well before the decline of Muslim shipping and the rise of the East India Company important Muslim trading communities had settled in the coastal towns of Burma. The monk Sangermano who lived in Burma during the years 1763-1807, wrote that “the commerce is entirely concentrated in Rangoon, where it is exercised by the inhabitants, as well as by a number of Mohammedan Moors, some Americans, few English, French and Portuguese, who have taken up their residence there” (Noman, 2013).

Modern day or real political interaction between the non-Burmese and the Burmese came lately only after the end of Second World War. In the course of the national liberation movement, the Shan, Kachin and Chin signed the historic Panglong Agreement in

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1947 with Burma, as separate political entities, and gained joint independence together with the Burman from the British in 1948.

However, in 1962 the Burmese military seized state power in a coup under General and declared the Union Constitution abolished. In so doing, the Burmese terminated the only existing legal bond between them and the other ethnic nationalities. The declaration of the suspension of the Constitution was in effect a self-denunciation that Burma had overnight become an aggressor-nation instead of partner. Thus in a legal constitutional sense, the Union of Burma ceased to exist.

The Burmese military regime has been attempting to hold the older union together by sheer military force, whilst the real and only solution was political. The Shan and the Karenni on their part have been waging a war of resistance to free themselves from the “Burmese oppression and domination. This was also true for all the other non-Burma ethnic groups, who were being subjected to the Burmese military’s Burmanization and forced assimilation” (Noman, 2013).

Ethnic Minorities in Myanmar

In the state of Myanmar there are so many minorities who are living and promote their culture. The ethnic communities have a vital impact on the economy, social and cultural growth of the country. There are some main and important ethnic communities of Myanmar are:

The Rohingya Muslims: The Muslims in Burma are known as the Rohingya Muslims who are generally poor and live in the areas that are extremely under developed and lack basic civil facilities.

The Rohingya Muslims trace their roots to Arabs. Moors, Mughals and Bengalis had lived in the Arakan area since the 8th century. There was a frequent movement of population between Chittagong and Arakan during all this period; at times there was struggle for the control of these areas. The Kings of Bengal captured Arakan several times. On occasions, the rulers of Arakan penetrated into the Chittagong area. This added to Muslim population in Arakan and a small population of Burmese origin settled in Chittagong.

When in 1784, the Burmese King captured Arakan, a large number of its people fled to Bengal. Some of them returned when the British got control of this area in the 19th century. The two-way movement of population continued during the British period. The

people from Chittagong area used to go to Akyab for agricultural labor work, and return after the harvesting season. Whenever there was a serious economic or political crisis in Arakan, population migration flowed to East Bengal areas. There was much turmoil in this area during World War II. The large scale military operations during 1942-45 caused much devastation in the area. The people got some military training and they were able to lay their hands on weapons which strengthened their resolve to resist the authority of the Rangoon government.

The Muslims of Arakan developed a strong sense of separate identity, comparable to the consciousness that sprang up amongst several other ethnic-religious minorities in Burma. The Arakan Muslim identity was closer to the Muslims of East Bengal. They talked proudly of their cultural ties with the Muslims of India, especially the Bengali Muslims. Having religious and, in some cases, ethnic ties with the Bengalis, they looked towards them for support. A relatively weak 'Mujahid' movement was initiated in the forties for the realization of their separatist aspiration which continued to function for some time after Burma attained independence from the British.

Chin: "90% Christian, have been subjected to forced labour, made to work on large infrastructural projects.

Karen: Animist Buddhists and Christian mainly living in the Kayin State and the Irrawaddy Delta, have been made to act as military porters; thousands forcibly relocated or displaced and over 1000,000 in refugee camps in Thailand.

Karenni: Animist and Christian live in the Kayah State; thousands have been forcibly relocated.

Kachins: 90% Christian living in Kachin State; reports continue that they are still made to engage in forced labour in spite of a cease-fire.

Mon: Mainly Buddhists live in the Mon State.

Rakhine: Mainly Buddhists, live in Rakhine State; have been made to take part in forced labour.

Shan: Shan people belong to Northern Thai and Lao, followers of Theravada Buddhism, living mainly in Shan State. Many have been made to be military porters and engage in hard labour. At least 300,000 have been forcibly relocated, and at least 80,000 have fled to Thailand where they are not permitted to stay in refugee camps" (Khatwani, 2006).

The Myanmar Government Policies during Military Rule 1962-1988

The root of military in Myanmar has been associated with the struggle for independence. The first brief military rule began in 1958 and a longer military rule started in 1962 when Ne Win captured power again through a military coup from disintegration. The 1962 coup led to the end of democratic form of government and the beginning of direct military rule in Myanmar till upto 1974. During the period of military rule under General Ne Win, the country was shaped into one-party socialist state under the army led party called as Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) till 1988. On “April 30, 1962 the Revolutionary Council under Ne Win announced a new national ideology called ‘The Burmese Way to Socialism’ to guide the country. Further the military was declared as the supreme authority. The military Junta adopted Burmanization Policy, nationalize land, banking sector, oil wells, foreign trade, the insurance sector, shipping wholesale trade, etc. Private schools, banks, industries and large shops were nationalized. Land and wealth were also redistributed” (Devi, 2014).

However, during this period Myanmar also pursued a policy of non-alignment and neutrality in world affairs and joined the British Commonwealth. Myanmar supported the UN, and in 1961 Myanmar became a founder member of the Non-aligned Movement.

The violence against Rohingya has strong anti-Muslim and racist sentiments. A conflict between a Buddhist and a Muslim gold shop owner came into action with a little dispute and as a result 40 people were killed and lots of houses and mosques were also burnt. In May, 2013 “1200 Muslims in the country northeast fled from their homes when throngs of armed Buddhist mobilized after unconfirmed reports that a Muslim man killed a Buddhist woman in the area. In late August, hundreds of Muslims homes were burnt by mobs in the Sagaing region of Myanmar, once again, over unconfirmed report of a Muslim man involved in the rape of a Buddhist woman in Kanbalu” (Al-Adawy, 2013).

Meanwhile, Myanmar’s famous politicians and ex-Generals were doing nothing to stop the wave of violent racism across the country. However, the present movement is barely an aberration within the Burmese background. “Where historically the

conception of national security has been driven by strong nationalism, notion of self-reliance and distrust of foreigners” (Al-Adawy, 2013).

If there is one move toward that would come together the peoples of Myanmar in a close demanding union and give good reason for this continuance of the stronghold state it would be the warning of material foreign involvement into Burmese affairs. There is always the danger, as we have seen in typical garrison state situations, that a regime may “invoke, erroneously believe, or create the impression of external threats justifying continuity of power and repression in the interests of the national security – foreign powers aligning with minorities or opposition elements” (Steinberg, 2012).

Race to Religion: The Discourse of Violence

The ordinary discourses linked with the brutalities of 2012 to 2013 basically reflect a logic of, ‘communal’ conflict and hatred along with the economic inequalities. They were subjected to violent land grabs, enforced relocations of the Rohingya and the following demographical and racial production in the mixed villages of Arakan. A two child policy enforced on the Rohingya by the general government, with the official blessing from the centre, once again betrays an irresistible fascination with demographics. Amidst calls of intolerant payback, the economic policies based on of hatred can be glimpsed in several of the linked policies and discourses nearby the violence.

Sexual Violence in Burma

In the 2006 UNASEF report, “the Women’s League of Chinland maps the incidents of rape it has documented, showing that rapes are committed by troops from at least 11 battalions throughout Chin State and in close proximity to military camps. The UN Committee on Human Rights (now the Human Rights Council) and the General Assembly have acknowledged that the problem of rape in Burma entails more than a few isolated incidents. Following the publication of *License to Rape* in 2002, the UN Committee on Human Rights passed a resolution deploring the state’s systematic violations of human rights, including rape” (United Nations General Assembly Resolution Situation of human rights in Myanmar , 2005).

Table: Documentation of Rape and Sexual Violence

Name of Report	License to Rape	Shattering Silences	System of Impunity	Catwalk to the Barracks	Unsafe State	Total Cases Cited
Release Date	May 2002	April 2004	September 2004	July 2005	March 2007	
Focus Area	Shan State	Karen State	All ethnic states and central Burma	Mon State	Chin State	
Period Covered	1996–2001	1988–2004	2002–2004	1995–2004	1989–2006	
Number of Cases	173	125	26	37	38	399
Number of Women and Girls	625	127	34	50	39	875
Number of Girls (younger than 18)	77	20	15	11	5	128
Remark	High-ranking military officers (commander—corporal) committed 83 percent of cases, 61 percent were gang rapes, and 25 percent resulted in death. Perpetrator punished by commanding officer in only one case.	Half of the incidents were committed by high-ranking officers; 40 percent were gang rapes. In 28 percent of cases women were killed after being raped.	Seventeen cases were gang rapes by senior military officers, authorities, or with their complicity.	Scores of “comfort women” forced to work by day and be sex slaves at night; 30 young women, including schoolgirls, made to stay at military base and take part in a military “fashion and beauty show.” More than half the cases committed by military officers, often in front of or together with their troops.	Women and girls as young as 12 are being raped in their homes and on farms, while traveling outside their villages and when conscripted as forced labor	

Source: <https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Myanmar-Impunity-Constitution-2009-English.pdf>

During 2002 to 2007, Burma women's organization recognized almost 400 incidents of rape and other forms of sexual cruelty that Burmese forces committed between 1988 and 2006. They recognized 875 dead, 128 of whom were younger than 18. Quite a few factors propose that the amount of incidents detailed in this information is a small part of those that really occurred. While some communities feel sorry there are some that support rape fatalities. The social disgrace linked with sexual brutality leads many women to stay quiet about what they have faced or still have been facing. In its 2005 report, *Catwalk to the Barracks*, the Women and Child Rights Project (Southern Burma) reports that three women interviewed for the report "decided to flee from their villages after the incidents because they felt 'blamed and despised' by local villagers". One more woman reported that she was too embarrassed to call for help out while she was being sexually beaten. We can think that, all along with the common disgrace, the loneliness of many country villages in Burma, the existence of armed forces checkpoints, and the bodily dangers of armed disagreement also guide to an underreporting of incidents of sexual violence.

According to different sources, curfew was affirmed on Thursday (May 24) as soon as anti Muslim clash ruined away in the business district zone, said one local of Pegu, a huge city about 80 km northeast of the capital Rangoon. Some crowd throws pebbles at cars and trains carrying Muslim passengers.

However, there have been some confirmed reports of casualties from this latest flare-up of religion violence. It appears that the worst is far from over. According to the recent report issued by the Washington DC, that approximately hundreds of people were killed and a huge amount of homes were burned in Burma since the violence started in Burma.

The latest and the most violence against them began in 2012. Over the last three years accusations of sexual assault and local disputes have created a flashpoint for violence that has quickly escalated into widespread communal clashes.

- The first and most deadly incident began in June 2012 when widespread rioting and clashes between Rakhine Buddhists and Muslims, largely thought to be Rohingya

Muslims, left 200 dead and displaced thousands. It was the rape and murder of a young Buddhist woman which sparked off that deadly chain of events

- On 28 May 2012, “in a small township of Ramri, a series of incendiary pamphlets began to circulate from one house to another. Reports suggested the alleged rape of a 27-year-old Buddhist woman, Thida Htwe, by three Muslims men. Six days later, a few dozen miles southeast of Ramri in Toungop, a group of villagers detained a bus, killing ten Muslims onboard” (Al-Adawy, 2013).
- In August 2013 rioters burnt Muslim-owned houses and shops in the central town of Kanbalu after police refused to hand over a Muslim man accused of raping a Buddhist woman.
- In January 2014, the UN said that more than 40 Rohingya men, women and children were killed in Rakhine state in violence that flared after accusations that Rohingyas killed a Rakhine policeman.
- In 2015, near about 100,000 Rohingya Muslims are restricted to internal displacement camps. Owing to the latest acts of brutality that include the rape of both male and female Muslims irrespective of age, slaughtering them alive and later mutilating the corpses, the plight of Rohingyas became a regional crunch when thousands of people landed on the seashores of Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, with many others still supposed to be stuck at sea.

The Conflict or Religious Discrimination

In 1997, Myanmar’s State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) replaced the State Law and Order Restoration Council which had taken power through a military coup in 1988. By 21st century, agreements had been signed with the majority of armed ethnic opposition groups. However a number of ethnic groups refused to signed the ceasefire agreements including the Karen National Union, the Karenni National Progressive Party, Shan State Army South, the Chin National Front and the various Rohingya Groups. According to the 2007 report of UN’s Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar on the eastern Thai-Burma “border and in the Western areas of the country government-led- counter-insurgency operations continue and are

characterized by high intensity violence and repression involving the use of excessive force and fire arms, and severe abuses of the human rights of unarmed civilians” (Ekeh & Smith, 2007).

Bangladesh refused the Hope Rohingya Movement with on the ground that it is not a participant to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention or its 1967 protocol that recognized the baseline for humanitarian behavior of refugees. The Bangladesh government has argued that refusing support to the Rohingya has been Bangladesh’s personal superior right, as well as its economic imperative, as the country has not been able to give hold up to the Rohingya monetarily, developmentally, or otherwise. In June 2012, Bangladesh’s Foreign Minister Dipu Moni remarked that “Dhaka is not bound under any internal law to allow Rohingya refugees to enter Bangladesh. Some are trying to say that Bangladesh should open the border in line with the international customary law” (Bjonberg, 2012). One line of arguments for providing assistance to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh looked back to Bangladeshi own history of displacement at partition and during the liberation war. A joint statement signed on June 15th, 2012 by 32 leading civil society figures labeled Bangladeshi’s Liberation War as a “massive refugee crisis. Their statement read: We called that as a nation we were beneficiaries of similar assistance in 1971 during our war of liberation, which saw one of the world’s largest influx of refugees to a neighboring country” (PM urged to let Myanmar refugee , 2012).

The Rohingya Muslim minority in the North Rakhine State still faces deep discrimination as the government refuses to recognise them as an official ethnic group and denies them equal citizenship rights. In addition “freedom of movement for the Rohingyas is severely restricted, and they are unable to access medical and education services because they cannot travel outside their local areas” (Ekeh & Smith, 2007). In addition to attacking against military. “Civilians were isolated from their homes to camps around Burmese Army bases and denied the right to farm and support themselves. They get food from the army, they had to serve as military porters in war zones. Many old people were murdered and women raped by Burmese troops” (Ahmed, 1994).

Myanmar Officials aiding Muslims Killings

The human rights abuses took place in Myanmar against the Rohingya Muslims. Though the military government introduced

some political reforms in 2011 and brought civilian into government, the situation of the Rohingya Muslims remained unchanged. “While the state security forces in some instances intervened to prevent violence and protect fleeing Muslims, more frequently they stood aside during attacks or directly supported the assailants, committing killings and other abuses, the report said of the unrest, in which at least 110 people killed. The failure to investigate properly or punish state officials had emboldened those behind campaigns against Muslims elsewhere, said Phil Robertson, Deputy Asia director at HRW, with reference to violence in central Myanmar that killed more than 43 people in March and displaced at least 12,000” (Myanmar Official Aiding Muslims Killings: HRW, 2013).

The International Community Reaction

Since 1990, four UN reports have documented the systematic violation of human rights by the Burma army. On 17 May 2004, “Mr Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary-General noted with concern that Myanmar’s national convention was reconvened without the involvement of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and other political parties that won the majority of seats in the elections of 1990. He subsequently indicated that there could be a world boycott of Myanmar if this process did not include the NLD” (Human Rights Violations by the Burmese Army).

All peoples are equal by the law and are entitled without any bias to the equivalent safety of the law. In this respect, the law shall prohibited any favoritism and assurance to all peoples equal and efficient defense against discrimination on any level such as sex, race, colour, language, religion, political and any other view, general or communal source, property, birth or other status. In those states “in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practiced their own religion, or to use their own language” (international Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, U.N, 2006).

United States

In November 2000, the US government actively supported the decision of the ILO to implement sanctions against the Myanmar regime based on the government’s continued systematic use of forced labor for a wide range of civilian and military purpose.

In 2014, situation in Rakhine state, “where 140,000 people remain confined in squalid displacement camps after violence erupted between Buddhist and Muslim presents a challenge to the reform efforts across the country, said deputy national security advisor Ben Rhodes” (US asks Myanmar to grant Citizenship to Rohingya, 2014).

Bangladesh

The Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, me M. Morshed Khan, has said that “the ongoing violence in Myanmar will have to impact on relations between the two countries. It seems part of the reason for this reaction is twofold. The first reason seems to be that there still remain 19,700 refugees from Myanmar in Bangladesh and Bangladesh might not want to antagonize the government of Myanmar too much so as to jeopardize the further return of refugees. The other reason could very well be that Bangladesh could be involved in a lucrative gas pipeline project with Myanmar and India” (Human Rights Violations by the Burmese Army).

Malaysia

The Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM), which is said to have 60,000 members, regularly issues statements concerning the situation of Muslims in Myanmar. The group, “amongst others, appealed to the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Conferences to press Myanmar to allow an independent investigation. It has also called on the Junta to rebuild mosques destroyed in the clashes” (Human Rights Violations by the Burmese Army).

Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC)

The OIC regularly calls on the international community and human rights organizations to intervene and force the Myanmar government to halt attacks on Muslims, and quit destroying mosques and Islamic historical places. It “urges the international community to secure the safety of Muslims in Myanmar and enable them to exercise their political and social rights as accorded to other citizens, and safeguard their Islamic identity. If today's world community is all about coexistence and cultural exchanges, why is it silent about the persecution of Muslims” (Human Rights Violations by the Burmese Army).

Pakistan

Pakistan are mounting protests online and in the streets of cities like Lahore and Peshawar over the ill-treatment of Muslims in

Myanmar, a situation that Islamist groups here are distorting to raise money and potentially win recruits.

On the streets of Pakistan, “the rhetoric runs much hotter with protesters claiming thousands of Rohingyas are being slaughtered in western Myanmar (also known as Burma). Online, meanwhile, a series of doctored and misidentified photographs are circulating widely in Pakistani social media and beyond that purport to show violence against Rohingyas” (Human Rights Violations by the Burmese Army).

Pakistan, though belatedly, has also expressed grave concern over the genocidal persecution of the Muslims in Myanmar. To what extent the Muslim world, including our own country, can help the Rohingyas is still to be seen. Besides, the US’s assistant secretary for population, refugees, and migration affairs, Anne Richard, expressed grave concern over this Muslims genocide in Burma. Anne, during a press session held in Putrajaya a few days ago, argued that relocation of Rohingyas in a third country is not the right response to the swelling tide of fleeing people in Southeast Asia and urged the Burmese state to grant citizenship rights to the Rohingya Muslim community. However, it has been terribly shocking to see the silence on part of Aung San Suu Kyi, the liberal Burmese politician, Nobel laureate and human rights activist. “San Kyi is probably silent on the genocide done to the Rohingya Muslims in order not to antagonize her powerful Buddhist electoral community on whom she is relying for the upcoming elections,” commented BBC Urdu the other day.

Everyday newspapers that published against the violence in Burma like, Dawn, Jang, Dunia and many other newspapers also filled with the scholars articles on Burma violence against Muslims and they protest on the attitude of the Muslims countries are not taking any action against the Buddhists of Burma. The top writers and scholars of Pakistan like Syed Asim Mehmood, Shada Islam, Shafi Moosa Mansoori, Awais Hafeez, Senator (R) Tariq Choudhry, Hafiz Akif Saeed and the others and political parties / politicians raised their voices on the daily basis but nothing is going in favor of the Burmese Muslims. They also emphasize on the blame game. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran and other Muslim countries should take action otherwise this violence will reach on their doors and the anti-Islam powers will ruin other Islamic countries. Most of the Muslim countries like Pakistan, Iran,

Afghanistan, Iraq, and many other Muslim countries are suffered from terrorism by the anti-Islamic states. In fact there are several organizations and countries who aiding the anti-Islamic organizations to support the violence and terrorism in the Muslim states.

Conclusion

The Buddhists are generally viewed as the most religious and peace loving of all people. Therefore, their latest violence in Burma was awful. Burmese Buddhists are carrying out a 'cleansing' of the Muslims by killing them, damaging their property and forcing them to leave Myanmar.

The violence against the Rohingya Muslims has anti-Islam and racist character. There is a systematic effort on the part of the hard line Buddhists groups and criminals to loot and plunder the Rohingya Muslim areas. The Myanmar Government and the military are unable to protect the Rohingya Muslims. In fact they lack interest in this matter that emboldens hard line Buddhists groups to use violence against the Rohingyans. This applies to all Myanmar government-civil and military.

The international community has raised its voice for protecting the Rohingya Muslims. However, no political step has been taken. The neighboring states like Bangladesh and Thailand do not welcome Rohingya refugees. Some of these refugees are going to other countries by illegal means through boats. A good number of them died on way in the sea.

The OIC and the Muslim world has not done much expect giving them some limited financial support. The Rohingya Muslims face a difficult time and their sufferings are not expected to end soon.

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