
Insurgency and Repression in Myanmar

From Communal to State Violence

Lynn Kuok



MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN / REUTERS

A Rohingya girl wipes her eyes at a refugee camp in Teknaf, Bangladesh, February 2017.

Since October 9, 2016, [66,000 Rohingya](#), members of a Muslim minority in [Buddhist-majority Myanmar](#), have fled Rakhine State in the country's west and entered neighboring Bangladesh. They crossed the river separating the two countries on boats or by holding on to plastic containers—these ramshackle vessels and flimsy objects their best hope of reaching safety. The [Rohingya have faced](#)

[decades of persecution](#). Today, they are not fleeing Rakhine Buddhists, with whom they first clashed in May 2012. They are fleeing their own government.

When Myanmar's current leader, State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, led her National League for Democracy (NLD) to victory in the November 2015 elections, expectations were high for the country's [first civilian government since the 1960s](#). The winner of the [Nobel Peace Prize](#) for "her non-violent struggle for democracy and human rights," Aung San Suu Kyi declared after the election that the peace process between armed ethnic groups on Myanmar's periphery and the state would be her government's first priority. In a [speech](#) marking Independence Day in January 2016, she acknowledged that "[w]e can do nothing without peace in our country."

Her government, however, has not applied the logic of peace to the situation in Rakhine State. A [key NLD official](#), U Win Htein, stated shortly after the party's victory that "we have other priorities" than the Rohingya. Indeed, the government continues to reject the use of the term "Rohingya," which is perceived as an attempt to establish the community as one of Myanmar's 135 officially recognized indigenous groups. Many in Myanmar regard the Rohingya as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. An onerous 1982 Citizenship Law has the effect of denying the Rohingya citizenship. Without this, the Rohingya suffer some of the worst discrimination and abuse out of all the groups in the country.

A LONG TIME COMING

In June 2012, riots in Rakhine State led to violent clashes between the Rohingya and the Rakhine Buddhist communities, prompting the government to declare a state of emergency. In the almost five years since then, around 140,000 Rohingya have languished in segregated camps

purportedly “[for their own security](#).” They, along with the Rohingya still in their villages, have little or no access to basic sanitation, health care, or education. Freedom of movement is severely curtailed, limiting work and other opportunities. In the run-up to the 2015 national elections, Rohingya were [disenfranchised](#), removing their last best hope of peaceful influence. These indignities follow decades of exclusion and marginalization in one of Myanmar’s poorest states.

Faced with [deepening despair](#), some Rohingya have resorted to violence. On October 9, 2016, armed groups of Rohingya launched simultaneous attacks on three border police bases in northern Rakhine State, killing nine police officers and capturing weapons and ammunition. A month later, on November 12, a lieutenant colonel was killed in further clashes between soldiers and armed militants.

The attacks marked the beginning of an insurgency by a militant group which refers to itself as Harakah al-Yaqin, or Faith Movement. It is led by Rohingya émigrés living in Saudi Arabia, is commanded on the ground by Rohingya with international training, and has sought religious legitimacy for its actions through fatwas (religious edicts) issued by local and foreign clerics. But the group’s aims, according to the [International Crisis Group](#), are strictly local: they are to stop the persecution of Rohingya and secure their rights and autonomy as Myanmar citizens.

The insurgents’ targeting of security forces has led the latter to respond with deadly force in what the government has called “area-clearance operations,” nominally meant to capture militants and recover weapons. Journalists and NGOs have been denied access to the conflict zones, making it difficult to establish facts on the ground. But [UN officials have suggested](#) that over 1,000 Rohingya may have already been killed in such operations. A February report from the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has

recorded “widespread” and “systematic” attacks by security forces against Rohingya, including extrajudicial killings, rape, torture, and arson. The report, based on interviews with Rohingya who had fled to Bangladesh, ascertained the “very likely commission of crimes against humanity” in Rakhine State. Over half of the 101 women interviewed reported having survived rape or experienced other forms of sexual violence. The perpetrators were identified as mainly military, although rapes by police and Rakhine villagers were also reported. Separately, [Human Rights Watch](#) found that government forces committed gang rape, invasive body searches, and sexual assaults against Rohingya women and girls, broadly corroborating the OHCHR’s findings.

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PASSING THE BUCK

In the face of mounting evidence of gross human rights violations, Myanmar’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a [statement](#) on February 8 declaring that the [Rakhine State Investigation Committee](#), a nine-member body created by the president’s office in December, would look into the UN’s accusations. The foreign ministry also promised that the government will punish those found guilty of abuses. These comments marked a shift from the government’s earlier blanket denials of wrongdoing. In January, the committee requested an indefinite extension of its original deadline for submitting a report in order to have time to investigate fresh claims.

But questions remain as to whether the investigation

committee can deliver objective findings. It has no international members or observers and is chaired by Vice President Myint Swe, who headed military intelligence under the former junta. In an [interim report](#) released in January, the committee concluded that “there were no cases of genocide and religious persecution in the region,” although its investigations into allegations of arson, torture, and illegal arrest were still under way. The committee also established that there was “insufficient evidence to take legal action” over rape claims, echoing the [determination](#) made by the State Counselor Office Information Committee that the rumors of rapes were “fabricated.” And in the face of claims that security forces had razed villages to the ground, the government and military accused the Rohingya of setting fire to their own homes. [Three independently prepared satellite imagery analysis reports](#), however, refute official allegations. The satellite images show patterns of systematic burnings consistent with an advancing military force.

In contrast to the investigation committee, the [Advisory Commission on Rakhine State](#) does have international representation. The commission, which was formed by Aung San Suu Kyi in August 2016, consists of six local and three international experts, including former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. But its remit is limited: the commission is not empowered to investigate violations by security forces. Rather, its mandate is to propose measures for development, humanitarian assistance, reconciliation, conflict prevention, and the strengthening of institutions. Its findings and recommendations can thus do little to temper a heavy-handed security response. Nor can its report, which is only due in the second half of 2017, alleviate in the meantime the ongoing humanitarian crisis, even if the commission’s recommendations are eventually adopted and implemented.



*Soe Zeya Tun / Reuters
Rohingya pick through the ruins of a burned market in Rakhine State, Myanmar, October 2016.*

THE LONG SHADOW OF STATE VIOLENCE

In addition to the unfolding humanitarian crisis, the situation in northern Rakhine State is worrying for at least two reasons.

First, recent developments represent a hardening of attitudes on both sides and are likely to lead to further radicalization and violence. Radical Rohingya groups have existed before, from the 1970s to the 1990s, but they enjoyed little local support. This time, as the International Crisis Group has [argued](#), it would not have been possible for Harakah al-Yaqin to carry out its attacks without local buy-in. (At the same time, this “buy-in” may have simply been fear of punishment, as the group reportedly killed two informants in September 2016.)

What is almost certain, however, is that the use of indiscriminate force by security forces will swell the numbers of Rohingya willing to accept violence as the only available means to resist persecution. There is also a threat of Harakah al-Yaqin’s objectives expanding to include religious ones,

which in turn increases the possibility of transnational conflict. The groundwork for such an expansion has already been laid by the movement's appeal to religious legitimacy for its attacks, as well as its (still limited) links to international jihadist groups. In addition, according to the OHCHR, security forces have occupied mosques, desecrated and burned Korans, and raped women and girls inside mosques. Such provocations inflame religious sentiment.

Second, the escalation of conflict threatens to undermine already fraught relations between Buddhists and Muslims. In northern Rakhine State, for instance, 3,000 Buddhists have reportedly fled for fear of retaliation. In Myanmar, Rohingya and other Muslims are widely regarded as outsiders who threaten the nation by being "[too populous, too rich, and too different](#)." That is, Muslims are thought to be reproducing faster than Buddhists, are resented for their alleged wealth (wealth that Muslim men purportedly use to attract and convert Buddhist women), and are stigmatized for their different beliefs and customs. The October and November 2016 insurgent attacks have compounded anti-Muslim sentiment.

The government's punishment of the Rohingya community for the acts of an insurgent group further undermines social ties. Naypyidaw should be leading from the front in correcting problematic perceptions about Muslims, both by condemning violence against the Rohingya and by affirming the value of Muslims to Myanmar. Instead, the government is legitimizing prejudice. In addition to the heavy-handed security crackdown and the dire humanitarian situation that has been allowed to fester in Rakhine State, the government has kept on the books the discriminatory [National Race and Religion Protection laws](#). These circumscribe interfaith marriage and religious conversion, forbid polygamy, and give the government the power to curb population growth by mandating that women in certain areas space their

pregnancies three years apart. The laws are widely seen as anti-Muslim and targeting Muslim population growth.

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A CALL TO ACTION

Aung San Suu Kyi has declared that her government is [committed](#) to resolving the conflict in Rakhine State, but has asked for “time and space ... for the efforts to bear fruit.” Yet some steps must be taken immediately. Any response to the insurgency by security forces must be proportionate and distinguish between militants and civilians. The government should also ensure humanitarian access to affected areas and allow media and international observers in to help establish facts on the ground.

Some observers argue that Aung San Suu Kyi has kept her head down about the situation in Rakhine State because it exposes the limits of her power. Myanmar's military controls key ministries, namely Border Affairs, Defense, and Home Affairs. But Aung San Suu Kyi has hurt the situation by failing to do even fairly basic things requiring no cooperation from the military, such as visit the affected area or end government denials of any wrongdoing. This has sent the disturbing message that what is happening to the Rohingya is acceptable.

Moving forward, the government must provide a clear and expeditious path to citizenship for the Rohingya. Aung San Suu Kyi's government has restarted former president Thein Sein's citizenship verification program, which allows undocumented Muslims to be considered for citizenship, but the process stalled because of a requirement for participants

to identify as Bengali, which many Rohingya refused to do. That requirement has since been dropped, but participation remains low due to a lack of transparency and general distrust of the government.

In addition, Myanmar must consider and put in place strategies for economic development and nation-building. Fostering identity along national lines will require creating opportunities for different race and religious groups, including the Rohingya and Rakhine Buddhists, to interact with one another, while feeling secure about their place in the nation. Creating such opportunities for the Rohingya and Rakhine Buddhists must ultimately mean ending their segregation and implementing sensitively designed policies for the communities to live, study, and work together.

If the government continues to ignore the Rohingya crisis, violence could spread. This would be hugely destabilizing and potentially [undermine the country's fledgling democracy](#). In addition to domestic repercussions, the situation in Rakhine State is also hurting Myanmar's regional and international standing. Protests against the violence have occurred in Muslim-majority Indonesia and Malaysia. Although leaders from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations generally adhere to the group's principle of noninterference in member states' internal affairs, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak has [accused Myanmar of "genocide"](#) against the Rohingya. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation plans to send a high-level delegation to Rakhine State to meet the persecuted minority.

Although some consider Aung San Suu Kyi a saint, recent developments have seen others eager to brand her a sinner. She herself [lays claim only to being a politician](#). The politician in her should recognize—or be made to see—the seriousness of developments in northern Rakhine State and the imperative of taking both immediate and longer-term action

to address them. Myanmar might otherwise find itself isolated abroad and facing chaos at home, with violence threatening to engulf the entire country.

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