# Between Identity and Territory: The Ethno-Political Conflict in Rakhine State

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MIA MAHMUDUR RAHIM, MAY 14 2025

The conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State—historically known as Arakan—is one of the most protracted and complex ethno-political crises in Southeast Asia. At its core lies a struggle between the predominantly Buddhist Rakhine (Arakanese) population and the stateless Muslim Rohingya minority, whose contested identity and historical presence in the region have sparked decades of tension, violence, and displacement. The Rakhine people, themselves a marginalized ethnic group within Myanmar, have long harbored grievances against the central government for political and economic neglect. This has fostered a strong regional nationalism, which views the Rohingya not only as religious outsiders but also as demographic and political threats. The Rohingya, on the other hand, claim deep historical roots in the region, yet have been systematically denied citizenship under Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law, rendering them one of the world's largest stateless populations.

The conflict escalated dramatically in 2017 when Myanmar's military launched a brutal crackdown in response to attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). The operation led to mass atrocities, including killings, sexual violence, and the displacement of over 700,000 Rohingya to Bangladesh—actions widely condemned as ethnic cleansing and possibly genocide. While the international community has focused on the humanitarian crisis, the deeper ethno-political dynamics remain unresolved. The Rakhine nationalist movement, represented by groups like the Arakan Army, seeks greater autonomy or even independence, complicating the narrative that frames the Rohingya solely as victims. This dual marginalization—of both Rakhine and Rohingya—has created a volatile environment where identity, territory, and political power collide.

Efforts at reconciliation and repatriation have largely stalled. Myanmar's military junta, which seized power in 2021, has shown little interest in addressing the root causes of the conflict. Meanwhile, the Rohingya remain in limbo, caught between statelessness and exile, while the Rakhine continue to push for self-determination.

In late 2024, a coalition of 28 Rohingya organizations issued a unified statement calling for peaceful coexistence, inclusive governance, and equal rights in Rakhine State. The statement urged the Arakan Army (AA) and its political wing, the United League of Arakan (ULA), to recognize the Rohingya as equal stakeholders and to end human rights abuses, including forced displacement and extrajudicial killings. This appeal came after the AA consolidated control over key northern townships, including Maungdaw and Buthidaung—areas with significant Rohingya populations. The Rohingya coalition emphasized the need for an inclusive interim consultative committee to promote trust and ensure fair representation in governance.

But the persistence of armed conflict remains one of the most immediate threats to coexistence. In May 2024, credible reports emerged that the Arakan Army, an ethnic Rakhine armed group, forcibly displaced thousands of Rohingya civilians from the town of Buthidaung. Eyewitness accounts and satellite imagery confirmed widespread looting and the burning of Rohingya homes. These actions not only deepen the humanitarian crisis but also reinforce fears among the Rohingya that they are being systematically targeted for removal. The AA's growing territorial control in northern Rakhine has raised concerns that it may be replicating the exclusionary practices of the Myanmar military, undermining any prospects for inclusive governance or reconciliation.

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A fundamental barrier to coexistence is the Rohingya's continued statelessness. Under Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law, the Rohingya are not recognized as one of the country's official ethnic groups, effectively denying them citizenship and the rights that come with it. This legal exclusion has left generations of Rohingya without access to education, healthcare, property rights, or freedom of movement. Without legal recognition, the Rohingya remain vulnerable to exploitation, displacement, and abuse.

Decades of state-sponsored propaganda, communal violence, and political manipulation have entrenched deep mistrust between the Rakhine and Rohingya communities. The Rakhine often view the Rohingya as illegal immigrants and a demographic threat, while the Rohingya see the Rakhine as complicit in their persecution. This mutual suspicion has been exacerbated by cycles of violence, including the 2012 and 2017 clashes, which left entire communities devastated.

The humanitarian situation in Rakhine State remains dire. Over 600,000 Rohingya still reside in the state, many of them in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps with limited access to food, clean water, healthcare, and education. Movement restrictions imposed by both the military and local authorities have further isolated these communities. The lack of basic services not only exacerbates suffering but also fuels resentment and instability.

A sustainable resolution requires more than humanitarian aid or international condemnation. Repealing or amending Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law is essential to granting the Rohingya full legal status and the rights that come with it. Both the Arakanese and Rohingya communities must have a voice in the political and administrative structures that govern Rakhine State. Inclusive governance means ensuring fair representation in local councils, regional parliaments, and decision-making bodies. It also involves creating mechanisms for power-sharing and conflict resolution that reflect the region's ethnic and religious diversity. Empowering both communities to participate in shaping their future can help reduce tensions, foster mutual respect, and build a more equitable society.

The legacy of violence and impunity must be addressed through credible justice mechanisms. Perpetrators of atrocities—whether from the Myanmar military or ethnic armed groups like the Arakan Army—must be held accountable through national or international legal processes. This includes investigating war crimes, crimes against humanity, and acts of ethnic cleansing. Justice is not only a moral imperative but also a practical necessity for reconciliation. Without accountability, grievances will fester, and cycles of revenge and mistrust will continue to undermine peace efforts.

Rebuilding trust between the Arakanese and Rohingya requires sustained grassroots dialogue. Community-based reconciliation initiatives, supported by civil society organizations, religious leaders, and international partners, can help bridge divides and foster empathy. These dialogues should focus on shared experiences, mutual concerns, and collaborative problem-solving. Education and media campaigns that counter hate speech and promote intercommunal understanding are also vital. While national-level reforms are crucial, peace must be cultivated at the local level where people live side by side.

Economic inequality and competition over resources have long fuelled tensions in Rakhine State. To prevent further conflict, development efforts must be inclusive and equitable. This means investing in infrastructure, schools, hospitals, and job creation in a way that benefits all communities—regardless of ethnicity or religion. International donors and development agencies should ensure that aid is distributed fairly and that marginalized groups, including the Rohingya, are not excluded from economic opportunities. Equitable development can help reduce resentment, foster cooperation, and create a foundation for lasting peace.

The Rohingya's call for coexistence is not just a plea for survival—it is a vision for a shared future in a land both communities call home. While the obstacles are immense, the alternative—continued violence, displacement, and division—is far worse. The international community, regional actors, and Myanmar's own civil society must seize this moment to support a peace process that includes both the Arakanese and the Rohingya. Only through justice, inclusion, and mutual recognition can Rakhine State move from a history of conflict to a future of coexistence.

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