

Burma's Rakhine Conflict

Written by David Gilbert

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DAVID GILBERT, JUN 27 2012

Western Burma has been the site of continuing sectarian violence since the reported gang rape and murder of a girl from the Rakhine mostly Buddhist ethnic group, the majority in the area. Or perhaps it was since Operation King Dragon, when a brutal military offensive caused many Rohingya, a Muslim minority group who speak a Bengali dialect, to take refuge in Bangladesh and further afield. Or perhaps it started in the late 18th Century, when the Burmese Konbaung Kingdom invaded and annexed the Kingdom of Arakan. Or was it about 50 years later, when the British started to colonize Burma? Under colonial administration, large numbers migrated from the subcontinent and the British classified those of Indian descent as 'non-indigenous.'

When discussing the conflict with Rakhine and Rohingya individuals, history plays a key role. Some speak so vividly it is as if events of one thousand years previous are in their immediate memory. Nationalists from both communities use historical discourse to justify their existence and rights claims in the strip of coastal land that is Rakhine State. The dominant historical narratives are of course ideological. The tendency on both sides to switch into historical argument demonstrates the entrenchment of rival ethnonationalist positions.

According to Rakhine ethnonationalists discourse, Rakhine are the inheritors of an ancient lowland kingdom, an originary site of Burmese civilization. For Rakhine nationalists, claims are partly justified by a written script, surviving texts and the survival of an ancient capital, Mrauk-U. And if you look at pre-colonial maps of Southeast Asia, as one Rakhine exile recently exclaimed to me, 'Arracan' is included. While historical power is often equated with lines on maps and bricks and mortar, the application of modern cultural constructs like 'nation' and 'ethnicity' in pre-colonial Burmese history is much more problematic.

For Rohingya, like non-literary people around the world, their place in history is harder to prove and they are more likely to lose if archaeology is a prerequisite for human rights. They claim to have been indigenous to western Burma for hundreds (or thousands) of years. Rohingya are mostly denied Burmese citizenship and lack advocates in national politics. Aung San Suu Kyi, when recently asked if they should be Burmese citizens, answered, 'I do not know.'

Members of both Rohingya and Rakhine communities have been subject to human rights abuses including imprisonment, torture and slavery. Rohingya suffer additional abuses associated with statelessness. The area is impoverished and little if any wealth trickles down from the large-scale energy projects off the coast, which paradoxically lead to increased abuses. The buzz of democratization is more muted compared to central Burma. Ethnonationalist ideology at least partly distracts from and covers up the pressing issues of poverty and marginalization.

This conflict is sometimes reported as pitting Buddhists against Muslims. This is inaccurate. Religion is intricately tied to ethnic identity, Rakhine as Buddhist and Rohingya as Muslim. However many members of other Muslim minority groups in Burma, such as the Khaman, also hold prejudicial views towards Rohingya. Rakhine individuals I have spoken to, who express rage at Rohingya claims for recognition, are quick to declare that they are not anti-Muslim.

The conflict comes in the first period of major democratic reforms since the initial military coup in 1962. These

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reforms have included notable progress in peace negotiations with key ethnonationalist groups, the loosening of media controls, the right to form labour organisations, the National League for Democracy and Aung San Suu Kyi's re-entry into national politics and parliament; and the gradual return of political exiles.

Some view the violence in Rakhine State as an army conspiracy, orchestrated by high-level military men seeking to undermine the democratization process. Those holding this view include some commentators and Rakhine and Rohingya exiles I have spoken with in Australia.

This army conspiracy view shifts the root causes and the blame from the uncomfortable and complicated reality of communal tension to political figures in the capital Naypyidaw. While there are some reports of abuses by authorities, there is no evidence to point this to a wider conspiracy. Rohingya individuals I have spoken to claim soldiers have arrested police officers that perpetrate violence.

The reform process, rather than being a threat to the military, has been planned and managed by key generals in a way to prevent alienation of the armed forces. Under the 2008 Constitution, the army has a quota of approximately 25% of the seats in the parliament and there are limits on civilian control. The inclusion of the military in the political system is crucial for reforms, as it maintains army power and enables a new positive spin on current and former generals

So far, the conflict has added to President Thein Sein's image as a reformer abroad. The US government, amongst others, has praised the way Thein Sein has dealt with the conflict. His response has also largely received a positively lukewarm reaction in Burmese exiled media, which operates outside of the censorship regime. It is in the Government's interest to see a cessation of violence so as not to detract attention from the continued reform process, a second stage of which was recently announced.

The violence has so far been limited to the western periphery and has not spread to cosmopolitan Yangon or other cities in central Burma, despite the flourishing of anti-Rohingya (and anti-Muslim) rhetoric in the public sphere. Looking north, what is turning out to be a protracted war in Kachin State has intensified in parallel to Burma's opening up. This shows the government has the ability to quarantine areas of conflict, although the sectarian violence in western Burma is complicated in that there is no leadership to talk to or target.

While it is likely the more shocking acts of violence will gradually cease in the coming weeks, the conflict will leave a deep legacy on this region of Burma and can easily restart at anytime. I was in the Rakhine State capital Sittwe in early May, before the violence started, and the ethnic tension was palpable. The city is roughly half Rakhine with a large Rohingya minority. Segregation is the norm and individuals I spoke to on both sides were preoccupied with the threat of the Other to their respective ethnic groups. Backgrounding the violence, and obscured by it, is the abject poverty the majority of the region's residents live in.

Beyond the cessation of violence, entrenched ethno-political positions will be hardest to dissolve. Seriously addressing residents' livelihood challenges seems a good place to start.

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