

The Rise of ARSA: Threats and Strategic Implications for Bangladesh

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Synopsis

Ethnic tension has flared up in Myanmar in recent years, while Rakhine state is being most severely affected. Rohingya population had been persecuted for years and the crisis has sent a mass exodus into neighboring Bangladesh for a number of years – the most recent one is one of the largest in the history. This ethnic tension within Myanmar has given birth to new armed organisation Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) – recently called for an all out resistance for Rohingya population. The rise of ARSA comes at a time when al Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and Islamic state in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) made statements to appeal to the Rohingya population to join in their cause.

Commentary

The history of Myanmar is riddled with ethnic tension and ethno-political upheaval. The Tatmadaw (armed forces of Myanmar) had ruled the country from its inception. The demography of the country indicates most of the people of Myanmar belong to Bamar ethnic group while Rakhine ethnic population represents less than 4% of the total demography living with other small minority communities. Different ethnic groups had formed insurgent groups to fight against what they perceive as an oppressive regime that oppressed minorities, thus forming their own organisations to protect their ethnic communities. The inception of the ARSA, a group comprised of members of Myanmar's Muslim Rohingya minority in the

Rakhine state, armed with machetes and rifles recently launched unprecedented attacks, triggering fighting with security forces that has left more than 100 people dead. This incident had triggered a backlash that driven Rohingya population across the border to Bangladesh.

The insurgency of the new armed group was nascent for much of 2016 and the first half of 2017. The organisation began as Harakah al-Yaqin (HaY), under the leadership of Attullah Abu Ammar Jununi, who was born in Pakistan and raised in Saudi Arabia, returned home to lead the struggle. The group concentrating on low-level attacks began to occur on a more sustained basis in 2016. Much of the violence in Rakhine state was perpetrated by authority-backed vigilantes, as state security forces did little to protect the general population in the Rakhine state.

Operations and activities

In the early hours of August 25, 2017, according to International Crisis Group (ICG) militants from Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) launched coordinated attacks on 30 police posts and an army base in the north of Myanmar's Rakhine state, in the townships of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung. The government reports that the attackers equipped with hand-held explosive devices, machetes and along with a few small arms, killed ten police officers, a soldier and an immigration official. Myanmar government accounted that 77 insurgents were killed and one captured. This incident made the Myanmar military conduct "clearance operations" across the area and rural outposts of police moved to more secure locations in anticipation of farther attacks. There are reports suggested that clashes continue in some locations, and there are reports of vigilantism against Rohingya communities. ICG has also stated that ARSA gets its funding from Rohingya Diaspora as well as from major private donors in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East.



In this screenshot from a video posted on YouTube, a man identifying himself as Ataullah Abu Jununi (center), commander of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), delivers a statement to the Myanmar government and ethnic groups in Rakhine state, Aug. 28, 2017.

Source: BenarNews/RFA

The leader of the ARSA called for resistance as Rohingya atrocities continued in the Rakhine state. In an audio message surfaced in the media where the leader of the group Ataullah Abu Jununi said, “If 200 or 300 people come out, 50 will die. God willing, the remaining 150 can kill them with knives,” to his supporters. It was circulated around the time of the offensive against security forces on mobile messaging apps and a recording was subsequently reviewed by Reuters and other international news outlet. In this regard, ARSA represents a new type of insurgency, as members of the group wears uniforms or badges that shows their ranks, unlike the other ethnic resistance groups such as the Kachin, Shan, Karen or Mon. The groups rely on mobilizing hundreds of unarmed villagers to attack state positions in the middle of the night. In terms of tactical disposition, the group has more similarities with Muslim insurgents in southern Thailand, rather than Myanmar’s other ethnic armed groups.

Early operations

The insurgent group launched its first operation in October 2016, when it conducted a complex and a deadly, coordinated attack on three border police bases in northern Rakhine state. A months-long, heavy-handed military response followed, including a new deployment of Myanmar army troops. As a result, some 87,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh and, in February 2017, a UN investigation concluded that there had been grave and widespread abuses by the military that very likely amounted to crimes against humanity. A domestic investigation in Myanmar has rejected these claims.



Source: Rohingya refugees get off to the boat as they arrive in Bangladesh by boat through the Bay of Bengal in Teknaf, Bangladesh, September 5, 2017. — Reuters pictures

Elements responsible for the insurgency

Most notably, the early Rohingya insurgency was associated with the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), formed in 1986, was an active insurgent group in between the '80s and '90s. The RSO has mostly operated from across the border. Small attacks on the Border Guard Police (BGP) over the years have always been blamed on this group, even though the RSO is considered to have been defunct since 2001. In October 9, 2016, attack was initially thought to be perpetrated by the RSO; some researchers and the Myanmar government later tried to link HaY to the RSO.

The religious card has been played in the process of Rohingya expulsion. In 2012, riots led to mass killings, rapes, and burning of mosques in Rakhine state and subsequently the rise of Buddhist radical groups such as MaBaTha under the leadership of monk Ashin Wirathu. The radical Buddhists instilled the idea of exclusion of Muslim communities in Myanmar in the mass and laid the platform for an armed group like HaY. The previous government, under the leadership of Thein Sein, proved unable to resolve this conflict and antipathy from the Myanmar authorities and radical groups furthered their interests as the tension between the Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims reached to a boiling point.

The disenfranchisement of the Rohingya in the 2015 election acted as a catalyst. Similar to other ethnic communities in Myanmar, the Rohingya community was hopeful about a political resolution with the formation of a democratic government in Myanmar. Previously, the Rohingya community has always negated the use of violence, a primary reason that earlier insurgent groups failed. Until now, groups resorting to violence lacked local support. The Rohingya community has also ruled out the claims of al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and the Islamic State (ISIS) taking up their cause. Instead, the Rohingya have always sought a peaceful resolution till the recent violence against them.

Security Issues for Bangladesh

The Rohingya militant groups were a significant security threat to Bangladesh. Among such groups in the past, the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF), Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), Rohingya National Alliance (RNA) and Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO) were considered as threats to Bangladesh's internal security. The militants have supporters and sympathizers among Rohingya migrants within Bangladesh. Some of the groups had involved in drugs and illicit businesses in Bangladesh. Many individuals evidently collaborated with the Bangladeshi militant groups such as the Harkat ul Jihad al Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B). The ARSA could further complicate the security situation in Bangladesh as Rohingya refugee influx continues.

The Rohingya refugees who are completely marginalized are most vulnerable to human trafficking. The prevalence of notorious drug known as Yabba has been associated with the illegal activities of Rohingya population residing in Bangladesh. International terror outfits have already announced their support as they call for Jihad after witnessing the plight of the Rohingya. South Asia terrorism expert C. Christine Fair believes that as the Rohingya crisis continues to deepen, Bangladesh could become a hotspot of terror as many Islamist militant groups would seek to recruit the ill-fated victims of the Myanmar government.

The rise of ARSA would be a major security concern as more and more Rohingya refugees coming in Bangladesh. Although there is no clear evidence of ARSA has any religious motivation in its struggle, however, Islamist outfits like the IS and al Qaeda would like to exploit the situation to recruit some of the enraged groups to raise their army of extremists.

With the influx of refugees and looming threat from extremist militants from within, Bangladesh must not only find a long-term strategy regarding Rohingya issues, but must also find ways to minimize threats from new armed groups growing in neighboring countries.

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