

Myanmar's Buddhist Burmese Nationalism: Implications for Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis

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Synopsis

Ethno-religious tensions and sectarian violence has made up a key characteristic in Myanmar ever since its independence. One of the gravest conflicts in the country is, no doubt, the inhumanity directed towards those titled the “most persecuted minority”, i.e. the Muslim Rohingya minority by the dominant Buddhist Rakhines. Historically the violence against the Rohingya minority has been consistent in nature and due to this, the people belonging to this repressed minority have had to find refuge in other states due to their fear of life and no human rights. Having had started from the pre-colonial times, the oppressive nature of Buddhist-Burmese chauvinism has been one of the core reasons driving the brutality against the Muslim minority.

Historical Context

The unfortunate plight of oppression against the Rohingya people have existed before the pre-colonial periods. The people of the Arakan Kingdom faced much repression under the rule of Burmese King Bodawpaya, after he captured the region and joined it with the larger part of the Buddhist kingdom of Burma in 1784. The Rohingya community is known to have helped the British establish their colonial rule in Myanmar, as an attempt to escape the oppressive rule of the Buddhist King, but only to be abandoned during the 1942 invasion of Burma by the Japanese, and the combined carnages of both the Buddhist majority and the Japanese.

January of 1948 marked the end of British colonial rule in Burma, after which the new state was based on its previous pre-colonial territorial boundaries. One of the initial controversies was regarding whether the ethnic and religious minorities should be allowed to stay in the new Buddhist and Burmese majority, and Buddhist and Burmese nationalism driven state, a characteristic that it inherited from its previous colonial ruler. Those who formed the counter arguments to this concept, such as General Aung San asserted that inclusion of all who live within the border of the new state was paramount and that they all should be seen as Burmese citizens. Indeed, had the progression been so, the future of Rohingyas and their current unfortunate situation can be expected to have had a different turn. The assassination of General Aung San was followed by shift towards the idea that the new state should be made so that it bear a pure Burmese national character. The beginning of the post-colonial period was marked by weak democratic structure, which was soon replaced by dominance of General Ne Win after a

coup in 1962, who began a widespread nationalization programme. Under this, hundreds of thousands of Indians faced exodus from Myanmar. He was much driven by what is known now as the modern conceptualization of states, which involved acknowledging “us” and creating “them”, leading to “other-ing”. This was reflected in Operation Nagamin (1978), the 1982 Citizenship Law after the repatriation of the Rohingya refugees following the Operation, and during the atrocities carried out against the Rohingya after failed democratic elections in 1991. The bitterness of the Buddhist-Burmese nationalism driven majority was reflected in the mass sectarian violence of 2012, leaving over 140,000 Rohingyas displaced.

The recent Rohingya refugee crisis that started from the carnages directed against the ethnic community starting from 25th August, 2017, has so far led to displacement of more than 800,000 Rohingya people with Bangladesh housing 671, 000 as a result of the military crackdown, as reported in February 15th, 2018. The initial response to lambaste of the Myanmar government to the allegations of “textbook example of ethnic cleansing” was ignoring and denying the existence of such violence occurring in the Rakhine state. The Myanmar government rejected proposals made by UN to visit the Rakhine state to assess the condition. The silence of Nobel laureate Aung San SuuKyí regarding the issue was highly criticized by the international body.

Buddhist-Burmese Nationalism & Keeping Out the Outsiders

Religious nationalism on the rise is a phenomenon, not unique to Myanmar, but one that is taking place globally. Buddhist-Burmese nationalism in Myanmar has turned out to be altogether more unmistakable since the beginning of the political progress in 2011, initially with the upliftment on the barriers to access to mainstream social media. These new eased and fastened the spreading of nationalistic narratives when the news of rape of a Buddhist Burmese female by three Muslim males on public transport emerged, which then led to the 2012 sectarian violence. The 969 Movement, which is a Buddhist nationalist movement, played an extremist role in the influence of the events. Rakhine, having been and its continual presence as an interface between Buddhist and Muslim Asia, is of demographic importance, as it is believed that Myanmar and the rest of Buddhist South East Asia would have become Muslim had Buddhists in Rakhine had not protected the “Western Gate” of the country and held fast against demographic pressure from Muslim Bengal. In reference with the motto of the Myanmar immigration ministry that, “a race does not face extinction by being swallowed into the earth, but from being swallowed up by another race”, other assertions include that Muslims across the country accumulate capital and properties, with which they woo Buddhist women, and expand their community.

Myanmarese ambassador to Bangladesh, Mr. PhaeThannOo, expressed his government’s view of the “Rohingyas” as follows in 2009, “The Rohingyas are an unfortunate issue between the two countries. The so-called ‘Rohingyas’ for you of course, not for us. For us, they are Bengali Muslims.” From this statement a clear indication is that the Myanmar government does not acknowledge the term “Rohingya,”, let alone the ethnic group’s belonging to the land of their forefathers. This has been recognized as one of the reasons for the initial silence of the Myanmar government body to the issue of humanitarian crisis against the Rohingya throughout decades.

State Counselor of Myanmar Aung San SuuKyi asserted that the information regarding the scale of the crisis was being distorted by “huge iceberg of misinformation” during the initial periods of the crisis during August 2017. In September 2017, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate said her administration had “already started defending all the people in Rakhine in the best way possible.” In December, the Myanmar government denied access to the UN extraordinary rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee, and suspended collaboration for the rest of her term. Mark Farmaner, director of Burma Campaign UK, has asserted that the Ms. SuuKyi has developed “authoritarian tendencies” and used oppressive laws.

The Myanmar government’s relentless attempts to prove the Rohingya as Bengalis was taken another step further after the publishing of fake photos in a new book on the Rohingya crisis pointing to alleged atrocities by “illegal Bengali immigrants” on April 2018. However, the false allegations made via the false pictures was soon caught red-handed when acclaimed international news agency Reuters revealed previously published pictures of previous incidents, which were merely edited for publication in the Myanmar military-authored book.

Future Unknown?

While a vast majority of Rohingya would like to return to their homes and villages in Rakhine state, and while on paper, at least, the governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh have agreed to a repatriation programme, the situation is quite the opposite in practice; the Rohingya have little or nothing to return to. Hence, unfortunately, the immediate options are neither appealing nor practical. Farmaner, pointed out how Myanmar had built shelters for the Rohingya to house only 30,000 of them as a clear indication that Myanmar does not intend to take their people back. An article published in the Human Rights Watch website records the wishes of an elderly to return to her homeland and her fears that she will be buried in foreign land: "Of course I want to go back home. But it’s not safe there, so I fear I will be buried in this foreign land."

Conclusion

Buddhist-Burmese nationalism also means aggressions against other ethnic communities within Myanmar. However, the situations are not as bad as in the context of the Rohingya ethnic community, who have been differentiated as racially, linguistically and religiously different from the rest of the people in Myanmar. Buddhist-Burmese nationalism is one of the main drivers of Myanmar government’s attempts of “Burmanisation” of the country. The repeated oppression against the Rohingya ethnic community, even after multiple repatriation projects, the enforcement of the 1982 Citizenship Law, the atrocities carried out against the eyesore Rohingya ethnic community after a failed democratic elections in the country 1991, the killings during 2016 alleged Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) manhunt, and finally the 2017 military crackdown, are repeated alike policies of the Myanmar government, even after multiple regime changes, to oust the Rohingya people from the country. Attempts of conservation of the

Buddhist-Burmese identity of the state of Myanmar and chauvinist tendencies of the state leaders, backed by the Buddhist-Burmese population, have been largely visible throughout the atrocities carried out within the country by the Buddhist-Burmese majority against the various ethnic minorities. The members of the ethnic group recognize the non-existence of protection under the security umbrella of human rights and say, 'Rohingya people who are living in [Burma] don't have rights. Even a bird has rights. A bird can build a nest, give birth, bring food to their children and raise them until they are ready to fly. We don't have basic rights like that.'

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