Myanmar in Transition: Missed Chances, Many Challenges

Bertil Lintner
Myanmar’s transition from authoritarian rule to democracy began with optimism but lately has generated its share of disillusionment.

Hyuk Kim
The causes of violence involving stateless Rohingya have deep roots, and unless the complex tensions are addressed, peace will remain elusive.
A Complex Crisis: The Twisted Roots of Myanmar’s Rohingya Conflict

By Hyuk Kim

The latest eruption of violence in August involving stateless Muslims known as Rohingya in Myanmar’s Rakhine state has generated a wave of thousands of refugees fleeing the fighting and renewed calls for the government to take stronger measures to deal with grievances that have festered in Rakhine for decades. But the causes of the violence have deep roots, and without a concerted effort to address the complex tensions between the Rohingya and other peoples of Rakhine, as well as between Buddhists and Muslims more generally in Myanmar, peace will be elusive, writes Hyuk Kim.

ON OCT. 9, 2016, several hundred armed people, believed to be organized by Rohingya residents, attacked three Border Guard Police posts in Myanmar’s Rakhine state, leading to the death of nine police officers. In response, Myanmar security forces launched harsh “area clearance operations” in northern Rakhine that raised questions about Myanmar’s transition to democracy. In November 2016, an official of the United Nations Refugee Agency said that the “clearance operation” was tantamount to “ethnic cleansing” of the Rohingya.1 Some argued that the actions taken against the Rohingya constitute genocide as defined in the 1948 UN convention on genocide. Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, who is leading an advisory group for the Myanmar government, has acknowledged the suffering of the Rohingya and the role of the Myanmar military in the conflict.2

The urgency of the situation flared anew in August this year with even greater violence, when Rohingya militant forces again attacked police stations, this time killing a total of 71 people, including 12 members of Myanmar’s security forces. The government’s response, in conjunction with Buddhist militias, was another “clearance operation” that has resulted in numerous deaths among the Rohingya and government forces and renewed allegations of genocide and ethnic cleansing as hundreds of thousands of Rohingya flee to neighboring Bangladesh. Plainly, there are different interpretations that necessitate thinking how different narratives can be drawn in Rakhine state to resolve the longstanding issues involving the Rohingya people.

Even though a breakthrough in Rakhine seemingly rests on the political will of the Myanmar government, there should be better understanding of the intertwined causes and the interests of Rakhine stakeholders. There are at least three perspectives to be considered for practical and feasible steps toward eventual unity in Myanmar:

1. The Buddhist-Burmese nationalist identity established during military rule that discriminates against other races and religions.
2. The threat to national security created by the emergence of new armed groups involving Rohingya, which recalls past separatist movements.
3. The internal politics in Rakhine itself, which requires consideration of the grievances of the local Rakhine people.

None of these perspectives can be the sole source of clear answers to the Rohingya crisis. These viewpoints, as well as the human rights of the Rohingya, should be taken into account together. This suggests that achieving social integration through gradually building mutual trust in Rakhine must be a priority if a solution to the pain felt by the Rohingya is to be found.

WHO ARE THE ROHINGYA — AND WHY DOES THEIR IDENTITY MATTER?

The Rohingya are often described as the most persecuted Muslim-minority ethnic group in the world.3 About one million people reside in Myanmar’s northern Rakhine state, which shares a border with Bangladesh. Most Rohingya in Myanmar are stateless under the 1982 Citizenship Law, which categorizes full citizenship holders of temporary registration cards (TRCs), forcing labor and denied freedom of movement and marriage. They also suffer from lack of education and limits on their choice of professions. The international community, non-governmental organizations and individual activists have been urging Myanmar to grant citizenship to the Rohingya in order to help solve human rights abuses, noting that the root cause of the lingering pain of the Rohingya people is ethnic and religious discrimination.

There are various understandings of the Rohingya identity. The community emphasizes centuries of Burmese-Buddhist rule and the roots of Muslim settlement in the Arakan region. They describe the Rohingya as Muslim descendants of Arabs, Persians, Turks, Mughals and Bengalis who came to Arakan in the 8th century, mainly as traders, religious figures and warriors, and developed their own culture and language, sometimes mixed with the local Arakanese.4 The other communities in Myanmar, including local Rakhine people, insist that “Rohingya” is merely a descriptive term for “Bengali” or “Chittagonian” people who immigrated during British rule in Arakan between 1824 and 1948, instead of a term for an indigenous ethnic group. Some Myanmar locals highlight the distinction between Rohingya and other Muslim ethnic groups holding Myanmar citizenship, such as the Kamanese on Ramree Island in Rakhine state.5

Acknowledgment of indigenous ethnicity is sensitive in Myanmar. The different understandings of “Rohingya” and insufficient historical records with a clear reference to the term “Rohingya” have contributed to the humanitarian crisis. For example, Rohingya are seen as “illegal immigrants” by most people in Myanmar. And

the fact that the term Rohingya has appeared only since the 1950s has resulted in suspicions about their identity. In addition, there are social and economic aspects to recognition of a certain ethnicity. The religion and ethnicity of every citizen is on their national identification card, and each indigenous ethnic group with a population of more than 0.1 percent of the national total is entitled to one representative in regional and state parliaments. Also, each state or region has the authority to manage the budget and to raise revenue in a centralized federal system. Given that the estimate for the Rohingya population is about 1 million, or 2 percent of the Myanmar population, there could be a significant impact if citizenship is granted to all Rohingya.

Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) stipulates that all people have a right to a nationality. Former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon asserted that Rohingya are entitled to Myanmar citizenship. In this regard, it is imperative to understand why citizenship hasn’t been granted to the Rohingya despite their long presence in the country. The following sections introduce three viewpoints on the humanitarian situation in Rakhine state, followed by recommendations.

**Viewpoint 1: National Identity**

One of the main causes of the problems in Rakhine lies with the notion of Myanmar identity as Buddhist-Burmese nationalism, the dominant idea in the period of military rule between 1962 and 2011, given the fact that Burmese and Buddhists, respectively, have accounted for about 70 percent and 90 percent of the total population in the past. Especially during the period of the Burmese Way to Socialism, national unity was pursued at the expense of diversity of language, culture and religion, such as halting the teaching of languages other than Burmese, a prohibition on Christian missionary activities and the nationalization of public schools. In the case of Rakhine, the national identity-driven perspective can be viewed as discrimination against Muslims by Buddhist Burmese.

As examples, after independence from British rule, Burma kept a parliamentary democratic system until the military coup in 1962. During this time, Prime Minister U Nu promised autonomy to residents of northern Rakhine in order to obtain Muslim votes in the region. But the pledge was overturned immediately after the military took over the government in 1962. In 1978, hundreds of Muslims were killed and about 300,000 people were displaced during Operation King Dragon, a drive against “illegal immigrants.” In 1982, the government enacted the Citizenship Law, which some view as having rendered the Rohingya stateless, even though the law was not intended to target only Rohingya, since other groups were also affected, such as descendants of Chinese and Indians. In addition, the political rights of the Rohingya were significantly undermined when their political parties were dismissed in 1991.

Even with the nominal end of military rule, national identity persists as a driver of anti-Muslim sentiment. The 2012 communal clashes between local Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya, triggered by the murder and rape of local Rakhine women by Muslims, led to anti-Muslim riots nationally. The creation in 2014 of the Patriotic Association of Myanmar, led by nationalist monks, was a further manifestation of anti-Muslim sentiment.

A perspective that focuses on the ultra-nationalistic Buddhist Burmese and the Muslim Rohingya minority is helpful in describing the humanitarian situation in Rakhine. However, immediate granting of citizenship to the Rohingya won’t solve the problem since political goodwill or individual politicians themselves cannot generate a political decision without endorsement by the majority of society. Although it may take some time for the general population to embrace the meaning of diversity, there are stakeholders more closely related to the issues in Rakhine itself.

**Viewpoint 2: National Security**

Concerns about national security are often interpreted as a justification for the military’s influence in national affairs. Some NGOs worry that the lack of transparency in security operations in Rakhine could be a prelude to a state of emergency that might transfer government power to the military. In their view, the Rakhine situation could bring Myanmar back to military rule.

However, the term “area clearance operations,” which is viewed as “ethnic cleansing” by some, is a product of a decision made at a special meeting between Myanmar government officials including President Htin Kyaw, Aung San Suu Kyi and the military commander-in-chief. The joint operations are conducted by security forces consisting of the Border Guard Police, the military and the local militia under the western commander. Article 40 (c) and Article 314 (b) of the Myanmar Constitution stipulates that a state of emergency, declared under approval from the National Defense and Security Council, would transfer
judicial and executive powers to the military if there is a risk of disintegration of national unity. According to a report of the International Crisis Group, Aung San Suu Kyi refused to declare a state of emergency after the October 2016 events, because she considers the council as not politically legitimate.\textsuperscript{12} This indicates that the military is unlikely to regain state power anytime soon, although the civilian government seeks the assistance of the military to manage the threat and risk of instability in Rakhine. Therefore, it is necessary to look into the latest position of the government on the security aspects in Rakhine.

The perspective of the Myanmar government can be described as anxiety about national security that is guided by a fear of separatist and jihadist movements. The deadly attacks by Harakah al-Yaqin (now known as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army) in October 2016 recalled episodes of separatism and jihadism waged by some Rohingya around the time of independence. The perceived threat to national security obliges the secular government to co-operate with the military to ensure stability in the region. Some Rohingya leaders claim that their armed attacks on the Border Guard Police were not driven by religious reasons but from a desire for basic human rights. However, from the viewpoint of the government, the creation of Harakah al-Yaqin (HaY) could be a sign of radicalization among the Rohingya, as was the case in the 1940–60s. In the 1940s, Muslims in Rakhine state, who didn’t refer to themselves as Rohingya at the time, sent a delegation to Pakistan to pursue integration of northern Rakhine into what was then West Pakistan and is now Bangladesh. This attempt was unsuccessful, and Muslims in Rakhine declared jihad by establishing a Mujahid guerilla group that launched attacks until a ceasefire in 1946.\textsuperscript{13} In addition, in 1960, the Arakan Muslim community claimed that it

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would not support statehood unless the government accepted demands that included autonomy for northern Rakhine and the prohibition of settlement by non-Muslims in that region.

From the government’s view, the armed aggression by the Mujahid and their demand for autonomy for northern Rakhine free of non-Muslims were not acceptable, because this was fundamentally different from other states like Chin, Shan and Kachin who also sought autonomy. During the period of divide-and-rule by the British, these areas were categorized as Frontier Areas with a great level of autonomy due to the unfavorable and remote geographical conditions, while Rakhine was considered part of Burma Proper and was under direct control by the British. Northern Rakhine was designated the Mayu Frontier Area by the civilian government in 1961 in return for the ceasefire with the Mujahid. However, the fact that it was mostly administered by Arankan Buddhists could be an indication that there was still a certain level of distrust by the civilian government at that time. The national security perspective explains Kofi Annan’s description of the situation in Rakhine following the October 2016 incidents as related to tension and fighting instead of “genocide.” During operations, security forces were attacked by the HaY with some support from armed Rohingya villagers, and those armed conflicts resulted in casualties to both the security forces and Rohingya. However, allegations of indiscriminate shooting against the HaY and the villagers and claims that the Border Guard Police is routinely brutal toward villagers should trigger alarm about possible “ethnic cleansing.” In addition, the lack of progress on the human rights of Rohingya for decades leads to concern about Myanmar’s democratic transition.

\textbf{Viewpoint 3: Local Politics in Rakhine}

The sentiment of local Rakhine people is often seen as a mix of hatred of Muslims and historical feelings of deprivation in terms of land and opportunities. The feeling of deprivation was formed during British rule. Arakan was an independent kingdom until it was invaded by Burma in 1784 and annexed to British India in 1826 after 40 years of Burmese rule. Under the British, immense numbers of immigrants went from Bengal to Arakan in search of economic opportunities and land. At that time, the wage level in Arakan was much higher than that of Bengal, and seasonal employers in Arakan replaced Arakanese with “Chittagongians.” Also, the British encouraged immigration for agricultural purposes and vast arable lands were granted to the newcomers. When the Arakanese who fled Arakan due to oppressive Burmese rule came back to their homeland, the land was no longer theirs.\textsuperscript{14}

The feeling of deprivation, laced with deep religious and ethnic divisions, erupted into communal violence. In the period 1942–43, when there was anarchy amid the British withdrawal and Japanese invasion, some NGOs and Rohingya community members claim that there was a massacre by local Rakhine Buddhists against “defenceless Muslims” in southern Rakhine.\textsuperscript{15} In the meantime, in northern Rakhine, Force V, consisting mainly of Chittagongians, was created by the British to fight the Japanese, and killed thousands of Arankan civilians, burning their houses and pagodas.\textsuperscript{16} A British Army Liaison officer described the violence as “a war” between two sects, and interestingly some historians described the mass killings of Arankanese by Muslims in northern Rakhine as “ethnic cleansing.” In addition, for the local Rakhine people, the Rohingya were seen as an immediate threat to the unity and preservation of their culture and language. In other words, Muslims including Rohingya were a demographic threat to local Rakhine people. In the past, according to the British census, the population then known as “Mahomedan,” included all Chittagongians and Muslims, skyrocketed from 58,255 to 178,647 between 1871 and 1911, while that of Arakanese increased from 171,612 to just 209,432 during the same period.\textsuperscript{17} At present, the Rohingya are already a majority in northern Rakhine, and local Rakhine people worry that high birth rates in Muslim communities and illegal Bengali immigration will render them further outnumbered. One of the most important factors to consider in addressing the crisis is the local politics of Rakhine. The tension between the local communities is a tinderbox that can explode beyond what we are seeing now, as happened in the clashes in 2012. Together with memories of past Muslim separatism and jihadism, the local Rakhine people distrust the Rohingya and worry, for example, that Sharia Law may be imposed in the region. Even the Kamanese, the Muslims...
in Rakhine that hold Myanmar citizenship, fear that the Rohingya might seek a self-administered zone or autonomy. Given that the emergence of HaYe can further deepen the cleavages, it is important that social integration and mutual trust be immediately pursued in advance of any discussions on granting citizenship to the Rohingya.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At independence, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar was established primarily based on the principle of “unity in diversity.” But due to the long military rule justified by social instability, Myanmar is still a rudimentary democracy that hasn’t had time to harmonize the different values and interests of its 135 ethnic groups and other communities, including those in Rakhine. Even though the Myanmar government is accountable for the current Rohingya crisis, there are obstacles such as the unwelcome legacy of British rule; social, economic and cultural disparities between communities in Rakhine; nationalistic Buddhism; and fearful memories of jihadist and separatist movements that generate suspicions directed against the Rohingya. Meanwhile, the Rohingya community seeks recognition, citizenship and human rights. These objectives should be met in a way that addresses the root causes of the impasse, in other words through gradual social integration. It is important to find a neutral term to refer to the Rohingya. Flexibility has already been seen in the positions of the Myanmar government and the Rohingya themselves. In 2016, Aung San Suu Kyi called on officials to stop referring to the Rohingya as “Bengali.” Some Rohingya leaders, meanwhile, have said they are willing to compromise on the term “Rohingya,” while expressing firm opposition to the label “Bengali.”

But other peoples in Rakhine oppose this. In mid-2016, there were anti-Muslim protests against a neutral terminology to the effect of: “Bengalis should be called Bengalis.” Also, many Kama-nese don’t support a Rohingya identity due to suspicions about separatism, although they have expressed sympathy for the Rohingya as another Muslim group. In this regard, the recognition issue should be addressed through enhancing social acceptance of Rohingya by people in Rakhine.

The Myanmar government might not be able to control all national affairs given the military’s power and influence. However, it can play a role as a facilitator and initiator to enhance the social acceptance of the Rohingya with a long-term perspective. These processes can begin with education encompassing the cultures and social values of each community. In so doing, the Buddhist community in Rakhine can learn about diversity while the Rohingya can be taught to understand the social values of Myanmar, including the Burmese language, as preparation for becoming full members of the society. When it is necessary, interfaith dialogue can be promoted to bridge religious gaps.

As for citizenship, the Myanmar government should consider full citizenship for children born of parents living in Myanmar. Given enough political will, the National League of Democracy (NLD) could help amend the Citizenship Law of 1982, although this option may take a while to gain support. A transformation of the partially descendent-based citizenship system to a birth-based one has three significant implications. First, full citizenship to newborns will be a strong signal to the international community that Myanmar is fully abiding by Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Myanmar has been a party since 1991. Second, full citizenship can assure the Rohingya that they will receive basic human rights that might be subject to deprivation in cases of association and naturalized citizens. Third, a transition to birth-based citizenship would indicate a concrete and sincere commitment by the Myanmar government, which can contribute to preventing the ideologically driven radicalization of the HaYe.

On human rights, it is imperative for the Rohingya to persuade the HaYe to stop armed aggression, which can legitimize persecution and greater involvement by the military in northern Rakhine. Plus, if the aggression continues, it can attract external jihadists such as the Islamic State into Rakhine under the justification of helping the Rohingya. In the worst case, Rohingya can be exploited by external jihadists for ideological purposes. Should the Rohingya community achieve its goals violently, it might be hard to ask the jihadists to leave, since they may try to establish Islamic law in Rakhine. Also, if the Rohingya give the impression to the outside world that their goals were obtained through armed aggression, it could galvanize religious terrorism globally.

While the Myanmar government can do a better job of providing basic human rights such as education and health care to the Rohingya, there should be enhanced co-operation both regionally and globally. At the regional level, the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) should show solidarity over the Rohingya crisis, which can legitimize persecution and the possible radicalization of the HaYe. The Rohingya problem has multiple intertwined roots. The government may regard the Rohingya issue as just one of many social imperatives, but it should show more political will to resolve it. In the military’s view, the HaYe is a new enemy, but not all Rohingya belong to the HaYe and all individuals deserve human dignity. The general population and the Buddhists in Rakhine should learn the meaning of diversity. Leaders of the Rohingya must make it clear that they are not interested in establishing a self-administered zone or an independent state. Lastly, the international community should not judge the Rohingya situation based solely on its standards without understanding domestic issues. There must be patience and understanding with regard to the grievances of all communities in Rakhine. Without patience, prudence and public support, any political decision on the Rohingya issue will only generate more social, economic and political problems that can lead to violence.

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