



Rohingya refugees walk from Myanmar to refugee camps in Bangladesh. REUTERS/Jorge Silva through <http://theconversation.com>

## Decolonization, Democracy and Displacement: Consequences of British Rule in Burma and the Repercussions on the Rohingya

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### Introduction

Citizens of Myanmar rejoiced at the results of the historic 2015 elections, in which Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won the majority of Parliamentary seats.<sup>1</sup> The shadows of military rule were finally beginning to diminish after fifty-three years. However, inter-communal violence has ravaged the country's

Rakhine state, while the most progressive movement in the history of the country was underway. Conflict between the Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims<sup>2</sup> has caused a surge in displacement of Rohingya refugees, who have been fleeing violence and discriminatory laws since Burma gained independence in 1948.<sup>3</sup> The government of Myanmar has been accused of committing a multitude of human rights vio-

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<sup>1</sup> Harrison Akins, "The Two Faces of Democratization in Myanmar: A Case Study of the Rohingya and Burmese Nationalism," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 38 (2) 2018: 229-45.

<sup>2</sup> The Rohingya are a Sunni Muslim ethnic group living in the northwestern region of Rakhine state, formerly known as Ara-

kan. They make up about half of the state population, approximately 1.4 million people. In this paper, Rohingya also refers to Muslims of Arakan or Arakanese Muslims.

<sup>3</sup> Burma became Myanmar, and Arakan Rakhine, by the military government in 1988. Myanmar's population is approximately 53 million as of 2017. Burma refers to the state prior to 1989.

lations against the Rohingya, including sexual violence, mass arson, rampant killings, forced labor, and restrictions on reproduction, marriage, and movement in an attempt to exterminate the group.<sup>4</sup> By 2011, the Rohingya became one of the world's most vulnerable ethnic minority groups in the history of the Southeast Asian region. Oppressive governmental policies, going back decades, have led to the destruction of Rohingya homes and sent more than 700,000 refugees to neighboring countries.<sup>5</sup>

Various theories attempt to explain why anti-Muslim attitude has recently escalated. One theory posits that civil groups and citizens recently gained the right to participate freely in civic space and influence the political sphere in the years leading up to the 2015 elections. Increased attacks, hate speech, and protest against minorities, especially the Muslim community in Myanmar, have accompanied this freedom of political expression.<sup>6</sup> The opening of free political expression has created a space for pre-existing prejudices against minorities to proliferate.

This paper will show that Burma has been involved in continuous armed conflict with its ethnic minorities since it gained independence. During colonial rule, the notion of ethnicity was politicized, and the post-independence Burmese state decided to adopt an ethno-religious nationalism, favored among the majority Bamar<sup>7</sup> population, in opposition to colonial policies favoring ethnic minorities. The ruling Bamar ethnic group developed an exclusive form of nationalism that defined 'true' citizens as Burman and Buddhist. This ideology ostracized ethnic minorities.

For many non-Bamar people,<sup>8</sup> the state has been violent in its incursions through the *Tatmadaw*, also known as the Myanmar Armed Forces. The *Tatmadaw* have been the primary enforcers of law in the country, and since 1988 it rules "solely through force and terror," according to *The Ottawa Citizen*.

In 1992, *Ottawa Citizen* also reported Muslim refugees fleeing horrors inflicted on them by the *Tatmadaw*, many of whom died of starvation and disease at camps in Bangladesh. The Burman military purged Arakan province of Muslims, and more than 100,000 refugees were driven to neighboring countries. The *Tatmadaw* burned down mosques, villages, and crops; killed cattle and entire families; raped women; and forced male members of the Muslim community to work as slave laborers. Reports indicate that military leaders called for expulsion of the Muslims of Arakan from Buddhist dominated Myanmar. The military has systematically destroyed ethnic minority rights since then.<sup>9</sup> Today, Myanmar is rife with religious and ethnic division, which many scholars claim is rooted in conflicts based on this national identity.

The consequences of British colonialism, specifically the Rohingyas' ostensible association with the British, supports justifications of the persecution against this minority community in independent Myanmar. The evolution of nationalism has remained resilient through the instability of regime changes, and the current situation of the Rohingya continues to deteriorate. The Rohingya are unable to escape military influence, and the civilian government is struggling to address the crisis. The persistent persecution of the minority communities legitimizes the ethnic division created by the colonial institution. The division justifies the use of violence and coercion by the state to reinforce the dominant group's national identity and ethnic boundaries, present since British colonial rule.<sup>10</sup>

The international community plays a role in speaking out against the atrocities committed against the Rohingya. The lack of response and inaction by the U.K. government is particularly notable, since it has remained mostly silent.<sup>11</sup> It should make more of an effort to become involved because the origins of the conflict lay in British colonial times. Perhaps the

<sup>4</sup> "The Rohingya Crisis: Past, Present, and Future," ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights, 2018; "Burma Ethnic Violence Escalates as Villagers Flee," *The Guardian*, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> "U.N. Investigator says Myanmar Genocide against Rohingya 'Ongoing'," *Al Jazeera*, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Akins, 230.

<sup>7</sup> Bamar citizens are recognized according to their religion, which is pre-dominantly Buddhist. Burman citizens refer to the entire populations, including ethnic minorities.

<sup>8</sup> Non-Bamar refers to ethnic people that do not identify as Buddhist Bamar. This includes ethnic minorities such as the Shan, Karen, Kachin, Chin, Rohingya, and others. Non-Bamar people make up 30% of the population.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Goodspeed, "Refugees Flee Terror of Myanmar's Killing Fields," *The Ottawa Citizen*, 1992.

<sup>10</sup> Akins, 230.

<sup>11</sup> Salma Yaqoob, "The Very Least the UK Owes the Rohingya is Protection," *Al-Jazeera*, 2017.

first step to set Myanmar on the road to recovery is to bring to attention the impact of colonial rule and to hold colonial powers accountable. Another reason why it is imperative to examine the historical trajectory of this newly democratic nation is because the communal violence is threatening to undermine the country's transition from a one-party, autocratic military rule to a more representative government. Additionally, the on-going chronic refugee crisis adversely impacts global security, due to deplorable human rights conditions. Neighboring countries dealing with the reverberations of the communal violence should be aware of the political, social, and economic issues, and should understand the history of the persecution.

Event	Date
British colonial rule begins	1824
Japanese occupation	1942
Burmese independence	1948
Tensions rise between government & Muslims	1950
Ne Win adopts hardline policy against Muslims	1962
Establishment of Burmese Constitution	1974
Establishment of Citizenship laws	1982
Ne Win overthrown by Military	1988
Martial Law declared	1990
250,000 Muslims flee to Bangladesh	1991
Junta supresses anti-government protest	2007
Democratic elections	2010
Tensions turn violent between Muslims and Buddhists in Rakhine	2012
Rape, killings and arson attacks on Rohingya	2015
NLD's Aang San Sum Kyi named defacto leader	2016

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From 1824 to 1948, the Burman population experienced forced integration with Hindu and Muslim immigrants from neighboring countries such as India, and colonial strategies promoted ethnic divisions. The repercussions and impact of these policies changed the favorable fortune of the minority community in the post-colonial Burmese state. The Muslim population, especially, was vulnerable under the newly formed Burmese government. The case of the Rohingya was a consequence of the legacy of colonialism, particularly of how the British administration cultivated a Burmese nationalist sensation amongst the ethnic Bamar. They began to view ethnic minorities as invaders and foreigners in their own land. Interaction with the Rohingya was viewed through an ethnic and religious lens, which impacted their legal status in the country.

Open democratization of Burma after British independence provided the perfect opportunity for Buddhist nationalism to soar. These policies formed and mobilized a Burmese collective identity that defined itself in part by rejecting ethnic minorities' cultures.

### Historiography

Historical analyses have followed two main schools of thought regarding the Rohingya crisis. The first draws on work that focuses primarily on the refugee crisis and the impact it has had on surrounding countries. Syeda Parini examines bilateral relations between Myanmar and Bangladesh from the 1970s, focusing on how the Muslim Rohingya crisis is causing disputes between the two nations. Parini focuses on security issues, mostly emphasizing the impact of this "non-traditional" refugee crisis on neighboring countries and highlighting international and local responses to the Rohingya problem.<sup>12</sup>

Grundy-Warr and Wong describe the Rohingya refugees' harsh conditions once they were 'repatriated' back to Burma after fleeing the violence inflicted on them by the Burmese military in 1992.

<sup>12</sup> Syeda Naushin Parnini, "The Crisis of the Rohingya as a Muslim Minority in Myanmar and Bilateral Relations with Bangladesh," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 33.2 (2013): 281-297.

They discuss the atrocious conditions of the Rohingya in refugee camps and the future refugees still in Bangladesh. Grundy-Warr and Wong assess circumstances the Arakan Muslims faced during British colonial rule. They address inter-communal tensions under military rule, the role of the *Tatmadaw* in fueling the refugee crisis, and the impact it had on the international community.<sup>13</sup> A.K.M. Ahsan Ullah emphasizes particular ways in which the Burmese government has systematically “persecuted, marginalized, abused and deprived [the Rohingya] of basic rights,”<sup>14</sup> and attempts to erase the minority group’s part in Burmese history. He complains that there is insufficient research on the dynamics and complexity of the Rohingya case. He calls for international and local activists to denounce the Myanmar government for being unable to stop the violence.<sup>15</sup>

Others stress the importance of Buddhist nationalism. Francis Wade suggests that the mass violence was due to the manipulation of identities by an anxious ruling class that turned on the Muslim population. Pro-democracy activists, politicians, and even monks participated in hostile protests against minority rights.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, Matthew Walton in *Buddhism, Politics, and Political Thought*, argues that democracy and political participation are intertwined with Buddhism. He observes that political thinking in Myanmar is impossible without Buddhist ideas because the “moral universe” of Buddhism represents the political one in Myanmar. This formulation has defined, he suggests, political participation and authority amongst the civilian people and military rulers. One of the first scholars to provide this type of overview, Walton hopes to stress the role of religious influence on the political institutions during the democratic transition of the country during the parliamentary (pre-1962) and military-socialist rule (1962-88).<sup>17</sup> Ashley South’s essay on *Ethnic Politics in Burma* further explores the notion of Buddhist nationalism, which arises from this intersection of religion and politics. South attempts to understand the

ethnic conflict between the majority Buddhist and minority populations by following the roles of politicians and international networks in the dispute. The author has attempted to understand the origins of communal violence and sees the emergence of ethnic identity as resulting from events that occurred during Burma’s colonial period. Scholars have also aimed to analyze the impact and inner workings of military rule on displaced people, exploring issues of ethnicity and political freedom.<sup>18</sup>

These schools of thought have dominated research on refugees and nationalism. Most historians tend to focus on injustices carried out against the Rohingya, wanting to document their situation and provide context to the conflict. They also try to gain a deeper understanding of the issue by relating it to the rise of Buddhist nationalism and appreciating the role it has played in the discrimination of ethnic minorities.

It was not until this year that Harrison Akins published an article about how British colonial rulers played a role in the rise of Burmese nationalism and how it affected the Rohingya. He traces experiences of the Rohingya and Bamar population under colonial rule and provides an argument for how, as a result of these experiences, a Buddhist national identity formed around the dominant Burman ethnic group. He asserts that the Rohingya were deliberately excluded, labelled as illegal immigrants, and denied their identity following independence from Britain. He links Myanmar’s treatment of the Rohingya to Britain’s manipulative colonial policies. He further emphasizes that the democratization process left a power vacuum whereupon anti-Rohingya and anti-Muslim sentiment spread among the political players and common people, who began to internalize such prejudices.<sup>19</sup> This paper takes a similar approach. It focuses on the colonial origins of the on-going Rohingya crisis by explaining the culmination of colonial policies on the political trajectory of the country. A

<sup>13</sup> Carl Grundy-Warr and Elaine Wong, “Sanctuary under a Plastic Sheet - The Unresolved Problem of Rohingya Refugees,” *IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin* (1997): 79-91.

<sup>14</sup> Akm Ahsan, Ullah, “Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar,” *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 32.3 (2016): 285-301.

<sup>15</sup> Akm Ahsan Ullah, “Rohingya Refugees to Bangladesh: Historical Exclusions and Contemporary Marginalization,” *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 9.2 (2011): 139-161.

<sup>16</sup> Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 2017).

<sup>17</sup> Matthew Walton, *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Ashley South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma: States of Conflict*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Akins, 241.

deeper awareness of the repercussions of colonial rule on the nation is essential.

### *Sources & Methodology*

I have used newspapers such as *The Ottawa Citizen*, one of the only newspapers in the archive that had information on the Muslim refugee crisis in the 1990s, and Al Jazeera reporting on Rohingya grievances and the political situation in Myanmar. I also used reports from international organizations such as the UNHCR and Doctors without Borders. In order to understand the British perception of the Burmese way of life, I used books authored by British-born colonial public servants about the history, people, economy and international trade of Burma between 1901-1920. I argue that the Rohingya became stateless persons through two government documents, the 1974 Burmese constitution and the 1982 Burmese Citizenship Law. Additional sources include analyses of census data and speeches from prominent Burmese political figures. Each of these sources reveal challenges that the Burmese citizens faced socially, politically and religiously from pre-colonial times to the present.

### *British Colonial Policies (1824-1948)*

British rule played a critical role in the making of modern Myanmar and the Muslim Rohingya's place within it. The British ruled over people with diverse cultures and languages, and Burman society clashed with western cultural ideals. Ni Ni Mint, an esteemed Myanmar historian, argued that even though the period from the Third Anglo-Burmese war to independence was short, the challenges the Burmans faced produced severe consequences.<sup>20</sup> British colonial policies supplanted traditional 'Myanma' society after 1886, when Britain took control of Burma.<sup>21</sup> John Furnivall, a British-born colonial public servant wrote an enlightening analysis of Burma's ethnic heterogeneity:

"In Burma...probably the first thing that strikes the visitor is the medley of peoples — European, Chinese, Indian, and Native...for they mix but do not combine. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways.... There is a plural society, with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit. Even in the economic sphere there is a division of labour along racial lines."<sup>22</sup>

### *Divide and Rule*

As a complex ethnic society, British Burma experienced many changes that were dynamic yet unstable. British administrators implemented a 'divide and rule' strategy that fostered ethnic divisions, and the success and failure of that strategy reveal a pattern of exploitation. The expansion of this strategy had a notable impact on the nation's historical path.<sup>23</sup> The heterogeneous minorities living alongside the dominant Bamar Buddhist population clashed with the British 'homogenizing' forces.<sup>24</sup> Mrs. Alice Hart, a Briton, visited Burma with her husband in 1895 and wrote a book about her experience named "Picturesque Burma," which was critical of British rule. Mrs. Hart believed that the Anglo-Burmese wars were a good thing for the Burmese, stating that:

"Burma is not, it must be borne in mind, the country exclusively of the Burmans; in its immense area, it contains races and nationalities differing widely in language, ideas, and religion, and the task the English have before them is to make these peoples a homogenous country...An united Burma would become a strong country, particularly as the Burmans, Karens, and Shans have shown themselves capable of education and anxious to be taught."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Stephen L. Keck, *British Burma in the New Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1895-1918), 2.

<sup>21</sup> Guy Lubeigt, "Introduction of Western culture in Myanmar in the 19th century: from civilian acceptance to religious resistance," in *Essays in commemoration of the golden jubilee of the Myanmar historical commission* (Yangon: Myanmar Historical commission, 2005), 381.

<sup>22</sup> John Sydenham Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (New York City: New York University Press, 1948), 304-305.

<sup>23</sup> Keck, 25.

<sup>24</sup> Keck, 43 and 27.

<sup>25</sup> Mrs. Ernest (Alice) Hart, *Picturesque Burma: Past and Present* (London, 1897).



Source: Wikimedia Commons

Burma's identity, Mrs. Hart made clear, was composed of different ethnicities. The British made a clear effort to evaluate the dominant and inferior groups in the country and began to portray the Burmese and ethnic minorities distinctly. Ethnic minorities included the Karen, Kachin, Shans, Chins, Mon, and Rohingya, all of whom lived in remote areas of the country, within Burma's imprecise borders. These ethnic minorities were of great interest to the British during the first years of their rule.<sup>26</sup> For example, the British regarded the Karen as loyal subjects who "represented a model minority." They supplied soldiers, embraced Christianity, and were the "least difficult people to modernize."<sup>27</sup>

Sir George Scott's 1906 book, *Burma: A Handbook of Practical Commercial and Political Information*, extols the natives' penchant for military service. "Since 1894," he wrote, "numbers of Kachins have enlisted, and are ready to enlist, in the military police, and seem likely to make excellent light infantry. The Kachins are dealt with on the principle of political, as distinguished from administrative,

control."<sup>28</sup> Scott's handbook highlights commonplace stereotypes about Burmese and ethnic minorities. British authors conceptualized ethnic minorities based on language, ethnicity, or physiology. Joseph Dautremer and James Scott described the Arakanese as having "a distinguishing dress and even a difference in their physiognomy...their nose is more prominent and their eyes are less tilted...their skin is darker."<sup>29</sup> Scott wrote that they were "lighthearted," noting their laziness, criminality, violence, aggressiveness, and most importantly, indifference to British rule.

These putative characteristics, especially the alleged malleability, made for distrust.<sup>30</sup> Widely believed by missionaries, modernizers, and writers of the time, these stereotypes spread and caused ethnic tensions. The Burmese began viewing minorities as siding with the British and believing the British favored the minority over the majority in all aspects of civil life.<sup>31</sup> The issue of ethnic division became explosive, not because of the diversity and presence of different ethnic groups, but because it was accompanied by significant immigration.<sup>32</sup>

#### *Immigration from India*

Migration played a crucial role in the development of British Burma. Patterns of immigration, largely from India, show that Indians immigrating to Burma were offset by those who returned after independence. Nilini Ranjan Chakravarti, then a high-level government official in Burma, chronicled the impact and rise of the Indian population in the country.<sup>33</sup> Particularly interesting is the growth of migrants in the Arakan region, where most of the Rohingya dwell. Arakan in 1891 saw a 20.5% percent increase in Indian population, almost half of them identifying as Muslims<sup>34</sup> and by 1911, this increased to 23.5%. Chakravarti also noted the overall immigrant population besides Arakan, which was about 3.8% of the total population in 1891, with an increase to 4.8%

<sup>26</sup> Keck, 39.

<sup>27</sup> Keck, 147.

<sup>28</sup> Sir George Scott, *Burma: A Handbook of Practical Commercial and Political Information*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (London: De La More Press, 1908), 154.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Dautremer and James George Scott, *Burma Under British Rule* (London: T.F. Unwin, 1916), 79.

<sup>30</sup> Scott, 76.

<sup>31</sup> Scott, 78.

<sup>32</sup> Keck, 40.

<sup>33</sup> See Nilini Ranjan Chakravarti, *The Indian Minority in Burma: The Rise and Decline of an Immigrant Immunity* (Oxford: Institute for Race Relations, 1971).

<sup>34</sup> Yegar Moshe, *The Muslims of Burma: The Study of a Minority Group* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1972), 31.

by 1911. By 1931, there were almost one million Indian immigrants in Burma, increasing to 6.9%. Chakravarti noted that almost half of all immigrants were Muslims.

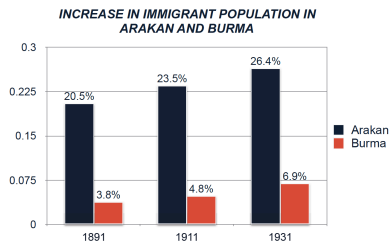


Chart created by author

Why was there a mass migration movement to Burma? Burma was part of British India, and the British and Indians viewed this movement as relocation to another territory within the colony. The British also needed cheap labor. Burma was sparsely populated and India was the easiest, nearest, and cheapest source of manpower.<sup>35</sup> However, Indians were always considered a minority, regardless of how much they prospered. They subverted the Burmese by accepting labor for cheap wages and were willing to work at menial tasks for little pay. They never assimilated to Burmese culture and continued to resist Burmese annexation from India. Most Muslim Indians worked as traders or shopkeepers, “[Muslims from the] Malayalam area were restaurant-keepers and distillers...and Muslims from Chittagong took over river shipping...,” explained Moshe Yegar, a scholar who wrote about Muslims in Burma during the 1970s.<sup>36</sup>

The Muslim immigration from India had destabilizing social results because of the widespread practice of mixed marriages. This made many Burmese anxious because their Buddhist marriage customs were different from Islamic rites, rules, and rituals. Many Muslims served in the government, crowding the Burmese out. British preference for placing Muslims in civil service jobs resulted in violence in 1938, directed particularly at the Indian Muslim community. Additionally, they were viewed

as immigrants and foreigners who were replacing the Bamar population in the workforce. Many Muslims also seemed to be living in better standards than the native population. To the Burmese, the immigrants represented the reason behind their misery. Many Arakan Muslims and Indians were killed, properties were damaged, and approximately 113 mosques were burned to the ground.<sup>37</sup> These anxieties against Muslims and Indians appeared in anti-Muslim propaganda after independence, when the nationalist movement was gaining ground.<sup>38</sup>

How did immigration from India impact the Rohingya, and what did the introduction of this policy mean for them? In order to understand these questions, it is important to address conflicting narratives about the origins of the Rohingya. The Rohingya are not part of the same community as the Muslim immigrants from India. The Muslim Indians who immigrated came from what is currently Bangladesh and what was then Bengal, India. Some of these Muslim immigrants assimilated into Rohingya communities, but most remained immigrant Muslim Indians in Burma.

Azeem Ibrahim, author of *Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide: The Rohingyas*, uses British census data to debunk the idea that all Rohingya are colonial immigrants. He argues that Islam and the Rohingya came to Arakan in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, even before the Buddhist Rakhine. The Rohingya claim to be descendants of this community, declaring ancestry with Muslims from Turkey, Bengal, Persia, and Afghanistan. Buddhist Rakhine and Arakanese Muslims co-existed until the British occupation of Arakan in 1884.<sup>39</sup> British colonial rulers classified the Rohingya on the basis of religion, not ethnicity. In 1799, Francis Buchanan, a “Scottish doctor traveling to Burma on a political mission,”<sup>40</sup> wrote, “the Mahomedans settled at Arakan, call the country *Rovingaw* ... I shall now add three dialects, spoken in the Burma empire ... The first is that spoken by the Mohammedans, who have been long settled in Arakan, and who call themselves *Rooinga*, or natives of Arakan,”<sup>41</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Yegar, 29.

<sup>36</sup> Yegar, 30.

<sup>37</sup> Yegar, 37.

<sup>38</sup> Yegar, 32.

<sup>39</sup> *Médecins sans Frontières-Holland*, “10 Years for the Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh: Past, Present and Future,” 2002. (Hereafter MSF-Holland).

<sup>40</sup> Akins, 231.

<sup>41</sup> Francis Buchanan, “A Comparative Vocabulary of Some of the Languages Spoken in the Burma Empire,” *Asiatic Researches*, 5 (1799): 223, 237.

and “Ruinga” in 1815 offer sufficient proof that Rohingya existed in the area. Ibrahim therefore refutes the conventional narrative that all Rohingya are immigrants or foreigners and do not belong in Burma.

### *Japanese Occupation of Burma in 1942*

Fearing that the continued immigration strategy would threaten economic and social life, the British had India and Burma sign the Indo-Burma Immigration Agreement in 1941.<sup>42</sup> It caused violent protests among the Indian population in Burma because it imposed restrictions on Indian immigration into the colony. However, not long before the law came into force, Japan conquered Burma.<sup>43</sup> Japan invaded Burma in 1942 and when the British withdrew, inter-communal violence flared. Burmese nationalists attacked groups that benefited from British colonial rule, as many ethnic Bamar joined the anti-British Burma Independence Army.<sup>44</sup> Burmese Buddhists attacked Indian and Karen communities, while the Rohingya and Rakhine Buddhists attacked each other, leading to territorial separation of Buddhist and Muslim villagers in the state.<sup>45</sup>

In order to regain control and drive the Japanese out, Britain sought support from Arakan Muslims, promising the Rohingya an autonomous Muslim National Area in northern Arakan in exchange for joining the British offensive. The Rohingya participated in the covert V force, a “reconnaissance and intelligence-gathering” group established by the British. As a result, both Japanese and Bamar forces attacked the Rohingya. The Rohingya were loyal to the British and the Rakhine to the Japanese, and neither commitment boded well for the Bamar later.<sup>46</sup> Britain regained control of Burma in 1945, but never honored its promise to provide an independent Muslim National Area for the Rohingya.<sup>47</sup>

The British, however, did appoint Muslim leaders to valuable administrative posts in northern Arakan. This decision caused a number of disputes between the Rakhine and Rohingya, who were on

opposite sides of the war during the Japanese occupation.<sup>48</sup> Ethnic oppression continued and the Rakhine Buddhists’ tolerance for Muslims decreased dramatically.

In July 1947, Muhammad Ali Jinnah of the All India Muslim League met with a few Rohingya leaders in Dhaka to discuss the integration of the Rohingya people and their part of Arakan into newly founded East Pakistan. Unfortunately for the Rohingya, Jinnah supported Burma’s incorporation of the Rohingya, not wanting to create animosity between Pakistan and Burma.<sup>49</sup>

The Burmese administration viewed the Muslims’ repeated demands for autonomy as betrayal and territorial undermining, fueling their attitude of suspicion and estrangement toward the ethnic minority that lingers today. Regardless, some Muslims pushed further for an independent Muslim state even after Burma gained independence.

By 1954, the government suppressed all rebellions and protests, and this only increased the distrust of the Burmese administration towards the Muslim community. Nevertheless, it is important to address conflicting narratives. The Rohingya sided with the British during the Japanese invasion and advocated separation from Myanmar.

Building a strong social and political foundation, especially after gaining independence and the right to self-govern, lies in embracing distinct ethnic boundaries. Cultural differences can exist and persist regardless of inter-ethnic conflict and interaction. As a moral humanitarian issue, regardless of whether the Rohingya wanted to be part of Burma or not, violence and human rights violations, under false pretense of a free democratic society celebrating free religious expression, is not justified. Irrespective of the ethical issues, Burmese nationalism emerged with the majority Bamar population participating and promoting anti-Muslim sentiment.<sup>50</sup> Muslims lost civil posts, and landed property.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Bertil Lintner, *Outrage: Burma’s Struggle for Democracy* (London: White Lotus, 1990), 31.

<sup>43</sup> Yegar, 39.

<sup>44</sup> Akins, 234.

<sup>45</sup> Joseph Silverstein, *Burmese Politics: The Dilemma of National Unity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1980), 50-51; cf. Yegar, 95.

<sup>46</sup> MSF-Holland, 10.

<sup>47</sup> Yegar, 95.

<sup>48</sup> Akins, 234.

<sup>49</sup> Akins, 235.

<sup>50</sup> Yegar, 38.

<sup>51</sup> MSF-Holland, 10.



### *Impact of Colonial Policy on Post-Colonial Burma*

Burma gained independence from British rule in 1948, yet freedom did not bring liberation from the past. Nationalist movements, mainly Burman, expressed opposition to ethnic minorities and the British. Post-colonial Burma was a place where fear of foreign influence and paranoia surrounding that sentiment grew into violence. Nationalism in this context referred to Buddhist tradition, literature, history, and language.<sup>52</sup> Burman and Buddhist were coterminous. After 1948, national identity was synonymous with the army and the Buddhist order. Instead of creating a sense of unity, it created further division.

In order to reverse the effects of British colonial policy and in an attempt to separate politics from religion, the first Prime Minister, U Nu, used Buddhist nationalism to create national stability and unify the country. Buddhism became the official state religion, and U Nu openly opposed minority rights:

“In my frank opinion, the term “Minority Rights” is a clever invention of the Imperialists to enable them to divide-and-rule over us for as long as they please. With this spectre they have succeeded in dividing us further and further apart...So long as we allow this spectre of Minority Rights to continue in our midst, so long shall our efforts to achieve Unity and national solidarity be of no avail.”<sup>53</sup>

### *U Nu and Ne Win*

Under U Nu, Buddhists displaced the Rohingya in all aspects of civil and social life. The Rohingya were unable to serve in the military, and lost their police and village headmen positions. Some Rohingya lost their lands. Fueled by a politics of fear, the Burmese military and their general, Ne Win, staged a coup to over-

throw U Nu in 1962. Ne Win wanted to block foreign influence and erase the religious and ethnic divide by unifying the Burmese under a singular national identity. He adopted a strategy that would create a “link to the past,” and take Burma back to pre-colonial times, completely controlling “plurality and individuality.”

Nationalism pervaded political and economic structures. In order to preserve the cultural past, Ne Win and his military were prepared to use violence and bloodshed to create a new society.<sup>54</sup> This further legitimated the military regime, and did not allow for the creation of a democratic society in Burma.<sup>55</sup> Ne Win aimed to suppress the minorities by taking away their autonomy and constitutional rights, in addition to stopping their many “rebellions.” Ne Win and the military exploited fear of losing the Burmese identity, connecting it with the battle against colonialism and independence to inflict violence on the minority. The Rohingya seemed to be perfect targets.

### *Legal Persecution*

The legal persecution of minorities in Burma began, arguably, with the 1974 constitution. It stripped the Rohingya of their national identity, making them foreigners in their own land.<sup>56</sup> Article 31 declared, “The States and Divisions of the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma are as follows:- (a) Kachin State, (b) Kayah State, Karen State, (d) Chin State, (e) Sagaing Division, (f) Tenasserim Division, (g) Pegu Division, (h) Magwe Division, (i) Mandalay Division, (j) Mon State, (k) Arakan State, (l) Rangoon Division, (m) Shan State, (n) Irrawaddy Division.”<sup>57</sup> The addition of this clause meant that all groups were recognized and unified within the territory, and it acknowledged citizenship to indigenous races and minorities.

However, the ‘right of residence’ in these specific states depended on ethnic criteria that were set at the discretion of the government. This clause

<sup>52</sup> Mikael Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma: An Essay on the Historical Practice of Power* (Copenhagen: NIAS 1993), 19.

<sup>53</sup> U Nu, *Burma Looks Ahead. Translation of Selected Speeches by the Honorable PM of the Union of Burma, Delivered on Various Occasions from 19th July 1951 to 4th August 1952* (Rangoon: The Ministry of Information Government of Burma, 1952), 15.

<sup>54</sup> Gravers, 40.

<sup>55</sup> Gravers, 2.

<sup>56</sup> MS- Holland, 2002, 10.

<sup>57</sup> “The Constitution of the Union of Burma, 1974,”

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs07/1974Constitution.pdf> [accessed 28 May 2019].

was also included to ensure that national ethnic groups unify under one Burman identity.<sup>58</sup> By establishing the Arakan state, the Burman government recognized the Rakhine Buddhists as the indigenous residents, thereby stripping the Rohingya of citizenship and voting rights. The Rohingya were not in the classification of 135 “recognized” ethnic groups, which made them ineligible to vote.<sup>59</sup> Article 152 states, “Burmese is the common language, languages of the other national races may also be taught.”<sup>60</sup> Establishing *all* of these legal acts together was the military’s flagrant attempt to solidify dictatorship and “Burmanize” ethnic minorities in order to expand Burman dominance and incite racial hostility. Therefore, the 1974 constitution had little support from minorities. In Arakan state particularly, this law established that the indigenous people were the Rakhine Buddhists.

Shortly after Ne Win relinquished his presidency, the 1982 citizenship law defined citizenship as “a new boundary of legal inclusion and exclusion.”<sup>61</sup> Thereafter, in order to be recognized as a citizen, one needed to prove relation to indigenous ethnic groups who lived in Burma before colonization began in 1824. Chapter II, No. 3 states, “Nationals such as the Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Burman, Ivlon, Rakhine, or Shan, and ethnic groups as have settled in any of the territories included within the State as their permanent home from a period prior to 1185 B.E., 1823 A.D. are Burma citizens.”<sup>62</sup> Chinese, Indians, and Eurasians could obtain associate citizenship, while the Rohingya were disenfranchised. As immigrants, they did not fit any of the proper categories. In this way, the military capitalized on fear of ‘foreign’ and ‘immigrant’ influence.<sup>63</sup>

To the detriment of the Rohingya, there was no formal, official difference made by the government institutions between the Indian Muslims or the Rohingya in post-colonial Burma. All Muslims — Bengali or Indian Muslims or Rohingya/Arakan

Muslims— were to be part of the same group. This distinction did not exist in British Burma. Confusion results between Indian Muslims and Rohingya/Arakan Muslims, adversely affecting Rohingya identity.

The British favored Hindu, Muslim, and Christian faiths all together, rather than the dominant Bamar. It is understandable that the post-colonial institution targets the Rohingya who chose to stay.<sup>64</sup> The Christian Karen were willing to assimilate, and Hindus tended to stay away from politics. Most Indian immigrants moved back to India after Britain retreated. In the eyes of the Bamar, the Rohingya had overstayed their welcome, even though it has been established that the Rohingya have been in Arakan since the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

The ethnic cleansing escalated in the late 1970s. Rohingya and Arakanese Muslims are not illegal Indian immigrants who entered the country under British colonial rule. In 1978, 200,000 fled Burmese authorities under alleged claims of their illegal status. Between 1991 and 1992, 200,000 again fled forced labor in Arakan, but many were sent back between 1996 and 1999.<sup>65</sup> A *Times* journalist reported from Rangoon in 1992,

“Burma has deployed more than 75,000 troops along its border with Bangladesh and intensified its persecution of Muslims, causing thousands to flee across the frontier...the Burmese military relocated all the Muslims, seizing their land without any compensation...forced to work as porters for the army, and given no pay...wives have been raped, husbands taken to the hills and asked to clear mines...all our mosques have been demolished and Muslim schools closed down. Our people are regularly tortured and imprisoned without trial — many have been detained since the 1950s — while laws prevent them from escaping the persecution.”<sup>66</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Robert H. Taylor, “Burma’s National Unity Problem and the 1974 Constitution,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 1, no. 3 (1979): 232-48.

<sup>59</sup> Akins, 237.

<sup>60</sup> “The Constitution of the Union of Burma, 1974.”

<sup>61</sup> Akins, 238.

<sup>62</sup> Burma Citizenship Law, 15 October 1982, available at <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b4f71b.html> [accessed 26 May 2019].

<sup>63</sup> Gravers, 6.

<sup>64</sup> J.A. Berlie, *The Burmanization of Myanmar’s Muslims* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2008), 21.

<sup>65</sup> Berlie, 25.

<sup>66</sup> Alistar Lawson-Tanc, “Rangoon steps up border forces as Muslims flee,” *The Times* (London England), Monday, January 20, 1992, 8.

In addition, most Rohingya cannot leave their villages without permission. By 1994, Rohingya children were not issued birth certificates.<sup>67</sup> The military demands that girls aged 15-18 be separated from their families and trained for a period of six months. Lands belonging to generations of Rohingya are expropriated and given cost free to Burmans.<sup>68</sup> Muslim children are excluded from “state-run secondary schools” creating an “illiteracy rate as high as 80%.” The state of affairs is a result of the Rohingya’s stateless status, as well as the prejudices held against them.<sup>69</sup>

### Conclusion

When the British arrived in 1824, they gradually implemented a series of strategies to gain control over the Burmese. This included fostering ethnic divisions between the majority Bamar population and the various minorities. They also introduced immigration from India, which consisted of mostly Hindus and some Muslims. The Arakan Muslim population grew dramatically, and ethnic boundaries between the Arakanese Muslims and Indian Muslims were obscure. During the Japanese occupation, the minorities, particularly the Rohingya, sided with the British, who promised them an independent Muslim Arakan in exchange for their loyalty. While the Arakanese Buddhists supported the Japanese, the power vacuum left space for communal violence and hate to rise up. The legacy of British colonial administration has left the Rohingya vulnerable to the Myanmar Government’s discriminatory laws and policies.

The development of Bamar national identity, which used the Buddhist religion as its shield, came about through colonial policies. The Rohingya have been considered outsiders, invaders, foreigners, and illegal immigrants for their association with British colonial powers and the Indian Muslim immigrants. Despite evidence that the Rohingya have been around since the 9<sup>th</sup> century C.E., the state continues to deny their right to citizenship.

Currently, the government of Myanmar wishes to transfer the Rohingya ethnic group to UNHCR to settle them in a different country.<sup>70</sup> There

still exists a growing fear of the presence of Muslims in Myanmar, which the military and nationalists believe diminishes the collective national identity and the nation’s ability to serve as champions of Buddhism. These factors contribute to the inaction of government.<sup>71</sup>

Ernest Hart long ago stated, “As the country improves in population, in wealth, and in education, it may in the far future recover its lost nationality, and freed from ancient Burmese tyranny and cruelty, give the world the example of a people who know how to be happy without caring incessantly to toil, and to be joyous without desiring insatiably to possess.”<sup>72</sup> The realization of his prediction apparently still lies far off.

The prognosis seems bleak for the immediate future. Aang San Suu Kyi and her pro-democracy party have continued to allow suppression of free speech, and have drawn outrage from the Dalai Lama, who condemns the persecution and Suu Kyi for not speaking out or putting an end to the military’s campaign against the Rohingya. Myanmar’s road to democracy is a rocky one, and the dangers of communal conflict continue to imperil it.

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<sup>67</sup> Akins, 239.

<sup>68</sup> Berlie, 28.

<sup>69</sup> Akins, 239.

<sup>70</sup> Akins, 241

<sup>71</sup> Akins, 242.

<sup>72</sup> Hart, 386.

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