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School of Sociology and Public Policy

How Burman privilege excludes the Rohingya from the contemporary
Myanmar society

Tatiana Andreia Mota Pires de Aguiar Trilho

Dissertation submitted as partial requirement for the conferral of the Master's in International
Studies

Supervisor:

Dr. Giulia Daniele, integrated researcher and guest assistant professor,
Centre for International Studies (CEI_Iscte),
Iscte - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa

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RESUMO

O Myanmar é um país localizado no sudeste asiático que em 2017 e 2018 foi particularmente alvo de atenção mediática e internacional, devido às acusações de genocídio e limpeza étnica dirigidas aos militares do país que estiveram envolvidos nos episódios de violência que levaram centenas de milhares de Rohingya a fugir do país e a procurar refugio no Bangladesh. A relutância interna em condenar os militares por atos de violência desmedida e desproporcional fez com que fosse removido a Aung San Suu Kyi – líder de facto do país e antiga laureada com o Prémio Nobel da Paz – o próprio Prémio Nobel.

Neste contexto, é importante perceber a razão por de trás da legitimação destes atos violentos aos olhos da população geral do Myanmar que considera os Rohingya como imigrantes ilegais do Bangladesh, apelidando-os de Bengalis e recusando-se a reconhecer a identidade Rohingya com a qual se identificam.

É possível perceber que num país em que a etnia está relacionada com o obtenção (ou não) de poder que o grupo étnico dominante, os birmaneses, possuem uma legitimidade e privilégio que as restantes minorias étnicas não usufruem. Neste sentido, é pertinente investigar até que ponto é que o privilégio birmanês não só exclui os Rohingya mas também legitima o comportamento e tratamento discriminatório de que a comunidade tem sido alvo no país.

Palavras-chave: privilégio birmanês; Rohingya; crise de cidadania; taingyintha

ABSTRACT

Myanmar is a country located in Southeast Asia that in 2017 and 2018 was worthy of international attention, due to accusations of genocide and ethnic cleansing directed at the country's military that were involved in the episodes of violence that led hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to fleeing the country and seeking refuge in Bangladesh. The internal reluctance to condemn the military for acts of excessive and disproportionate violence led to the removal of Aung San Suu Kyi – the country's de facto leader and former Nobel Peace Prize laureate – from Nobel Prize itself.

In this context, it is important to understand the reason behind the legitimization of these violent acts in the eyes of the general population of Myanmar who consider the Rohingya to be illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, calling them Bengalis and refusing to recognize the Rohingya identity with which identify themselves.

It is possible to understand that in a country where ethnicity is related to the obtaining (or not) any type of power that the dominant ethnic group, the Burmans, have a legitimacy and privilege that other ethnic minorities do not enjoy. Against this background, it is pertinent to investigate to what extent the Burman privilege not only excludes the Rohingya but also legitimizes the discriminatory behavior and treatment that the community has been subjected to in the country.

Key-words: Burman privilege; Rohingya; citizenship crisis; taighnythia

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INTRODUCTION

MYANMAR – A SHORT BACKGROUND

Myanmar is a fairly-recent country born on January 4th, 1948, after gaining independence from the British Empire, whose governance over Myanmar lasted for 125 years. The country is located in Southeast Asia and borders China in the North and Northeast, Laos in the East, Thailand in the Southeast, and Bangladesh and India in the Northwest.

Since September 24, 1974, it has been divided into 14 states: 7 largely populated by the Burman¹ majority and 7 inhabited by ethnic minorities, all of them named after the ethnic group which is a majority within the state (Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan). Nonetheless, each state comprises numerous ethnic communities. For example, 60% of the population in Rakhine State are the Rakhine Buddhists (about 3.2 million); while approximately 30% are Muslims (including the Rohingya) and the remaining 10% consists of Chin, Kaman, Mro, Khami, Dainet, and Maramagyi (ICG, 2014: 1).

According to the Myanmar 2014 Census, the country is home to more than 51 million people. However, this figure is argued to be underrepresented, as claims of Rakhine Muslims not being able to identify themselves as Rohingya have surfaced. This has prevented Myanmar officials from taking into account over 1 million people living in the Rakhine State (Thawngmung, 2016b: 539). Myanmar census acknowledges that "members of some communities were not counted because they were not allowed to self-identify using a name that was not recognized by the Government" (Ministry of Immigration and Population, Department of Population, The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2014: XIII). The term is a controversial one and is not recognised as an official designated ethnic community in the country, as Rohingya is seen by the government as an artificial identity created by Bengali immigrants to claim their right to the citizenship, a status only assigned to taingyintha² – a term that can be roughly translated as the people who have lived in Myanmar prior to the first British invasion in 1823.

Hence, the grievances presented by the Rohingya are likely to resonate with other ethnic minority groups, considering only 135 ethnic communities (which are grouped into eight major ethnic groups: the Burman, Chin, Kachin, Kraren, Kayah, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan) are recognised, a definition disputed by numerous observers and scholars as misrepresentative.

¹ Burman is used to refer to ethnicity while Burmese is most commonly refers to nationality (Smith, 1999: 29).

² Which translates as "national races" (Cheesman, 2017:1).

Despite the fact that the country has been transitioning to a system of federal democracy,³ the freedom that it has enjoyed has, in fact, enhanced ethnic divisions, grievances and its manipulation towards political ends, resulting in the further inflammation of aggressive expressions of ethno-religious nationalism (Akins, 2018; Naveeda, 2017).

MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

First of all, it is important to notice that despite the main agent of this dissertation being the Rohingya people, almost every ethnic minority group in Myanmar has complained about discriminatory treatments by the military or the government.

However, the Rohingya situation is rather peculiar since they are the world's larger stateless population⁴ (Alam, 2019: 3). Additionally, they are one of the most persecuted populations in the world and have been subjected to state-sponsored abuse, which may amount to ethnic cleansing or even genocide (Alam, 2018: 180). Furthermore, they have long been targeted not only by the military but also by other civil society organizations that have tainted Myanmar's popular opinion and, thus, population in general by emboldening discriminatory behaviours. In particular, the legacy of colonialism – regarded as favouring ethnic minorities – coupled with the idea that a true and loyal national citizen is both Burman and Buddhist has fuelled this discrimination against the Rohingya (Akins, 2018).

In 2017, the situation escalated to the point that thousands of Rohingya left their towns and villages in Myanmar and fled to neighbouring Bangladesh seeking shelter. This exodus was not only the result of the abuse they had endured, but was also sparked by the military response and discriminatory treatment following the 2017 Rohingya militants' attack on Border Guard Police (BGP) posts in Northern Rakhine. The emergence of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), in response to the communal violence which erupted back in 2012, had already planned a deadly attack in October 2016 and launched a new one on 25 August 2017 directed to 30 BGP posts. The clashes on 25 August 2017 and during the next few days, according to official reports, killed 14 security officers, 1 government official, and 371 militants (ICG, 2017: 6). This round of attacks led to discriminatory treatment of the military towards the Rohingya, who have been targeted with retaliation regardless of their involvement with the group that planned the attacks.

³ Myanmar was ruled by a military dictatorship from 1958-1960, 1962-1974, and 1988-2010 and or one party-regime (1974-1988). In 2011, the military junta handed over power to a quasi-civilian government. However, 25% of the seats in regional and national parliaments are automatically ascribed to the military and the ministers of defence, home affairs and border affairs are led by military personnel.

⁴ Out of the 2.5 million Rohingya estimated population, fewer than half a million live in Myanmar (Alam, 2018: 3)

Given this scenario, it is important to highlight that Rohingya have been subjected to several restrictions (cultural, religious, of movement, etc.) since Myanmar's independence in 1948 and this is not the first time they have fled the country⁵. This scenario can suggest a continuous and permanent persecution at first sight based on the fact that Rohingya are believed to be illegal immigrants who entered Myanmar during British rule from former India. This opinion widely disseminated among the country's population has been institutionalised in several ways, as I will detail in the following chapters.

Against this background, one starts to connect the institutionalization of the Burman privilege to the marginalisation of several minority groups, particularly the Rohingya. Notwithstanding, it is still puzzling to understand why out of all the ethnic minority groups living in Myanmar, the Rohingya have been hit the hardest – in recent years – by this persecutory treatment. Hence, the main research question is “to what extent is the institutionalization of Burman privilege to blame for driving out the Rohingya from a society they used to be a part of?” In order to be able to answer this question, it is utterly important to understand what this institutionalization implies. Thus, there are two sub-questions which will be answered as well throughout this thesis, the first one being “how is the institutionalization of Burman privilege perceived by the Burmans?” and the second one “what implications does it have on everyday life, particularly for the Rohingya?”.

METHODOLOGY AND THESIS OVERVIEW

Given my academic background in journalism, I have always paid attention to media coverage of international affairs. In 2017, the case of the Rohingya particularly caught my attention when news about their ordeal first appeared. In a time where Muslims were increasingly portrayed as the culprits of countless conflicts and pinpointed as the root of many world problems, news about the Rohingya (a Muslim minority being persecuted to the point that the UN admitted there were reasons to believe they were being victims of an ethnic cleansing) seemed to contradict this trend in both national and international media.

For this reasons, I decided to investigate further what was going on in Myanmar at the time. The country had recently started its transition to a democratic system, it was led by an at the time Nobel Peace Prize winner, there appeared to be a wide spread anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya sentiment in a largely Buddhist country, and a wide-spread approval of the violence that drove Rohingya out of Myanmar.

Therefore, a scenario which at first glance seemed to have every ingredient to succeed (a Buddhist majority country led by a Nobel Prize Winner) was actually attacking a Muslim

⁵ Rohingya have also been expunged in 1978, early 1990s and 2012.

minority, when these communities are usually – at least, in the media – the ones portrayed as violent and oppressive.

Against this scenario, I have decided to investigate why was this crisis unfolding at this particular time, given the international attention dedicated to the coverage of these events that were “swimming against the flow” of news in the previous couple of years.

Taking into account the limited resources available to conduct a field research in Bangladesh (where refugees have settled) and in Myanmar (where journalist and international organizations were barred from entering), I casted aside this possibility. From this point on, I tried to reach aid associations in the field and propose them a joint cooperation to interview Rohingya in refugee’s camps, but only a couple of contacts were fruitful. When talks were being scheduled with possible interviewees the coronavirus epidemic limited volunteers and aid organizations contacts with refugees to the absolutely essential. Hence, I have chosen to conduct a literature review on the subject.

I will analyse the roots of this conflict through the existing body of literature. However, Amnesty International and International Crisis Group reports provide reliable and trustworthy accounts of Rohingya refugees about their life in Myanmar, their journey to Bangladesh, and the recent violence outbreak. Thus, they will also be vital in answering both research sub-questions. While the subject of the 2017 violence outbreak is yet underresearched, the literature on Myanmar’s history, contemporary policies, citizenship laws, ethnic minority rights, and the Rohingya is fairly-documented.

Additionally, I will take into account international media coverage from the most visited news website in the United Kingdom (The Guardian and BBC News) on the crisis. By analyzing the discourse of several articles from these media outlets, I hope to find coincidences between both narratives: the journalistic and academic one, partly due to the articles I have read so far about the topic. However, my goal is to analyze at what extent are do both narratives vouch for one another.

In the first chapter I will explore the context in which this conflict has grown, taking into account the country’s historical legacy, the administrative divisions established by the 1974 constitution and its implications in everyday political life as well as the repercussions of the 1982 Citizenship Law. In the second chapter, I will discuss and compare different narratives about the origin of the Rohingya keeping in mind that the political debate around the Rohingya has blackened and often politicised the discussions about the term. The third chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the problematic and research questions presented above: the institutionalisation of Burman privilege and its roots, to what extent the 2017 crisis can be considered the result of this institutionalisation, the international media coverage of the event, and how this privilege has been seen by its primary beneficiaries: the Burmans.

CHAPTER 1 – BACKGROUND

The map below (figure 1) shows Myanmar's administrative divisions at the time when Myanmar census was conducted in April 2014. These regions were enshrined in the 1974 Constitution, dividing the country into seven regions and seven states according to ethnic groups. Seven states were formed in order to grant a higher degree of autonomy to ethnic minority groups. These states were named after the ethnicity which is considered to be the majority in that territory: Rakhine, Chin, Kachin, Kayin, Kayah, Mon, and Shan. Despite the official terminology of each state, each one hosts several other ethnic groups. Additionally, other seven regions were created for the Burman majority as shown in the picture below. Smaller areas in which an ethnic group makes up the majority, yet does not have its own state, have been classified as Special Administrative Zones.

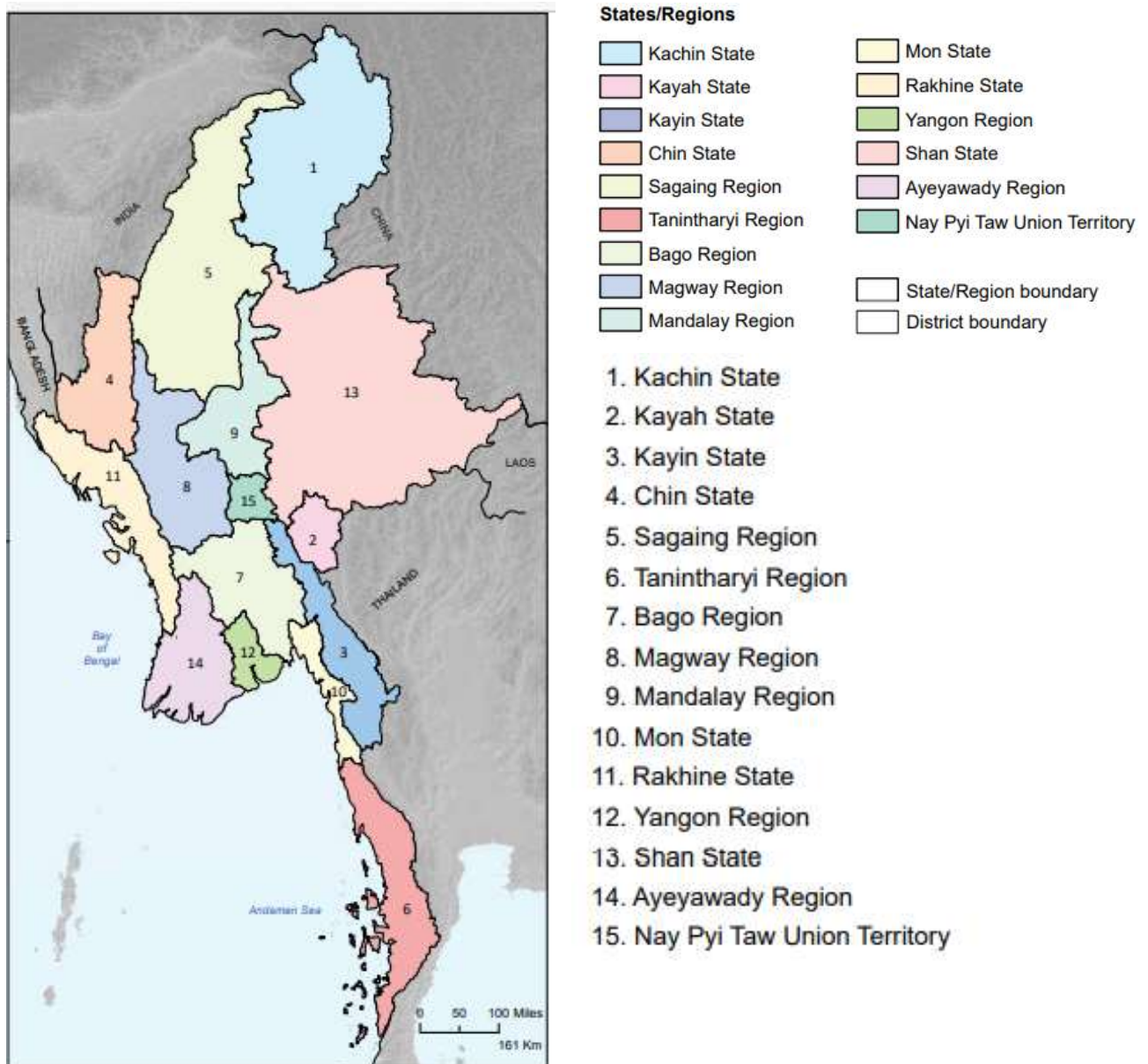


Figure 1.1. – Map of Myanmar

After gaining independence in 1948, Myanmar spent decades under military rule: from 1958 until 1960, 1962 until 1974 and again in from 1988 until 2010. Between 1974 and 1988 Myanmar was a one party-regime. The country had been under military rule for almost 50 years. In 1989, the country was renamed from 'Burma' to 'Myanmar', which in Burman, means Burma. Democracy only glanced in 2008 when a new constitution drafting the threshold of a democratic regime set elections for the nearest future in 2011.

In 2011, after decades promising a smooth transition to a democratic government, military rule was dismantled and a quasi-civilian government took office. In 2012, elections were held to fill about 50 seats in the government. National and regional elections came three years after, with a landslide victory in the National League for Democracy. This was led by Aung San Suu Kyi (the military's regime nemeses, former Nobel Prize winner and daughter of General Aung Sun⁶ – one of the leaders of Myanmar's independence movement). Despite the fact that the current 2008 constitution, drafted by the military, prevents any person whose children⁷, spouse or children's spouse are foreign from becoming president, Aung San Suu Kyi was still able to create and fulfil a position as a state counsellor, thanks to her party's majority in parliament. Nevertheless, the country's military forces still keep a tight grip on the country's politics: they appoint the ministers of defence, home affairs, and border affairs; they represent a quarter of the personnel of each institution. The military leader can nominate members of the parliament and of all 14 regional and state assemblies (Holiday, 2014: 407). They retain a veto on constitutional changes, like the one needed to allow Aung San Suu Kyi to become the president of the country (ICG, 2018: 6). Furthermore, they are inevitably assigned to 25% of all national and regional legislative seats, granting that constitutional amendments cannot be done without their support, considering a support of more than 75% of national legislature members is necessary for the amendments to be approved (Thawngmung, 2016a: 132).

1.1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Rakhine state, once called Arakan state⁸, borders southeast Bangladesh to the north and Arakan Yoma to the south, thus separating the state which was long isolated from the main

⁶ Aung Sun (and other members of Burma Independence Army) was – and still is – considered as a cultural icon, endowed with supernatural powers, for the success in eliminating colonial rule. He was assassinated on the eve of Burma's independence by a political rival after having reached an almost miraculous and peaceful agreement between warring ethnic groups. Aung San Suu Kyi's political rhetoric has often stressed the resemblances with her father's logics and way of thinking, which coupled with the parallelisms between Buddhism and the changes needed in Myanmar (Palmer-Mehta, 2009: 152). This has bolstered her popular support inside the country (ibid.)

⁷ Aung San Suu Kyi has two British children from her marriage to Michael Aris, a British historian.

⁸ A term still often used by scholars to refer to the region which used to be an independent kingdom with that name and is now inhabited by Rakhine, Rohingya, and other ethnic minority groups.

political and economic centres of Myanmar from the rest of the country by a large mountain range and river (Farzana, 2015: 295). The border between Burma (thus, its northeastern Rakhine State which borderlines Bangladesh) and Bangladesh has not been a boundary separating communities (ibid.). This separation has enabled the development of this community in a very distinct fashion from those in the rest of country (Tran, 1996, apud Lee, 2014, p. 324). Hence, the border between Myanmar and Bangladesh has witnessed a frequent flow of people coming back and forth (Farzana, 2015: 295). As a matter of fact, Arakan kingdom (1429-1785) ruled over the current Rakhine State and Chittagong Division (in southeast Bangladesh) and a close relationship was developed between the kingdom's inhabitants.

Thus, Farzana (2015) traces back conflict in current Rakhine state to 1784, following the rebellion against the Burman oppression in Arakan, when the Burman king conquered the at-the-time independent kingdom. This would later embolden the British conquest of mainland Burma. The British benefited from the Arakanese support who were deeply unsatisfied with the rule of the Burman king. Also, the region was used as a buffer zone in order to invade mainland Burma. At the time many Rohingya who had fled the region started returning, accompanied by a flow of Bengali farmers – labeled as “flow of Chittagonian labor” to stress their foreignness by Burmese scholars – encouraged by Arakan's ruler with the goal of developing the agricultural system in the area (Chan, 2005: 401).

This support would later translate into a positive discrimination of ethnic minorities in favour of the primordial ethnic group, the Burmans. As a matter of fact, ethnic minorities enjoyed several benefits denied to the majority in a practice described by scholars as a “policy of ‘divide-and-rule’”. British administration ended the traditional monarchial system and introduced a distinguished form of government in Ministerial Burma, while the ethnic minority-based frontier and peripheral areas enjoyed a certain degree of positive discrimination (Farzana, 2015: 296). At the same time, the Burmans were being excluded from areas like the army. British's recruitment policy completely excluded them by 1925⁹, deepening the mistrust between Burmans and the other ethnic groups hired by the British to play this role (Walton, 2008: 894). From there on, national identity began to be particularly intertwined with ethnic and religious lines, fostering pre-existing mistrusts and misconceptions between majority and minority groups (Burke, 2016: 274).

Hence, the legacy of “conquest and colonial and dictatorial oppression”, as explained by Hussain (2017), has been fueling the conflict in northern Rakhine state between competing communities, a concept based on a collective consciousness of a separate ethnic identity in

⁹ The British only hired Chins, Kachins, and Karens, most likely due to the fact Christian missionaries had greater success among the non-Burman ethnicities (Walton, 2008: 894).

opposition to one another. Ethnic identity has, thus, coalesced into the primary differentiating factor in colonial and post-colonial, social and political life due to British colonial policies (Walton, 2013: 7).

However, this is not the only legacy left by the British colonial administration. First, due to the British division of the country between ethnic races, the differences between ethnic groups were incremented (Smith, 1991: 40). Second, this division particularly between Ministerial Burma, where Burmans dwelled, and Peripheral Regions, where minority groups lived, has repercussions in nowadays Myanmar (Alam, 2019: 6). The first region was ruled by the British and the latter was administered by the village headmen and the lowest representative of the Crown (*ibid.*) This has resulted in an increasing centralization¹⁰ of the government involvement in people's everyday lives (*ibid.*) Third, the British created a racial classification system which laid the foundations for the radicalization of citizenship by distinguishing between national and indigenous people (*ibid.*) Fourth, the introduction of a secular educational system, which marginalized Buddhism – the primordial value of then Burman society -, enhanced the feeling of ostracism and favoring of ethnic minorities (*ibid.*)

Tensions between ethnic groups particularly in Rakhine State rose during World War II, when the Japanese threatened the British position in India and Myanmar. At the time, the protection provided to minorities by the British was removed (Farzana, 2015: 296). The British armed the Rohingya by forming a task force with the aim of defending their position in north Myanmar. According to Chan (2005), this support was used against Rakhine's lives, Buddhists' monasteries and Arakanese's houses. The Burma Independent Army attacked minorities, resulting in many bloody communal clashes (Farzana, 2015: 296). In the end, several episodes of communal violence amounted to claims of ethnic cleansing from both sides.

The blood shed between both led to the separation of the two ethnic groups: Rohingya moved to northern Rakhine state, becoming the majority ethnic group, while the rest of the state is predominantly ethnic Rakhine (Hussain, 2017: 9). The result has further segregated the two communities between a Muslim and a Buddhist part (ICG, 2016: 3). Notwithstanding, this is not the only grievance that remains from that time. The British had promised Muslim populations an autonomous region in Northern Rakhine for their support, which failed when Burma became an independent country in 1948 (Hussain, 2017: 10). However, at this time a lot of Muslim refugees returned to Rakhine and immigration rose, coupled with previous

¹⁰ The different ethnic groups were under different authorities up until Myanmar's independency and the creation of a single government (Alam, 2019: 7). Until then, they all enjoyed a certain degree of freedom in their own region and were allowed some autonomy (*ibid.*) Hence, the tendency to increasingly centralize power starting from the country's independence time created a lot of problems.

episodes of intercommunal violence that intensified nationwide antipathy towards Muslims (ibid.)

After independence, Rohingya who had been negotiating an independent state – or at least an independent region – inside Myanmar with the British, attempted to fulfil its dream of an autonomous region (as described in Table 1). A mujahidin rebellion which sought to annex northern Rakhine State to East Pakistan erupted (ICG, 2016: 3). This was rejected by Pakistan and then the rebellion tried to create an autonomous Muslim area in the north of the state (ibid.). The goal was to end discriminatory practices from Buddhist officials (ibid.)

The quest for an autonomous territory in Northern Rakhine State was soon defeated. However, this secessionist movement has been waged as the near future if the Rohingya population continues to increase. This is one of the main arguments used by Rakhine to justify the need to disenfranchise Rohingya from any political rights (ibid.). After the defeat, the government established the Mayu Frontier Administration, whose goal was to create an autonomous and separate region for the Rohingya, but it was overseen by the army. Henceforth, the development of a collective consciousness of the oppression they all experienced at Buddhists hands coalesced into a stronger identification as ‘Rohingya’ (Hussain, 2017: 11). The frontier was later dissolved following General Ne Win’s 1962 coup d’état. After that, Myanmar’s position towards Rohingya harshly changed: henceforth they were deemed as ‘Indian Bengalis’ who came to Burma with the British during the first Anglo-Burmese War (Balazo, 2015: 8). At the same time, an armed group responsible for several attacks in Myanmar was created with small bases in remote parts of Bangladesh (the Rohingya Solidarity Organization) and it was in activity until the early 2009s.

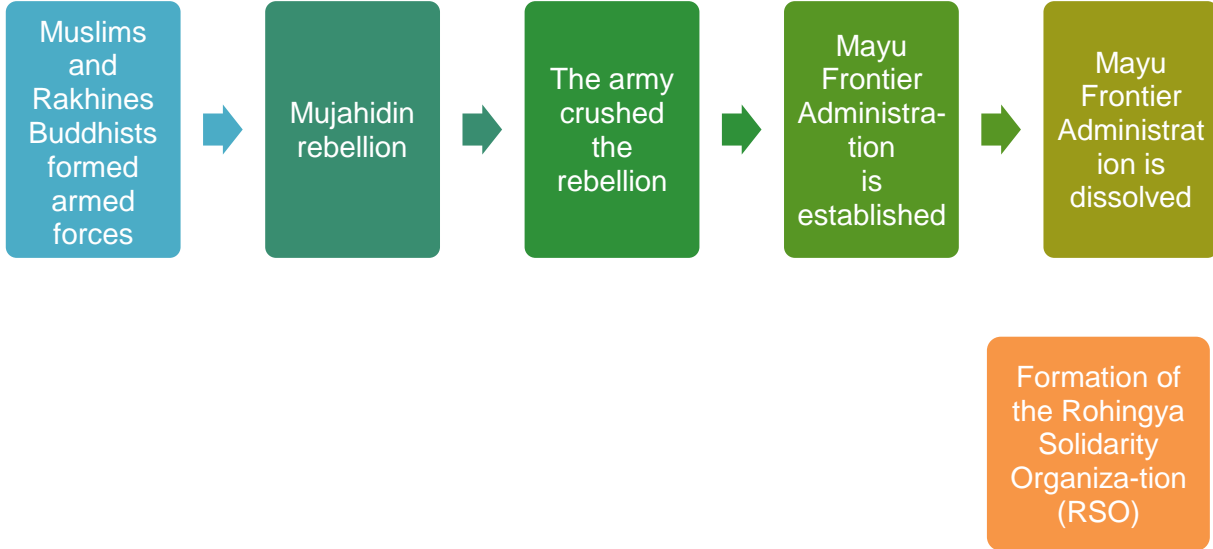


Table 1: Timeline of events from 1942 to 1962

Burke (2016) also argues that long-term historical tensions in Rakhine state between Rakhine Buddhists and Muslims have played a significant role in the current conflict. Drawing on the concept of 'horizontal inequalities', the author explains how Rakhine Buddhists feel discrimination by the central government and the military in one of the poorest states in Myanmar, and the Rohingya are ostracized by the Rakhine. Complaints from both communities include liberty restrictions, marginalization, lack of political power, and human rights abuse, leading them to deem themselves as oppressed and persecuted minorities. At the same time, Rohingya pose an economical, territorial¹¹, and demographical threat to Rakhines who fear becoming a minority within their own state. Furthermore, national identity has been defined along ethnic and religious lines. As a result, identity-based voting, which has been largely promoted by Rakhine politicians, fuelled rigid ethnic classifications enshrined in Myanmar's laws, while Rohingya have been denied their right to vote or to have political representatives.

1.2. ACCESS TO CITIZENSHIP

Rohingya claim that Myanmar is their ancestral homeland and that they are entitled to enjoy Burmese citizenship just like any other citizen. The question of whether or not they are entitled to be deemed Myanmar citizens has been widely discussed, due to the correct – or incorrect – perception that Rohingya are not native to Myanmar, being instead illegal immigrants. Despite this widely popular perception in the country, the official process of 'othering', as Farzana (2015) names it, was enshrined in the 1982 Citizenship Law.

The 1982 Citizenship Law distinguished between three categories of citizenship: full citizenship, associate citizenship, and naturalized citizenship¹². One could acquire full citizenship (or citizenship by birth) if was recognized as belonging to an ethnic group which lived in Myanmar prior to 1823, i.e. one of 135 ethnic indigenous groups – a list that was later published in the 90s. Hence, anyone born of parents that are both "nationals" is a citizen by birth (Burma Citizenship Law, 1982: 1). However, children also acquire citizenship even if one of their parents is a naturalized or associate citizen (*ibid*). In the case of both parents being associate or naturalized citizens, children can still be granted the first tier of citizenship

¹¹ In Myanmar, once an ethnic group is recognized as national, it is entitled to have control over a piece of land; thus, the territorial claim the recognition of the term 'Rohingya' encompasses further threats Rakhine's interest who already complaint about a lack of autonomy and control over the states' resources. (Burke, 2016: 256)

¹² Citizens by birth enjoy the most freedoms and rights, such as the benefit of having the right to always be considered citizens, except if they register themselves as citizens of another country. On the other hand, associate or naturalized citizens can have their citizenship revoked if it is in the interest of the state (Burma Citizenship Law, 1982: 2). Moreover, an associate or naturalized citizen must swear allegiance to the state in front of a committee and may be forbidden to enjoy the same rights as citizens by birth if determined by the state (Burma Citizenship Law, 1982: 4-7).

as long as two of their grandparents are associate or naturalized citizens (*ibid.*). An associate citizen is a citizen that was recognized as such under the 1948 Citizenship Act¹³ (Burma Citizenship Law, 1982: 4). Naturalized citizens are those who lived in Burma before January, 4th 1948, applied for citizenship after 1982 and have at least one parent that is at least a naturalized citizen (Burma Citizenship Law, 1982: 6). To become a naturalized citizen, people must provide conclusive evidence that he/she or his/her parents entered and resided in Burma prior to independence in 1948 or that at least one of their parents is a Burmese citizen (Thawngmung, 2016b: 535).

The 1982 law enshrines the year of 1823 as the threshold of citizenship, stating that ethnic groups as the Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Burman, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan¹⁴ have settled in the country prior to that date and are therefore nationals of the country (Burma Citizenship Law, 1982: 1). Nonetheless, this law granted that every citizen that was recognized as such under the 1948 Citizenship Act would remain to be so (*ibid.*).

The 1982 Citizenship Law restricted citizenship to people whose forebears lived in Myanmar before 1823. Despite not defining which ethnic groups have lived in the country before the first Anglo-Burmese war, the law states that the Council of the State is responsible for determining which those groups are. Cheesman (2017) explains that a few years later a first draft of these ethnic groups was drawn by a new junta, which considered 135 national groups. However, the origin of these 135 ethnic groups remains something of a mystery. Although official accounts have argued that they are based on the country's census, a careful analysis reveals that it is not the case, with some ethnic groups being added or removed from the ones listed in previous census. Furthermore, the definition of 'national race' or taingyintha, the primordial criteria to be considered a Myanmar citizen fails to have a clear definition: "Deriving from an essentially negative idea, denoting non-Europeans, Indians or Chinese, it lacks positive contents" (Cheesman, 2017: 469). The closest definition of the term appeared in 2015 when the President of the country explained that a national race "[has] continuously resided in the Union of the Republic of Myanmar as their homeland" (Cheesman, 2017: 470).

Cheesman (2017) explains the term which has come to mean 'national races' in Myanmar as the gold standard to acquire citizenship inside the country and highlights the fact that the country is not facing a 'Rohingya problem', but a national race problem, due to the surpassing status of taingyintha. The 1982 Citizenship law established the superordinate

¹³ Persons who were granted or qualified for citizenship under the 1948 law but are not entitled to it under the 1982 law are considered associate citizens.

¹⁴ Despite mentioning these ethnic groups in specific, the law sets provisions to widen the range of national groups, delegating that power to the council of the state (Citizenship Law, 1982: 1).

relation of taingyintha to citizenship, in a move that was later followed by other official documents (Cheesman, 2017: 470):

The preamble [of the 2008 constitution] puts *taingyintha* over and ahead of citizenship, addressing the political community not as an aggregation of 'citizens' but as 'national races'. The constitution establishes a conceptual relation between national races and citizenship, such that the former is irreducible to the latter. (...) Today national races precede and surpass citizenship. To talk of the political community 'Myanmar' is to address its member not as citizens but as national races (Cheesman, 2017: 470).

In contrast with the 1947 Constitution and drafted on the eve of independence which allows any person whose ancestors had lived in Burma for two generations to be a citizen, the 1982 Citizenship Law rendered membership in the national community the gold standard and primary basis for citizenship (Cheesman, 2017: 471).

People outside the 135 recognized ethnic groups are regarded as immigrants, however they can still apply for partial citizenship status (Burke, 2016: 263). According to the law, a person can only be a citizen or a foreigner – in the absence of not fulfilling the criteria outlined to acquire none of the three tiers of citizenship (1982, Burma Citizenship Law: 1). Moreover, people born of Burmese parents citizens abroad are deemed citizens but the other way around – people born in Myanmar whose parents are not citizens¹⁵ – cannot acquire citizenship.

1.2.1 ROHINGYA STATUS

The law states that the cabinet determines which ethnic groups are national races, therefore encouraging the Rohingya to claim that they too have been in the country for centuries and are native to Myanmar (Cheesman, 2017: 474). If a person can provide conclusive evidence of their lineage in Myanmar predating 1823, citizenship could be granted (Burma Citizenship Law, 1982: 1). However, this is a hard – if not impossible – task for the Rohingya (Balazo, 2015: 8). In 1974, under the Emergency Immigration Act, they were document as foreign to Myanmar (ibid.). Furthermore, their identity cards have been confiscated and replaced by 'immigrant' cards, rendering them unable to provide documentary evidence even if they existed (ibid.). The onus of proof is, thus, placed on ethnic groups like the Rohingya, and instead of challenging the idea of national races, Rohingya advocates end up reproducing it (Cheesman, 2017: 477). Rohingya feel that they have no other choice but to embrace and reproduce the taingyintha truth regime, given the fact that it accepts people who designate themselves as Bengali (hence, native to Bangladesh) to apply for citizenship on a case-by-case basis (ibid.).

¹⁵ The term includes any of the three tiers of citizenship.

Nonetheless, the fear of being deported to Bangladesh if they identify themselves as Bengali grows as the few who have applied for citizenship, arguing they are Bengali have been largely discriminated (Thawngmung, 2016b: 541). Moreover, only a small proportion of them have been granted citizenship and even when it happens they still face a lot of restrictions and discrimination (ibid.).

However, ICG (2014) warns that citizenship is not an easy fix for the problems faced by the Rohingya. The Kaman, a Muslim ethnic group in Rakhine State recognized as one of the 135 taingyintha, have been confined to displacement camps where they cannot enjoy freedom of movement or return to their homes.

Following Myanmar independence, Muslims in a couple townships in Northern Rakhine were issued National Registration Cards (NRCs), which conferred them temporarily citizenship and granted them the right to vote (Thawngmung, 2016b: 532). After the enforcement of the 1982 Citizenship Law, Rohingya were stripped of their NRCs and categorized as Bengali (ibid.). This happened during operation Dragon King, which was launched in northern Rakhine state with the goal of cleaning the area from foreigners before the 1983 national census. The operation resulted in a massive exodus of Rohingya to Bangladesh, proving in the country's view that they were in fact immigrants, and under the Rohingya perception – they had been threatened and targeted by the military to leave the country.

This citizenship inspection carried out in 1989 handed out Citizenship Scrutiny Cards (CSCs) to those who met the requirements of the 1982 Citizenship Law (ICG, 2014: 11). At this time, the majority of Rakhine Muslims surrendered their NRCs but were left without any Citizenship Scrutiny Cards, hence stateless¹⁶ (ibid.) Moreover, the operation further segregated Rohingya from Rakhine Buddhists, due to the fact that the first escaped to the north of the state becoming more than 80% of the population in a couple of towns, where Rakhine were reduced to a minority (Kipgen, 2014 apud Hussain, 2017, p.13). During this operation, almost the entire Myanmar population was given identity cards: pink for those who are full citizens, blue for those who are associate citizens, green for those who are naturalized citizens, and white to foreigners (Mohsin 2010 apud Lee, 2014, p. 326). The Rohingya did not receive any cards (ibid.). In 1995, the government issued Temporary Registration Cards to the Rohingya after international pressure; however, it did not provide the evidence of birth in Burma because it did not provide their place of birth (Thawngmung, 2016b: 532). Officials handed out these cards randomly, both to people who had previously had NRCs and those who had not (ICG, 2014: 11).

¹⁶ Sullivan (2016) claimed that, at the time, more than 1 million Rohingya were found to be stateless, due to the Myanmar's government reluctance to acknowledge them as citizens.

CHAPTER 2 – THE ROHINGYA

Rohingya is a term which refers to a stateless Muslim population estimated to number from 725,000 to 1.3 million people living in North Arakan (officially known as Rakhine State since 1989). Before the recent outbreak of violence (which has erupted in the middle of 2017¹⁷) Rohingya made up 90% of two of the most densely populated areas of the state (Thawngmung, 2016b: 527). An exact figure is hard to estimate, given the fact that Rohingya is not an identity recognized by the government and, in the last census conducted by Myanmar officials, people who did not self-identify with one of the 135 recognized national ethnic groups were left out of the calculus. Myanmar census (2014) assesses that about 1 million people living in Rakhine state remained uncounted. Thawngmung (2016b) warns that no information was collected from Buthitaung and Maungdaw townships, where Rohingya constitute between 80 and 90% of the population. Rakhine, the largest group in the state, have been depicted as violent extremist while they have drawn the support of not only the central government, but also from the Myanmar public. Rohingya, Rakhine Muslims or Muslims (as they often addressed as by scholar and human rights groups intricately) have gathered the support of the international community. This view further increases Rakhine siege mentality, who is also a long-oppressed minority. Their grievances are similar to other ethnic minority groups in Myanmar: lack of political control, restrictions on language and cultural expression, human rights abuses, state discrimination, and economic marginalisation (ICG, 2014: 15).

Although there is a wide-spread anti-Muslim sentiment in the country, religious markers alone do not seem enough to explain the plight Rohingya have endured for years¹⁸. Particularly, when compared to other Muslims in the country, and even in the same state, who have not been subject to – at least – the same degree of persecution¹⁹. The Kamans, another Muslim ethnic group living in Rakhine State, are accorded full citizenship, they are represented as 1 of the 135 recognized national ethnic groups (Holiday, 2014: 409). The majority of Myanmar's Muslims live in urban areas, speak Burman, have Burman names, and are, indeed, Myanmar citizens (Alam, 2013: 3). On the contrary, Rohingya live in mostly rural areas, speak a dialect of Bengali, and have Muslim names (ibid.) As a matter of fact this ethnic group is deemed as the most distinctive in Myanmar (Holiday, 2010: 121).

¹⁷ Today estimates point to fewer than half of million in the country (Alam, 2019: 3)

It is significant to stress that this is not the first time Rohingya have been expunged from Myanmar. Similar crisis have taken place in 1978, 1990 and 2012 (Alam, 2019: 1)

¹⁹ Other Muslims living in Myanmar and Rakhine State were also targeted, although to a less extensive scale, by their countrymen when violence against the Rohingya erupted, forcing Muslims who are indeed recognized as Myanmar citizens into displacement camps (Holiday, 2014; Burke, 2016).

2.1. AN ARTIFICIALLY CONSTRUCTED IDENTITY? – COMPETING NARRATIVES

At the heart of the discrimination lies the question of Rohingya's origin²⁰. To be able to substantiate the claim that they are entitled to Myanmar citizenship²¹, Rohingya must prove their ancestors lived in the country prior to the first British invasion in 1824. As ethnic minorities were often associated with colonial power during the colonial period, Holiday (2014) warns, all non-Burmans must prove their loyalty²² to the national community before being deemed citizens. As it happens, this task has proven to be increasingly more difficult to the Rohingya as they are often associated with immigration either under British rule or more recent immigration. The deep controversy about when Rohingya first settled in Myanmar is profoundly intertwined with the question of whether or not they should be considered taingyintha (which in contemporary Myanmar has come to be understood as national races) and, in turn, whether or not they are entitled to citizenship.

Notwithstanding, the Rohingya were once rendered as citizens, since their families had been living in Myanmar for more than two generations – although not acknowledging their 'indigenous status' – right after Myanmar's independency under UN government and the 1948 Citizenship Act (Alam, 2019: 8). Nonetheless, the 1962 coup d'état stripped them from all the benefits and recognition they had had so far by publishing a list of 135 ethnic groups entitled to citizenship which did not feature the Rohingya (*ibid.*). Henceforth, they started being marginalized as an ethnic minority, to which the politicization and the Burmanisation of national identity contributed (Alam, 2018: 181.) Hence, it is relevant to explore to which degree Rohingya's identity is politicized and how narratives of indigeneity are used in favour or against them.

2.1.1. ARGUMENTS AGAINST

On the one hand, the current Myanmar government narrative – shared by much of the society where there is a widespread anti-Muslim sentiment (Burke, 2016: 274; Holiday, 2014: 416) – often stresses the non-existence of the term Rohingya, rendering them as Bengali migrants and, thereby, suggesting their illegality and foreignness. The term remains highly contentious “because it is perceived as a claim of indigenous ethnic status by a community regarded as immigrants from Bangladesh” (ICG, 2016: 1). Created with the goal of attaining

²⁰ The quest to prove the legitimacy of the Rohingya claim as an ethnic nationality has exacerbated inter-ethnic competition with fellow state neighbours Rakhine Buddhist over access to land and over issues related to state power and resources (Thawngmung, 2016b).

²¹ Under the current law, Myanmar only recognizes minority groups living in the country prior to 1823 (the date of the first Anglo-Burmese wars) as indigenous and, hence, country's citizens.

²² During the Japanese occupation in World War I, the Rohingya sided with the British under hopes of building their own independent state in Norther Rakhine as promised by the British. On the other hand, Rakhine fought next to the opposite side, which grew the animosity between communities even deeply and the question of loyalty gained an even stronger salience.

indigenous status (which would entitle them to be considered citizens by birth under Myanmar's highly criticized²³ Citizenship Law), the claim would grant the Rohingya a political, economic and territorial power regarded as threatening particularly by Rakhine Buddhists living in Rakhine State.

Although political tensions and interests have tarnished the debate over Rohingya origins, there are some historical facts which can support both claims. When the British annexed Burma to their empire, firstly in 1824 when they conquered the then Arakan State, there was not any international boundary between Bangladesh and Myanmar and no restrictions on migration or flow of people, as they all were inhabitants of the same British empire (Chan, 2005: 398). As a matter of fact, the current Rakhine state population seems to have had a close link with its neighboring country, Bangladesh: first, in the 17th century with the influx of Bengali slaves to the region; second, in the late 1700s when the Burman king conquered the region and many Arakanese fled/were deported to British Bengal; last, in 1824 when the British occupied Arakan and encouraged the Bengali inhabitants to move to the then scarcely populated area (ibid.). Lee (2014) explains that the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1824 emboldened the settling of Bengali farmers into Arakan, and the second (1852) and third (1885) – which eventually would lead to the annexation of the entire country – witnessed a growing number of Indian migrants moving to the country, which has clouded Rohingya's history by creating a direct link between colonial-era migrants and the Rohingya who already lived in the country at that time.

Colonial grievances have continued to be a significant factor for ethnic and religious tensions, according to Lee (2016), as minority groups are still seen as representative of the colonial era during which they have gained benefits at the Burma's population's expense, in the latter's view. Despite emphasizing the politicization of ethnic markers during the colonial period, Holiday (2014) explains that the animosity and distrust towards Rohingya in particular (and Muslims in Myanmar in general) stem from an association between them and an alien imposition from the UK, which was responsible for opening the door to an influx of Muslims from nearby British colonies from 1824 to 1948. In the face of the Muslim identity, Hindus and other arrivals from nearby British colonies, the problem emerged of clearly distinguishing between apparently similar ethnicities and, above all, between Muslims whose families had been living in Myanmar and recent immigrants (Burke, 2016: 261). This exodus has obscured the Rohingya's historical presence in the region as Bengali farmers started settling in Arakan in 1824, at the time of the first British invasion which annexed the Rakhine state to

²³ Criticism concerns the subdivision of citizenship into three tiers – full, associated, and nationalized – placing people whose ancestors lived in Myanmar prior to 1823 the only who are automatically considered citizens at birth.

its longstanding empire, and over 1 million Indians migrated to Burma after 1985, when Britain conquered the entire country (Balazo, 2015; Lee, 2014). Henceforth, Rohingya slowly began to be deemed as 'Indian Muslims' in colonial records (ibid.)

Thus, the existing Muslim community was absorbed into a new influx of Muslim Bengalis, whose growing numbers were met with animosity by local Rakhine Buddhists who were starting to feel their prosperity and security threatened by them (Thawngmung, 2016b: 531). Here lies the origin of the majority of the country's Muslim population for Rakhine scholars and Myanmar government: large-scale migration from Bengal during the British rule, an opinion shared by household named scholars as Jacques Leider and Derek Tonkin (ibid.).

Furthermore, Leider (2015) reasons that the term Rohingya began to be used in the 1950s to unify Muslim communities in the North Arakan who were distinguished from other Muslims in Myanmar and from the majority Buddhist population, but nonetheless the term encompasses individuals from diverse historical backgrounds.

Moreover, Alam (2019) argues that the longstanding Rohingya crisis is rooted in the British colonial era, considering that they eased the entry of Muslims to Arakan who were then characterized as foreigners ("Kala") creating an anti-Khala xenophobia which would later darken even further the true origin of the Rohingya. The classification of its people by race and religion ossified the once fluid ethnic markers leading to the politicization of concepts as taingyintha which nowadays is at the core of nation building in Myanmar (Alam, 2019:16).

On the same token, also Hussain (2017) claims that politics of indigeneity have existed in Rakhine for decades, "depicting the Rohingya as illegal immigrants viciously seizing the already limited resources available to the Rakhine". Conflict as thus become a product of pre-colonial, colonial, and military policies that have fueled grievances and misunderstandings between both communities. The division installed between communities would later burst into a collective consciousness of a separate ethnic identity built in opposition to the other.

However, it is of the utmost importance to note that ethnicity at the time was sometimes based on shifting political networks, geographical location or political allegiance and, for example, many non-Burmans would identify themselves as such for social or political purposes (Walton, 2013: 7). The concept of ethnic groups as we currently interpret it had not yet hatched and was fostered by the British colonial zeal for classification and administration based on ethnic and religious categories which started to acquire an increasing political, social, economic, and individual significance (ibid.)

2.1.2. ARGUMENTS IN FAVOUR

On the other hand, the Rohingya contend that they have common ancestors with other indigenous groups such as the Rakhine Buddhist (the majority ethnic group in the state) and trace back their ancestors' origin to the Arakan region in Myanmar with estimates about their arrival to the area varying widely from the 7th to the 18th century. The Rohingya insist that they are natives to Rakhine State and share common ancestors with Rakhine Buddhists.

Evidence of Muslim settlement in Arakan can be traced back several centuries: Thawngmung (2016b) dates it to the 15th century; Balazo (2015) reasons that back in the 15th century the community already featured prominently in the region; and Green (2014) quotes eight-century Rohingya stone monuments found in the Burmese state of Arakan by Abu Tahay to prove their ancestry history.

Nowadays, the National Democratic Party for Development (NPDP), a political party representing the Muslim population in Rakhine State, maintains that the state was once occupied by Muslim kings, proving this statement with historical records which sustain that those kings adopted Islamic titles and issued coins embellished with Islamic leaders (Thawngmung, 2016b: 540). They also withstand that Rakhine are not the earliest settlers of the state and that both communities (Rohingyas and Rakhine) share common ancestors (ibid.)

Despite the variety of historical accounts, there seems to be clear evidence of Muslim presence in Rakhine state before 1824. However, the question of whether or not those Muslim people were Rohingya remains, given the fact that there are other Muslims in the state who are recognized as citizens.

Indeed, the country's 1964 Encyclopedia employs the term Rohingya to designate 75% of the population in the region bordering then East Pakistan (Burma Translation Society, 1964 apud Cheesman, 2017, p. 475) and the 1961 Deputy Chief of Defence recognised Rohingya as an ethnic group in the union (Cheesman, 2017: 475). Moreover, in 1799 the term firstly appears in reference to one of the languages spoken in Burma at the time (Balazo, 2015: 7). However, other scholars claim that the term used by Buchanan in 1799, "Rooinga", means nothing but "Rakhine" in the Chittagonian dialect (dialect spoken in a Bangladeshi town a little over 150 km from the border with Rakhine State) (Parashar, A. & Alam, J, 2018.:95)

More recent field studies in Myanmar have witnesses the existence of a Rohingya identity, although with some caution. For example, in 2014, the International Crisis Group recognized that is likely that the term was not in use during the colonial or pre-colonial period. A much stronger Rohingya political identity was forged from 2012 onwards, when tension started to rise between Muslims and Buddhists in Rakhine State. On the same token, Burke (2016) draws attention to the possibility that the widespread use of the term Rohingya

to define most Muslims in Rakhine State (in which dwell other Muslim minority groups) is a recent phenomenon²⁴ bolstered by the need to strengthen group solidarity in face of the most recent ordeals they have faced. Thawnghmung (2016b) also warns about the fact that this identity is employed as a shield from deportation and some retain this identity for fear of being deported to Bangladesh. Nonetheless, while some Rohingya are illegal immigrants, others have been in Myanmar for generations but simply lack the paper trail to prove it (Holiday, 2014: 416).

On this background, Cheesman (2017) contends that Myanmar's problem is deeply intertwined with the surpassing status of taingyintha. The term's salience in the country's politics was rendered increasingly important in 1964 under General Ne Win government when it started to be employed as an equivalent to national races rather than as 'people' or 'countrywomen and men' as it did in pre-colonial times. The 1974 Constitution enshrines the term as central to the state's national-building process and in 2015 was issued a definition of the term by the country's President as the people for whom Myanmar has been their homeland and country of residency. This becomes problematic when taingyintha are over and ahead of citizenship and the political community starts being deemed as an aggregation of national races instead of an aggregation of citizens. Hence, Rohingya have no other choice than to reproduce this system which denies them citizenship, by proving they too are taingyintha.

²⁴ Burke (2016) during his field interviews in Kyauk Phyu and Sittwe townships with Muslim community leaders in 2013 found that Muslims in Rakhine State do not refer to themselves using the term Rohingya.

CHAPTER 3 – ANALYSIS

3.1. HISTORICAL MISTRUST

Literature on Myanmar political issues unavoidably addresses the different Myanmar ethnic groups, and topics are often analysed through an ethnic lens. Ethnicity has become the primary marker of difference in the colonial era (Taylor, 1982 apud Holiday, 2014, p. 412). Henceforth, ethnicity²⁵ and religious differences have been closely intertwined with political and economic issues and thus undergird the citizenship crisis that later unfolded (Holiday, 2014: 412). In fact, the political salience of ethnic markers amounted to a talk of a Burman “master race” by the time of the country’s independency (Holiday, 2014: 416).

Today, ethnic and religious questions are fused with difficult political and economic issues, which increase the reluctance of the Bamar majority to cede its dominant position. Holiday (2014: 212)

By the same token, Farzana (2015) holds the British rule accountable for the creation of ethnic boundaries. Given the fact that ethnic claims are accompanied by territorial ownership in Myanmar, the scholar also argues that the colonial period enforced territorial ownership. In short, ethnic minority groups collaborated with the British; that would often work against the Burmese state, excluding the Burmans. This created more solid boundaries between the Burmans and ethnic minorities. These boundaries would later coalesce into an inherent mistrust of minority groups for whom membership in the national community was conditional and whose loyalty was questioned (Holiday, 2014: 416). On this background, at the time of independency, the first Myanmar government felt the need to unify the ethnic and cultural divisions in the country. Under their perception, this unity would have been accomplished by the development of a communal language, education, and culture. However, in practice, this would mean the primacy of the Burman culture, identity, religion, and language, considering that they are the majority ethnic group in the country.

Thawngmung (2016b) understands recent communal conflict as the product of distrust and fear based on cultural differences, long periods of antagonistic relations between groups, the policies of colonial and postcolonial governments, the growing international notoriety of Islamic extremists, and competition for land and resources. The ongoing debate over whether or not Rohingya are taingyintha systematically dictates the conversations held on this topic and the recent political opening in 2011 created space for the expression of all kinds of speech, including political mobilization based on indigeneity and ethnic affiliations.

²⁵ In contemporary Myanmar ethnicity seems to be as ascriptive as race (Walton, 2013: 12).

Likewise, Burke (2016) contends that the current conflict targeting Rohingya is a consequence of ethnic classifications²⁶ which have encouraged territorial attitudes and furthered discrimination against everyone who is perceived as an immigrant.

Nowadays the primacy of Burman culture is still evident when it comes to the access to citizenship, for example. Holiday (2014) sustains that besides the stateless status of the Rohingya, in peripheral areas minority groups do not enjoy full citizenship rights, facing a lot of restrictions, while the Burman majority is arrogating and appropriating citizenship. The formal rights are mainly similar, but Burman religious, linguistic, social, and cultural dominance places them in a higher position which enables them to generate normative and institutional benefits for themselves, even if unconsciously (Holiday, 2014: 412).

3.2. THE ROHINGYA CRISIS

3.2.1 PREVIOUS OUTBREAKS OF VIOLENCE IN RAKHINE STATE

The most recent Rohingya exodus in 2017 was not an isolated incident. As a matter of fact, the community has long been targeted and has been victim of organized attacks since the country's independency with the aim of forcing their eviction from the country. Tensions were first exposed during the 'anti-Indian' riots while the country was under British rule in the 1930s, when the protests against the presence of Indian Muslims – which the Rohingya were considered to be a part of – were held.

In 1978, in an operation codenamed 'Dragon King', which aimed at driving illegal immigrants out of the country, more than 200,000 Rohingyas fled across the border with Bangladesh (Thawngmung, 2016b: 531). Pressure by Muslim-country members of the United Nations led the Burmese government to take back all refugees (*ibid.*). In 1991, another military operation expelled more than 250,000 Rohingyas, after which that the pressure from the United Nations prompted the Burmese government to assign documentation to the Rohingya population (*ibid.*). This only occurred four years later, in 1995, and the documents granted did not allow its holders to apply for Burmese citizenship (*ibid.*). Incidents of communal violence between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims were reported at least four times between 1984 and 1998 (*ibid.*).

However, the recent political reform in 2011 may have stirred the waters and enabled the spur of communal violence between opposing factions in Rakhine State²⁷. The process of democratization and the new political liberties that accompanied it have influenced the spark

²⁶ Those categories have remained virtually unchanged since they were adapted by colonial authorities (Burke, 2016: 262).

²⁷ The end of authoritarian rule may have led some people to consider that the costs of committing violence are now less (ICG: 2014: 7). Along with the decentralization of political structures, Myanmar has witnessed a growing Buddhist nationalist sentiment along with an anti-Muslim sentiment (*ibid.*).

of communal violence in the state (Hussain, 2017: 5). Conditions for Rakhine politicians to engage in ethno-nationalist fear-mongering²⁸ were set like never before, because it created unprecedented opportunities for the Rakhine to assert self-determination (ibid.). This was the first time Rakhine politicians had the opportunity to access power and change, create or amend legislation that would privilege their own interests (ibid.) Therefore, it was necessary to call on group solidarity to Rakhine inhabitants by downgrading Rohingya, which – at least – bolstered the mistrust atmosphere surrounding both communities, creating the conditions for inter-ethnic violence (ibid.).

Rakhine political elites have maximized this support by forming ethnic parties. The historical politicization and entrenchment of ethnic identity in Myanmar, coupled with the opening of political space lends itself to the formation of political parties along ethnic lines. Where ethnic groups have been marginalized by a dominant state or by other ethnic groups, ethnic parties act almost as lobby groups, advancing group claims. (Hussain, 2017: 19)

In 2012, the rape and murder of a young Rakhine Buddhist woman, for which 'Bengali Muslims' were charged, sparked retaliatory violence and protests (Cheesman, 2017b: 336). Almost two weeks after, the country declared a state of emergency in Rakhine and sent in the army to restore order (ibid). Official accounts report 98²⁹ dead, two-thirds of which were recorded as Bengali; 6,550 burnt houses, two-thirds of which were also Muslim properties (ibid). Later that year, a three day long new wave of violence targeting Muslims quarters and villages killed 89 people and in the following year violence entered on a more generalized anti-Muslim character (ibid.) A state of emergency was again declared (ibid.)

Communal violence from 2012 to 2014 has overwhelmingly been directed towards Muslims and has included not only acts of physical violence but also repeated public expressions of an existential Muslim threat and a firm belief of the right to use violence in order to exercise sovereignty (Cheesman, 2017b: 339). This narrative is prompt by a widespread belief, particularly in Southeast Asia, that a defined group of people whose ethnic characteristics are rooted in their genes have the right to their ancestral land (Burke, 2016: 261). These events culminated in a nationwide campaign which called for anti-Muslim legislation, led by extremist Buddhist monks (Thawngmung, 2016b: 532).

The repeated violent attacks against Muslims in Rakhine State sometimes sought to change the ethnic composition of the territory (Burke, 2016: 259). Usually, violence was emboldened by a claim of offences committed by Muslim men against Rakhine women (ibid.) This would immediately call for the violent action of young Rakhine men which often had

²⁸ This includes the spread of rumors that Muslim communities are plotting revenge for the violence, or seeking an autonomous region, or to establish sharia, etc. (ICG, 2014: 17).

²⁹ Burke (2016) warns that casual figures are unreliable and estimates surround 1,000 killed in these attacks in 2012 and 2013.

close ties with Rakhine politicians, well-known for their anti-Muslim rhetoric (ibid.) Apparently, the outbreak of violence particularly targeted areas where the success of Rakhine politicians was undermined by the presence of a large Muslim minority (ibid.)

In June 2012, the United Nations had already classified the violence against Rohingya as crimes against humanity, carried out as a part of a campaign for ethnic cleansing. At the time, the state response and intervention to limit violence in the state was considered to be a primordial factor to the de-escalation of the conflict (Burke, 2016: 276). Furthermore, with Muslims restricted to isolated camps, the eviction of Muslims from central parts in Rakhine State also contributed to the cycle of violence (ibid.). Rakhine nationalists started asking for their right to carry weapons, given the fact that they are greatly outnumbered by Muslims and fear for their safety (ICG, 2016: 8).

At the height of the communal tensions, Rakhine leaders held a meeting which called for special birth control laws for Muslim Bengalis, the formation of armed militants in border villages, further monitoring of Muslim schools, resettlement of Muslim Bengalis to a third country, and the return of all land allegedly taken during communal rioting in 1942.

Burke (2016) explains that this mistrust and animosity is fueled by the fact that both Muslims and Rakhine feel that they are persecuted minorities, victims of longstanding discrimination with almost no control over their resources, social and political life. The fear of becoming a minority in their own state and, hence, of losing the very limited political and territorial control that they currently possess has emboldened a 'siege mentality'.

The fact that the humanitarian assistance has been offered primarily to the Muslim community, while ethnic Rakhine still struggle with poverty, has further emphasized the feeling of loneliness and siege mentality of ethnic Rakhine. Moreover, such international efforts have long been depicted as an unwelcome attack on national sovereignty (Burke, 2016: 273). The attempt to cast the Rakhine community as an extremist one ignoring the fact that they are a long-oppressed minority, which like other Myanmar ethnic minorities complain about longstanding discrimination by the state, a lack of political control over their own affairs, economic marginalization, human rights abuses and restrictions on language and cultural expression promotes a siege mentality (ICG, 2014: 15).

Oddly enough, when political reform in 2011 led to the decentralizations of power and the establishment of state level parliaments³⁰, the central government remained dominant. It can overrule and have the final say in state matters like the recent exploitation of offshore natural gas near the Rakhine coastline, from which the government retained all of the profits.

³⁰ These parliaments did not meet the expectations towards federalism with which they were initially seen: they have little administrative capacity or budget control and have not been able to do more than pass minor local bylaws (Burke 2016: 266).

Thus, Burke (2016) explains, the need to grasp and hold control can, under no circumstances, be undermined by the Muslim community, according to Rakhine politician's view. Furthermore, ethnic Rakhine feel further discriminated and regard the central government as an enemy. Against this background, we can observe two sets of inequalities: the first between Muslims and ethnic Rakhine in Rakhine State and the second between ethnic Rakhine and Burmans nationally.

A historical perspective shows that ethnic violence in Rakhine State follows long-term patterns characterized by a potent mix of tense inter-group relations and combative politics. Both Muslim and ethnic Rakhine activists feel that they are oppressed minorities and interpret the history of Rakhine State to fit their perceptions. These trends interact with events across Myanmar, where anti-Muslim sentiment is widespread. In particular, national identity has been intricately defined along ethnic and religious lines, contributing to tensions between majority and minority groups and denying full citizenship to many people. (Burke, 2016: 274)

The sense of oppression about which both communities have complained was heightened by 50 years of military dictatorship, followed by unmet expectations of a more federalist constitution which currently still ascribes a great deal of influence and power over ethnic states to the central government (Hussain, 2017: 4).

Against this background, Burke (2016) highlights, ethnic inter-group tensions are highly manipulated when it comes to politics in order to promote affiliation with an ethnic support base. The easiest way to do so in Rakhine state seems to be by stressing the threat that a different ethnic group presents. In the 2015 elections, Rakhine political leaders' rhetoric often focused on a two-fold fear of domination: by the central government and by the Muslim community – which often encompasses not only Rohingya Muslim but also others who dwell on the state. The truth is that this rhetoric has been useful and fruitful: not only did Rakhine politicians ensure that the government stripped Muslims with temporary citizenship status from their right to vote, but also Muslim-led candidates were barred from running for office. This happened when the Arakan National Party (ANP), a Rakhine party, leaders successfully spread the message that Myanmar government supported Muslims, hence, immigrants and foreigners, right to vote, threatening the USDP (known as the military party which had long seized political power in Myanmar) Buddhist political support nationally (Burke, 2016: 268).

Burke (2016) analyses the result of 2015 elections, when Arakan National Party³¹ became the largest party in Rakhine state and the third-largest in the country. The party's state parliament's results were weaker in areas with low proportions of Muslims and seen as culturally close to central Myanmar. These data suggest that when the call for Rakhine ethnic solidarity resonated less strongly with the local population, the party performed poorly. While,

³¹ Drawing from the previous name of the Rakhine State (the Arakan region), the Arakan National Party represents Rakhine interests.

in other states, ethnic parties competing against each other split votes, ethnic tensions appeared to help gather popular support for Rakhine politicians.

Besides stripping Rohingya from their right to vote, shortly before elections, at a time of ongoing violence in Rakhine state, the parliament approved two highly discriminatory bills, according to human rights organizations. The two laws were a part of a legislative package promoted by the Association for Protection of Race and Religion (known by its Burman acronym Ma Ba Tha)³² named 'Protection of Race and Religion' and called for government's approval before converting to a different religion and other discriminatory measures for non-Buddhist men who marry Buddhist women.

This set of laws³³ seeks to establish a timespan which women in highly populated areas have to respect before giving birth to another child. Although the legislators of the law claimed health reasons and concerns to for women, they also admit that the aim of the law includes stopping the Bengali's population growth in Myanmar. Another example of the discriminatory goal of this bill is represented by the provisions created for the marriage of Buddhist women with men from another religion. Apart from the duty to register their intention publicly, there has to be no objections to their union for the couple to be able to get married. Moreover, pre-existing marriages between Buddhist women and men from other religions would have to go through the same process, once the law came into force.

Furthermore, it stipulates the mandatory submission of a request to change religion that would later need to be approved by government officials and community members. Lastly, the fourth bills criminalizes extra-marital relations in a clear effort to target religious minorities where polygamy is perceived to occur more often. As a matter of fact, it is specifically addressed to 'non-Buddhist persons'.

3.2.2. HOW HAS THE 2017 CRISIS UNFOLDED

The violence in the beginning of the decade seriously affected intercommunal relations and hardened anti-Muslim sentiment and Buddhist nationalist hate speech (ICG, 2016: 5). Since then, Rohingya have faced even more severe restrictions of movement, which have limited work opportunities and governmental services (ibid.). This, coupled with the closure of smuggling routes to Malaysia³⁴ which is regarded by some as a critical escape and

³² An ultra-nationalist Buddhist organization, widely known for their anti-Muslim rhetoric, whose leader had been incarcerated and even featured in the cover of Times magazine as "the face of Buddhist terror".

³³ Despite the approval of the project which outlaws polygamy and the project which sets a birth spacing limit in areas with a concerning population grow, the proposal was later vetoed by Myanmar's President.

³⁴ The disenfranchisement of Muslim voters, lack of hope in a political solution and the shutting down of migration routes to Malaysia in 2015 greatly created a much more fertile recruiting ground. Until the

alternative to live [living] in Rakhine state, could explain the recent support from an insurgent group of a population not known as extremist so far (ibid.).

According to ICG (2016), following the violence outbreaks in 2012 and 2013, an advisory commission was established in 2016 led by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. A few months later, in October 2016, the Harakah al-Yaqin (HaY) carried its first attacks on border police bases. Although both events do not seem to be connected, the attacks prove the shortcomings of political measures implemented so far. From this point, the conflict's nature stopped being inter-ethnic violence and started to be addressed as an insurgency (Hussain, 2017: 44)

This insurgent group, who first began organising itself after the deadly communal violence in 2012, enjoys considerable support from Muslims in northern Rakhine State, after the severing of its last connections to politics before the 2015 elections, when Rohingya were disenfranchised from their temporary citizenship status and, thus, barred from voting (ICG, 2016: 5). It is led by a committee of Rohingya in Saudi Arabia and it is commanded on the ground by Rohingya with international training and experience in modern guerrilla war tactics (ibid.).

ICG (2016) explains that the armed group based in Mecca and constituted by Rohingya emigrants or people with Rohingya heritage started planning its attack after the 2012 violence. It enjoys the support of – at least a part – of the northern Rakhine villagers Muslims, given the fact that the main fighting force and the logistics required to carry on such attacks would not have been possible without the help of some locals. They are organized into village-level cells where they are given basic training. Since 9 October, several hundred young Rohingya men from Bangladesh have joined the fight.

The first round of attacks carried on October, 9th 2016 aimed to take complete control of Maungdaw township – an area located at the utmost North-western point of the country where, at the time, 90% of the population was Rohingya Muslims and which shares a border with Bangladesh – severe communication with the closest township to the southeast and establish military posts in the border separating the two cities (ICG, 2016: 16). The goal of creating a liberated area copied the manner in which larger ethnic armed group in Myanmar live in the eastern borderlands of the country (ibid.). About 400 Rohingya militants attacked three BGP posts, killing nine police officers and marking the first coordinated and violent Rohingya attack in the conflict's history (Hussain, 2017: 42). After a lieutenant-colonel was

2012 violence, the community was known for following a conservative Islam, but not a radicalized one, and the population steered away from violence out of fear of causing further discrimination and undermining the community political goals (ICG, 2016: 17).

killed, security forces destroyed more than 1500 Rohingya buildings and villagers were randomly targeted (ICG, 2016: 10).

ICG (2016) clarifies that, although HaY is not considered to have a transnational terrorist agenda and does not appear to be religiously motivated, the approval of their first attacks on October 9 by the issuance of fatwas was decisive in harnessing more population support (ICG, 2016: 13). Moreover, its leaders are regarded as selfless: they had a good life in Saudi Arabia – the dream of many Rohingya – and still they sacrificed that in the name of the Rohingya cause and came to live beside impoverished villagers.

ICG (2017) traces back the events which unfolded after the second round of attacks in 2017. On August 25th 2017, the group launched attacks on some 30 BGP posts and army base. The outbreak killed 14 members of the security forces, 1 government official and 371 militants, according to government reports. The offensive was coordinated via WhatsApp, where HaY leaders instructed cell leaders who usually enjoyed considerable religious and community authority. The plan included the assembly of villagers in pre-planned locations with whatever sharp objects were available or IEDs devices. The targets were mostly small police posts and checkpoints. With the goal of boosting the spirit of villagers, on which the attacks greatly depended on, the group sent a series of false messages claiming to have taken control of a couple areas or that reinforcements were on arrival.

The attacks triggered a brutal army crackdown that failed to discriminate between militants and the general Rohingya population, that in a three month time span had already fled to Bangladesh by the hundreds of thousands (ICG, 2017: 10). Rohingya villages have been set on fire, widespread unlawful killings, massacres, rape, other forms of sexual violence against women and children have been documented and proved that these deeds have been carried out by the military, police and vigilantes across the state (ibid.). Particularly in Maungdaw, the focus of the attacks on Border Police Gard posts and home to the largest Rohingya population, in the end of 2017 appeared to have been almost depopulated of Rohingya (ibid).

Initial estimates quoted by ICG (2017) suggested the escape of about 85 per cent of the Rohingya population in the main three townships they used to live and the displacement to camps of about 120,000 in the first three months after the attacks. The organization's report also elucidates that apart from the people who were directly affected by the military backlash, a couple of other towns in Northern Rakhine witnessed an increased number of burned villages, attacks or threats made by Rakhine vigilantes, and new restrictions of movement. Rohingya there chose to leave the area, escaping from untenable living conditions. For example, in Rathedaung, a Buddhist-majority township, anti-Rohingya violence and threats have driven pretty much the entire Rohingya population out of the country, apart from five villages with no viable escape route.

The second round of HaY attacks in August 2017 sparked a series of violent responses and backlashes that would merit the comparison “in nature, gravity and scope to those that have allowed genocidal intent to be established in other contexts” by the United Nations Human Rights Council (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2018: 5).

Shortly after the Rohingya exodus, Myanmar and Bangladesh signed a repatriation agreement but no international observers were allowed to visit the affected areas. The first draft of the agreement seemed fragile: not only Rohingya need to have left Myanmar after 9 October 2016 and provide evidence of residence in Myanmar, but it also requires the repatriation to be voluntary (ICG, 2017:10). Apart from the violence and hardships Rohingya have faced in Myanmar, the climate of impunity to the perpetrators of these crimes³⁵, and the fact that the agreement includes the granting of National Verification Cards – a document most Rohingya reject out of fear that it will codify second-class citizenship status – might contribute to their unwillingness to come back (*ibid.*) Furthermore, returnees will likely be subject to extreme scrutiny out of fear that there are “terrorists” or supporters present among the refugees (*ibid.*). Lastly, Rakhine Buddhists strongly oppose to the return of any Rohingya refugees (*ibid.*).

3.2.3. BURMAN REASONING OF THE CRISIS

It is important to distinguish between Burmese (anyone who is considered a citizen of Myanmar) and Burman (anyone who self-identifies as belonging to the major ethnic group in the country).

On a wider scale, Burmese motives – under which Rakhine Buddhists which enjoy citizenship status in Myanmar are included – have already been to some extent discussed so far. Rakhine state is one of the poorest areas of the country (ICG, 2014: 7). The community already feels economically excluded in a state with limited economic opportunities and increasingly more small Muslim local business (*ibid.*).

Rakhine fear being outnumbered and, hence, displaced from their own state by the Rohingya growing population³⁶. In addition, they feel that their culture has already been weakened due to the primacy given to the Burmans (Hussain, 2017: 16). Moreover, the visible differences between Rakhine and Rohingya culture – assuming that this is a static concept³⁷ independent from the cultural and social contexts – may threaten even further the

³⁵ An investigation led by the military concluded that they were not to blame for the acts of violence, considering troops did not fire against civilians. The country's commander-in-chief also stated that people who fled to Bangladesh were either terrorists or had close ties to them (ICG, 2017: 13).

³⁶ A higher birth rate in Muslim communities, Rakhine emigration and Rohingya immigration has contributed to this aspect (ICG, 2014: 14).

³⁷ Walton (2013) explains that “in Myanmar people often perceive ethnicity as something inborn, unchangeable and, in some cases, determinant of an individual's very nature”.

already undermined Rakhine culture (ibid.). At last, past events seeking the creation of autonomous area by the Rohingya as well as reported episodes of violence from Rohingya men to Buddhist women have contributed to the build-up tensions that have exploded from 2012 onwards (ibid.).

As Hussain (2017) argues, there is an underlying existential threat under which the Rohingya existence alone may weaken Rakhine economic and symbolic power. Politicians have refuted the Rohingya claims to citizenship through the media by spreading myths like some members of the community were working with Al-Qaeda, storing weapons, and others.

On the one hand, historical grievances contributed to a rising atmosphere of tension and mistrust from the Rohingya to the Rakhine. On the other hand, the advent of a democratic transition under which the possibility for Rakhine to take back some control over their interests fuelled the formation and political manipulation of ethnic parties. In this particular case, it was very profitable to stoke fears of the Rohingya to Rakhine politicians.

Moving on to the Burmans motives, there is a clear overlap between the reasoning behind the anti-Rohingya sentiment of both communities. Firstly, the fact that Rohingya are a part of a Muslim community likewise poses in itself as an existential threat. By seeing Islam as a violent religion and its practitioners as dangerous in face of a vulnerable Buddhist religion, the population increasingly worries about being erased or supplanted by another people (Schissler, 2015: 8). In this scenario, Muslims are depicted³⁸ as devout, hence, dangerous, violent and untrustworthy and outwards indications of religious devotion are deemed as indicators of potential violent people (ibid.). Along with the prejudice that Muslims seek to overtake³⁹ other religions, this justifies the existential threat that, for a wide range of people in Myanmar, Muslim communities pose⁴⁰ (ibid.).

However, Schissler, Walton and Thi (2015) stresses the importance to draw attention to the fact that hate speech only enhances Rohingya's outcast, but does not create it. Anti-Muslim sentiment is often expressed through references to reasonable international news coverage. This means that personal and domestic incidents only reinforce an already global and international narrative of Islamic existential threat. The anti-Muslim riots that have been waged all over the country over the past few years embody those fears.

This political and cultural process asks for the expulsion of Muslims while at the same time stresses the martyr character of Buddhists (ibid). For this reason, the rejection of

³⁸ This description is based on accounts of international events, events within Myanmar, and personal experiences held by the interviewees (Schissler, Walton and Thi, 2015: 1).

³⁹ Rapid Muslim population growth, intermarriage, conversion of Buddhist women, and migration fuel the fear of a Muslim takeover in a near future (Schissler, Walton and Thi, 2015: 9).

⁴⁰ However, it is important to notice that this narrative is not static or pre-defined but rather stems from the influence of powerful actors within the society and a narrative framework that draws on global discourses related to Islam (Schissler, Walton and Thi, 2015: 16).

recognizing Rohingya citizenship status in Myanmar has been founded on a need to protect the country. Furthermore, Rakhine state is often referred to as Myanmar's western gate, stressing the perception of this area as an important line separating a possible 'Muslim invasion' from the rest of the country.

To sum up, there are four main arguments supporting the already widespread anti-Muslim sentiment prior to the 2017 violence, as explained by Schissler (2013). Firstly, Muslims are considered to be disrespectful of Buddhist traditions and follow a religion that teaches them to act without thinking (i.e. if they are martyrs, hence, violent they will meet young women in heaven). Secondly, they have an unfair economic advantage over their Buddhist counterparts because they only hire Muslims, shop at Muslim stores and bribe government officials or politicians to serve their economic interests. Thirdly, interfaith marriage to a Muslim man requires the conversion of the Buddhist woman, they have many children so that they can outnumber Buddhists in a near future, and they wish to form their own Muslim country in the Northern Rakhine State. Fourthly, the international arena favors Muslim narratives. Not only has the media reported violence against Muslims in Myanmar, instead of violence committed by Muslims, but also international organizations provide most of their aid to Muslims who arson their own houses in order to receive food and money.

3.2.4 INTERNATIONAL MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE CRISIS

International media coverage of the conflict often vouches scholars and International Human Rights version of events, although news articles and stories lack the same degree of research and historical background.

The ARSA attack dates back to August, 25th, 2017. Hence, I will now analyse news about this crisis from August 25th until the end of the month. I have selected a couple of on-line news outlets to conduct the research. This choice is supported by the data collected by Reuters in 2020 and published in a report focused on the most visited news websites worldwide. Given the fact that there no worldwide data, and it is only organized by country, I have conducted this research based on the results of the United Kingdom⁴¹ (Reuters, 2020) The websites chosen are BBC News online, and Guardian online. These represent the most visited websites by people living in the UK to access information, according to the report on the weekly usage of these platforms in the United Kingdom. I have selected two different news outlets, due to the fact that the 3rd newspaper more visited, Mail online, news coverage of the crisis is a copy past of reports of international news agency and doesn't seem to have

⁴¹ United Kingdom is the country of reference because Myanmar is a former British colony and therefore the country is more likely to have a wider range of news about this string of events. Furthermore, the fact that this dissertation is being written in English has also contributed to this decision.

conducted any investigation or cover of the event with its own news correspondents.

When BBC first reported the news, the focus was on the ARSA military attack. Communal violence in the months that preceded the event between Muslim and Buddhist communities is stressed. Throughout the article, previous exodus of the Rohingya is mentioned as well as an ongoing UN investigation into complaints of human rights abuse by the security forces. Once again, the article vouches for the unwillingness of recognizing the Rohingya as a community, instead government officials refer to them as Bengali as the following excerpt proves:

Extremist Bengali insurgents attacked a police station in Maungdaw region in northern Rakhine state with a handmade bomb explosive and held co-ordinated attacks on several police posts at 01:00 (BBC, 2017a)

Furthermore, the news stresses the worrisome background around these events, highlighting the fact that several warnings have been issued requiring the urgent action needed to address rising ethnic tensions before the burst of the conflict.

After August 25th an unending string of brutal retaliation on the Rohingya lumped together the entire community deemed as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. An article from the Guardian dated to August 25th strengthens this perspective:

The military and police members are fighting back together against extremist Bengali terrorists," said Min Aung Hlaing, commander in chief of the armed forces, in a statement that used the state's description for Rohingya militants. (The Guardian, 2017a)

This rhetoric proves once again the lack of distinction between the perpetrators of the attack and the rest of the community, known for having largely eschewed violence (The Guardian, 2017b).

Six days later, on August 31st BBC wrote an article more focused on the Rohingya ordeal entitled "Myanmar Rakhine: Rohingya refugees drown as exodus mounts". Explaining the difficulties they have had to overcome: trying to flee on rickety inland fishing boats, spending nights on the street under total darkness, having seen their villages raided and burnt to the ground, among others. The conflict between the official account of the events and the Rohingya one still stands with both attacking each other of burning villages and houses to the ground.

However, there is a remarkable change in the government's narrative that is worth to stress. Probably due to Rohingya and, thus, international allegations that the military was attacking the Rohingya indiscriminately, with no concern over their involvement in the ARSA, considering them all as extremist, the government stopped waging a fight against all Rohingya. Instead, it started employing the term ARSA:

Myanmar earlier in the week changed from using the term "extremist Bengali terrorists" to using "ARSA extremist terrorists" in referring to the insurgents.

Moving on to the Guardian report of the events, the online newspaper mentions additional information not yet discussed in previous reports: the evacuation of at least 4,000 non-Muslim villagers amid ongoing clashes between the Rohingya and security forces (The Guardian, 2017a). This move can be seen as both a way to protect other residents or a more effective method to raid and target members of the Rohingya community.

Another important fact reported by the Guardian is related to Aung San Suu Kyi's highly internationally frowned upon role amid this crisis (The Guardian, 2017b). She condemned the insurgent attacks on police stations and army base and defended the army's counteroffensive after the October 2016 attacks (the first round of attacks carried out by the ARSA).

Moreover, the article quotes testimonies from people living ethnically mixed or non-Muslim towns who claim being stranded in their villages as clashes continued and they were forced to ready knives and sticks to defend themselves, fearing being blown up by several landmines that thwart them from fleeing (The Guardian, 2017b). The news articles also argues that in 24 hours around 2,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh, where they joined a community over 400,000 that have been seeking refuge in the country since 1990s.

Overall, it is reasonable to state that the Guardian news coverage of the crisis has confirmed scholars and International Human Organizations reports on the plodding in of government and military persecution of the Rohingya:

Despite years of persecution, the Rohingya have largely eschewed violence. But a previously unknown militant group emerged last October under the banner of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), which claims to be leading an insurgency based in the remote May Yu mountain range bordering Bangladesh. (The Guardian, 2017b)

After analysing the media coverage of the two most visited news website in the United Kingdom, it is possible to conclude that it follows the same narrative of International Human Rights Organizations in ascribing responsibility for the solution and roots of this exodus to government policies and military discrimination in face of a helpless stateless minority. However, as mentioned in previous chapters this kind of narrative fuels the siege mentality under which the Rakhine and Myanmar nationals feel surrounded, which may have contributed for a harsher and less sympathetic rhetoric of Myanmar's lider de facto, Aung San Suu Kyi towards the Rohingya.

3.3. BURMAN'S PRIVILEGES IN CONTEMPORARY MYANMAR

Hussain (2017) claims that the institutionalization of Burman's privileges dates back to 1962 when general Ne Win seized power in a coup d'état that established a dictatorship. Not only did it institutionalize Burman superiority but it also marginalized ethnic minorities, given the obsession with a unitary state. Drawing on the "Buddha-bata-Myanmar-lumyo", which means

that to be a Myanmar is to be a Buddhist, the role of religion at the heart of the nation and a related feeling of belonging were set from the beginning. This became a precedent that would later be followed in official documents, like the Constitution which places Buddhism – the religion of the majority of ethnic Burmans – in a special position.

Moreover, Burmans also enjoy a linguistic dominance, due to the fact that the language spoken by them has been promoted as the national language ever since independence in 1948 (Callahan 2003, 143 apud Holiday, 2014, p. 411).

[The 1974 constitution] declared the Myanmar language as the only official language of the Union of Burma. The regime's focus on nation-building and homogenizing the Burmese state materialized not only in the efforts to undermine ethnic rights, but also through efforts to exclude and marginalize perceived enemies of the nation. (...) In 1989, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLROC) began with another measure to reinforce Burman superiority, by renaming the country Myanmar. The name Myanmar "refers exclusively to one particular ethnic group in the country, while the term 'Burma' refers to a post-colonial multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-culture plural nation-state of the Union of Burma". (Hussain, 2017: 13)

The state has seen diversity as a threat, restricted ethnic political, cultural and social expression, and neglected the development of (usually borderland) areas where ethnic minorities dwell (ICG, 2014: 7). In Rakhine State particularly, there is a strongly-held sense of separate identity, in part because historically it was never integrated into the Myanmar state (ibid.).

More recently, the beginning of a democratic transition in 2011 has also proved Burman's privileges, according to Walton (2013). While in Burman areas political space has been opening up and Burmans have been the primary beneficiaries of this change, non-Burman areas – not only in Rakhine state – have witnessed a new wave of violence and a policy of oppression victimizing, to a larger scale, non-Burmans.

This demonstrates that many non-Burmans are not in a position to enjoy the benefits of recent political reforms. (...) Part of Burman privilege is not only avoiding the worst elements of violent repression, but also being able to ignore it when it occurs elsewhere, since it is not part of their everyday political reality (...) What we have seen is an effective merging of ethnic and national identity. One group enjoys not only unproblematic inclusion in a particular national community, but also access to a specific set of privileges, while simultaneously denying all of that to varying degrees to those in other groups. (Walton, 2013: 21)

Walton (2013) also clarifies that whilst Burmans often consider themselves as subject to oppression – Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of NLD – the party that won the national elections, was on house arrest from more than 20 years for criticizing the military government and calling for a democratic state –, they are not under the same degree of scrutiny as non-Burmans are.

However, these privileges are invisible to Burmans (Walton, 2013: 5). In part, this can be due to the degree of oppression pretty much every citizen has experienced during the military rule. Moreover, this primacy has not always been intentional, since this set of privileges is often invisible to their own eyes, that have already seen the group's values and believes as the norm (ibid).

A couple of scholars had previously discussed the concept of Burmanisation or Myanmarfication, as means to nationalize and enforce the adoption of Burman culture. As a matter of fact, the country's renaming from Burma to Myanmar reinforces this theory.

In the particular case of the military – which both Rakhine and Rohingya regard as oppressors –, Walton (2013) exemplifies the double-standard under which they acted during the dictatorship. The military focused its campaigns in non-Burman areas, arguing that in such areas active rebellions, insurgent groups or other types of security threats have taken place – an argument that is hard to prove wrong, because there are in fact active insurgencies. However, regardless of the motives, the institutionalization of a different treatment given by the military to Burmans and non-Burmans is present through daily security conditions in the peripheral areas and worse living conditions.

Furthermore, according to Walton (2013), not only has Burman dominance been institutionalised, but is also the only group in a position to challenge this institutionalisation. Proofs of these double-standards are the fact that the military is focused on non-Burman areas; non-Burmans are subjected to a programme of Burmanisation⁴² but are never above the suspicion of disloyalty⁴³ (to the unity of the country); Burman culture and values are presented as the norm; and Burman opposition has been expressed (almost always) through the norms of the system. Burmans are the main group represented on the political arena, whether as power holders or as members of the democratic opposition.

Non-Burmans are required to prove their loyalty to the nation. They are inherently suspects because of their ethnicity. On the contrary, Burmans are considered as loyal until proven otherwise. This is another set of invisible privileges, unconsciously assimilated through military campaigns located almost entirely in non-Burman areas against non-Burmans rebellions or resistance. Nowadays, ethnic minority groups often call for a federalist system and this demand is also seen as a danger to Myanmar's physical union as a country,

⁴² There are no accurate data that allow us to determine the reasons behind non-Burmans adoption of Burman cultural traits (Walton, 2013: 11). Nonetheless, Burmans are never required to embrace other communities' cultures, since they are presented as the norm. Hence, it seems clear that, coupled or not with a question of choice, this adoption is also the result of coercion – even if only cultural (ibid.).

⁴³ Non-Burman demands for representation in the 1950s were perceived as an evidence of disloyalty to the nation. The three-tiers of citizenship, thus, excluded all suspects from full membership in the nation, probably as a retaliatory practice justified by their disloyalty to the national cultural heritage (Walton, 2013: 10).

fuelling military paranoia – in the past up to the point of a coup d'état. Hence, ongoing non-Burmans resistance has been an easy answer to a persistent militarization of Myanmar, influencing Burmans depiction of ethnic minority groups.

CONCLUSION

Myanmar is a fairly recent country born in 1948 and a former British colony. Although the legacy of colonialism is often deemed responsible for the country's current divisions, a historical perspective alone does not explain the (citizenship) crisis that outcasts Rohingya from the contemporary Myanmar society. Fears of a Muslim takeover are often voiced by Myanmar country members, particularly given the wide-spread believe that Rohingya are illegal immigrants who have been given a free pass to enter the country at the time of the British administration and whose growing population undermines the interests of the remaining population.

From the Rakhine point of view, according to Thawngmung (2016b) Rohingya is an artificial identity built by a group of Bengali (illegal immigrants from Bangladesh) in order to gain international support. Moreover, it is used as ground to claim that the community is indigenous to Myanmar and, therefore, entitled to citizenship. Rohingya claim that they have been in Myanmar for centuries – even before the British rule – and are entitled to citizenship just like any of the 135 recognized indigenous ethnic groups. The truth is that there is not a consensus about whether or not Rohingya have settled in Myanmar prior to British rule – the goal standard for an ethnic group to be deemed as a rightful Myanmar citizen. Furthermore, the inaccurate ethnic categorization during the colonial period, which has mingled people with similar physical features as the same ethnic group – despite the fact that they did not belong to the same ethnic group and the concept of ethnicity was not as ossified as it is today –, has blurred their truthful background (Alam, 2019:16).

Claims voiced by the Rohingya demanding the right to be recognized as citizens have often been disregarded as false and unsubstantiated to the extent that Rohingya have faced serious restrictions of movement, political and cultural liberties. Given the fact that the country has long been ruled by a military dictatorship whose goal was to build a strong – and perhaps unbreakable – national identity, cultural differences were often frowned upon. In the particular case of the Rohingya, there were several attempts to drive them out of the country, prompted by military authorities (Thawngmung, 2016b: 532).

Furthermore, is important to stress the role played by fellow state members: the Rakhine – the major ethnic group in Rakhine state where Rohingya used to dwell. They have long complained about discrimination from the central government and the threat posed by the Rohingya community. According to Hussain (2017), since 2012, this animosity has sharpened, mainly due to the transition to a democratic system, which for the first time in decades would allow Rakhine to take some control over state affairs if elected in the regional elections. On the same token, Burke (2016) reasons that the rhetoric of the electoral campaign for the state parliament was closely intertwined with long time grievances toward the Rohingya. Ethnic lines were often manipulated to political purposes and calls to restrict

even further Rohingya liberties and rights, in order to favour Rakhine interests was at the core base of the Rakhine leaders political campaign. Supporting Rakhine leaders also meant protecting the community against the Rohingya. This is corroborated by the 2015 results, quoted by Burke (2016) which showed that Rakhine politicians performed better in areas with a higher rate of Rohingya – or even Muslim – residents in which the call to ethnic solidarity resonated stronger.

Although cultural and religious reasons are often stressed by elements of the Myanmar national community, it seems that economic, political, and social factors overlap with the visible differences often highlighted by Rakhine or Burman people. In light of the discoveries throughout this dissertation, I have come to the conclusion that power has been considered to be a “one party” privilege, which has to be annihilated from any other competitor in order to be truly powerful. Hence, political rhetoric tends to stress the role of other communities or parties regarded as potentially threatening.

Furthermore, I have found that every community seems to have its grievances and feels discriminated to some extent. Rohingya feel discriminated by the Rakhine, by the military, and by the central government. Rakhine not only feel limited by the small degree of autonomy granted to them by the government on state affairs, but also consider their cultural values underrepresented in face of the principles and traditions held by the Burman majority. Hence, the optics of power are blurred by the several layers of inequalities faced by different groups in Myanmar. The society is stuck in a vicious cycle where they keep blaming each other – rightfully or not – for their current weakened status. At the same, time Rohingya reason they are persecuted and victims of state sponsored abuses, the state claims their presence is undermining its power and national unity and they are not its rightful citizens.

This rhetoric is hardly a first in Myanmar, a country which has a long history of conflict with ethnic minorities. At the time of independency this tumultuous situation led to the signature of a peace agreement between every party involved. Unfortunately, the agreement fell through when the leaders at the time – including Aung San Suu Kyi’s father – were murdered.

With the advent of democracy in the early years of the new millennium, several episodes of communal violence have unfolded in Rakhine state following a similar pattern: claims that Rohingya have attacked a Rakhine woman, which led the latter to retaliate to the former. This would later lead to the creation of an insurgent group that escalated the conflict to unseen levels. The first ever organized attacks from ARSA had the goal of creating an autonomous region – just like the community tried to a few decades ago – and sparked a brutal crackdown on members, not members, supporters and not supporters of the group. The events of 2017 were followed by a massive Rohingya exodus towards Bangladesh.

The group responsible for the attacks has enjoyed a fair degree of population support among the Rohingya community and could convince several respected leaders of the legitimacy of their actions. After having severed any remaining links between the Rohingya and the political community by stripping them of their right to vote, it was easier to persuade the community to assume a harder stance.

Knowing the political and historical background surrounding this event and following Walton (2013) line of thought, it is fair to say that only the political elite, currently formed by Burman citizens, and major ethnic group in the country – the Burmans – have the power to normalize or condemn events that have unfolded in Rakhine state.

In light of this theory which presents Burman privilege as a reality unseen to the own beneficiaries eyes, I reason that Aung San Suu Kyi is the embodiment of this privilege. The former Nobel Prize winner spent years under house arrest for calling elections and a more democratic regime in her country. Despite having been subject to military oppression her current status and conquests – being the de facto leader of the country – have led me to convincingly assume that only members of the dominant group have the privilege to challenge the system under its own rules.

However, it is important to stress that besides the ethnical privilege that Aung San Suu Kyi enjoys she also is socially privileged – which may have leveraged her position to challenge the regime. This means that her and her family's economic status is higher than the average Burman. As a teenager she moved to India, where her mother became the Burmese ambassador in the country, and had a privileged education in India and later in England (Palmer-Mehta, 2009:154). She attained a science degree from New Delhi University before departing to England to study in Oxford where she met her future husband. Before marrying Michael Aris, descendant of a high-profile family of diplomats and representatives of the British Crown in the United Kingdom, she worked in the United Nations. She returned to Burman in 1988 to care for her ill mother, soon after recent clashes between military forces and university students killed dozens of pupils – a time of social turmoil in Burma when pro-democracy uprisings were arising.

Her social and economic status was privileged enough to enable her to leave her academic life and family behind in the United Kingdom and head to Myanmar where she would enter politics and later be arrested for her involvement in the pro-democracy uprising. Although it is true that the military were prompted to arrest her because they felt threatened by the political charisma and support she enjoyed in part due to her father's legacy, we still should not overlook the class privilege that allowed her to receive a higher than average education and enjoy a higher than average social status in the countries she lived.

In international interviews and political speeches on the matter, Aung San Suu Kyi often reasons that both communities may have legitimate grievances towards one another, but like

many other Myanmar citizens share the belief that Rohingyas are illegal immigrants. The leader refers to the community as Bengalis – in order to stress their foreignness – and draws attention to the ordeals the Rakhine community has also faced.

It is fair to say that the country, and particularly the Rakhine, has developed a kind of siege mentality under which they feel misunderstood and blame the international media and organisations of bias in favour of the Rohingyas and against them. Once again, this logic illustrates how privilege is an invisible reality to their own eyes, because the obstacles both communities face everyday renders them, in their perspective, as the victims.

To sum up, Burman privilege excludes the Rohingyas from contemporary Myanmar to the extent that the ethnic majority group has the power to set norms or challenge them under the rules of their own system. On the hand, their privilege keeps them as the only group above suspicion, who is entitled to full citizenship rights and whose values and beliefs are presented not only as the norm but also the ones which should be preserved above all. Their language and religion, Buddhism, play a central role in the country and they never have to assimilate cultural values from another group. Due to past attempts to subdue or destroy their union, they are extreme alert to any potential threats and immediately deny or cast as illegitimate any alien (from the outside) criticism, including other ethnic groups which live in Myanmar. They also have the power to make exceptions to the rules and determine which claims are legitimate or not.

On the other hand, their privilege leaves them as the only group able to challenge the current political, social, cultural, and religious norms. Therefore, this had led me to conclude that the claim to recognize Rohingyas as citizens, to condemn the violence they have been subject to, or even to welcome them back into the country is only as strong as the Burman perception of their legitimacy. It is important to stress that Burman citizens alone do not have the power to instantly concede shelter or citizenship rights to anyone. Nevertheless, looking at the long term effects of a favouring Burman position– by drawing on past experiences like the call to end the military dictatorship and transition to democracy – we can expect their potential support to have a big impact on Rohingyas' journey in the country.

Just like Aung San Suu Kyi was able to be elected as the country's national leader after decades of house arrest, the Burman majority has the possibility to call for changes in the country that can actually be heard. By the same token, Buddhist leaders have particularly voiced the dangers of an inherent violent and illogical religion. This has been one of the main factors, together with international and national events and personal stories, for the spread of anti-Muslim sentiment throughout the country. This proves they are respected leaders in the society who have the power to shape or influence to some degree people's opinions. Hence, this helps boosting the idea that the Burmans are the only group in a privileged enough position to maintain or change the status-quo. Their conscious decision to outcast Rohingyas

– and other minority groups – from Myanmar and refusal to recognize – let alone condemn – the ordeals, restrictions and discrimination they have been subject to is a determinant factor to further ossify their underprivileged status.

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