

# POLITICS OF NATIONALISM OF MYANMAR: AN ANALYSIS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ROHINGYA CRISIS

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## Abstract

*On 25<sup>th</sup> August 2017 Myanmar army started severe crackdown in the name of “clearance operation for national security” on the Rohingya Muslims of Rakhine state following an attack by alleged Rohingya insurgency group, which drove out almost 7,00,000 Rohingya to neighbouring Bangladesh. United Nations Human Rights Council termed this as “genocide”, accusing top army personnel of Myanmar. Despite growing international pressure, the Myanmar government continued to decline almost every accusation of human right violation against its minority community and justified the operation by saying it was necessary for its national security. This article focuses on the responses of the Myanmar government and the security personnel by analyzing the contents of newspaper articles since the emergence of the crisis. Myanmar government’s terming the Rohingya Muslims as illegal Bengali Migrants; non-cooperation with the international community to properly investigate the crimes; blocking the members of UN fact-finding mission members, aid groups and journalist from entering the crisis-ridden Rakhine state; spreading false information and propaganda by government and security agencies and not preparing a suitable environment in Rakhine state for repatriation of the Rohingya living in the refugee camps of Bangladesh- all these matters demonstrate the repetition of their state policy to alienate the Rohingya community. Finally, this article justifies that Buddhist nationalism is the primary issue which shapes the actions and speeches of the Myanmar leaders regarding the injustice with Rohingya Muslims since the independence of the nation and the role of the current government is the continuation of that attitude.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Rohingya are often said to be the world's most persecuted minority. They are an ethnic Muslim group in the majority Buddhist country and made up around one million of the total 50 million populations before the alleged “clearance operation” started in Rakhine state by security forces of Myanmar in August 2017.<sup>1</sup> Myanmar officially recognizes 135 ethnic groups but Rohingya Muslims have been rendered stateless and stripped of their citizenship in 1982.

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<sup>1</sup> *Aljazeera*, “Myanmar: Major ethnic groups and where they live”, 14 March 2017, Available at: <<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2017/03/myanmar-major-ethnic-groups-live-170309143208539.html>> (accessed on: 5 November 2018)

Not only Rohingya are stripped of their citizenship in 1982 but also, they are subject to severe restrictions on their freedom of movement, with more than 120,000 Rohingya confined to camps since 2012. The rights of the Rohingya are further limited by the "Protection of Race and Religion" laws that place harsh restrictions on fundamental religious freedoms, as well as reproductive and marital rights.<sup>2</sup>

Since the violence started on 25 August 2017, Myanmar has committed mass atrocity against the ethnic Rohingya community, including the unlawful killing of civilians, rape and the burning of nearly 400 villages after Rohingya militants known as Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) carried out attacks on police posts and an army station in northern Rakhine, killing 12 security forces. Over 723,000 people fled the violence, with the majority of refugees arriving in the first three months of the crisis, according to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). This has brought the number of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh to more than 900,000 people.<sup>3</sup> The United Nations and international humanitarian organizations accused the Myanmar military of committing genocide<sup>4</sup> against the Rohingya. Bangladesh and the international community have been continuously putting pressure on Myanmar to stop violence against these people and repatriate them. But Myanmar government response so far is quite disappointing.

The incidents that took place in the Rakhine state of Myanmar in August 25, 2017 and the Myanmar governments' actions and reactions on the Rohingya crisis, indicate the ugly face of Buddhist nationalism. This version of extreme nationalism is carefully crafted by Myanmar's governments, irrespective of their military or civil nature, since the independence of the country. It resulted from a longstanding history of colonisation and military dictatorship in a context of ethnic and religious diversity. Despite the 2008 Myanmar Constitution, which provides religious freedom, there is an underlying recognition of the special position of Theravada Buddhism as the religion of the majority of the citizens (89%).<sup>5</sup> Over the course of the past years, the tension

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<sup>2</sup> Available at :<[http://www.globalr2p.org/regions/myanmar\\_burma](http://www.globalr2p.org/regions/myanmar_burma) >(accessed on: 5 November 2018)

<sup>3</sup> Available at :<[http://www.globalr2p.org/regions/myanmar\\_burma](http://www.globalr2p.org/regions/myanmar_burma) >(accessed on: 5 November 2018)

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Beech, "Year After Rohingya Massacres, Top Generals Unrepentant and Unpunished", *The New Yorks Times*, 25 August 2018, Available at:<<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/25/world/asia/rohingya-myanmar-ethnic-cleansing-anniversary.html>> (accessed on : 6 November 2018)

<sup>5</sup> Emilie Biver, "Religious nationalism: Myanmar and the role of Buddhism in anti-Muslim narratives", Lund University, Master of Science in Global Studies Spring 2014, Available at: <<http://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordOId=4778729&fileOId=4778731>> (accessed on 5 November 2018)

between Buddhist nationalists and Muslim minorities, the Rohingya in particular, has grown into a dangerous strain of racism and intolerance. Despite Myanmar's recent democratic and economic development, violence and instability are still inherently present across the country, especially in Rakhine, Kachin and Shan state. Some Buddhist monks spread rumour against the Muslims, most notorious of these is Ashin Wirathu, a 49-year-old Buddhist monk who was on the cover of TIME magazine in 2013 and was the subject of the 2017 documentary film *The Venerable W.* by French filmmaker Barbet Schroder.<sup>6</sup>

Given this backdrop, this paper's objective is to explore the responses of the Government and security forces of Myanmar after the recent crisis in Rakhine state and how those are deeply influenced by the ideology of Buddhist nationalism. The analysis of these responses contains much importance for understanding the profundity of the Rohingya problem and the level of aversion of the government wings to bring a solution and repatriate the Rohingya community. For the convenience of the discussion, the paper is divided into six major sections including introduction and conclusion. The second section comprehensively discusses the concept of nationalism. The third section discusses the history of Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar since the colonial era. The fourth section assesses the Myanmar government and security forces response in the recent humanitarian crisis. The fifth section analyse how Buddhist nationalism has influenced these responses. The last section concludes the paper.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The paper is based on qualitative method. Articles from different Newspapers, especially *The Guardian* and Reuters, has been used as primary data to analyse acts and speeches of Myanmar political leaders, government officials and military personnel regarding the crisis of Rakhine state. Existing literatures such as books, magazine and journal articles on Buddhist nationalism has been consulted as secondary data.

## **CONCEPT OF NATIONALISM**

Nationalism is mainly a European concept and 'modern' in its origin. It is a complex and deeply contested political phenomenon. The word 'nation' entered the English language from Latin 'natio' or 'natus' meaning "I have been born". In the ancient time, it had a derogatory meaning which implied to a group of people of no superior origin, banded together, outside the common stratum of the Roman society. Gradually the meaning went through a series of

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<sup>6</sup> Randy Rosenthal, What's the connection between Buddhism and ethnic cleansing in Myanmar? *Lion's Roar*, 13 November, 2018, Available at: <[https://www.lionsroar.com/what-does-buddhism-have-to-do-with-the-ethnic-cleansing-in-myanmar/?\\_ga=2.58617706.1146429433.1544596127-676551321.1544596127](https://www.lionsroar.com/what-does-buddhism-have-to-do-with-the-ethnic-cleansing-in-myanmar/?_ga=2.58617706.1146429433.1544596127-676551321.1544596127)> (accessed on: 13 November 2018)