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The Long Road: Historical Context and Ongoing Challenges of the Rohingya Crisis

by Sarah Goldfeder
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POLICY PAPER

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► Executive Summary

On September 20, 2018, the Canadian parliament showed unanimous support for the Rohingya, declaring the actions of the Burmese government a genocide and calling on the UN Security Council to refer the matter to the International Criminal Court. Later that month, the same body unanimously voted to strip Aung San Suu Kyi of her honorary Canadian citizenship for her role in presiding over the genocide and the imprisonment of two Reuters journalists who reported on it.

There is no doubt that most of the world now sees what has happened to the Rohingya as something that is both deplorable and criminal. The desire for immediate, decisive action minimizes the complexity of the issues that have created conflict for the people who call the sliver of land on the west coast of Myanmar, home. Their story is deeply rooted in history and sociology. Holding a few leaders to account may assuage some need to be responsive, but it will not solve the underlying issues that have created this toxic division.

Perhaps we have failed the Rohingya, but that is only part of the story of the rocky relationship between Myanmar and the rest of the world. We have failed the people of Myanmar not just in our slow action on this crisis, but going back at least as far as the end of the Second World War. As the post-war liberal world order took hold and began to stabilize Europe, our Asian allies were left to forge their own path forward. The end result, at least in Myanmar, has been an isolationism that encouraged the disparagement of groups seen to be a drain on the prosperity of those affiliated with the ruling party.

Efforts to establish international oversight on what the Burmese see as an internal issue – or at most, a bilateral issue with Bangladesh, may only serve to exacerbate the problem. The International Criminal Court has yet to demonstrate its ability to compel changes in governmental behavior. The threat of increased obstacles to oversight and support of the process to resettle or reintegrate the Rohingya grows with the use of multilateral sticks via bodies such as the UN and the ICC. Much of the reporting and investigative efforts by international bodies indicates a closing of ranks between the democratically elected government and the military in Myanmar.

The future of the Rohingya and indeed, of their Buddhist neighbours, the Rakhine, is far from clear. Obstacles continue to multiply, with every report outlining a new challenge to be considered as the world looks to build the region a happy ending. The history of Myanmar tells a complex story which only hints at the future. Any hope for the Rohingya relies on countries like Canada not just watching the repatriation and reintegration efforts, but closely mentoring the government of Myanmar as it establishes policies that can establish the protection of human rights in the future.



Over the past two years, the Rohingya of northeastern Myanmar have captured the world's attention. Multiple western democracies, including Canada, have created task forces, appointed envoys and commissioned studies on what to do about the situation. And while all the reports, studies and recommendations have alluded to the historical issues surrounding the Rohingya's plight, the history lesson for the rest of the world seems to have passed us by.

For generations, Myanmar has been a Buddhist country. Regardless of government (including the military junta that controlled the country for the latter half of the 20th century), the underlying foundation of the laws and civil society has been Buddhist. Governments have consistently sought credibility and support by aligning themselves with the Sangha, the abbots and monks of the monasteries that are ubiquitous throughout the country. Myanmar is a nascent democracy where politics play on division, not inclusion. The immediate needs and requirements of the displaced Rohingya, while important, are only one part of the equation. Resolution to the Rohingya crisis can only come with a reset of the power narrative in Myanmar.

The very structure of the country is designed to foment division – an “us and them” mentality. The country is divided into equal numbers of majority Bamar areas and ethnic minority states. There is no degree of autonomy for the minority states. Myanmar military have historically been more present and active in those areas than in the Bamar-controlled divisions.

Persecution is not reserved for the Rohingya, not in modern Myanmar nor in its history. The notion of Buddhists being peaceful and tolerant of other religions ignores the history of Buddhist kingdoms in the region. The Western understanding of this religion is subject to blinders, as is our understanding of the Burmese people. Buddhism has no more claim to pacifism than any other world religion, and in Myanmar, the mix of religion and nationalism has had the same disastrous effects as elsewhere in the world.

The Roadmap of History

The latest round of persecution of the Rohingya began on Oct. 9, 2016. The event ascribed to initiating that escalation was the attack on a group of Burmese police by a group of what the Burmese government labelled “terrorist insurgents”. The extent of the reprisals against the Rohingya this time was far beyond what the world had seen before. By the time the Canadian government had appointed Bob Rae to be the prime minister's special envoy to Myanmar, the damage was done.

The Buddhist monks have traditionally supported the National League for Democracy (NLD), the party that Aung San Suu Kyi has represented since her return to Burma in 1988. These are the same monks who in 2007 marched in the streets of Rangoon and Mandalay, initially to protest fuel prices, but ultimately in a battle with the military government. The culture of the monasteries,



also known as the Sangha, infuses political life in Myanmar – from King Anawrahta’s Pagan kingdom in 1044 through to independence in 1962 until today.

Suspicion of different religious groups and ethnicities grows out of increased contact with new communities and ideas. As global trade routes grew in the 1400s, traders came from across the Bay of Bengal to the shores of what is now Rakhine State. The influx of newcomers included Persians – leading global traders of the times – as well as Arabs, Portuguese and Dutch. As the Bamar Buddhist kingdoms moved west into the area, they initially brought the Muslim parts of the population under their wing, although generally not as equals.

British rule (from 1824-1948) further served to disrupt the balance of religious and ethnic minorities, especially in Rakhine State. And as the Second World War bore down upon the region, the British organized Rohingya fighters to counter Japanese-led Buddhist forces in brutal battles from the jungles along the Burma Road to the Bay of Bengal. Postwar, the Rohingya had a brief window of power within the region. The region’s British administrators placed them in leadership roles and at the same time assembled the Mujaddid, a group that sought to control land ownership via village raids and impose taxation – specifically upon the Buddhist Rakhine.

While it may be possible to draw a direct line between ancient history, the events of the 20th century and those today, to do so jeopardizes our understanding of the events of the past 10 years. The tensions between the Bamar Buddhist majority in Myanmar and its religious and ethnic minorities have not been sufficiently addressed in the pathway to democracy.

135 Ethnicities: The Legacy of Ne Win

In 1962, Ne Win, who had just four years earlier served as the country’s prime minister, staged a coup, transforming Burma from one of the leading Southeast Asian democracies to the difficult and isolated state that it has been for the past generation. He closed the borders to outsiders and investment, and invoked bizarre astrological predictions in his governance of what, under his watch, became one of the poorest nations in the world. The magnitude of this downward spiral is largely lost to history, with only faint memories of when Rangoon was the shopping destination for the wealthy families of mainland Southeast Asia.

Ne Win was a nationalist. He came to power bringing promises of restoring Burma to ancient glories and invoked a system of autarky – promising economic independence and self-sufficiency. In short, he promised to “Make Burma Great Again”. Instead, he succeeded in laying the groundwork that made Burma one of the greatest stories of missed opportunities in history. Under Ne Win, the Burmese government nationalized its economy – making every aspect a state-owned-enterprise (SOE) while forcing private business out of the country entirely. Rather than enriching the country or its citizens, the move [plunged the country into economic chaos](#).

In addition to impoverishing the Burmese citizens, Ne Win targeted the ethnic insurgencies. While the Rohingya were not the only group he was focused on, they were left out when it came



time to enumerate the ethnicities within the country. The British had started the project of identifying ethnicities during their colonial rule. They had come to 144, which at other times numbered higher or lower, depending on how ethnicities were defined by those identifying them. As noted earlier, Ne Win was superstitious and focused on a host of numerological and astrological talismans. One of the most significant for the people of Burma was his love of the number nine. Nothing happened in quantities that could not be divided by nine, so rumour has it that when it came time to codify Burma's ethnicities, the moving target became fixed at 135 (1+3+5 = 9 or 9 x 15). The Muslim Rakhine (or Rohingya) were not included in that final finite assessment.¹

The significance of the [1982 Citizenship Law](#) has been discussed by every group and individual assigned to address the Rohingya crisis ([Human Rights Watch](#) on citizenship). This law made it impossible for anyone of an ethnicity not included in that arbitrarily chosen group of 135 to become a citizen of Myanmar. The law's rigidity has come under attack from the day it was enacted, as it not only denies citizenship to entire groups of people who have lived inside the borders of modern Myanmar for generations, but it also does not ascribe to them any other status. As a result, the Rohingya are not only stateless, they have no status whatsoever. Any Rohingya children born outside of Burma are doubly ineligible, as the law allows for parents to pass along citizenship to children born outside of Myanmar, but not children of parents who left the country without status, permission or fled fearing persecution.

In addition, the Burmese are incredibly prolific at devising ways to register and account for people. All individuals inside the country must register – which means that the Rohingya must present themselves, be rendered stateless and carry identification that confirms their lack of status to any official they meet. The establishment of the 135 ethnicities made it not only important to be one of the 135, but to be one of the “right” ones. To this day, the policy of registering and identifying oneself – categorizing oneself – continues to stoke divisions.

[Rae's report](#) notes that there is little support for providing the Rohingya citizenship and recognition under the constitution. This sentiment is repeated in reports by the [Special Rapporteur United Nations Human Rights Commissioner](#) and in Francis Wade's book, [Myanmar's Enemy Within](#). Some Buddhists believe that the success of other religions comes at a cost to their own. That sense of identity as a zero-sum game is reflected not just in the case of the Rohingya but also in the border states, home to other ethnicities and religious groups.

Na Ta La Model Villages

In 1988, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) created the Ministry for the Progress of Border Areas and National Races – abbreviated as Na Ta La. One of the Na Ta La's banner projects was the creation of model villages in the ethnic states where Bamar Buddhists

¹ Ferguson, Jane M. “Who's Counting? Ethnicity, Belonging, and the National Census in Burma/Myanmar.” *Bijdragen Tot De Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde*, vol. 171, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1–28. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/43819166.



were a minority. In Rakhine State, the Na Ta La village project was especially heavy-handed. Rakhine and Bamar Buddhist prisoners were [given the opportunity](#) to essentially serve a shortened sentence if they agreed to move into one of these model villages.

Volunteers were provided food and rations for a three-year stint as well as a house and land which they were able to sell at the end of their time. This program placed more than 50 model villages in an area of majority Rohingya villages in northern Rakhine State. While the intent was for the inhabitants of the model villages to thrive and overtake the Muslim Rohingya, the reality was that the new arrivals struggled. In their failures, they came to see the Rohingya as the source of their problems. In the end, the very existence of the Na Ta La model villages increased the area's instability and provided more fuel for inter-village skirmishes. In late May of 2012, the rape and murder of a young Rakhine woman on her way home from work began a round of violence.

As part of that summer's violence, government-supplied buses would arrive in Rakhine townships to recruit and carry Buddhist men to Rohingya villages to rout the village and torture its inhabitants. Buddhists boarded these buses not because they had individual complaints against Rohingya, but because they saw the situation as "us against them". The stories of Muslim atrocities against Buddhists grew, with little veracity, but enough credibility to keep them going.

Outside of Rakhine State, [the rise of Buddhist nationalism manifested itself in the 969 movement and the creation of Ma Ba Tha or the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion](#). Both present themselves as mechanisms to demonstrate support of Buddhism, not detract from any other religion. The use of 969 is a numerological counter to 786 (which is shorthand for the phrase "in the name of Allah" and used as a talisman by Muslims on homes and businesses). While 969 was more of a grassroots campaign, Ma Ba Tha had an organizational sophistication to it. The government ordered it disbanded in 2017, but the core leadership re-branded and persists. The fear that Islam specifically, but all other religions as well, will undermine Myanmar's Buddhist traditions drives the supporters of these movements and despite the ban on the use of 969 and the elimination of Ma Ba Tha, that fear remains.

Again, as seen throughout this country's history, the government, often working with the Sangha, has created a narrative of polarization, of being either "one of us or the enemy". It was not dry kindling that spontaneously combusted in 2012, 2016 or 2017 but embers that were provided enough oxygen to burn hot.

October 2016

On [Oct. 9, 2016](#), several hundred Rohingya men attacked border guard police (BGP) offices in northern Rakhine State. The response from the Myanmar military and security forces was swift and unequivocal. The area was closed off and the military used helicopters to intimidate villagers; at least 90 Rohingya were killed and hundreds attempted to flee to Bangladesh.



Leading into this event, [Physicians for Human Rights released a report](#) identifying systemic human rights abuses by government security forces in Rakhine State. Specifically, the group found that discriminatory processes limited Rohingya access to medical care, housing and work. They documented that while more than 125,000 Rohingya were living in internally displaced persons camps in northern Rakhine State, more than one million Rohingya were living outside of those camps and subject to totalitarian control, including severe limitations on freedom of movement. The Rohingya were also routinely subject to abuse including extortion, sexual violence, forced labour and extrajudicial killings.

The BGP were particularly brutal in their enforcement of the restrictions on movement. They were also alleged to have conducted nighttime raids and to use those raids to extort money from households, often because individuals on the “household list” were not present. Rohingya were also forced to pay fees for activities such as slaughtering their own animals for food and repairing their homes. The enforcers of these policies were primarily the BGP, who were given responsibility for the region by the government.

In the aftermath of the BGP’s raid, the Myanmar government subjected the area to even more draconian measures, enforced by the Tatmadaw (Myanmar armed forces). Between October 2016 and February 2017, more than 94,000 Rohingya were displaced and approximately 66,000 fled the region to Bangladesh.

August 2017

The events of the previous nine months served to create an increasingly tense environment within Rakhine State. In late August of 2017, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked BGP outposts much as in the events of the previous October. The response to the ARSA attacks was even more brutal than in 2016. Months later, [Fortify Rights](#) reviewed Myanmar army and police actions taken in advance of the August events and found evidence of systemic preparation for genocide.

Their report documents how the Myanmar authorities laid the groundwork for an all-out war against the Rohingya by arming their neighbours, removing NGO monitors and stripping the Rohingya of all (limited) physical protections (fencing, outbuildings, etc.). The group argues that the evidence they have gathered demonstrated that the Myanmar operation meets the threshold provided by the UN’s “Framework for Analysis of Atrocity Crimes” for preparatory action for genocide.

Elimination of NGO observers was perhaps the most concerning. By suspending aid delivery, the Myanmar government succeeded in closing the curtain around the state in the days leading to the Aug. 24 attack and counter-actions. For any understanding of what happened in late August 2017 that led to so many dead, villages literally wiped off the map and the exodus of Muslims to Bangladesh, we must rely on the memories of those who were either persecuted or participated.



Regardless of whether the government actively prepared for the military and police exercise that eventually forced hundreds of thousands to flee Myanmar and left tens of thousands of Rohingya dead in the scorched remains of their villages, the scale of the event attracted renewed and heightened concern around the world.

The government was able to enlist and arm many ordinary Buddhist citizens of Rakhine State to turn on their neighbours and literally beat them to death. In the Fortify Rights report, witnesses recount over and over how they knew the people who came and slit the throats of their family members, stole their livestock and burned their homes. They testify that the Myanmar army and police came in the days ahead and armed their neighbours against them, revealing a willingness to destroy fellow human beings that is extraordinary.

What the World Wants Next

The international community is mostly aligned on the severity of human rights abuses that have taken place in Rakhine State. [Fortify Rights](#), [Amnesty International](#), [Human Rights Watch](#) and [the Global Center for Responsibility to Protect](#) have all demanded that an investigation into the situation result in charges of crimes against humanity. Canada has done the same in the Special Envoy's report and subsequent response, outlined in a [May 23, 2018 speech](#) by Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland, calling not just for Canada to commence humanitarian actions, but to gather evidence for future legal actions.

Allegations also exist against the Rohingya, specifically against ARSA. Most recently (in May 2018), [Amnesty International](#) indicated that it had been provided evidence showing that ARSA was responsible for targeting Hindus in Rakhine State. That there are ongoing, often violent actions perpetrated by all sides against each other is clear. What will be far more difficult to determine is how to find a path forward towards peaceful co-existence to which all sides will agree.

Global calls for the reintegration of the Rohingya in Rakhine State may prove to be a bridge too far. In his report, Rae recognizes the limitations of the situation. Resettlement is also not a solution to the problem. To a large extent, the world understands that the issue of the Rohingya is not something that can be easily fixed and there is no path to making everyone whole. A pragmatic solution will have to suffice, and the larger challenge is moving Myanmar to a more inclusive understanding of its own people.

Canada, along with the United States, Europe, most of the ASEAN nations and other democracies, has long hoped that opening Myanmar would be productive and full of good news stories. Democracy is difficult, and even though the path forward for Myanmar was built on years of diplomacy and international support, this is a setback of a degree that was not anticipated.

One of the aspects of this particular crisis is the extent to which the world wants Myanmar to succeed. We watched the uprising 30 years ago with horror, and followed Aung San Suu Kyi's saga as the NLD seemed to embody all the hopes of every citizen in a democracy. We followed the failed



(and misnamed) Saffron Revolution, the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis and the government's stubbornness as it turned away literally boatloads of aid. We want the Burmese people to find a path to self-determination and freedom, to access a life that is about more than just survival.

The path forward will be difficult in large part due to the disconnect between what the world and what the Burmese people understand of the situation. In order to be seen with credibility, any international solution will have to manage the distinct challenge of discrimination based on a set of beliefs entrenched in this society for generations. Not to mention the scorched remains of northern Rakhine State, which, for the moment at least, are not suitable for rebuilding.

Addressing the “Other”

Across the country, not just in Rakhine State, Muslims found themselves targeted by people who had been influenced by a few nationalist monks who popularized the 969 movement. While there are also stories of abbots opening up their monasteries to provide sanctuary to Muslims, the sense was overwhelming that what divided the two groups was more important than what pulled them together. The idea that another religion might threaten Buddhism is bolstered by rumours and misinformation spread both through face-to-face conversation and, especially now, through social media.

The use of social media to provide examples that prove discriminatory beliefs has provided fuel to the fire of latent rhetorical traditions. Like other stories of “us and them” around the world, the fear that Muslims will convert through marriage, force or cunning drives nationalism. The fact that so many nations within the region have growing Muslim populations compounds the tension. It is worth noting that Buddhist nationalism and attacks against Muslims have followed roughly the same path in Sri Lanka.

The path forward for Myanmar will require efforts to normalize the relationships between Buddhists and Muslims not just in Rakhine State, but throughout the country. The healing of division will take time and effort and will likely be subject to setbacks and challenges. Countries like Canada will need to be engaged continuously – not just when it's politically expedient or when crises occur.

The hatred that has gripped this region did not come about overnight and will not take mere weeks or months to manage and undo. Sustained engagement, education and monitoring by a coalition of nations will be necessary for any level of success. Our expectations as more established democracies with cultures that welcome immigration and diversity will also need to be adjusted. What success looks like in Manitoba and in Myanmar will be two very different things.



Rule of Law and Sustained Engagement

A distinction needs to be made between law and order, which means ensuring that the population behaves according to the laws created by the ruling authority, and the rule of law, which means it is understood that laws apply to everyone and that it matters how laws are created. That distinction and the shift from a dialogue of law and order to one on the rule of law will have to be central to any discussion on the future of Rakhine State and the reintegration of the Rohingya.

In order for the process to be credible, all parties must be included. To manage this in a transitioning government will be difficult. Countries such as Canada should be prepared to position themselves as advocates for legal reforms that include public consultations and participation. The immediate concerns of refugee resettlement and provision of basic services aside, this is a long-term engagement. The perilous conditions that the vast majority of Burmese live in mean that any sense of inequity is met with anger. Managing those concerns and balancing them with the plight of those who fled for their lives yet want to return will be a challenge for a generation.

► About the Author

***Sarah Goldfeder** is a Principal at the Earncliffe Strategy Group in Ottawa, where she provides high-level insight on the inner workings of the U.S. and Canadian governments, including how they work together on important issues. With 15 years of experience in the U.S. federal government, Sarah most recently served as Special Assistant to two U.S. Ambassadors to Canada, fostering bilateral relationships at the most senior levels. Her understanding of the interplay between state and federal governments complements her service within the U.S. federal bureaucracy. She has expertise in a wide range of policy issues, which has enabled her to provide practical short and long-term advice on managing the economic, cultural and political dynamics in North America.*

Prior to her arrival in Ottawa, Sarah spent three years in Mexico as a Foreign Service Officer, cultivating a deep understanding of U.S./Mexico border issues and appreciation for a region revitalizing itself after years of violence and fear. Her experiences have convinced her of the potential for a stronger, more cohesive partnership across the North American continent. In her work, she seeks to maximize the region's ability to advance the movement of people, goods, and services; the supply, production, and use of energy; and balancing the energy and environment equation. Sarah has also served in Southeast Asia, giving her a global perspective on North American policy development and an appreciation of the opportunities available both within and beyond the Western hemisphere.

Sarah is a North American nomad, with a father from Brooklyn, a mother from Chicago, and a life lived in eight states, six countries, and three continents. She calls the West her home, having studied at the University of Oregon in Eugene, Oregon and Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colorado.

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