

Religion, Mass Violence, and Illiberal Regimes: Recent Research on the Rohingya in Myanmar

Zakaria, Faizah Binte

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Zakaria, F. B. (2019). Religion, Mass Violence, and Illiberal Regimes: Recent Research on the Rohingya in Myanmar. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 38(1), 98-111. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1868103419845583>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC Licence (Attribution-NonCommercial). For more information see: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>

Religion, Mass Violence, and Illiberal Regimes: Recent Research on the Rohingya in Myanmar

Journal of Current
Southeast Asian Affairs
2019, Vol. 38(1) 98–111
© The Author(s) 2019
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/1868103419845583
journals.sagepub.com/home/saa



Faizah Binte Zakaria

Abstract

The plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar has drawn considerable international attention in recent years but a solution to the crisis remains elusive. This article gathers pertinent research from key books on Myanmar's politics and society published during the last five years and synthesizes their contributions to our understanding of the issue. It argues that the picture emerging from these works highlights how legal infrastructure for dealing with mass violence fails to deal adequately with the realities of an illiberal state. It further shows how the conflict's religious dimension - amplified through public discourse - obscures a competition between historically oppressed peoples to be heard. Rather than a conflict between Buddhists and Muslims, the nested dynamics of Rakhine State's regional politics shaped a situation where minorities turn on other minorities. This critical reading of the issue thus implies that international intervention in the form of labeling victims to save and perpetrators to sanction would likely be unproductive.

Keywords

Rohingya, Myanmar, genocide, illiberal states

Ever since Raphael Lemkin coined the term “genocide” in the 1940s, the field of genocide studies has helped in the creation of an international legal infrastructure underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of

School of the Humanities, Nanyang Technological University Singapore, Singapore

Corresponding author:

Faizah Binte Zakaria, Nanyang Technological University Singapore, Singapore.
Email: faizahz@ntu.edu.sg



Creative Commons Non Commercial CC BY-NC: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 License (<http://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>) which permits non-commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

Genocide. Over the years, this legalistic approach has also broadened to encompass sociological and political dimensions of such phenomena and opened the way for comparative genocide theorising, which systematically identified agents, structures, and processes that lead to them (Hiebert, 2008; Kim, 2016). The flourishing of the field, however, sits uneasily with the international community's frequent paralysis in the face of new outbreaks of mass violence and the inability of the United Nations to enforce its responsibility to protect (Janssen, 2008).

The unfolding plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar underscores the striking paralysis and the inadequacy of the field in dealing with such a crisis in real time. In September 2017, the chief of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights called the large-scale killings and the displacement of more than half a million Rohingya, mostly Muslims, who fled into neighbouring Bangladesh as "a textbook case of ethnic cleansing," facilitated by the Myanmar state (UN News, 2017). It is thus confounding that there is a persistent insistence across a cross section of Myanmar's state and society that the violence either never occurred at all or was justified. That such actions elicited either a vague silence or outright support from disparate groups ranging from ethno-nationalist Buddhist monks to politicians from the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, requires explanation. Why does the court of Myanmar's public opinion run towards persistent denial? It is necessary to understand this popular, internal refusal to confront the violent discrimination against the Rohingya, as the denial is a key stumbling block that has rendered international intervention ineffectual.

Four recent studies on Myanmar offer fresh insights. Azeem Ibrahim (2016) and Francis Wade (2017) focus on the Rohingya specifically; the former depicts the crisis in terms of a legal case for genocide and the latter provides a phenomenological analysis of interactions between perpetrators and survivors. These analyses should be read in the light of larger transformations taking place in the nation state, namely the transition from military dictatorship to partial democracy. 2015 marks a milestone year in which openly contested elections were held in Myanmar for the first time since 1990. These elections resulted in a landslide win for the NLD. Nonetheless, the Myanmar state can hardly be described as democratic. Despite the elections, the state remains illiberal in the sense that it lacks a robust constitution, consistent enforcement of rule of law and basic protections of civil liberties (Zakaria, 1997: 2).

Renaud Egreteau and François Robinne's edited volume (2016) addresses many of the challenges confronting Myanmar's new government, including the evolving relationship between military and civil society, ethnic and religious tensions, and economic inequality. Within this work, the tension in Rakhine State is positioned in historical perspective, as just one of many problems during this political transition. The collection edited by Melissa Crouch (2016) similarly covers a broad cross section of topics, but in a larger context of national and international geopolitics at play among Muslims in Myanmar. This allows us to measure claims of genocide or anti-Muslim animus relative to the Rohingya's position as one group among diverse Muslim communities in Myanmar. Putting all these works in conversation with each other allows us to critically observe how religion, society, and the illiberal Burmese state operate to produce mass

violence and a humanitarian stalemate at its border. This article discusses each book's contributions in illuminating the Rohingya crisis and evaluates their discursive implications for an international quest for a solution.

A Legal Case for Genocide?

From the outset, Ibrahim's *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide* takes a clear stance that the Rohingya are facing the threat of genocidal extermination, supported by global indifference to their plight. Bearing in mind that the genocide is defined in international law as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group," Ibrahim begins his case by establishing that the Rohingya constitutes a coherent ethnic group with deep historical links to the Arakan region (United Nations, 1948). In his framing, the precolonial kingdom of Mrauk U, straddling what is now Rakhine State in Myanmar and parts of Bangladesh, was significantly populated by many Muslims settlers from the Bengal Delta well before Burmese conquest in 1784. The sociopolitical culture of the region was also shaped by interactions of Muslims from Bengal with Buddhists moving overland from the Irrawaddy delta. *The Rohingyas* thus refutes the contention by the state and several Burmese scholars that the group comprises relatively recent illegal migrants from Bangladesh whose identity only came into being in the mid-twentieth century (Saw, 2016; Zan and Chan, 2005). The tumultuous political decolonisation process after the Second World War generated much ethnic friction. Like a few other minorities such as the Kachin, some of the Rohingya were uneasy with the prospect of being part of an independent state dominated by the majority Bamar ethnic group and agitated for incorporation of parts of Arakan into what was then East Pakistan. Others sought the protection of the central government against this uprising. This attempt at separation generated conflict with the Rakhine Buddhist majority and engendered hostility from the fledgling independent state during the early post-war years. The Rohingya were not given full citizenship, although then Prime Minister U Nu declared this status was temporary and "the Rohingyas have the equal status of nationality with Kachin, Kayah, Kayah, Karen, Mon, Shan and Rakhine" (Ibrahim, 2016: 48).

Subsequent chapters lay out the actions by the Myanmar state that Ibrahim sees as leading towards potential genocide. When the military took control of the state in 1962, tentative tolerance gave way to repressive measures that redefined the Rohingya as aliens in Myanmar leading to a denial of their legal rights. This was depicted as part of the military junta's strategy to maintain their hegemony by entrenching a national identity that conflates being Burmese with being Buddhist and positioning themselves as protectors of the Burmese-Buddhist nation. One of the most notable measures taken to marginalise them occurred in the 1990s when the Rohingya were stripped of their state identity cards and given "Temporary Registration Cards" as part of the process of adjudicating who belonged to the country and who did not. This process, to date, was never completed, and in 2015, the Rohingya were even deprived of this temporarily accorded status and were not permitted to take part in the national elections. Ibrahim contends that these measures depict the establishment of "preconditions to genocide,"

giving license for further violation of their lives and property (Ibrahim, 2016: 48). He further argues that rather than check the military regime, the main opposition party – Aung San Suu Kyi’s NLD – courted electoral support by placating Buddhist monks who feared the rise of Islam. Ibrahim thus urges the international community not to believe “the pleasant myth that Myanmar is finding its way to democracy and that it has an opposition party that is committed to the good of all its citizens” (Ibrahim, 2016: 15). In brief, he argues that the junta that had enriched itself by making war against ethnic minorities living on land with rich natural resources would continue to foment internal conflict in Myanmar to bolster their dominance. At the same time, the opposition party, whose connection with their base significantly depends on the influence of Buddhist monks, are likely to sacrifice the Rohingya at the altar of practical politics. Rounding off his argument, Ibrahim reiterates that “the pre-conditions for genocide are now firmly in place” and international pressure is needed as “silence will be interpreted as international disinterest” (Ibrahim, 2016: 137).

As a case for genocide and the international community’s duty for intervention, the narrative in *The Rohingyas* is compelling and persuasive. In the tradition of Lemkin, it systematically summarises the actions that impugn the rights of a minority group and indicts the Myanmar state for institutionalising discrimination that sanctioned violence. However, it is precisely because it makes such a case that some aspects of the book fails to hold up to closer scrutiny. This is especially evident in Ibrahim’s treatment of history. His argument is necessarily polemical: the shading and selection of facts depends on its fit with his own argument instead of a pursuit of historical truth. For instance, he highlights migration from Bengal before 1784 while downplaying the important demographic change through colonial migrations when Burma was part of British India as the latter became the basis for arguing that the Rohingya were outsiders (Sardiña Galache, 2017). Moreover, no Rakhine sources or interviews were conducted in this book. Ibrahim also simplistically divides complex traditions of Buddhist thought into two: a Theravada strand that contains “elements within its belief system that makes it very vulnerable to being captured by those who wish to construct an exclusive, confessionally pure, polity” and a Vajrayana tradition that “tends to stress social inclusivity but places greater emphasis on individual actions” (Ibrahim, 2016: 65–66). This “good Buddhism–bad Buddhism” dichotomy is reminiscent of the “good Muslim–bad Muslim” construct that Mamdani (2004) aptly critiques with regard to terrorism in the United States and is no more appropriate for understanding Myanmar’s society as it is in depicting Muslims.

Ibrahim’s work is based on questionable history, but one cannot dispute the urgency of his call for action. Nonetheless, his legalistic approach to understanding the crisis results in an examination of sources that heavily leans to one side of the conflict in order to make its case, potentially undermining its own call for action. What emerges from Ibrahim’s book is not the strength of the evidence for genocide, but the limitations of a legalistic stance towards the issue, chief of which is potential aggrievement of a Myanmar majority whose concerns appeared unheard. Ibrahim argues that “pragmatism must have its limits” and should not compromise the fundamental rights of the Rohingya (Ibrahim, 2016:131), a call he reiterates in an updated version of the book published in

2018. Specifically, his new epilogue condemns the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi for their inaction. However, other analysts opine that putting pressure on Myanmar through sanctions and condemnation is unlikely to work (Kyaw, 2017; Lintner, 2017). At the centre of the issue is not simply the Rohingya, but also the Myanmar state. Its present political conjuncture needs to be understood in a more nuanced way than *The Rohingyas* provide.

Arakan and Its Histories

Renaud Egreteau and François Robinne's edited volume *Metamorphosis: Studies in Social and Political Change in Myanmar* (2016) offers some thought on how to place myriad case studies on contemporary Burma in a wider historical perspective. Organised into four sections, it focuses on the following themes: political ecology, identity and nation building, social policy, and Buddhism. While the aim was to offer an accessible overview of political and social challenges in contemporary Myanmar, many contributions also utilise history as a means of understanding how Myanmar reached this point in its development. Of central interest are continuities and change in the role of the military as a force in Myanmar's politics. Published a year after Myanmar's watershed elections in 2015, the volume is also concerned with nascent civil society and the prospects for their continued development, given the current political climate. This rich volume covers a variety of topics outside the scope of this discussion, which will focus solely on the contributions that concern Rakhine State and the Rohingya.

Two of the papers deal directly with the Rohingya crisis and three others do so indirectly in their studies of Buddhism. The first is a contribution by Jacques Leider, a historian of precolonial Arakan. Leider reflects on Rohingya writing of their own history and sees two competing strands in the writing of Arakan history: one deriving from Buddhist sources dating back to the fifteenth century and a "hybridised" retelling that grafts Islamic presence and influence on Buddhist chronicles. The hybrid approach, he argues, emerged from attempts by the Muslim population in the 1950s to claim the northern part of Arakan as an independent or autonomous state. Rohingya identity originated from this historiographical conflict and unlike Ibrahim, Leider considers this a political rather than ethnic construct with the name "Rohingya" gaining currency only from 1960. As evidence, he points to the absence of the term until its first mention in 1955 and critically analyses the sources from which Rohingya history was drawn.¹ He particularly objects to the depictions of history by Rohingya activists – and scholars like Ibrahim who draw on them uncritically – that purport to draw an unbroken line from Muslim migrants to pre-1784 Arakan to the present-day Rohingya. Such a "hybridisation of history," Leider argues, does no service to either the Rohingya or history, as it obscures their origins and places them in a self-isolating vacuum.

Leider's argument partially builds on his earlier historical work on Arakan where he examined the Bamar Konbaung dynasty's expansionist policy westward, resulting in the conquest of Arakan in 1784 which was actively resisted by the Rakhine (Leider, 2004; Leider, 2014). He shows that focusing on the common religion between Bamar and Rakhine has the effect of masking very real political friction that historically existed

between these two groups and serves to conflate the relatively weak and impoverished Rakhine with the Bamar Buddhist majority. From this perspective, the Rakhine are not part of a powerful majority seeking to marginalise a minority in their midst but are themselves a struggling minority group in Myanmar's second poorest region, hemmed in by Bamar Buddhist illiberal rule on one side and a continuous influx of Chittagonian migrants from another. Such a point of view accounts for Rakhine outrage with what they perceive as Rohingya rewriting of history. It is a perception that Leider has considerable sympathy with, as he writes,

Rohingya authors do not historicize the birth of the Rohingya movement itself as a process that emerged from novel political circumstances created by the independence of Pakistan and Burma... several of these flaws have been examined, sometimes eloquently and patiently, sometimes in a regrettably aggressive way. (Egreteau and Robinne, 2016: 164)

Unfortunately, Leider's own stance as a historian who illuminates the obscured past is undermined by this sympathy as he uncritically lists a slew of polemical works by Rakhine or Burmese authors as part of this corrective historical refutation, tacitly giving more credence to them than perhaps is due (Egreteau and Robinne, 2016: 135 gives a full list). Among the list of works Leider listed is Maung Tha Hla's inflammatory *Rohingya Hoax* (Maung, 2009), whose argument that the Rohingya ethnicity is made up in order by poor Bengali migrants in order to stake a claim on Myanmar's land and displace the Rakhine through higher birth rates has been refuted by other scholars (Dapice, 2015). Although he takes our viewpoint of the conflict beyond an ethnic or religious binary, ultimately, Leider does seem to see Rohingya and Rakhine histories as competing narratives. As with Ibrahim, the implication is that the cause being supported selectively colours the history presented, calling to question the capacity to break the stalemate without privileging one group.

A second contributor to *Metamorphosis*, Alexandra de Mersan, updates the experience of being a Rakhine minority in contemporary Myanmar through an ethnography of a Rakhine politician's election to the national parliament in 2010. Like Leider, de Mersan observes a real fear of Islam, dating back to large-scale immigration from India during the colonial period. She suggests that this fear is exacerbated by the absence of a democratic political culture, except for a brief period in the 1950s. When the military junta moved towards limited reform in the 2010 election, minority politicians were suddenly given the opportunity to participate in political life but had no existing political model to draw on. In this absence, she argues, "the agents of change drew upon their own society's values and traditional models of social organization, in particular turning to Buddhism" (Egreteau and Robinne, 2016: 45). Such a situation is reflected in the strategies of U Maung Nyo, the Rakhine politician that she scrutinised. U Maung Nyo tapped on traditional activist networks in Rakhine State for popular support and cultivated close relationships with Rakhine businessmen, combining grass-roots appeal with elite clientelism. Moreover, he purposefully utilises the symbols of Buddhist piety, making pilgrimages to Sandawshan Pagoda, a popular religious site and championing the restoration of local relics, which had been placed in museums to monasteries where they

had previously belonged. The effect was a further polarisation of Rakhine society. In such a context, Rakhine-Buddhist identities, which was first deployed against a form of resistance against the dictatorial Burmese military junta developed into an insular Rakhine religious nationalism that turned against the Muslims in the province.

Therefore, a key insight from De Mersan and Leider is that religion in Arakan has long been a means of resistance against hegemony emanating from the Burmese Irrawaddy delta and thus, the violence against the Rohingya should not be seen as a binary conflict but one interactively responds to politics of marginalisation that have limited civil liberties and religious life in the area. The “Buddhic landscapes” section in *Metamorphosis* further demonstrates that while Buddhism has a special position in the construction of Myanmar’s national identity, it is also a social infrastructure independent of the state and is vulnerable to repression and radicalisation. At the same time, Buddhism is a significant part of what delineates the political, giving both moral and political force to civic engagements.² Hiroko Kawanami outlines developments in the organisation of Buddhist nuns in Myanmar over a thirty-year period up to the present and charts two “opposing directions” for their future: an otherworldly dissemination of the dhamma or an active engagement with social welfare issues not tackled effectively by the government. Both paths, one might note, involved either cooperative co-option or staying within parameters set by the state. Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière turns our attention to Buddhist monks and shows that while there is a general “symbiosis” between political power with religious life in Theravada Buddhist societies, understanding violence against Muslims as a radical offshoot of this teaching is woefully inadequate. Rather, she argues that, contrary to surface narratives, the democratic transition has weakened rather than strengthened the links between the Buddhist *sangha* and the state, spurring renewed activism to redefine their role in this new society. In this light, rhetoric against Muslims should be understood as part of a spectrum of Buddhist activism ranging from benign teaching of insight meditation to the 969 movement’s virulent discourse of exclusion that seeks to reinforce its flagging links with the secular state. Robinne, in the final chapter, rounds off the volume by historicising the notion of citizenship in Myanmar and how this played into dynamics of belonging to local ethnicity, global religion, and national state. He places Myanmar’s Christians and Muslims in juxtaposition and argues that what is changing today are not the basic interaction between sectarian tension and dictatorial regime but the choice of community targeted. Where Christians had been subject to violent exclusion, Muslims are now taking centre stage.

Metamorphosis thus adds more nuanced historical layers to Rohingya crisis, with the disturbing implication that the resolution does not lie in a straightforward international intervention but has to engage with the broader pattern of internal tension and fear. The volume as a whole demonstrates that this internal tension stems from Myanmar’s political transition. As such, the tension struggles with the continued participation of the army in political life, pragmatic politics that undermines a fledgling grassroots movement and an abysmal health and education system that was partly the legacy of previous international sanctions.³ The case studies provide some solid empirical analysis of a society that is uncertain about its future position when it interacts with an illiberal state insecure about its hold on power. These circumstances undercut the narrative of a

perpetrator-driven genocide as they diffuse the agency and motivations for such violence. It is within this particular conjuncture – a struggle for representation and resources by competing regional actors within nested social margins – that the Rohingya crisis should be understood.

Islamic Geopolitics and the Myanmar State

Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the ruling NLD, reportedly commented in the aftermath of the violence and mass exodus of the Rohingya in September 2017 that “more than 60% of the Muslim villages” remained intact (Wright et al., 2017). Underscoring this statistic publicly was part of her broader rebuke of the idea that the country as a whole was hostile towards Muslims. While this appears to be a cynical attempt to deflect attention from the ongoing violence, charges of ethnic cleansing do require positioning the Rohingya among other Muslim communities in Myanmar and examining how Muslim–Buddhist relations play out over this broader spectrum. The Rohingya is not the only community of Muslims in Myanmar. There are also Indian Muslims mostly clustered in urban centres and Panthays or Chinese Muslims who settled in Burma for generations after fleeing Qing China. Another group called the Kaman are migrants from the Bengal Delta who assimilated into the precolonial Burmese culture but unlike the Rohingya, they are accepted by the present state as indigenous rather than illegal migrants. There is also a very small group of Bamar Muslims. Together, Crouch estimates that Muslims make up 13% of the country’s population today although census figures published after the book’s publication puts the figure at 4.3% (Crouch, 2016: 18). The discrepant estimates suggest a paucity of reliable data on Muslims in Myanmar, and indeed, Crouch’s book is the first book-length treatment of the subject since 1972.⁴

Crouch’s edited volume *Islam and the State in Myanmar: Muslim-Buddhist Relations and the Politics of Belonging* brings together a group of papers that emphasise the lived experience of being Muslim in contemporary Myanmar. But beyond the national framework, Crouch also addressed the geopolitics of religion and their global perceptions. She argues that scholarship must displace “the myth of Buddhism as an inherently peaceful religion” and “overcome the stereotype of Islam as violent or unusual in the context of Myanmar” and instead utilise Islam in the country as a relevant lens to offer new thoughts on connections between Central, South and Southeast Asia (Crouch, 2016: 35). The first section of the book examines the legacy of British colonialism on these age-old connections. Stephen Keck argues that Muslims have been written out of Burmese history, tracing this back to the British colonial discourse on Muslims that effectively bifurcated Burmese and Muslims identities, making them difficult to reconcile. In reality, Myanmar society has deep multicultural roots in which China and India play important parts. Panthay Muslims from China who came to Burma as refugees or traders assimilated relatively better than the Indian Muslims who entered the country through policies enacted by the British Indian government and were resented. Crouch also sees this resentment enacted in legal circles in her contribution to the volume. Focusing on how law developed post-independence, she finds that it increasingly became more

difficult for Muslims to enter the judiciary and the civil service as a whole after the military junta led by Ne Win seized power in 1962. Muslim professional judges were replaced with members of Burma Socialist Program Party members. Islamic law was pushed to the periphery of the judicial system, as the cases would be heard by people who were non-Muslim and not trained in Islamic law.

The next section on “everyday experiences” presents a nuanced picture of how social exclusion was enforced even though Muslim presence was largely tolerated. Nicholas Farrelly approaches this issue through a broad examination of Muslim participation in Myanmar’s electoral politics. In Rakhine state, specifically, he highlights that there are a few political parties that needed Muslim support for electoral success and even the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) had a small number of Rohingya representatives. However, these Muslim representatives in USDP had not attended parliament since 2012; the escalation of violent tension in the area sharply reduced Rohingya visibility in the public sphere. Judith Beyer shows that this pattern of exclusion also extends beyond the Rohingya. In her ethnography of a Shi’ite Muslim family from the Kalai Menom community, public religious life is largely enacted through philanthropy for the poor. Nonetheless, despite being based in relatively cosmopolitan downtown Yangon, they had much difficulty securing permission to build a mosque to worship in. Discrimination was exacerbated by gender as Phyu Phyu Oo demonstrates through her examination of women’s education. The lack of access to quality women’s education was not only a problem for Muslim women but also reflects general systemic gender discrimination in the current regime. Everyday experiences of discrimination is thus intersectional, neither attributable to being Muslim alone nor detached from the position of being a religious minority.

The final section in the book returns to the question of violence and uncertainty that simmers beneath the surface of each community. Nyi Nyi Kyaw unpacks the history of the 969 movement and its Islamophobic agenda, which, he argues, continues to fuel sectarian conflict in the country. Most disturbingly, democratisation hands new tools for their propaganda and contribute to government inertia to intervene while political leaders who voice out risk losing popular support. Nyi Nyi Kyaw’s findings match Matt Schissler’s observations on the use of information technology. Schissler finds that technological tools for free speech have been subverted to the cause of violence and are instrumental in the spreading of a narrative of a large Muslim threat. Benjamin Schonthal and Alistair Cook, in separate studies, go on to show that popular perceptions of this Muslim threat were not only shaped by developments in the country but the geopolitical context of how the Muslim world writ large is perceived. Comparing Myanmar Buddhist and Sri Lankan Buddhist depictions of Muslims, Schonthal finds that Muslims tended to be constructed as a “unified Other,” amplifying the possibility of threat. As he looks at local dissatisfaction of the distribution of international aid in the Rakhine region, Cook also discerns that in the eyes of many Burmese Buddhists, the world seems to prefer supporting Muslims.

By assembling this insightful collection of essays, Crouch addresses a very large gap in the research on Myanmar and adds three key contributions to the current discourse on Myanmar. First, it establishes that Muslim–Buddhist relations were not necessarily

antagonistic. At the same time, it fends off a critique that has been made by Burmese leaders or journalists who point to other Muslim communities living peacefully in Myanmar to deny the severity of the Rohingya situation. As essays in the volume collectively show, there is systemic state discrimination against Muslims and other religious minorities even where there is no overt violence. Third, it highlights that part of this suspicion of Muslims stems from the spectre of a threat from a huge, unified Muslim world that is perceived as powerful and hostile. This then raises the question of whether the conflict between Rakhine and Rohingya is a localised, contained conflict or if it has the potential to spill beyond the borders of Rakhine State and escalate at the national or even international level.

Psychology of Mass Violence

When fresh massacres broke out after the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked several military outposts in mid-2017, the killings are partly a response to fears that foreign Muslim terrorists could be joining in the fray. These personal fears become important when we examine the agents of violence. In the context of such a crisis, to human rights activists and observers, the debate on whether the Rohingya is an ethnic group or not, whether the violence is genocide or not, and whether the scale is local or national, might appear to be a rather macabre intellectual exercise with no constructive end. Journalist Francis Wade approaches the issue of how to best intervene in the conflict by looking more intimately at the actors instead. *The Enemy Within* (2017) was published when the ARSA attacks and ensuing military killings was very much in the news. It parses the social dynamics of the animus against Rohingya through a phenomenological approach that centralises the perspectives of participants and victims in the violence. Starting with a prologue which recounts Wade's conversation with a Rakhine man who participated in the 2012 riots sparked off by the rape and murder of a Buddhist woman in Ramree Island, Wade connects the violence to a deep existentialist fear that the Buddhist majority would lose power. To this Rakhine man,

if the Buddhist cultures vanish, Yangon will become like Saudi and Mecca. Then there wouldn't be the influence of peace and truth. There will be more discrimination and violence... it can be the fall of Yangon. It can also be the fall of Buddhism. And our race will be eliminated. (Wade, 2017: 5–6)

Several findings from the academic research previously discussed are portrayed in Wade's work in a lively way that is accessible to the general reader. Like Ibrahim, he identifies the emergence of a form of Bamar Buddhist nationalism that was amplified by the military into an existential fear of "the Other" since the 1960s as a key cause of the conflict. And like Leider, Wade also recognises that the Rakhine Buddhists and the Bamar Buddhists were distinct communities, with the former often oppressed by the latter's monarchies, citing the fact that in the late eighteenth century, King Bodawpaya carted off the most important religious relic in Arakan – a Mahamuni statue of the Buddha – and positioned himself as its guardian as a step towards bringing the Rakhine Buddhists under the hegemony of the Burmese crown. Like the contributors to Crouch's

volume, there is an underlying sense of possible escalation of discrimination not just against Muslims but also against other religious minorities such as the Christians in Myanmar's uplands.

Although he covers this familiar ground, Wade's quarry in this work differs from these scholars. His motivating question appears to be – what would make someone turn against his neighbour in violence? And this is where his work makes its most significant contributions; it humanises the conflict even as it portrays unimaginable atrocities. One of Wade's most insightful chapters is his layered narrative of the life of U Maung Soe, a Muslim Rohingya who thrived in Burmese society by passing off as Buddhist and serving in the self-same military that oppresses his people. His successful performance of a different religion and ethnicity is aided by a willingness on the part of his Buddhist colleagues to overlook any slippage, showing that the difference is a construct, not intrinsic. Along this vein, Wade's observations are in line with a nascent psychological turn in genocide studies that seeks to deconstruct the mental worldview enabling such acts. One strand of thought in the sociology of mass violence argues that genocides by the oppressed are often carried out by perpetrators who fear *future* humiliation, "based on an experience of past humiliations and habitual submission" (Lindner, 2009). When applied to the Myanmar case, it simply did not matter whether what religion U Maung Soe adhered to in reality. As someone who submits to the performance of a majority identity, U Maung Soe poses no threat. Long oppressed by an undemocratic military regime, perpetrators in the violence seem to displace the fear of humiliation and elimination to a minority who appear threatening only when they refuse to fully assimilate.

In some ways, the human stories in *The Enemy Within* indirectly illustrate several theoretical perspectives very recently adopted by Anthony Ware and Costa Laoutides in analysing the Rohingya conflict: a "double minority complex" where a majority group can feel threatened by a disempowered minority if the latter is perceived as having powerful allies, an "ethnic security dilemma" in which political uncertainties placed a group's existence at risk, and "an intractable conflict" in which friction is protracted and differences appear irreconcilable (Ware and Laoutides, 2018: 171–196).⁵ In a few others, such as the story of U Maung Soe, Wade's work complicates such lenses. It is worth noting, however, that both books taken together underscore that the historical illiberalism of the Myanmar state has and continues to influence local actors in the perpetration of mass violence. Wade shows the lived dynamics of political repression suffusing the conflict in its entangled complexity – what it means to be part of a conflict that Ware and Laoutides argues is primarily "a contestation over political inclusion and control over governance" (Ware and Laoutides, 2018: 21).

Since the publication of *The Enemy Within*, the precarious situation of Rohingya refugees has not improved much. Most of those who fled in 2017 have been unable to return, violent confrontations between ARSA and the military periodically break out and Myanmar's politicians continue to employ the rhetoric of exclusion. Wade's book nonetheless sounds a note of hope that peace may be possible if the space for bottom-up civic participation expands within a rule of law framework. The concluding chapters depict some cautiously positive encounters with interfaith activists, including a monastery that had helped to shelter Rohingya Muslims during the 2013 pogrom. Tentative

as these encounters are, they indicate that this circumscribed liberalisation of Myanmar's society can and has generated efforts to stem mass violence. On a broader scale, however, Ware and Laoutides caution us that a sustained peace in Myanmar is almost impossible to achieve without a national identity that eschews ethnicity, a military that is committed to political reform and international intervention that does not indirectly incentivise violence by minorities (Ware and Laoutides, 2018: 196–217).

Conclusion

Despite different political stances taken by the interlocutors, recent research pertinent to the Rohingya issue, broadly defined, converge more than they diverge. The works discussed above indicate a transitioning state in which the change towards greater democracy in political processes exacerbates anxieties towards a religious minority, which in turn gives an opportunity for Myanmar's military junta to reclaim a space in the political landscape by demonstrating their relevance. The nested dynamics of Rakhine State's regional politics, combined with an illiberal national government, shape a situation where minorities turn against other minorities. In this context, empirical evidence on the ground points towards a concurrent struggle over narratives in the public sphere, print and digital, and a competition between various historically oppressed peoples to be heard. They depict how perceptions of present and future danger obscure the real humanity of a target group involved and highlight perpetrators who see themselves as victims.

Such issues demonstrate the inadequacy of the current legal infrastructure to deal with ongoing mass violence. Designed on the basis of indicting leaders of rogue states or war criminals who commit crimes against those they rule, international intervention can seek to indict and punish but not to stop or heal. In 2018, the stalemate persists even amidst international condemnation. The US government has recently reimposed economic sanctions on Myanmar's security forces, while Amnesty International released a report which placed responsibility for mass violence against Hindus in Rakhine State on ARSA, which appeared to be escalating its militancy (Amnesty International, 2018; Wong, 2018). We do not yet know how or whether it is possible to assign responsibility for actions that has claimed so many victims, the level of involvement and action by the military government in the animus towards the Rohingya, the true level of popular support in Myanmar for such violence, how to create a space of acceptance for Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar, and the impact of international scrutiny on the country. But what is clear is that global scrutiny cannot simply take the form of condemnation or sanctions against the violence that do not address the fears and anxieties of those who project them on a powerless minority seen as powerful. Such an approach might only serve to entrench the perception of a larger, worldwide persecution against the Myanmar nation state. Unpalatable as it might sound, the quest for justice on behalf of victims and the quest for a solution to the crisis may have to proceed on parallel paths.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Note that a variant of the name Rohingya, “Rooinga,” was mentioned in a 1799 British East India Company source (see Francis Buchanan, 1799). This was cited by Ibrahim and a few other scholars as evidence of Rohingya group identity prior to British conquest in 1826. To date, it appears that no other source except Buchanan mentioning this name has been discovered.
2. In a separate, recent study, Matthew Walton explores how the moral universe of Buddhism shapes the political (see Walton, 2017).
3. On these issues, readers may wish to refer to the following contributions in the edited volume: Renaud Egreteau’s work on the role of the army in the Myanmar, Elliot Prasse-Freeman’s analysis of a grass-roots level protest against the acquisition of land for a Chinese copper mine, and Celine Corderey’s article on the state of healthcare in the country.
4. See Moshe Yegar (1972).
5. This book was published after this essay was written and I regret that there is little space here to fully discuss their work. In brief, this work synthesises a huge body of research that shows the conflict’s historical roots, its multi-faceted ethnic cleavages and clarifies that the Rohingya struggle for citizenship was in essence a fight to be recognised as an indigenous race. It further identifies key drivers of the conflict, chief of which was Myanmar’s military junta historically repressive and predatory policies towards its own people.

References

- Amnesty International (2018) Myanmar: new evidence reveals Rohingya armed group massacred scores in Rakhine State. *Amnesty International*. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/05/myanmar-new-evidence-reveals-rohingya-armed-group-massacred-scores-in-rakhine-state/> (accessed 29 August 2018).
- Buchanan F (1799) A comparative vocabulary of spoken languages spoken in the Burma empire. *Asiatic Researches* 5: 219–240.
- Crouch M (ed.) (2016) *Islam and the State in Myanmar: Muslim-Buddhist Relations and the Politics of Belonging*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dapice D (2015) *A Fatal Distraction from Federalism: Religious Conflict in the Rakhine*. Cambridge: Harvard Kennedy School Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation Institute for Asia Occasional Papers Series.
- Egreteau R and Robinne F (eds.) (2016) *Metamorphosis: Studies in Social and Political Change in Myanmar*. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press.
- Hiebert MS (2008) Theorizing destruction: reflections on the state of comparative genocide theory. *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 3(3): 309–339.
- Ibrahim A (2016) *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar’s Hidden Genocide*. London: C. Hurst & Co.
- Janssen D (2008) Humanitarian intervention and the prevention of genocide. *Journal of Genocide Research* 10(2): 289–306.
- Kim S (2016) *A Collective Theory of Genocide Intent*. Berlin: Springer-Verlag.
- Kyaw PT (2017) Analysis: Are sanctions the answer to the Rakhine crisis? *The Irrawaddy*. Available at: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/analysis-are-sanctions-the-answer-in-the-rakhine-crisis.html> (accessed 17 August 2018).

- Leider J (2004) *Le royaume d'Arakan: son histoire politique entre le début du XVe et la fin du XVIIe siècle* [The royalty of Arakan: Its political history from the beginning of the 15th century to the end of the 17th century]. Paris: Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient.
- Leider J (2014) Politics of integration and cultures of resistance: a study of Burma's conquest and the administration of Arakan. In: Wade G (ed.) *Asian Expansions: The Historical Experiences of Polity Expansion in Asia*. New York: Routledge, pp. 171–189.
- Lintner EG (2009) Genocide, humiliation and inferiority: an interdisciplinary perspective. In: Robins N and Jones A (eds), *Genocides by the Oppressed: Subaltern Genocide in Theory and Practice*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 138–158.
- Lintner B (2017) Mishandling the Rohingya crisis may open new frontier for terrorism. *Yale Global Online*. Available at: <https://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/mishandling-rohingya-crisis-may-open-new-frontier-terrorism> (accessed 17 August 2018).
- Mamdani M (2004) *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, The Cold War and the Roots of Terror*. New York: Pantheon.
- Maung TH (2009) *Rohingya Hoax*. New York: Buddhist Rakhaing Cultural Association.
- Sardiña Galache C (2017) Arakan divided. *New Left Review* 104: 151–159.
- Saw KM (2016) *Behind the Mask: The Truth Behind the Name 'Rohingya'*. Yangon: Taunggyi Publishing House.
- UN News (2017) UN human rights chief points to textbook example of ethnic cleansing in Myanmar. Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/09/564622-un-human-rights-chief-points-textbook-example-ethnic-cleansing-myanmar> (accessed 1 October 2017).
- United Nations (1948) Office of the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide (OSAPG). *UN.ORG*. OSPAG Analysis Framework. Available at: http://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/adviser/pdf/osapg_analysis_framework.pdf (accessed 7 March 2018).
- Wade F (2017) *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim 'Other'*. London: Zed Books.
- Walton MJ (2017) *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ware A and Laoutides C (2018) *Myanmar's "Rohingya" Conflict*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wong E (2018) U.S. imposes sanctions on Myanmar military over Rohingya atrocities. *New York Times*. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/17/us/politics/myanmar-sanctions-rohingya.html> (accessed 29 August 2018).
- Wright R, Hunt K and Berlinger J (2017) Aung San Suu Kyi breaks silence on Rohingya, sparks storm of criticism. *CNN World*. Available at: <https://www.cnn.com/2017/09/18/asia/aung-san-suu-kyi-speech-rohingya/index.html> (accessed 22 August 2018).
- Yegar M (1972) *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.
- Zakaria F (1997) The rise of illiberal democracies. *Foreign Affairs* 76: 2–7.
- Zan US and Chan A (2005) *Influx Viruses: The Illegal Muslims of Arakan*. New York: Arakanese in United States.

Author biography

Faizah Binte Zakaria is a postdoctoral fellow at Nanyang Technological University and a research affiliate at the International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden University. She holds a PhD in History from Yale University and has published on mass violence in *Critical Asian Studies*. E-mail: faizahz@ntu.edu.sg