



Paul Chambers

The Rohingyas' Trail of Tears: Continuing Persecution of an Ethnic Minority in Myanmar

[South Asia Democratic
Forum \(SADF\)](#)

19 Avenue des Arts 2nd
floor, 1210 Brussels,
Belgium

info@sadf.eu
www.sadf.eu

+12 026 834 180;
+32 2 808 42 08

Reg. Num. BE 833606320

Abstract

The Rohingya are an ethnic group who have long lived and suffered oppression in Myanmar. Though they were once accepted by Myanmar society, they now experience political and legal discrimination. The state marginalizes Rohingya through brute coercion and the enshrinement of laws designed to relegate them the bottom of society. Also, the state has at times practiced policies resulting in the deaths of Rohingya. In Myanmar—a country purported to be democratizing, such policies amount to persecution. Yet who exactly who are the Rohingya? What is Myanmar's "problem" with them? What might be their future? This paper examines these questions.

Keywords: Myanmar, Rohingya, Persecution, Ethnic Minorities

Hundreds killed, thousands wounded, and hundreds of thousands displaced. Such is the daunting tragedy of the Rohingya, an ethnic group living in Myanmar today. In June 2012, following unproven allegations that a Rohingya had raped a Buddhist Rakhine woman, sectarian tensions spilled over into violence between mobs of Rakhine and Rohingya mobs in Myanmar's Rakhine (formerly Arakan) State. Working alongside the Rakhine, Burmese soldiers and policemen used deadly force and made arbitrary arrests against the Rohingya population. One ethnic Rakhine soldier even bragged that his battalion killed 300 Rohingya alone. According to Human Rights Watch, the attacks appeared designed to "inflict maximum damage" on Rohingya communities while leaving the Rakhine unharmed. By June 12, military repression had quieted Rakhine State and Myanmar President Thein Sein publicly called for the deportation of all Rohingya to countries abroad or their internment in refugee camps in Bangladesh. Myanmar's general mistreatment of Rohingya and the indifference of most Burmese towards their predicament has caused them to take desperate measures. In 2015 tens of thousands of Rohingya set off on rickety boats searching for safe haven in Thailand, Malaysia or beyond.

Given the Bengali-like appearance of the Rohingya, their distinct language, and their Muslim religion, most Burmese in general have little sympathy for the plight of the Rohingya, pejoratively referring to them as "Bengali" or Kalar". Some Burmese even allege that even the term "Rohingya" did not exist before the 1950s. What is particularly disturbing is that such animosity towards the Rohingya has extended to members of other persecuted, ethnic minority groups and even established champions of democracy in Myanmar. Indeed, despite pressures for her to say something on the issue, Daw Aung Suu Kyi has remained relatively silent about the Rohingyas' dilemma.

But exactly who are the Rohingya and why do they suffer from such hatred and discrimination in Myanmar? There are approximately 800,000 to 1 million Rohingya living in Myanmar today. Still others are refugees abroad. They are predominantly Muslim, generally dark-skinned, and are closely related to Bengali people. Some scholars contend that the Rohingya are the descendants of Arab seafarers who became shipwrecked on the coast of Myanmar in the 8th Century. In the late 18th Century, a British historian mentioned Rohingya as a "dialect" spoken in British Burma. Under British colonial rule, there was no fixed frontier between the colonies of Bengal and Arakan and the British even encouraged Bengalis to migrate to Arakan. As the population of Arakan swelled, frictions skyrocketed between Rakhine Buddhists on one side and the Muslims, be they Bengal migrants or Rohingya, on the other. Violence between Arakan (Rakhine) Buddhists and mostly Rohingya Muslims has persisted since the 1940s. First, between 1942 and 1945, the imperial Japanese army and Arakan Buddhists together carried out atrocities against thousands of Rohingya, resulting in multitudes of deaths and forcing others to flee abroad as refugees. Times got better for the Rohingya in the 1950s: they were issued National Registration Cards in 1951; they were allowed to vote in the 1960 election; and they were even given a Rohingya language broadcasting

program. But persecution continued. Then in 1962, the nationalist Burmese regime under dictator Ne Win used extreme violence to squelch an attempt by Rohingya insurgents to achieve self-determination. It was under Ne Win that the Burmese regime began to delegitimize Rohingya identity in Myanmar: in 1965, the Rohingya language broadcasting program was cancelled and by the early 1970s, new laws disbanded Rohingya social and political organizations. In 1974, the state promulgated the 1974 Emergency Immigration Act, which required all Burmese citizens to carry national identity cards—Rohingya people were only allowed to have Foreign Registration Cards.

Then in 1978, Ne Win's dictatorship, calling the Rohingya illegal squatters from Bangladesh, conducted "Operation King Dragon" across Rakhine State. This campaign, amounting to an orgy of violence, was finally halted following intense international pressure and led to hundreds of thousands of Rohingya fleeing to refugee camps in Bangladesh. Meanwhile, on the legal front, the state added more legitimacy to its repression of the Rohingya through the enactment of the 1982 Citizenship Law, which designated that "full citizens" must belong to one of 135 state-recognized "national races" or provide "conclusive evidence" that their ancestors settled in Myanmar prior to 1823. The Rohingya were not included in the list of "national races." Also, it is quite difficult for poor, often-uneducated people suffering persecution to offer sufficient evidence of ancestry in Myanmar prior to 1823. Thus, the 1982 law has legally taken away any possibilities of citizenship for Rohingya people in Myanmar. In 2012, the Burmese government announced that it was only responsible for Rohingya who could prove that they had arrived in Myanmar before independence in 1948. With no citizenship, Rohingya have no rights whatsoever in Myanmar, and have no access to education, health care, employment opportunities and basic human rights. They were however permitted to vote in Myanmar's 1990 election—the results of which were quickly voided by the military following the victory of Aung San Suu Kyi's political party.

As the 1990s began, a new military junta in Myanmar again looked suspiciously at the Rohingya. Indeed, Operation "King Dragon" began anew in 1991, and amidst stories of security forces engaged in widespread killings, summary executions, torture, rape, and forced labor, a new wave of over 250,000 Rohingya fled to already-overcrowded camps in Bangladesh as well as refugee holding facilities in Thailand. International pressure again forced a halt to this severe repression. In 1992, the governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh jointly agreed that the Rohingya being held at UN-sponsored refugee camps in Bangladesh would be returned to Myanmar. Many Rohingya, however, were afraid to cross back across the border and in 1992-93, Bangladesh used force or made threats against refugees who refused to return to Myanmar. In the end, thousands—but not all—of the Rohingya were forcibly repatriated.

Since the mid-1990s, most Rohingya in Myanmar, though they are dispossessed and stateless, have survived in Rakhine State through assistance via the UN World Food Programme and other international donors. The Burmese regime placed Rohingya in Rakhine State under the authority of

Nasaka, a Burmese border guard force composed of soldiers, police and other security officials. Rohingya were often required to engage in forced labor, make pay-offs to Nasakan guards, and could suffer from routine beatings. Amidst growing international criticism of the state's treatment of Rohingya in July 2013, the Nasaka were disbanded. However, in September they were replaced with a new, equally brutal organization—*MaKhaPha*. Many Rohingya have set out in small boats to find sanctuary or a better life in countries other than Myanmar or Bangladesh. Thailand has accepted only a few Rohingya across their border, however, and in 2009, a scandal unfolded when it was discovered that the Thai Navy had pulled Rohingya refugee boats far out to sea and then cut the anchors of the crafts, forcing them to drift, a practice which has led to scores of Rohingya deaths, disappearances, or fortunate rescues by Indonesian naval ships.

With zero standing in Myanmar and little sympathy in Thailand, the Rohingya have been fortunate to find growing support among the international community in general and Muslim countries in particular.

Bangladesh continues to allow approximately 200,000 Rohingya to remain in UN-sponsored refugee camps though they are extremely overcrowded. Meanwhile, Bangladesh has resisted US pressures to take in more Rohingya and register more of them as refugees (28,000 are already registered as such), while blocking international charities from providing humanitarian assistance for them, fearing that such moves would simply encourage more Rohingya to flood into Bangladesh. The Muslim ASEAN states of Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei have spearheaded efforts to pressure a change in Myanmar's policy toward the Rohingya. Many Rohingya live in Malaysia today though the Malaysian government refuses to accord them any legal status. Indonesia has allowed hundreds of Rohingya to resettle there or move on to third countries such as Australia. Following Myanmar's June 2012 repression of the Rohingya, the government of Indonesia spurned investment opportunities in Myanmar and Indonesia's Foreign Minister, referring to the Rohingya as "our brothers" raised the issue of their plight with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as well as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). To this end, ASEAN's Muslim Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan demanded a full accounting from the Myanmar government while the OIC brought the matter before the UN General Assembly. The OIC and Rohingya NGOs are demanding that President Thein Sein recognize the Rohingya as Myanmar citizens. In August, Thein Sein did agree to OIC assistance for all residents of Rakhine State, where the June violence occurred.

For his part, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon has urged the OIC to "treat carefully" the issue of the Rohingya in Myanmar. He is worried that concessions to the Rohingya would be highly unpopular among most Burmese, potentially destabilizing the Thein Sein government, but that doing nothing about this stateless ethnicity could infuriate Western nations who might, like Indonesia, withhold badly-needed foreign investments that have diminished sanctions as Myanmar's reform process has continued.

This slight concession by the Secretary General to Myanmar permitted Thein Sein to announce his own “independent investigation of the June 2012 anti-Rohingya violence. The findings of the report, released in April 2013, failed to mention human rights abuses by state authorities and, save for recommendations on outside humanitarian assistance, offered no domestic solution or any means for Rohingya to achieve transitional justice.

In May 2015, multiple shallow graves were discovered in southern Thailand northern Malaysia which revealed a network of shadowy gangster-businesspeople who had trafficked Rohingya out of Myanmar and then either held them for ransom, forced them into slavery in Thailand’s fishing industry or simply killed them. The sudden unearthing of Rohingya graves again focused the global spotlight on the Rohingya in Southeast Asia, which compelled the Thai government in late May 2015 to hold a conference focusing on Rohingya.

Paralleling this summit, Myanmar’s regime enacted new laws designed to control the growth of the Rohingya population. As Myanmar headed for a general election in November, anti-Muslim events organized by nationalist Buddhist organizations such as *Ma Ba Tha* occurred with growing frequency. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, intent on winning votes for her National League for Democracy party, said little or nothing about the Rohingya.

Myanmar today is a country undergoing hyper-rapid political and economic changes. With military tyranny having been replaced by the apparent beginnings of democratization, the world is becoming aware of the plight of the Rohingya, which was long kept under the carpet by either repression or international ignorance. But the shadow of the Rohingya has now more than ever come to haunt the country, and neither the government-in-power nor opposition politicians such as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi can simply stand aloof from this growing crisis, reject the Rohingya as mere foreigners, or turn a blind eye to the carnage which has been inflicted against them. To do so would eventually encourage nothing less than genocide against the Rohingya.

So what is to be done with the Rohingya? It is an important question to ponder but the answer seems clear. In the short run, squalid conditions in Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh need to be improved while Thailand should accept more Rohingya. Western donor states can provide these countries with more assistance to take the Rohingya in. Meanwhile, countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei, as well as third countries such as Australia and the United States should match their words of support for the Rohingya with deeds—accepting more of them, along with other refugees, for resettlement. Finally, in the longer run, Myanmar’s 1982 Citizenship Law needs to be re-written to more easily incorporate Rohingya into the country. A UN Peacekeeping Force should be sent to Rakhine State to replace Nasaka and help keep order between Rakhine and Rohingya while humanitarian assistance is granted to both peoples. It is essential that the negative mindset toward the Rohingya held by the majority of Burmese change, while Rakhine-Rohingya

enmities be defused as well. Only with such changed thinking can the seeds of peace be reconstructed and the Rohingya become a trusting and trusted part of Myanmar society. Changed thinking necessitates a commitment by the state and leading politicians to use media and education to unite the Rohingya with the rest of Myanmar. Such an effort also means political sacrifices because these policies will not be popular. At the end of the day, if Thein Sein, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and other politicians are truly serious about reform in Myanmar, then reform has to also come in the state's policy toward the Rohingya. Meanwhile, if Thein Sein's military once again massacres the Rohingya, then Myanmar may once again find itself beset with international sanctions.