

Rohingya in Myanmar



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Rohingya: not even refugees with a nationality

“Rohingya” are the people living in and around the Rakhine State of Myanmar. Currently, it is not made clear whether the Rohingya are an ethnic group, a religious group, or a political association. It is necessary to keep in mind that the problem surrounding the Rohingya's ethnicity is still being discussed in academia. In Myanmar, the Rohingya people are purportedly called "Bengali" based on the claim that they are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. The Rohingya people are therefore not even refugees with a clearly defined nationality, nor are they considered an ethnic minority in Myanmar. Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's de-facto leader, denies that there is ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya in the north of the country, despite U.N. reports stating evidence to the contrary.¹

During the colonial period, the UK as the colonial master developed new agricultural lands in the Rakhine State; the country also brought massive Bengali Muslims to promote agricultural activity. Even in the period when the Rakhine State Governing Body was not functioning, the influx of Bengali did not stop. Arguably, these people are said to form a majority of the group currently known as Rohingya. The designation Rohingya² is widely used in Muslim countries, and the United Nations' agencies are using the designation “Rohingya refugees”.

The majority of Rohingya are Muslims. In Islam, a man can hold up to four wives, so the population of Rohingya has increased in Rakhine State. The number of family members per household in a Bengali family is said to have grown to more than 30 at present. This demographic trend is also heightening the tension between Rohingya and other citizens of Myanmar (who mostly observe Buddhism). From their perspective, Bengali who have invaded the Rakhine State are using the designation “Rohingya” to try to make a Muslim state after Myanmar's independence.

As mentioned above, one of the fundamental factors in the current Rohingya problem is that people who are regarded as “Rohingya” in the province of Rakhine as part of British

¹ Newsweek, “Aung San Suu Kyi Denies Rohingya Ethnic Cleansing Allegations”, April 6, 2017 (<http://www.newsweek.com/topic/rohingya-muslims>).

² The origin of this word remains indeterminate.

colonial policy originally came from the “West” (in South Asia, from the poorest countries, especially the neighboring country of Bangladesh) or they were brought in during British colonial policy. But when Burma later became independent from the UK, there was a shift in the nature of the conflict. Now we see terms such as “illegal refugees” in Myanmar. This phrase only make sense under state sovereignty. Since Myanmar and the neighboring Bangladesh both have the “sovereign state system” in the Westphalian sense, those without “nationality” are not protected.

As for Myanmar’s sovereign system, the idea of integrating Burma (Myanmar) as a single nation state (after independence in 1948) was driven by a Burmese style socialism. It is said that they wished to modify largely Soviet Union-style Marxism (socialism as a purely ideal form) into a “Burmese Way to Socialism” which places an expectation for the construction of the nation to have Buddhism as its main axis. In the context of the rebellion against Britain (a Christian nation) and its colonial rule, there seems to have arisen this idea of Burma’s original integration idea. This “philosophy” comprises at least part of the conflict between the Burmese people (including minority ethnic problems) and the Rohingya (non-Buddhists).

Rohingya and non-interference principle of ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations)

While the international public opinion is in favor of the Rohingya, the 30th ASEAN Summits (held in April 2017) did not directly address the Rohingya issue. This “omission” derives from the fact that ASEAN member states observe what is called the non-interference principle concerning intra-ASEAN diplomatic relations.

There is, however, some change being observed.³ In December 2016, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak led a rally protesting what he called Myanmar’s genocide of the Rohingya. In a meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers in December 2016, Malaysian Foreign Minister stated that the situation of Rohingya Muslims was “of a regional concern and should be resolved together.” Indonesian President Joko Widodo (also known as “Jokowi”) discussed the Rohingya crisis with Myanmar State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi. Jokowi is reported to have told Suu Kyi that stability in Myanmar was important not only for the country but also for the region. These instances indicate that there is

³ This paragraph draws on The Diplomat, “Why ASEAN Can’t Ignore the Rohingya Crisis”, May 17, 2017 (<https://thediplomat.com/2017/05/why-asean-cant-ignore-the-rohingya-crisis/>).

significant degree of concern for the plight of the Rohingya, at least in Muslim-majority Malaysia and Indonesia as members of ASEAN.

Setting aside diplomatic issues, there are some “geo-economic” factors behind the Rohingya problem. First and foremost, the population density in Bangladesh (1,252 people per square kilometer in 2016) is much higher than that in Myanmar (81 people per square kilometer in the same year)⁴. Because of the lack of arable land for food production, life is perceived to be more severe in Bangladesh than in Myanmar; so the migratory pressure from Bangladesh to Rakhine State in Myanmar, where the land is relatively wider and more fertile, is only natural.

Thus, the Rohingya’s plight has political, economic and religious dimensions. For Burmese people who hold Buddhist beliefs, there is no psychological preparation to accept and coexist with “Muslims” and their related cultural and lifestyle customs—this is fueling the crisis level of the Rohingya problem. Indeed, “multicultural co-existence (or symbiosis)” is easier said than done.

Interview with Myanmar’s former prime minister

Myanmar’s former Prime Minister Mr. Khin Nyunt (interviewed by the author in March 2017) shares the socioeconomic concern held by most ethnic groups in Myanmar. He has written a book which is entitled (in Burmese) “Challenge of Myanmar’s West Gate”. In the book, he states that the Rakhine State in Myanmar has long been a land that has nothing to do with Bengali Muslims, as there is no historical document indicating the presence of Rohingyas in the Rakhine State. During the Rakhine dynasty period, when Bangladesh did not yet exist, the dynasty had dominated the mountainous region. However, as the border was drawn during the British colonial days, ethnic tensions arose in the region.

Mr. Khin Nyunt also voices concern over the future of Myanmar. His book predicts that if Rohingyas are to gain control of the Rakhine State, they will try to be independent from Myanmar as a Muslim state. In Southeast Asia where Myanmar is located, there are Muslim countries. Since these countries do not side with the viewpoint of Myanmar, they criticize Myanmar, thereby heightening the tension, he says.

The Rohingya problem is becoming a global topic and discussed at the United Nations

⁴ Based on the United Nations’ Human development data (<http://hdr.undp.org/en/data>).

by hiding the facts and making the press twisted and pressed. To echo Mr.Khin Nyunt's viewpoint, wealthy Muslim countries with oil powers are using the world media and reporting the Rohingya problem as a human rights issue and politically charged refugee problem. For Mr.Khin Nyunt, these are "created" stories. At any rate, the current government of Myanmar has the responsibility to tackle the problem of Rohingya.

Conclusion

In the discussion of Rohingya, national sovereignty is at issue. ASEAN member states are not monolithic in their policy stance on how the Rohingya issue could be addressed officially in ASEAN. The consensus-based "ASEAN Way" is democratic, yet it can lead to non-decision making when national sovereignty is at stake. Mutual distrust among the stakeholders should be removed. But who are the clearly defined stakeholders in the first place? The Rohingya are a non-state actor, together with the "international public opinion" in favor of Rohingya.

The Rohingya issue is a problem that transcends sovereign states. Due to globalization, it has become common for the activities of pluralistic entities (political entities, ethnic groups, civil societies, business entities, etc.) to "interfere" with each other. Therefore, relevant public policy must address how to create peace and relate to "others" who have different reasoning and values than the group to which one belongs. For example, when a national body or ethnic group seeks to maximize its own interests, it is inevitable that in doing so the body or group will push the other to the point of reluctance, which creates a negative feedback in terms of relationship.

There are also stakeholders who do not think highly of relationships, so that the question of "whether consideration or tolerance towards non-tolerant others is a valid behavior" immediately arises. Of course, the answer to this ethical question is not immediately apparent. Still, we should first try to arrange concrete frameworks. If we further expand our viewpoint, we perceive relative concepts including national sovereignty and democratic politics, which were probably built in the process of the modernization of the Western world. It is necessary to grasp the limitation of these concepts in the face of emerging crises involving non-state actors (Rohingya and international public opinion, most importantly).

As seen in the Rohingya problem, it is necessary to develop a higher-level arrangement involving the global civil society in addition to improving inter-state mechanisms for

political and economic agendas. The Rohingya problem, being a global-scale crisis, necessarily involves micro (intra-region level), meso (country-to-country level), and macro (international or global level) perspectives for resolution.

Reference:

Khin Nyunt (2016), *Challenge of Myanmar's West Gate* (in Burmese).