

Does Nationalism Causes War? A Case Study of Rohingya Ethnic Minorities of Myanmar⁷

Ali nacionalizem povzroča vojne? Študija primera Rohingya etnične manjšine v Mjanmaru

Al Amin Rabby⁸

Abstract

This study tries to answer the question does nationalism causes war or is it the way around? Using various scholarly books and journal articles on theories of nationalism and conflict, the study argues that the process of Myanmarization has created ethnic violence in Myanmar. Karen, San, Chin and other ethnic groups including Rohingya ethnic Muslim minorities are suffering and facing ethnic cleansing in Myanmar. The subsequent military regimes forcefully assimilated all ethnic groups into one nation, one language and one religious policy through various state mechanisms such as military, police, and education. Explicitly or

⁷ This paper was submitted as a final essay for the course Ethnicity and Nationalism while the author did Joint European Master in International Migration and Social Cohesion (MISOCO) to University College Dublin, Ireland.

⁸ Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh.
Contact: alaminrabby@yahoo.com.

implicitly the junta is forcing ethnic Rohingya to leave the country or face execution, mass killing, forced labor and deportation. The current stud argues that the Myanmarization, or the process of ethnic nationalism, has contributed to conflict and war-making in the multi-ethnic, multi-religion and multi-cultural state Myanmar.

Key words: Refugee, Rohingya, Ethnicity, Nationalism, violence, Myanmar.

Introduction

In both developed and developing countries, all around the globe, different types of violence and war is taking place in modern nation-states. The obvious question that comes to mind is if nationalism causes war or if war fuels nationalism. This paper has tried to answer this question using various scholarly books and journal articles on theories of nationalism and conflict and the case of Myanmar has been cited for evidence that supports the arguments. The first section has discussed the theories that deal with nationalism and violence. The second section has depicted the case of Myanmar through a historical background of conflict and nationalism, and the final section has tried to reach a conclusion.

Theoretical Framework: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing

Mann (2005), in *The Dark-Side of Democracy* argued that if the meaning of people becomes the same as ethnic group, then democratic nation-states representing majority of the population but denying rights of other ethnic groups. As in different parts of the world ethnic cleansing is evident, not always as genocide but still murderous cleansing. Ethno-nationalism becomes strongest where, it 'captures' class; regional and gender sentiments. Thus ideology, economic and military power relations directed by the states required state coherence and capacity to do the ethnic cleansings. State power exercised in top-down, bottom-up and coercively sideways make the workable democratic way of exercising power over minority groups (ibid, 2005). However, non-democratic governments also seek mandates from the people to rule the state. The military rule often uses religion, language, and state mechanism to disciplining the difference, in this sense the other ethnic groups who do not belong to the national ethnic group or religion or culture.

Ethnic groups and their struggle are socially created. In discussing that issue, Mann (2005) created one explanatory table consisting of 1) multiculturalism and consociational/ con-federalism leads to voluntary assimilation, 2) institutional coercion and discrimination in the name of official language restriction and segregation that leads to cultural

suppression, 3) selective policed repression, and afterwards the political repression and forced displacement which leads to the policed total suppression of language and culture, population exchanges, and forced deportations and pressured emigration occurs, 4) violent repression with generalized policed repression leads to programmed communal riots, some forms of rape, and violent displacement afterwards wild deportation and biological sterilization and forced marriage, 5) civil wars, revolutionary projects and fratricide create callous war, civil war and class war and thus leads to ethnocide (ibid, 2005).

Nevertheless, ethnic cleansing is a modern phenomenon and there is a link between democracy and modernity. Modern state's desire to be a democratic one as the nation-state makes the situation worse for other ethnic groups. As the meaning of democracy is rule by the people. However, "the people" means two things. Firstly, is similar as Greek meaning, *demos* meant the ordinary people, the mass of the population. In this regard, democracy is the rule of ordinary people, the mass. Secondly, in modern time the people mean as a "nation" or the Greek term *ethnos* (p-5). The *ethnos* means a group which shares a common culture and sense of heritage, distinct from other peoples. Nonetheless, if some peoples are defined in ethnic terms then what happens to the other people who are not similar with the majority ethnic group? Mann argues that some European other states that are now democratic have also been ethnically cleansed (ibid, 2005).

In addition, he proposes that ethnicity cannot be understood without other social differences such as class, religion and gender. The fact is that ethno-nationalism is strongest where it is mixed with class, regional and gender sentiments. He discusses that a shared religion may become dangerous where political struggle is also intertwined with a religious group that tries to hold state power. An ethnic niche economy might even occupy certain positions in business and land ownership that will surely provide them possession over economy and the states as well. Moreover, war mobilization allows states to make the state more ethnic by cleaning the other enemies. This gives legality to kill other ethnic groups who does not belong to the 'nation' (ibid, 2005). Mann (2005) mentions that there are levels of perpetrator; these are i) the radical parties running states, ii) bands of militants forming violent "paramilitaries" and iii) core constituencies (p-11). He argues that these are essential for vicious cleansing to ensue and he identifies five core constituencies of murderous ethnic cleansing. These are:

- (1) Ethnic refugees and people from threatened border districts.
- (2) Those more dependent on the state for their subsistence and values
- (3) Those living and working outside of the main sectors of the economy which generate class conflicts.
- (4) Those socialized as into the acceptance of physical violence as a way of solving problems
- (5) Those attracted to machismo ideology (ibid, 2005, p-11).

However, In *Nations, States and Violence*, Laitin (2012), examines the relationship between cultural homogenization and ethnic conflicts. He suggests that there are no significant correlation between ethnic diversity and conflict. Nonetheless, coercive homogeneity upon diverse populations might escalate civil war or even to a separatist movement. Laitin states that cultural diversity and differences can create social cohesion, as in many parts of the world people live without any violence. He supports the argument drawing examples from around the world that show ethnic violence is very rare (Laitin, 2012). On the other hand, Tilly (1985) elucidates that the states were involved in war making and state- making with organized crime. States at present time with coercive nature of great powers with their increasing destructiveness can create violence anytime. The organized means of violence become relatively centralized as banditry, piracy, gangland rivalry, policing and war making belong to the states in Europe were dominant organizations which claim mercantile capitalism and state-making reinforced each other. State categorizes “legitimate” and “illegitimate” violence so that raping, looting, taking prizes become legal and the demobilized ships become pirate vessels and troops bandits (ibid, 1985). European governments reduce their indirect rules by extending their officialdom to local level and the creation of police force. Governments are in the business of producing and controlling violence thus monopolizes the profit or tribute and the protection rent. Laitin describes history of capitalism as a

period where: 1) anarchy, 2) a stage established their monopoly by creating exclusive and substantial states, 3) merchants and land lords began to gain more from protection rents than governors did from tributes and 4) technological changes surpassed protection rents as sources of profit for entrepreneurs. States who managed to create costly verities of military organization turn into more advanced in conquering new territory. Thus there were symbiotic relation between states, military and the private economy.

Methodology

The research methodology of this paper incorporated rigorous analysis, examination and evaluation of literature pertinent to the theories of nation and nationalism written by various scholars in the field. On the one hand, it based on several scholarly discussions in various academic papers and journals. On the other hand, the data used for the case study of the Rohingya refugees had been collected from various research reports from the webpage and internet materials of different international organizations that are working for refugee rights and ensuring humanitarian services for refugees. It also considered the academic documents, journals and newspapers to formulate the case. Therefore, the paper was secondary research in nature.

Result and Discussion

The case: Myanmar

Following the theoretical points in previous sections, the current segment will deal with the case, Myanmar which continues to suffer one of the longest internal ethnic armed conflicts in modern times. For the purpose of the paper Myanmar in general and Rohingya ethnic minorities of Rakhine (Arakan) state in particular has been chosen as a case, though there are similar other ethnic groups in Myanmar who are facing ethnic cleansing. This case study can provide a portrait of nature of the state and its nation-building processes and the consequences of the Myanmar nationalism or Myanmarization.

Myanmar, previously known as Burma, achieved independence in 4th January 1948 from the British. The country lies between Bangladesh and Thailand, with open coast on the Bay of Bengal in the South. It has borders with in the Northeast of China, North West of India and in the Southeast of Vietnam (MSU, 2014). Majority of the population (89 percent) are Buddhist, 4 percent are Muslims, 4 percent Christian and 1 percent Hindu and 2 percent are followers of other religions (CIA, 2014). More than 55-60 percent of the population is ethnic *Braman* (Sakhong, 2012).

In 1931 during British Colonial period there was a census in Burma which was flawed. This ambiguity over population statistics gave the chance to the authority to exclude others. The 1974 Constitution defined seven ethnic minority states- the Chin, Karen, Kachin, Kayah, Mon, Rakhine(or Arakan) and Shan and seven divisions, which are largely inhabited by the majority Burman population. Such a map, however, was created for political porpoises by the junta. Over 100 different dialects and languages were recognized in Burma, and many unique ethnic cultures survived late into the 20th century. The State Law and Order Restoration Council, which ruled Burma until recently, itself referred to the '135 national races' of Burma, but produced no reliable data or list of names (Smith, 1994).

Sakhong (2012) discussed that as a post colonial modern nation state, the Union of Burma was founded by the Chin, Arakan, Kachin, Shan and other people who formed a union together by signing the Panglon Agreement on 12th February 1947 to achieve independence from British colony. However, afterwards it became the single ethnic group's unitary state that controlled all state power and governing systems. Thus from the very beginning Burma confronted the state formation conflict which brought the country into civil war (Sakhong, 2012). Various successive governments had concentrated on the exclusive historical and religious experience and produced a spirit of national Burmese identity as one ethnic group, the *Braman*. Much public emphasis had been placed on

Theravadha Buddhism which over 80 per cent of the population practices. Former prime minister U Nu even attempted to make Buddhism the Burma's official state religion in the 1950s and early 60s, until thwarted by ethnic minority protests (ibid, 2012 and CIA, 2014).

Prime Minister U Nu (1948-1962) decided for cultural and religious incorporation as a means of a nation-building process by promoting Buddhism as a state religion, General Ne Win (1962-1988) imposed the national language policy of *Myanmar* as a means of creating an identical state. Supplementing U Nu's policy of state religion and Ne Win's national language policy, the military regime picked up *ethnicity* as a means of national integration, by imposing ethnic assimilation into *Myanmar* (ibid, 2012). General Ne Win removed the rights of the country's religious and cultural minorities, especially minority's language right, as a means of creating a homogeneous state with the aphorism of "one voice, one blood, and one nation", and adopted the "national language policy" as a means of ethnic "forced assimilation"(ibid, 2012:8). The regimes had the dream to transfer the Union of Burma to the pre-colonial kingdom of Myanmar as it was a Buddhist Kingdom (ibid, 2012). However, they did not consider about several other ethno-linguistic-religious groups within the state who are now living in the state of Myanmar.

After 1989, the Military government has changed the name of the country from the Union of Burma to Myanmar in 1989 (ABITSU, 2014). The junta also changes the name of the states such as from Rangoon to Yangon, Arakan to Rakhain. Critiques argue that these changes were due to the process of Myanmarization. This change has some political connotations to make Myanmar as unique national identity as Myanmar that means Buddhist or Buddhist land (ABITSU, 2014; Smith, 1999 and Sakhong 2012). The project of changing the name is clearly a homogenization process which causes more tensions among the ethnic minorities.

From the above discussion, it can be said that different regimes of the government of Myanmar explicitly or implicitly have created the context of Myanmar national identity to force the other ethnic groups to integrate their policy to one nation, one language and one religion. That is, who does not belong to the national *ethnic* group, they are forced to assimilate or move out of the nation-state. This idea has been penetrated through the state apparatuses such as military, police, education and media. In the next section the case of Rohingya Muslim ethnic minorities of Arakan state will be presented to show how the Myanmarization or the process of ethnic nationalism has contributed to make war in the multi-ethnic, multi-religion and multicultural state Myanmar.

The Rohingya Minorities and their Exclusion

The Rohingya Muslims are one of the most persecuted ethnic minorities in Myanmar, who are the decedents of Moorish, Arab and Persian traders including Moghul, Turk, Pathan and Bengali soldiers who came to Burma between 7th to 15th centuries (Ahmed, 2010, UNHCR, 2007). The independent Muslim kingdom of Arakan was conquered by the Buddhist kingdom of Burma in 1784. To save lives many Rohingya ran away to nearby area in the British ruled East Bengal⁹, now called Cox's Bazar. Some merged into Bangladesh, as the Rohingya are culturally and linguistically similar to the local Chittagonian people of Bangladesh and share the same Muslim faith (UNHCR 2007, and Ahmed, 2010). Afterwards, British colonized Burma and for administrative and agricultural purposes they moved population in and out of Burma. The displaced people of Arakan took the chance to return to their homeland. In 1942, the war between the British and the Japan forced many people to leave Burma for East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The Rohingya were ally of the British while the Buddhists supported the Japan that deepened further tension between the Buddhists and Muslims who stayed still in Burma after independence (Silverstein, 1980, cited by Pittaway, 2008). The Rohingya were promised to give freedom by the

⁹ Before the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, under British colonial period she was known as East Bengal and in Pakistan period was known as East Pakistan.

British but afterward they were put together with the Union of Burma. the independence of the Union of Burma even before 1947, they were promised to have the autonomy in economic, political and social rights so that other nation states join the union of Burma (ibid, 2008).

In reality, the Government of Myanmar considered the Rohingya not only the enemy but also illegal migrants from East Pakistan and persecution started from that time (Ahmed, 2010). They were forcefully enslaved, their land was appropriated and many were killed. Some Rohingya took up arms to establish their rights. Later on by promising them political rights and equal treatments similar to other citizens, they were persuaded to lay down their arms (ibid, 2010). However, the Rohingya were excluded from the census in 1977 by the military and again in the 1982 citizenship law while recognized 135 national races excluding Rohingya from full citizenship. The law categorized three types of citizenship (a) full citizenship, (b) associated citizenship and (c) naturalized citizenship. Citizenship security cards were issued consistent with a person's citizenship status: Pink, Blue and Green respectively (Fenny, 2001 and Ahmed, 2010). The law also required evidence of previous generations who lived in Arakan before 1820s. Most of the illiterate Rohingya failed to produce such documents.

The Rohingya were asked to register as Bengali-Burmese and thus excluded from the voter list, right to property, and other forms of citizen

and human rights (ibid, 2010). They were not even allowed to travel out of their village without permission from the local Peace and Development Council Chairman (Fenny, 2001 and Lewa, 2009). Along with economic and social deprivation, widespread violence, killing, rape and destruction of mosques forced most of the Rohingya to leave Burma for nearby Bangladesh not only for cultural similarity but also for weak border (Ahmed. 2010).

By now, approximately 800,000 Rohingya are living in Myanmar mainly in Arakan state, constituting 91% of the state population (Lewa, 2012). This huge concentration is due to internal forced displacement of the Rohingya communities from other areas. Tens of thousands have fled in recent decades to Malaysia, up to half a million to neighboring Bangladesh, and an unknown number are forcibly expatriated from Myanmar to Thailand, India and Saudi Arabia (IRIN, 2014). The eviction of Rohingya in the Rakhine state increases in Myanmar when military started clearing space to build army barracks and model villages (Ahmed, 2010 and Ullah, 2011).

The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) of Myanmar Government have taken plan to setup "Model Villages" to populate the Rohingya majority areas of Arakan by the Buddhists. Model villages have been established in the appropriated lands of the Rohingya communities. They also destroyed the previous Rohingya holy places,

historical monuments and relics by building Pagodas for Buddhists. Under the project, each of the families will receive 3 acres of Rohingya lands for cultivation and 0.2 acres of lands for housing along with monthly allowances for meal, monetary helps, a pair of bullocks and one bullock cart. Each of the model villages has been provided fifteen 5 Hp Honda Tractors (AFK Jilani, Human rights Violation cited in Ahmed, 2010 p-25). the factors that exclude Rohingya from Burma include deprivation of citizenship, forced labor, forced eviction and relocation, deprivation of right to education, mass killing, sexual harassment, the looting of properties, destroying mosques, and a lack of religious freedom (Ahmed, 2010; Lewa, 2009 and HRW, 2014).

Discussion

The government of Myanmar was isolated from the rest of the world for a long time. Currently they are trying to reform the political regime in a way to seek international support for economic development. However, in the national election only enlisted citizens can vote except for the Rohingya. In the recent census of Myanmar in 2014, the government forced the Rohingya to be enlisted as Bengali-Burmese. The Rohingya people rejected to be enlisted as government proposal, as they think that this enlistment will surely legalize that they are illegal in Myanmar.

One of the scholars in Arakan project, Iwama (2014) argued that this is a statistical exclusion to make Rohingya stateless.

According to the Human Right Watch (2013) report, the government of Myanmar is doing crime against humanity by ethnic cleansing. The military force is involved in killing the Rohingya Muslims. They burn houses, destroy mosques, rape and loot property from the Rohingya. Along with the military forces, the local monks are also agitating Buddhists to kill Muslims. Thus, the violence turns into a communal riot in which government forces directly or indirectly support the Buddhists. After the last violence in 2012, the Human Right Watch reports that there were several mass killing in the Arakan state, many witnessed Military, Police, Monks and local Buddhists were taking trucks loaded with dead bodies of the Rohingya Muslims and buried them in mass graves (HWR,2013).

The Arakanese political parties, Monks' association (shangha) and the other community groups produced various anti-Rohingya pamphlets and public statements. They all denied the Rohingya ethnicity, demonized them, and argued to remove them from the country, sometimes even using the phrase "ethnic cleansing" (HRW, 2013 p-12). After the mass riot, President Thein in 2012 July called for illegal Rohingya to be sent to third countries. However, most Rohingya are living in Myanmar for generations with a pre-colonial history. The president's call implied that

Rohingya did not belong to Myanmar that fosters the violence in Arakan state (HRW, 2013). the democratic leader Augn San Suu ki talks in the same way as Myanmar is for one nation, one language and one religion.

Moreover, the junta and militarization of state power leaves no scope for other ethnic groups to adjust with the new social reality. the Buddhist associations (*shangha*) and monks are rewarded with more land and social recognition which indicates that state power is in favor of their activities. In addition there were no legal actions against the perpetrators. Depriving the Rohingya of citizenship and human rights, create violence and exploitation which eventually leads to more ethnic cleansing, that reproduces violence in society in the name of ethnic nationalism.

From beginning of the Union of Burma, Myanmar's ethno-nationalism through civil war and armed conflict has created a new national identity that ultimately shapes members of the community into new types of politicized vernacular culture and thus leads to a different kind of participant society. Smith (2007) has identified this, as "insurgency as a way of life." In today's Myanmar, while ethnic and political injustices and exploitations have fuelled conflict in each and every governmental era, there have been "corollary factors underpinning the twin phenomena of insurgency as a way of life and the militarization of the state in post-colonial Burma" (Smith, 2007: 1).

Conclusion

Ethnic nationalism is constituted on race, kinship, language or common culture. In some cases it goes beyond the formation of identity to the reproduction of enmity, forces others to become faithful to that identity. Consequently, ethnic nationalism is associated with ethnic violence and project of ethnic cleansing or genocide (Calhoun, 2007:41). In this case, Myanmarization as ethnic nationalism created the Burmese identity as Buddhist and they propagate the Myanmar language as unique by denying other ethnic groups. At the same time socio-political and economic exclusion of other ethnic groups from the state institutions also fostered conflict. The relation between economic growth and grabbing lands also contribute to ethnic cleansing that Amy Chau (2005) has demonstrated in her book *World on Fire*. This is evident in recent economic reform and growth oriented development policies in Myanmar.

Not only the ethnic Rohingya Muslims but also Karen, kachin, San and other ethnic minorities are facing the same problem while the nation building process of Myanmarization is compelling all of the ethnic minorities to be integrated into the Myanmar nation. As a consequence, war and violence widely spread in Myanmar. These occurrences echo what Tilly (1985) said that state monopolize the means of violence to

support ruling government and the dominant social classes and religious groups.

As Mann (2005) mentioned that ethnic cleansing is not only murderous or physical removal but also non murderous “cleansing” (p-16). He identified various types of policies that create ambience of ethnic cleansing. These are institutional coercion, discrimination, segregation, cultural suppression, policed repression, wild deportation and mass emigration and finally mass killing. Here for the case of Rohingya ethnic minorities, each and every type of ethnic cleansing is present, excluding their name from the national race to mass killing; rape, deportation, forced displacement, deprivation of citizenship and human rights and forced labor. At the same time, five principles core constituencies of murderous ethnic cleansing identified by Mann (2005) is also present in Myanmar. After the recent election in 2016, Myanmar with a prototype of democratic government lead by the Democratic party of Augn San Suu ki is still in a vague position regarding the issue of Rohingya Muslim minorities which is an indication of ethnic denial as well.

From the overall discussion and evidence presented in this paper, convincing logic can be made that nationalism and homogenizing process in the name of one ethnic identity and one unique nation-state has created violence and war. In this case, denying other ethnic groups and their ethnic, linguistic and religious differences have created

violence and war in Myanmar from the very beginning of its independence. To be a peaceful land with diversity and tolerance, Myanmar should give other ethnic-religious-linguistic groups' socio-economic, cultural and political rights as full citizens to ensure social justice and human rights.

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