



The Rohingya Crisis: History and Politics

Introduction:

The recent events in Myanmar's South-western province of Rakhine have drawn considerable global and local attention. As a result of the army's "clearance operations", termed dubbed by Myanmar's government, nearly 600,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled from their homes in northern Rakhine regions into neighboring Bangladesh while approximately 2,000 people have been killed since August 24, 2017 **(1)**.

The Myanmar's government claims that the ongoing operations in the northern Rakhine region are being carried out in response to terrorist attacks conducted by Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) killing 11 members of security forces **(2)**.

The issue and origins of the latest violence, directed against ethnic Muslim in the Rakhine province (previously named as Muslim Arakan), are the continuation of the old historic dispute involving Mushrik Bhuddist hatred against Islam and Muslims. Therefore, it is important for Shabab to understand the issue in a comprehensive way to make our dawah more effective and influential in ummah.

Geography of Arakan:

Arakan – now a western province of Burma – had been an independent country till 1784 C.E. As with other countries, the geography of Arakan has had important influences on the course of its history. That Arakan managed to maintain itself as an independent kingdom until almost the end of the eighteenth century was mainly due to its geographical position **(3)**.

The total area of Arakan during the British period was approximately 20,000 sq. miles. It is a narrow mountainous strip of land along the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal. It stretches north and south; wider in the north and tapering down to the south. It touches Bangladesh in the northwest, India in the north and Chin Hills in the northeast. It is cut off from Burma by a long range of near-impassable mountains, of Arakan Yoma, in the east making it a natural physiographic unit. It has 176 miles long maritime and land boundary with Bangladesh which traditionally serves as 'Gate Way to the Far East'. Its 360 miles long coastal belt in the west makes Arakan easy for sea communication.

This rendered Arakan possible that Buddhism reached there earlier than Burma. Islam's arrival to Arakan and adjacent coastal regions of what is now called Chittagong was five centuries earlier than mainland Bengal and it is also attributed to its geography.

Arakan is a land of mountains, thick forests, rivers and creeks. Bulk of the total land surface area is covered with forests. Northern part of Arakan is wider with alluvial deltaic plains whereas the southern portion is narrow and rocky. There are a number of off-shore islands in the Arakan coast of which the Ramree and the Cheduba are the largest. There is a deep water natural harbour in the coast off the Ramree island a few miles northeast of Kyaukpyu township.

This deep sea natural harbour can accommodate large ships like U.S. 7th fleet. The alluvial soil of the Mayu, Kaladan and Lemro valleys in north Arakan is so fertile that once the area was popularly called Dhanavati or granary of rice. The growing of rice in Arakan became so extensive and successful that the surplus product, till the beginning of the Second World War, was used to be exported in huge quantities to Chittagong, Calcutta, Madaras, Colombo and Kochin.

History of Islam in Arakan:

The Arabs were a foremost seafaring and maritime people of the ancient times. They had been in contact with Southern Asia, South eastern Asia and Far East as early as third century C.E. Since then, the Arabs had founded small trading colonies all along the shores of Southern Asian and South eastern Asian waters including Arakan up to Sumatra, Java and the Molucus.

Then towards the middle of the seventh century C.E. dawned a new day for the Arabs with the rise of Islam as a great spiritual, social and political force. Within a hundred years of the

demise of the Prophet, they became the masters of a mighty state than that of Rome. Their domination of the seas extended from the two basins of the Mediterranean, down the Red sea to the known lengths of the Indian Ocean. The Red Sea was virtually an 'Arab Lake'. In the Indian Ocean, however, their direct political control did not extend in the east beyond the coastal areas of the lower Indus. Yet, we find the strange spectacle of numerous Arab settlements with the full enjoyment of their religious and social practices, along the Konkan, Malabar and the Coromandal coasts, in the Maldives and Ceylon, and their commercial activity extended to the Andamans, the Nicobars., the Arakan coast, Malaya, Sumatra and Java.

Islam had come to these regions without any political support whatsoever and remained rooted to the soil for centuries. Mr. R.B. Smart, author of Burma Gazetteer, stated: "About 788 A.D. Mahataing Sandya ascended the throne, founded a new city (Vesali) on the site of old Ramawadi and died after a reign of twenty two years. In his reign, several ships were wrecked on Ramree island and the crews, said to have been Mohamedans, were sent to Arakan proper and settled in villages." During the same period, stated Arakanese chronicles that Muslim faqirs and dervishes (saints) used to visit Arakan coast. One of the widely known fact is the existence of Muslim shrines called Badr Moqam are essentially the commemorative shrines originally erected by the followers of devotees of Pir Badrudin Badri-i-Alam, popular known as Pir Badr scattered along the coastline of Arakan (4).

The legendary Hanifar Tonki and Khayafurir Tonki (shrines) in Mayu territory, the shrines of Babaji Shah Monayam of Ambari and Pir Badr Shah at Akyab all bear conclusive evidence of the arrival of Musims in Arakan as early as 8th century C.E. The Arakanese chronicle further gives reference to the travelling of Muslim mystics in the country during Pagan period. Thus, it is proved that not only Muslim merchants but also saints and dervishes used to frequently the coast of the bay during those early times. The Arab merchants and mystics carried out missionary activities among the locals. Islam attracted large numbers of people towards. Many of the Arab Muslims married local women and settled in towns and villages permanently. The Muslims merchants used either overland routes across Arakan Yoma to upper Burma and then to China or travelled by the water way through Malacca, Sumatra and Java to the far East. On their return journey to the Middle East, the Muslims traders used the same routes via Arakan. The Muslims are said to be in control of the foreign trade of Arakan until recent centuries.

During the successive centuries, Muslim population grew in large numbers as a result of conversation and new immigration. Historian G.E. Harvey stated: "After the tenth century, the country was professedly Buddhist, notwithstanding the spread of Mohammedanism which by thirteenth century had dotted the coast from Assam to Malaya with the curious mosques known as Budder mokam. Doubtless, it is Mohammedan influence which led to women being more secluded in Arakan than in Burma". By the 13th century, Islam had conquered the heart and soul of the people between Africa's Atlantic seaboard and Bengal. It disseminated the most powerful set of values of the age. Arakan being adjacent to Bengal and having already a substantial Muslim population of its own the impact of Islamic influence on Arakan since 13th century had been tremendous.

The current population of Muslims in Arakan state is estimated to be 1.1 million.

Influx of Magadah Buddhists into Arakan:

Arrival of Buddhism into Arakan began around a century before the Christian Era. In 8th century, under the Hindu revivalist leader, Sankarachariya, Buddhists in India were persecuted in large-scale. In Magadah, old Bihar of India, Buddhists were so ruthlessly oppressed by chauvinist Hindus and rival Mahayana sect of Buddhists that large numbers of Hinayana Buddhists had been compelled to flee eastward who ultimately found shelter in Arakan under the Chandra kings (5).

Also, Buddhist refugees from Bengal, during the Tibenet conquest in the eighth and ninth centuries, crossed over to the nearest place viz. Arakan where they could preserve their religion. It is to be noticed that Magadah in its pristine days included Bengal. These Buddhist immigrants assumed the name Magh as they have migrated from Magadah. By this time, in Arakan, all the

three religions Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam were present side by side, but there had been large-scale conversion to Islam.

The Mongolian Invasion swept over Arakan which ended the Chandra dynasty in 957 C.E. Hinduism in the easterly Hindu State of Vesali thus vanished forever. This invasion not only closed the epoch of the Chandras but also carried away the Pala kings of Bengal at the same time. Vesali could never reemerge but in Bengal the Hindus regained their supremacy in a few years by pushing back the Mongolians into deeper mountainous areas. But the invaders became educated in the mixed culture of the country they have conquered and were ultimately assimilated with its inhabitants during those long five centuries.

After the disappearance of Hinduism and the assimilation of Mongolians and Tibeto-Burmans there remained only two distinctive races -- the Rohingyas and the Maghs Buddhists who lived together in Arakan centuries after centuries.

As a result of internal feuds and Palace intrigues, The Muslims rule in Arakan weakened in the eighteenth century and fell to neighbouring Burman Buddhists in early nineteenth century.

British rule over Arakan (1825-1947):

In 1826, when Britain assumed the task of ruling Arakan, the conditions were unsettled and remained so for some years. A widespread revolt against Britishers was put down in 1836 and the country began really to settle down. At first, the two provinces of Arakan and Tannasserim were separately administered under the direct supervision of the Governor-General of India, but Arakan was soon transferred to the Government of Bengal and its Superintendent subordinated to the Commissioner of Chittagong. The Indian system of administration was introduced there with almost exclusively Indian experience (6).

Before long, however, Arakan had its own Commissioner and was placed under at his disposal. The administration was reorganized. Under the Commissioner, the district officer styled senior assistant to the Commissioner of Arakan, and now called Deputy Commissioner, performed the duties of a District Magistrate, Judge and Collector; under him was Junior Assistant Commissioner, who exercises similar powers except those of hearing appeals.

It is totally misleading and ill-motivated to allege that the bulk of the Muslims entered Arakan during the British era. The fact is that many Muslim families, who had earlier been driven out by the Burmans, have returned to their homes in Arakan when peace prevailed there as explained by Phayre. But, since 1942 and till today, anti-Muslim has rioted as a result of continuous ethnic cleansing operations in which as many as a million Rohingyas have been forced to leave Arakan.

The Britishers completed annexation of whole Burma in 1885. An organization, named Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) led by students of Rangoon college, was established in 1906 originally intended to promote Buddhism and education and to render social service. The YMBA started taking political resolutions as early as 1917. The YMBA converted itself into the General Council of Burmese Association (GCBA) which was more broad-based and a symbol of Burmese nationalism. The GCBA fought with the British government for the rights of the Burmese.

Meanwhile, anti-foreigners hatred had been fanned by GCBA and other quarters, particularly Buddhist monks. Fiery speeches were delivered to drive out the Indians and loot their properties. Anti-Indian riots broke out in 1930 in Rangoon. Around 1930, a new organisation, Do Ba Ma Asiayone (Our Burman Association), was founded by young university students calling themselves Thakins (masters) who sent a wave of anti-Indian thrill throughout the country. Burmese Buddhist masses are unable to distinguish native Muslims like Rohingyas of Arakan, Zerbades of central Burma, Panthays of eastern Burma and Bashus of southern Burma from general Indians who entered during the colonial era and attacked them indiscriminately. Meantime, Burman religious and political leaders came to Arakan to organise the Arakanese Maghs into Thakin Party. The objective of Thakin Party is to free Burma from the British occupation.

However, the Thakins infused are Muslim hatred in the minds of Arakan Maghs during the struggle for independence Burma with the ulterior motive of dividing the two sister communities.

When the question of 'separation' arose, the British government invited 24 delegates representing various communities of Burma to a 'Burma Round Table Conference' held in London from November 27, 1931 to January 12, 1932. No representatives of the Rohingyas were invited as the Britishers counted them within the Indian community. Mr. Tun Aung Gyaw, a Magh Buddhist Thakin, led the Arakanese delegation. With the separation of Burma from British India, and granting of 'Home Rule' (internal self-government) in 1937, the Thakins got full control of the administration. Just one year after the separation in 1938, anti-Muslim riot broke out again in Rangoon. Aung San, leader of Thakin Party, paid a secret visit to Arakan around the same time where he attended a conference held at Myebon township. He discussed with Arakanese Buddhist leaders his strategy of gaining independence of Burma including his policy towards the Rohingyas of Arakan. When the Second Great World War started in Europe, Burma was declared by its Governor to be automatically at war with Axis powers.

Aung San and his thirty comrades secretly went to Japan where they formed Burma Independence Army (BIA) under the patronisation of Japanese. The Japanese bombed Rangoon on December 23, 1941. The Britishers withdrew from Burma and Arakan into India. The first group of BIA men, led by Ne Win (Ex-Gen. Ne Win), reached Rangoon in early months of 1942 via Moulmein. This caused great consternation in the minds of Indians in proper Burma and Rohingyas in Arakan. The Indians had already started to flee Burma through all available routes.

Current Dispute Between Buddhists and Muslims:

Myanmar is composed of 135 officially recognized ethnicities in country's eight different regions with Bamar being the largest and politically dominant of them belonging from country's heartland. Rohingya Muslims from Rakhine state, with estimated population of around 1.1 million, are not officially recognized by Myanmar since the controversial 1982 citizenship law (7).

According to this citizenship law, most Rohingya Muslims are considered by the Burmese authorities to be "resident foreigners" not citizens. This lack of full citizenship rights means that the Rohingya are subject to other abuses, including restrictions on their freedom of movement, discriminatory limitations on access to education, and arbitrary confiscation of property. Furthermore, the verification scheme under this law mandates to give proof of citizenship before 1823 for all ethnicities except Muslims as they are not recognized as a race in the country despite having Rohingya history since 15th century. UN has described Rohingya Muslims are "the most friendless people in the world" (8).

It is worth noting that Muslims in Myanmar were recognized as citizens till 1958.

Despite having a rich Muslim history of presence, trading and ruling of the Rakhine region (also called Arakan kingdom) since 1430, the local narrative in Myanmar is outright hostile claiming that Muslim population is in fact "Bengalis" imported during the British colonial rule for their local projects. The Kingdom of Muslim Arakan was economically and politically closely linked to Sultanate of Bengal but relatively independent bordering Buddhist dynasty in upper Burma (9).

There are two major ethnic communities in Arakan. The Rohingyas who from the majority population of Arakan, as a whole, are the believers in the religion of Islam and the Maghs (Rakhaings) who are the minority that professes Buddhism. During 1942, anti-Muslim rioting the Muslims of southern Arakan had been pushed to the north whereas the Buddhist Maghs took over the southern half of the country where they now form majority. There are a few tribes dwelling in Arakan hills who are mostly animists. Their number is still insignificant (10).

Extreme communal violence against Rohingyas Muslims is a permanent feature of Myanmar's polity even before independence of 1948. Historical fear and hatred within Buddhist community against Muslims are widespread as per the finding of the Kofi Anan Advisory Commission on Rakhine State. The military junta drafted citizenship law in 1982 which stripped Rohingya Muslims of their citizenship; thus, increasing their resentment, hardships and political exclusion.

Sources of communal anger against Rohingya are both historical and ideological. Historically, the Mughal military campaign, under Aurangzeb of the mid-17th century to liberate

Dhaka, Chittagong and Arakan territories from Buddhist (and Portuguese Christian marauders) occupation, has left a deep imprint on the psyche of followers of Theravāda branch of Buddhism which is dominant in Myanmar (11).

During the WWII, Britain recruited Rohigya and Bengali Muslims to repel the Japanese invasion. A significant faction of pro-independence movement against the British had close ties with Japan. This anger has been reflected by Army Commander Sr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing's recently when he was quoted by media on September 2, 2017 saying:

“It (army) won't ease off its campaign, describing it as “unfinished business” dating back to World War II. Army was pursuing its patriotic duty to preserve Myanmar's borders and prevent Rohingya insurgents carving out their own territory in northern Rakhine State. “We will never let such a terrible occurrence happen again” (12).

Ideologically, the Buddhist 969 movement is gaining ground within Myanmar and specially in Rakhin and is led by a monk named Wirathu. Wirathu urges Buddhists to boycott Muslim shops and shun interfaith marriages. He calls mosques “enemy bases.” He is also quoted as saying: “You can be full of kindness and love, but you cannot sleep next to a mad dog,” referring to Muslims (13).

How to Resolve the Misery of Rohingya Muslims?

There have been large numbers of protests Rohingya crisis within the Muslim countries showing solidarity with Rohingya cause. Many humanitarian and Islamic groups from Muslim countries have contributed in the relief effort near the Bangladesh-Myanmar border.

As explained above, the Rohingya crisis has deep roots within Buddhist society in Myanmar and the regime has taken no serious measures to stop the ongoing violence in northern Rakhine state. State Counselor Aung Sang Suu Kyi's address to the UN General Assembly session from capital Naypyidaw on September 18 labelled the media coverage of Rohingya issue as mere “allegations and counter allegations” and condemned “all human rights violation” without specifically addressing causes of misery of Rohingya Muslims.

The current Muslim rulers will always hold the Muslims back through their adherence to Western imposed borders. They will never allow Muslims to re-attain the status of the world's leading power or to disregard the so-called international laws and borders so as to respond to the cries of Muslims all over the world. Instead, they are moving persistently in the path of “divide and rule” that was set by their colonialist masters, as obedient slaves.

It is high time for the people of Pakistan in general and the officers of the armed forces in particular to turn the tide by re-establishing the ruling by the Deen of Allah (swt), so that a Khaleefah Rashid can unify all Muslim lands under the authority of Khilafah on the Method of the Prophethood. Allah (swt) said, **﴿وَاذْكُرُوا اللَّهَ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذْ كُنْتُمْ أَعْدَاءَ فَأَلَّفَ بَيْنَ فُلُوبِكُمْ فَأَصْبَحْتُمْ بِنِعْمَتِهِ إِخْوَانًا وَكُنْتُمْ عَلَى شَفَا حُفْرَةٍ مِنَ النَّارِ فَأَنْقَذَكُمْ مِنْهَا كَذَلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ آيَاتِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ﴾** **“And hold firmly to the rope of Allah all together and do not become divided. And remember the favor of Allah upon you – when you were enemies and He brought your hearts together and you became, by His favor, brothers. And you were on the edge of a pit of the Fire, and He saved you from it. Thus does Allah make clear to you His verses that you may be guided.”** [Surah Aali Imran 3:10]

The plight of Rohingya Muslims does not deserve the delay of one single day and Pakistan having a big Muslim army cannot justify this negligence by saying that it is busy fighting the terrorists within the country. The only enemy we need to fight is the one that is keeping us away from our duties and keeping us apart. This is the time to awaken from this deep slumber and take action. Friendship with Kuffar has never brought any good to us.

The people of Rohingya have been holding on to the rope of Allah with patience and forbearance, waiting for His (swt) help, the help we have been commanded to provide them in the form of Khilafah (Caliphate), as that is the shade of Allah and for Muslims there can be no other shade than of His mercy. Division of lands has divided the Ummah, and Khilafah will unite the Ummah and raise it as a power.

The unification between the militaries of Pakistan and Bangladesh on the basis of Islam joined together to answer the call of Rohingya Muslims will remove whatever is left of nationalistic enmity between them.

Depending upon how the pattern of Khilafah would emerge in South and South-East Asia, the combined armed forces of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia should ideally be suited for military maneuvers against Bhuddist regime of Myanmar. Combined arms actions should range from Naval Blockade of the entire Myanmar's coast in Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea while land warfare will include moves to cut off Arakan/Rakhine State from remaining Myanmar landmass. Complete conquest of Myanmar, however in my view, will require some time given the general societal hostility against Islam which needs to be softened before opening mainland Myanmar for Islam eventually.

Nuclear deterrence and diplomacy will also be in play to pressurize India and China so that Myanmar's regime is fully isolated in the international arena.

May Allah (swt) grant Islam and Muslims with victory in the form of Khilafah State Soon Inshallah. Amin.

﴿إِنَّمَا وَلِيُّكُمُ اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا الَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ وَهُمْ رَاغِبُونَ * وَمَنْ يَتَوَلَّ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا فَإِنَّ حِزْبَ اللَّهِ هُمُ الْغَالِبُونَ﴾

“Your ally is none but Allah and [therefore] His Messenger and those who have believed – those who establish prayer and give zakah, and they bow [in worship]. * And whoever is an ally of Allah and His Messenger and those who have believed – indeed, the party of Allah – they will be the predominant.” [Surah Al-Ma'idah: 55-56]

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