



## Muslim vs. Buddhist

Myanmar's young government must contain its growing ethnic divide.

by Animesh Roul



WHEN Muslim militants attacked Myanmar's border police in the western Rakhine State, the Buddhist-majority nation's security forces struck back against the region's vulnerable Muslim minority, who do not have citizen rights. The decade-old conflict between ethnic Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya (Bengali) Muslims has drawn international attention. There is a severe risk in the embattled Southeast Asian country that the clashes could spark both a militant Islamic insurgency against the state and a genocide against the Muslim minority population. Myanmar must somehow halt both.

Armed attacks against border police continued on and off for days toward the end of last year. An October 9 attack killed nine border policemen, and as many attackers died in the ensuing gun battles. A similar ambush on October 11 left four more policemen dead. Violence again erupted on November 12-13, when armed militants launched a surprise attack on a military convoy during a clearance operation in Ma Yinn Taung village in Maungdaw

town. Two security personnel, including a senior army officer, died in the ambush, while several suspected militants were killed. Subsequent government backed counter-insurgency operations in the area witnessed an escalation of armed clashes that claimed the lives of nearly 70 suspected Rohingya militants and 17 security force personnel.

Government forces have been accused of retaliating by razing entire villages of displaced Rohingya to the ground, with security forces allegedly killing over 500 people and raping women during one eviction last year, as reported in the Winter 2017 issue of

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*The Global Intelligence.* Over 77,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled their homes since October. The United Nations has called it a "crime against humanity", while the Myanmar government has said it is merely the result of "security clearance sweeps" in its attempts to roust out militants. There is fear that the back-and-forth attacks

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between insurgents and government forces will escalate into a much worse conflict, with many innocents caught in the middle.

## Rohingya Militancy

Despite the fact that no organized Islamist group claimed responsibility for the last year's attacks on the border posts, a Myanmar government investigation blamed the little-known Aqa-Mul Mujahidin (AMM) group. If the government investigations based on the statements of the arrested militants are correct, this may not be a local initiative. Jihadi videos in circulation point towards an operational link between AMM and Pakistan- and Bangladesh-based Rohingya Islamists.

Rohingyas are currently a stateless community, denied citizenship by both Myanmar and Bangladesh. Myanmar considers them illegal immigrants from neighboring Bangladesh, a country to which thousands of Rohingyas have fled. Islamist militancy in support of the minority Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar is not a novel phenomenon. Similar armed attacks against border police were reported in the area between February and May 2014. This spurt of violence traces its origin to the deadly June–October 2012 riots between Buddhists and Muslim Rohingyas that triggered huge losses of life and large-scale displacements. That year, many international rights agencies blamed Myanmar's government for a military crackdown against minority Rohingya Muslims. The government's information taskforce on the Rakhine situation rejected the allega-

tions of military excess. A report by the International Crisis Group suggested that both Muslim and Buddhist communities were grateful for the protection provided by the military during the riots. As thousands of homes were burnt, the rioting triggered a Rohingya refugee crisis that attracted transnational Islamic jihadi groups to support a nascent armed movement against Myanmar's government.

## Call for Organized Jihad

The propaganda machinery of Rohingya militant groups is currently active, spreading videos and messages on popular sharing websites. One such video featured AMM or Harakah al-Yaqin's (HaY) leader Hafiz Tohar urging Rohingya Muslims to come out and join the jihad. At this juncture, it is not clear if AMM is just another name or new incarnation for the HaY, and media reports suggest that these two could be the same group using different nomenclature. Speaking in a Bengali–Arabic local dialect, Tohar has issued several statements and propaganda videos highlighting the plights of Rohingya Bengalis and the military excesses of the Myanmar government against the community. The statements are aimed at inviting fellow radicalized Rohingyas, mostly settled in Middle Eastern countries, India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, to join the surge against the Myanmar government.

Various investigations undertaken by groups such as the International Crisis Group (ISG), as well as media investigations—especially by Bangladesh-based



*Rohingya refugees*

*Dhaka Tribune*—revealed and corroborated some aspects of the government’s claim about AMM’s international links and how the newly emerged group is backed by a section of radicalized Rohingya diaspora based in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. According to the ISG report, the group was established after the June–October 2012 riots and sectarian violence. The report also underscores that the militants were trained under the supervision of Rohingya Jihadi veterans with experience fighting in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Interviews with members of HaY revealed that the group was responsible for the series of attacks on Myanmar Border Guard Police outposts in October. In one of the interviews with the *Dhaka Tribune*, the leaders of HaY denied being a terrorist group, as portrayed by the Myanmar government, and said that they would prefer to be called a “revolutionary group waging a movement against the oppression of Rohingya Muslims by the Myanmar government”. HaY’s propaganda suggests that they are looking for Islamic legitimacy for their organized violence by seeking out fatwas from senior clerics in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. This would help this fringe group to unite scattered Rohingya militants under one platform.

Subsequent interrogations of captured HaY members have also brought the inner working style of the group to light, as well as details about the plots and details of its core membership. Its leader, Hafiz Tohar, reportedly attended a six-month Taliban training course in Pakistan and visited Myanmar from a village in Bangladesh to organize the armed insurgency. As



*Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi*

Hatched by IS-affiliated Jemaah Ansar Daulah, this plan to avenge atrocities against the Rohingya was foiled by local police. AQIS has also threatened to avenge the persecution of Rohingyas in Myanmar.

### Buddhists Extremists

Criticism levelled at democratic icon and current state counselor Aung San Suu Kyi has mostly been directed at her failure to condemn or control the religious intolerance in the country after her party took power. The Rohingya crisis has brought international condemnation from rights groups, governments, the United Nations, and even the Vatican. Overlooking the nascent militant movement and its violence, world leaders, including several Nobel Peace Prize laureates, have criticized Myanmar’s leadership, primarily Suu Kyi, herself a Nobel laureate, for failing to uphold the human rights of Rohingya Muslims. Some have even termed the ongoing state violence ethnic cleansing and a crime against humanity.

Those sympathetic to the Rohingya cause have raised concerns regarding the so-called Buddhist “969” nationalist movement in Myanmar, spearheaded by radical Buddhist monk Ashan Wirathu. Under Wirathu and his organization Ma Ba Tha (loosely trans-

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far as training and indoctrination of these AMM or HaY leaders are concerned, investigation reports indicate well-entrenched Pakistani and Bangladeshi links to this latest militant resurgence.

The regional wings of global Jihadist groups such as Islamic State and Al-Qaeda, for instance IS’s Khurasan province and Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), have also proclaimed support for Rohingya Muslims and attempted to exploit the situation there. The Islamic State inspired a bomb plot at the Myanmar Embassy in Jakarta in November 2016.

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*Rohingya village burning in 2012*

lated as Patriotic Association of Myanmar), Myanmar's Buddhist nationalists aim to restrict the spread of Islam and fight to protect the country's Buddhist identity. Wirathu's message is directed against Rohingyas, and he and his followers have been accused of inciting violence through religious hate speech with heavy anti-Islamic rhetoric. Though anti-Rohingya sentiment remains high in the Buddhist-majority country, the highest-ranking government-appointed Buddhist clergy, under severe international pressure, banned Wirathu from delivering sermons across the country for one year, starting from March 10,

It is however uncertain whether Wirathu and his Ma Ba Tha group will be silenced by this ban, as they enjoy the patronage of a powerful section in the military, elites from the previous administration, and of course a section of Buddhist nationalists and alarmists who oppose the expansion of Islam in the country.

The Rohingya issue and rising anti-Islamic sentiments are not the only challenge the present government is facing, however. There are other ethnic faultlines the administration has to tackle. A renewed armed insurgency in the North began in November, erupting again with violent force in the early weeks of March in Laukkai, the administrative capital of the

ethnic Kokang region of Shan State. Clashes between the Myanmar army and ethnic rebels, spearheaded by the Northern Alliance, left 30 dead and triggered mass displacement. The Northern Alliance is comprised of four ethnically-aligned armed groups fighting Myanmar forces in northern Shan and Kachin states. This conflict surfaced at a time when Aung San Suu Kyi and her government are attempting to bring all armed factions into the government-sponsored peace process through the signing of a nationwide ceasefire agreement.

With Myanmar's young democratic government facing an uphill battle to manage internal ethnic and armed strife, a growing Rohingya Islamic militancy will only add to the existing miseries amid a clamor against the government for failing to protect its minorities. Any further state apathy towards the stateless Rohingya population will exacerbate the emerging Islamist situation in the region, making the desperate among them easy recruits for global jihadi groups. ■

*Animesh Roul is a New-Delhi-based public policy analyst, with specializations in counterterrorism, radical Islam, terror financing, and other issues relating to armed conflict.*