



THE ROHINGYA AND ISLAMIC EXTREMISM: A CONVENIENT MYTH

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The plight of Myanmar's minority Muslim population, the Rohingya, has received widespread international attention, most notably in light of the ongoing refugee boat crisis. Within Myanmar itself, however, many actors continue to invoke the threat posed to the country by Islamic extremism. Not only does such a connection with the Rohingya lack credibility, argue Christopher O'Hara and Elliot Brennan, but such a narrative legitimates harsher repression and leads to the formation of grievances which, in the long term, may provoke radicalization.

The firebrand Buddhist monk, U Wirathu, frequently remarks that Islam poses an existential threat to Myanmar. A central tenet of this argument is the citation of one Muslim militant organization, the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO). The RSO is often accused of being responsible for coordinated attacks against the Myanmar Defense Services, as well having international links to terrorist organizations that seek to promote jihad in Myanmar. Indeed, these organizations have claimed they are supporting local resistance groups and exporting jihad to Myanmar's shores. This policy brief questions the credibility of the narrative that the Rohingya pose an extremist Islamic threat, arguing that attention should instead be focused on resolving the plight of the Rohingya and attenuating their grievances.

Rohingya Militancy

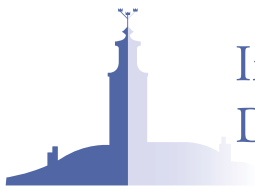
Beginning in the 1970s, the Myanmar Defense Services (MDS) launched an offensive in Arakan State, which led to violent clashes and resulted in the displacement of over 250,000 refugees, mainly Rohingya Muslims, who fled over the border into Bangladesh. The ensuing refugee crisis and dismal conditions for refugees created a fertile ground for nationalist groups to emerge. The RSO was one such group, which emerged from the more moderate Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF) in 1982. Classified as a terrorist organization by the Myanmar government, the RSO sought to secure greater rights for the Rohingya people within the Union.

In spite of purported and tenuous connections with Islamic extremist groups such as Jamaat-e-Islami, active in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, the RSO's activities were

largely confined to Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh from where it carried out localized military campaigns across the border against the MDS. It moreover lacked the military capacity of larger ethnic armies elsewhere in Myanmar and so represented, in the pre-September 11 counter-insurgency world, what was seen as a minimal threat. It was further dealt a body blow in 2001 when the Bangladeshi military and security apparatus targeted the group's training camps, which led to a severe decline in the RSO's operational capabilities.

Extremist Connections?

While many analysts agree that today the group is essentially operationally defunct, there remain claims that the RSO has maintained close links with international terrorist organizations in the region and further afield. After 2001, the Burmese government began sharing intelligence with the U.S. on Rohingya organizations, namely, the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO), a conglomerate organization of the RSO factions and other Rohingya militant groups. As one 2002 U.S. cable reports on this unusual intelligence sharing, "Its purpose is probably to draw a connection between Al Qaeda, which has supported ARNO, and Burmese insurgent groups active on the Thai border." The report, prepared by Burmese military intelligence, noted that as of 2002, ARNO had 170 armed insurgents with five representatives having met with al-Qaeda in May 2000, and that in 2001 some 90 ARNO members had been selected to attend a guerrilla warfare course in Libya and Afghanistan. Two Taliban representatives were reported to have reciprocated the visit, arriving in Chittagong in November 2001. While these details were



deemed by U.S. government officials receiving the Burmese intelligence as “generally plausible” given the detail of information submitted, they were otherwise unverified and represented tenuous links offered by a source (the MDS) with a significant vested interest in its dissemination.

More recent reports have further cast doubt on such connections. Photos released in 2013 that purported to show RSO soldiers at a training camp in North Arakan state were discredited and shown to be of Jamaat-e-Islami fighters training in Bangladesh many years prior. Noteworthy is that most alleged activities have taken place in southeast Bangladesh rather than in Myanmar. And while Naypyidaw has long warned Bangladesh not to harbor anti-Myanmar government forces, known groups with past links to the RSO are also hostile to the Bangladesh government. Dhaka would thus be loath to support an RSO presence in the east of the country. That said, the deterioration in the political situation in Bangladesh will erode the capacity of the government to act against terrorist groups within its borders.

Other information used by Naypyidaw to demonstrate the threat of Rohingya insurgency comes from further afield. Foiled terror attacks—such as the 2013 plot on the Myanmar Embassy in Indonesia—have been carried out by groups sympathetic to the Rohingya, but not by Rohingya themselves. Furthermore, Indian and Bangladeshi media have suggested that Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba has been trying to recruit Rohingya refugees. In 2013, the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute noted that a handful of Rohingya refugees were believed to have joined conservative Muslim organizations, and that the RSO had formed a partnership with Harkat-ul Jihad-e-Islami Bangladesh, a Pakistani-linked terrorist group banned in Bangladesh since 2005. Other reports suggest that Jaish-e-Mohammed, a Kashmiri separatist group, has also tried to recruit Rohingya.

Despite such reported linkages, there have been no known terrorist activities in Rakhine state. Accordingly, no open source information has supported the accusation that RSO poses a real and present threat to the MDS, and certainly not, as claimed by U Wirathu, an existential threat to Myanmar. Thus while sympathetic groups may try to launch attacks on Myanmar, they are highly unlikely to be driven by the RSO or any other Rohingya organization.

Stoking a Convenient Myth

While evidence of Rohingya militancy and Islam-inspired extremism lacks credibility, the Rohingya issue is being used

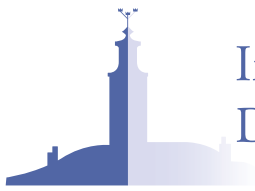
by Naypyidaw, international terrorist organizations, and certain domestic groups to serve their own agendas.

First, Naypyidaw’s desire to paint ethnic armed groups as terrorists has been exploited in the past to elicit counter-terrorism support from other states, notably the U.S. While progress made in ceasefire negotiations has since seen the Myanmar government distance itself somewhat from such conflations, it is nonetheless still exaggerating the threat posed by the RSO and the Rohingya. Playing the “terror threat” card also taps into nationalist sentiment and diverts attention away from the government’s failings in other spheres.

In terms of prominent domestic groups, the Buddhist nationalist 969 group led by U Witharu has been particularly vocal in its claims that the RSO and Islam in general threaten the core of Buddhist identity in Myanmar. This provides a convenient rallying cry for the 969 organization and a way to gain support, much like populist right wing parties do in Europe.

For international terrorist organizations in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia, the plight of the Rohingya and their repression are also an important catalyst for legitimizing their own goals of wanting to export their versions of Islam to Myanmar and the wider region. In 2014, the head of al-Qaeda, Al-Zawahiri, called upon Muslims in Myanmar to rise up against the Myanmar government. Abu Bakar Bashir, the Indonesian head of Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid, an offshoot of Jemaaah Islamiyah, which has declared baiyat or allegiance to ISIS has also issued threats of attacks on MDS and Burmese Buddhists. This has gone as far afield as Somali terror group Al Shabaab, which issued a statement in May calling on the saving of Myanmar’s Muslims from the “savage Buddhists.” These established Islamist groups, who promote their own version of global jihad, are also using the plight of the Rohingya to serve their own interests.

The above actors all have an interest in stoking a convenient myth, but this fact alone does not substantiate any threat of insurgency on the part of the Rohingya. Moreover, statements by the Rohingya and the RSO themselves have sought to dispel such fears. In a recent interview, Muhammad Yunus, leader of one RSO faction, denies that he has requested support from international terrorist organizations, and also denies that there are even active RSO armies. Another leader from the Rohingya minority group has also distanced the ethnic group from foreign Islamic organizations. While this does not prove that such links are totally



non-existent, more significant is that it is the Rohingya themselves who face the largest threat, if attacks are carried out in their name. Furthermore, wariness of previous Buddhist on Muslim violence, as witnessed in 2012, and the repercussions of reciprocal violence should any Rohingya take up arms, has led the majority of Rohingya Muslims to remain firmly anti-violent.

Addressing Grievances

Living in poverty under the former junta government, the Rohingya have been largely isolated from the influence of global jihadi and Islamic extremist groups. This, and the robust influence of a strong sense of community, has insulated the Rohingya from radicalization. Yet the Myanmar government has had a hand in their current dismal living conditions and also stripped the Rohingya of their temporary citizenship. While this by itself has not led to a taking up of arms, continued threats and injustices may, long term, lead to a certain radicalization—whether in the name of Islam or more simply to counter continued persecution.

Accordingly, greater attention needs to be paid to addressing the Rohingya issue. Indeed, the failure to address structural inequalities and underlying grievances in counter-terrorism strategies in recent years, notably in Iraq and Afghanistan, has broadly been seen to have increased the risk and ferocity of insurgencies and ballooned otherwise manageable issues. These are lessons Myanmar should heed. While there is a risk of radicalization in the wake of the recent Rohingya refugee crisis, the threat should not be taken as a given, nor as imminent. The situation must nonetheless be addressed through policy measures by the Myanmar government. Changing the anti-Muslim public sentiment and promoting more conciliatory narratives should be the starting point of this process. Addressing citizenship issues and discriminatory laws is also vital. Following this, rebuilding Rohingya communities and welcoming back Rohingya that have fled the country is necessary. A sort of institutional empathy from the Myanmar government is needed. These policies will not be easy processes nor popular amongst the influential Buddhist nationalist groups and their supporters. But they are needed to address the current discrimination and persecution facing the Rohingya community. Indeed, better accommodating rather than alienating the Rohingya will be essential to rebuilding a strong community and thus removing the seeds for any potential future violent extremism.

Conclusion

Amidst strong international criticism, Naypyidaw has much to do in addressing the Rohingya issue as well as managing anti-Muslim mobilization among certain groups in Myanmar. While countering terrorism indeed remains a legitimate concern for Naypyidaw, as it does for most countries, by pursuing a “radicalized narrative” that generates rather than attenuates grievances, the Myanmar government and other actors run the risk in the long term of creating the very threat they claim already exists.

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