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Reframing the Crisis in Myanmar's Rakhine State

Summary

- Attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army on Myanmar military and police posts and an intensive security-sector response in northern Rakhine State have resulted in widespread displacement, allegations of severe human rights abuses, and the evolution of a new humanitarian crisis.

- The current crisis and the broader Rakhine conflict are interpreted and represented distinctly by different ethnic and political groups, both within Myanmar and on the international stage. This narrative divergence has had tangible negative impacts on prospects for peace.

- The space for constructive international engagement with Myanmar authorities has greatly diminished in recent months, at a time when the need for inroads into collaborative conflict prevention is critical.

- The diverse positions and grievances of communities affected by the conflict have not been adequately represented in national and international media and strategy; correcting this is a prerequisite to positive change.

> *The conflict in Rakhine State since 2012 is informed by historical tensions and contemporary disputes over political power-sharing between the ethnic Rakhine and Rohingya.*

Introduction

The Rakhine State conflict has shifted fundamentally since the emergence of a new armed actor, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). The group staged two rounds of attacks on military and police posts in northern Rakhine, first in October 2016 and again in August 2017. These attacks and the ensuing military clearance operations have resulted in tragic loss of life, destruction of property, and internal displacement of civilians, among other consequences.

The recent violence is a culmination of decades of structural discrimination by the central government and military. These actors have dispossessed the Rohingya and ethnic Rakhine minority groups in distinct ways and increased competition and grievances. Following outbreaks of intercommunal violence in 2012, political and human rights have been further circumscribed.

How the crisis is understood varies, however, sometimes starkly. Misinformation has been circulated by all sides, and binary views quickly constructed despite the considerable complexity of the situation. The urgency of recent developments has largely eclipsed consideration of the

broader conflict, conditioning both domestic and international responses that may be more reactive to popular pressures than conducive to durable solutions. Narratives have therefore played a meaningful role in shaping conflict dynamics.

A War of Perception

Two often conflicting narratives have emerged since October 2016. One, to which the civilian government, military, and many non-Muslim constituents across Myanmar subscribe, frames ARSA's attacks as a critical threat to national security and the cultural-religious status quo. The government has branded ARSA a terrorist organization, fanning fears that the group has an Islamist or jihadist agenda.[1] Buddhist nationalism has also been increasingly invoked since 2010 by actors seeking to reap influence from a disordered democratic transition, leading to a rise in Islamophobia. The population sees the government and military as defenders of public interest and security; allegations of abuses leveled against these institutions by Rohingya refugees and international human rights groups are thus met with skepticism. Much of Myanmar's population view international condemnations as not only unfair but also adversarial to the national interest—generating little institutional incentive for military operations centered around civilian protection.

The second narrative, to which many in the international community as well as local and diaspora Rohingya subscribe, has focused on Rohingya suffering. The military is framed as a purveyor of atrocity, Aung San Suu Kyi's civilian government as pandering and hypocritical, and the ethnic Rakhine, when discussed, as uniformly racist. Government arguments about domestic security are seen by international actors as manipulative and as evidence that domestic actors are not genuinely committed to mitigating conflict.

A key barrier to conflict mitigation has been the international community's "naming and shaming" approach in responding to recent events. Reputation is central in Myanmar culture, and officials are reluctant to act in any way appearing to validate public criticism, rendering such efforts often counterproductive. International influence with Myanmar's decision makers has consequentially diminished. Furthermore, Myanmar is undergoing a tenuous democratic transition, in which relationships between the civilian and military branches of government are still being negotiated. The civilian government has thus found itself having to choose between prioritizing international relations or domestic.

At the same time, pressure has mounted on overseas policymakers, particularly from Western and Muslim-majority countries, to speak out in defense of the Rohingya. These individuals face a critical dilemma: to take a public moral stand condemning atrocity, and in doing so risk sealing off critical political inroads to preventing further abuses, or to maintain measured public messaging and a productive relationship with Myanmar authorities, risking accusations of inaction and complicity at home. In this zero-sum game between principles and practicality, principles have largely won out, albeit at times to the detriment of the goal to prevent further atrocity. Anti-international sentiment derived from heavy international criticism has coalesced within Myanmar, increasing blanket support for the civilian government and military and diminishing the likelihood that claims of abuse will be taken seriously—or acted upon.

Another key driver of the controversy is ARSA itself. ARSA's strategic communications have sought to portray it as a group of freedom fighters; however, brutal methods to silence dissent from moderate Rohingya and to forcibly increase the size of ARSA fighting forces have been reported.[2] Allegations have also circulated that the group has targeted civilians from other ethnic groups. Although violence perpetrated by ARSA is the focus of national discourse within the country, it has featured relatively little in the international space. To date no comprehensive

documentation of abuses by ARSA has been published by an international human rights agency, further discrediting the international community in the eyes of Myanmar's decision makers.

Furthermore, the crisis has now increased the interest of transnational extremist groups, which may seek to leverage the crisis to achieve broader regional and institutional objectives. Several groups have already expressed support for ARSA or have sought to recruit transnational fighters.[3] ARSA's leadership is thought to be wary of support from outside groups, but should they fail to build consensus on next steps it is highly possible that the group would factionalize. It is thus imperative that ARSA is discussed and addressed by all actors in line with the threat to regional stability that it represents. The Myanmar government-military narrative that the crisis is a domestic affair is now beyond tenability, and a coordinated political and humanitarian response is imperative. A deepened international-Myanmar divide will continue to impede necessary course corrections.

A Web of Grievance

The conflict in Rakhine State since 2012 is informed by long-standing historical tensions and contemporary disputes over political power-sharing between the ethnic Rakhine and Rohingya. Effective coverage of and responses to the crisis must reflect the broader conflict context.

The Ethnic Rakhine

Descendants of the Arakan Empire, the ethnic Rakhine today remain one of Myanmar's most cohesive ethnonational minority groups. Rakhine State is among the poorest and most politically marginalized ethnic states in Myanmar, having been historically repressed by the central Bamar government. There is a widespread ethnic Rakhine fear that, if unable to assert greater control over the political affairs of the state, Rakhine society will disintegrate in the culmination of a long, regressive path since the fall of the Arakan Empire.

In this context, changing demographics have given rise to substantial alarm among the ethnic Rakhine and are at the root of the controversy around the term Rohingya. If recognized as one of Myanmar's official ethnic groups, the Rohingya could gain political and representational rights currently denied them, and could then constitute a strong minority bloc with meaningful influence over local policies, resources, and culture. The ethnic Rakhine perspective is that the Rohingya are simply the latest in a long line of "outsiders" threatening dominion over Rakhine State.

Since 2012, the ethnic Rakhine have also developed substantial grievances toward the international community, both because humanitarian relief has largely targeted the internally displaced, the majority of whom are Muslim, and because ethnic Rakhine grievances have been underrepresented in international coverage of the conflict. In the absence of external engagement and trust comes defensiveness and insularity. Since 2012, nationalism has coalesced, and hard-liners have had an opening to spread fear and manipulate public sentiment. This dynamic has severely hindered inclusive solutions to the crisis and has attenuated humanitarian space.

The Rohingya

The Rohingya—a largely stateless people—have long faced systemic discrimination and rights abuses in Rakhine State, a situation worsened in the aftermath of the 2012 conflict. State-enforced segregation in many parts of central Rakhine has continually increased intercommunal fear and a tendency toward dehumanization. Heavy militarization of northern Rakhine has resulted in consistent violation of rights and rule of law, the consequences of which have been borne primarily by the Rohingya.

When the National League for Democracy came to power after the 2015 elections, hope resurfaced among the Rohingya. Because Daw Aung San Suu Kyi too was a victim of political persecution, many Rohingya expected her to address such abuses. That no gains were realized quickly constituted a significant disappointment, and may have contributed to conditions in northern Rakhine that were ripe for radicalization. Government efforts to conduct citizenship verification exercises for stateless Rohingya did not align with community concerns or recognize the diversity of local perspectives. Given Myanmar's largely ethnicity-based citizenship system, there is a debate among Rohingya in Rakhine State on whether to prioritize advocacy for recognition as ethnic Rohingya or to prioritize gaining citizenship at any cost, even if it means accepting an alternate ethnic categorization. While all Rohingya hope for improved human rights, there is no consensus on the most feasible path to achieve them. This debate is rarely acknowledged in discourse, rendering "one size fits all" policy and advocacy design ineffectual—both in Myanmar and overseas.

Nonetheless, the predominant attitude of Rohingya in Rakhine State has traditionally been that violent methods are futile. It is notable that members of the Rohingya diaspora have played a leading role in ARSA's founding, management, and public relations. Populations that are both vulnerable and desperate are easily manipulated, however; in northern Rakhine, persuasion and intimidation appear to have played a role in boosting cooperation with ARSA among a population with little history of radicalization. There remains intense frustration among many Rohingya that the actions of a few have resulted in such irrevocable damage.[4]

Rohingya voices in Rakhine State often go unheard, both domestically and overseas. More accessible Rohingya from Yangon and from the overseas diaspora have largely been accepted as the mouthpieces of the Rohingya community writ large. However, these actors are often disconnected from the everyday experience and perspectives of Rohingya in Rakhine State, often aligning advocacy with distinct—or at best, only partially representative—political agendas. This gap between decision makers and the Rohingya directly affected by the conflict has been a further obstacle to formulating feasible solutions.

Recommendations

Building mutual understanding on the causes and potential solutions to the crisis among actors with distinct but legitimate priorities and grievances is now critical. With this in mind, international and domestic actors must assess and mitigate the negative relational impacts of advocacy and other interventions in order to avoid unintended and divisive consequences that miss opportunities for positive change.

• International and domestic media outlets should refrain from disseminating unverified information, including on social media, and should avoid making generalizations (whether implicit or explicit) about any ethnoreligious group. This approach would be facilitated by unfettered media access to northern Rakhine State.

• International diplomats, media outlets, and human rights agencies should consistently highlight the plight of all ethnic communities in Rakhine State affected by the crisis.

• Overseas governments should seek to rebuild constructive relations with the Myanmar government and security sector to promote collaboration and course redirection.

• The government, military, and all civilians should pursue nonviolent approaches to stabilization and peacebuilding moving forward. International agencies operating in Rakhine State should urgently initiate public information campaigns, to raise awareness of existing international assistance that supports ethnic Rakhine and other minority communities. The government of

Myanmar should support and participate in this campaign and in agencies' efforts to obtain humanitarian access.

- The government of Myanmar should advocate tolerance to the Myanmar public consistently, highlighting the role of inclusion and diversity as key pillars of democracy.
- The government of Myanmar should work with Buddhist and Muslim religious leaders across Rakhine State to prepare and publicize signed commitments to nonviolence.

Notes

1. To date, evidence to suggest that ARSA pursues a jihadist or Islamist agenda is scant. Such a dynamic could develop in the future, however, should the group splinter into factions or ally itself with transnational terror organizations.

2. "Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State," Asia Report no. 283 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, December 2016).

3. Such as al-Qaeda, FPI (Islamic Defenders Front) in Indonesia, and mujahideen groups in Malaysia, among others.

4. Interviews with Rohingya community members in northern and central Rakhine State, 2014–17.