

PERSECUTION OF THE ROHINGYA – THE DARK SIDE OF DEVELOPMENT IN MYANMAR

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As the latest pictures emerge of refugees swarming the shores of South and South-East Asia, seeking asylum with their hands outstretched, the plight of the Rohingya people today aptly evokes the ancient figure of *Homo Sacer* from the writings of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. As a symbol of “bare life,” *Homo Sacer* is the object of biopolitics and sovereign power, its tragic life such that it can indeed be taken by anyone, without the law’s authority or mediation.⁽¹⁾ These are lives that exist in a “zone of indistinction,” falling outside of traditional state punishment by homicide, gathered into asylum camps or torture cells, or simply made to disappear without logic. For Agamben, brute sovereign power lies precisely in producing and controlling such “zones of indistinction.” With over 100,000 Rohingya displaced since the recent outbreak of communal (involving Buddhists and Muslims) violence in June 2012, human rights observers have decried what they describe as a systematic campaign of ethnic cleansing in Myanmar’s western province of Arakan, along the border of Bangladesh. Indeed, as Myanmar struggles against ethnic insurgencies in the borderlands, the widespread animosity towards the Rohingya in mainstream society is remarkable — if not ironic — given their status as one of the world’s most vulnerable minorities.⁽²⁾

Although anti-Rohingya pogroms and operations have not been uncommon in Burmese history since independence, the recent outbreak of violence, nevertheless, begs the question: Why now? As Myanmar stands on the cusp of economic expansion, a former ‘pariah state’ now touted by international investors as “Asia’s next economic tiger” and the “last frontier” for resources, there lies a darker face of the success story that remains overlooked. Since the advent of the quasi-civilian government headed by President Thein Sein in 2011

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and the subsequent march to political reform, the international community has embraced the new regime, with occasional reminders to curb the ethnic and communal violence plaguing the country. For a country that is recovering from decades of military heavy-handedness, much of the violence is taken as being part of the democratization process; and amidst the resumption of conflict in the Kachin and the Shan states of Myanmar, the violence against the Rohingya population as seemingly commonplace. Missing in this framework, however, is the particular exceptionalism of Rohingya persecution in Myanmar, now with ripple effects on the Burmese Muslim community at large. Even more so is the role of political economy, aided by inequitable investment, in fuelling the enduring persecution of Muslims in Myanmar.

Despite their precarious position in society, scholarly literature focusing on the Rohingya is scanty, or at best, scattered. A large part is devoted to the issue of Rohingya refugees as a humanitarian concern, including the challenges and consequences for host countries.⁽³⁾ Myanmar/Burma has been no stranger to conflicts — be they ethnic insurgencies or pro-democracy struggles against the military junta. Perhaps as a consequence of this sidetracking, there is little comprehensive study on how the present economic and political situation of Myanmar carries particular implications for one of its most persecuted minorities. On the other hand, mainstream coverage of the recent violence has primarily focused on the “communal” roots of the violence, as epitomized by *Time Magazine*’s controversial story “The Face of Buddhist Terror.”⁽⁴⁾ Many have argued that the process of democratization in Myanmar is giving vent to existing ethnic hatreds, while others have insinuated a post-reform power struggle between the hardliners and the moderate forces in the military.⁽⁵⁾ While there is some truth to the arguments above, this study tries to bridge the existing gap in literature by focusing on the *economics* of hate in Myanmar. It examines the international development and aid enterprise in Myanmar, and how it exacerbates existing cleavages within the society. In this sense, the violence of 2012-13 is linked with the larger dynamics of political economy alongside an exclusivist national vision that puts the Rohingya people and, by extension, Burmese Muslims as scapegoats in the economic sphere.

Arakan state of Myanmar



Source: “All you can do is pray” Human Rights Watch, April 2013

Background

As Muslims with a culture and Chittagonian dialect of their own, residing in a predominantly Buddhist province of Arakan (Rakhine), the Rohingya are a minority within a minority within the country’s diverse ethnic landscape. In the absence of a proper census and amidst various waves of displacement, it is difficult to get an accurate number of the Rohingya population, though estimates point to approximately one million. The prominence of the Rohingya in urban commerce existing at the time of independence has declined over time, with most of them now occupied as rice-farming peasants, while a fewer number as traders, fishermen, woodsmen, craftsmen, mariners and labourers. While Myanmar officially recognizes 135

ethnic groups in the Constitution, the Burmans as the majority followed by another seven major minorities (Shans, Karens, Buddhist Arakans, Kachins, Chins, Kayas and Mons), the Rohingya are excluded from holding an ethnic status. Under the Ne-Win military regime in the seventies, the Rohingya were rendered effectively 'stateless' with the promulgation of a citizenship law that excluded those whose ancestors settled in the country after 1823. In 1978, under a state-led operation to purge 'illegal immigrants', approximately 250,000 Rohingya fled en masse to Bangladesh, and again during an operation in 1991-2. Although the exoduses were resolved through repatriation agreements mediated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), those who came back found little improvement in their quality of life upon return; having lost the remnants of their possessions and their ID cards, in fact many of them were left even more vulnerable to state-based discrimination.

But unlike its precedents, the recent outbreak of violence did not begin with direct state orchestration. On 28 May 2012, in a small township of Ramri, a series of incendiary pamphlets began to circulate from one house to another. Reports suggested the alleged rape of a 27-year-old Buddhist woman, Thida Htwe, by three Muslim men. Six days later, a few dozen miles southeast of Ramri in Toungop, a group of villagers detained a bus, killing ten Muslims onboard. Following the two incidents, spontaneous rioting began in Sittwe, the capital of Arakan, and the northern township of Maungdaw; mobs from both communities took law into their own hands, storming unsuspecting neighbourhoods with spears, knives and makeshift weapons. On 10 June, the violence was brought to a brief halt as President Thein Sein announced a state of emergency. Civilian power was now effectively transferred to the Myanmar military in the affected areas.

According to Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, it is at this point of state intervention that a wave of concerted violence began as reprisals against the Rohingya community.⁽⁶⁾ In the Narzi quarter in Sittwe, the largest Muslim quarter home to 10,000 Muslims, witnesses described how Arakanese mobs burned down Muslim homes on 12 June 2012 while the police and paramilitary *Lon Thein* forces opened fire on them with live ammunition. Between 12-24 June, state security forces conducted systematic killings and mass arrests in Muslim townships of northern Arakan, rounding up Rohingya men and boys and transferring them to unknown locations. If the events of June were initially random, a fresh wave of violence breaking out in October was much more organized. Thousands of Arakanese men descended on Muslim villages with machetes, swords and guns, in nine different townships throughout the state, all whilst the police either participated or failed to intervene. The pattern of violence between June and October shows that 7 out of 9 townships attacked in October were different from those that had been hit in the first outbreak of June 2012. Sittwe and Rathedaung townships suffered in both waves of violence. Many witnesses of the October violence claimed that the assailants were from outside their villages; the attacks on the villages also occurred simultaneously, suggesting a pre-meditated plan in action.

Between June and October, local party officials and senior Buddhist monks in their respective townships publicly vilified the Rohingya population and called for their excommunication. Members of the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP) — the dominant ethnic Arakanese party in Arakan State — held several meetings in Sittwe to press Rohingya to leave the area, so that they do not reside mixed or close to the local Arakanese. Meanwhile, the army organized forced relocations of the Rohingya people, often on the pretext of preventing further violence, but with little recourse to return or compensation for properties. Many of the displaced Muslim residents were virtually jailed in overcrowded camps, with restrictions placed on their travel, their access to markets and their interaction with humanitarian agencies. On 18 October, just days before the renewed violence in the state, the All-Arakanese Monks' Solidarity Conference in Sittwe issued a virulent statement that urged townships to band together and help solve the 'problem.'

Although the central government has dismissed claims of state complicity, opting to portray the October violence as spontaneous 'communal rioting', it nevertheless played a role in stoking fear and animosity. After the first outbreak of violence, President Thein made a public statement that the 'only solution' lay in the expulsion of Rohingya to other countries, or to camps overseen by UNHCR. Latent in his statement was an implicit *carte blanche* to the local Arakanese government to effectively create a refugee situation. Amidst the culture of impunity prevailing throughout the 2012 violence, it is no surprise that a third wave of violence has broken out in 2013, spilling beyond Arakan and targeting the Rohingya as well as the Burmese Muslims at large.

Development and its discontents

The Big Picture

It is instructive to examine the impetus to violence against the Rohingya community through the paradigm of political economy and lopsided development. Over the past decade, particularly in the aftermath of mass violence in Central Africa and the Balkans, the development community has been theorizing and codifying an agenda of using aid and investment for peace, democracy and reconciliation in recipient countries. Deliberations over a new policy have emerged in response to long-standing criticism of how the aid enterprise could condone or exacerbate human rights violations, social exclusion and conflict. Arturo Escobar provocatively argues that violence or displacement is not only endemic but also constitutive of development. For him, development as a feature of modernity has made its associated violence so natural that it is no longer remarked upon, and at times even celebrated. Building on Escobar's criticism, other theorists have presented the case of how development could aid violence, particularly when it is blind to the politics of underdevelopment or the socio-political trends in the recipient country.⁽⁷⁾

Amartya Sen joins the chorus of theorists who emphasize inclusive development, forewarning the dangers of economic growth, if concentrated in the hands of a few, and of investment, if it is conflict-insensitive. Writing on the

subject, Sen describes development as a means of expanding freedoms, with freedom not only being its end but also its principal means.⁽⁸⁾ For him, the process of development requires the removal of poverty, tyranny, lack of economic opportunities, social deprivation, neglect of public services and the machinery of repression. At the heart of his thesis is the “capability approach,” where the central concern of human development is the “capability to lead the kind of lives we have reason to value.” Breaking from the orthodox view that economic growth must be a prerequisite to social welfare, Sen presents the case that welfare expenditures can actually spur economic growth. More importantly, he argues that overt indicators such as a rising gross domestic product (GDP) or industrialization do not signify growth in real terms, unless people are given the opportunity to “shape their own destiny” instead of being “passive recipients of the fruits of cunning development programs.”⁽⁹⁾

In Myanmar, the agenda of political liberalization and development was, by and large, driven by two overwhelming concerns: a staggering economy, pitching the country as the poorest of its poorer neighbours, and its over-reliance on China for sustenance. After half a century of being shunned by the international community, the picture began to gradually change in 2011 when former general and president of the quasi-civilian government, Thein Sein, announced the need for political reform. The promise of a more democratic order ushered in through political reforms was an essential requirement for getting support and investment from the West; but much in contrast to Amartya Sen’s vision, it was not a principal objective behind the reforms. Min and Brian Joseph write:

It is too soon to say precisely what the generals mean when they talk of building a modern, developed and democratic state. Likewise, it is too soon to say how many hardliners remain in posts from which they can undermine reforms. But it increasingly appears that the government’s goal is to set up a system, run by military backed dominant party — that will bring all political and ethnic forces within a single constitutional framework and pursue economic development more or less in the style of Malaysia or Singapore.⁽¹⁰⁾

Although the constitution effectively ensured the continued dominance of the military in politics, Thein Sein followed up with the relaxation of press censorship, the release of political prisoners and former dissidents, and the revision of party laws allowing opposition leaders to participate, including most notably Aung San SuuKyi from the National League of Democracy.

In turn, political reforms have allowed the warming of relations with the US, giving it a new opportunity to engage with the resource-rich country as part of its larger ‘pivot to Asia-Pacific.’ For the West, Myanmar holds the promise of growth and investment opportunities in an underserved market of 60 million people.⁽¹¹⁾ It also serves as a battleground over which regional and international powers, namely the US, China and India, vie for influence. As

secretary of state Hillary Clinton visited Myanmar in December 2011, Washington suspended most of its economic sanctions, paving way for aid, investment and advice from US and its allies, and multilateral financial institutions. This was followed by President Obama's landmark visit to Myanmar in November 2012, ironically coinciding with the outbreak of communal violence in the Arakan state. Obama's visit, in which he praised the government for its reform agenda, was a mark of renewed relations with Myanmar after decades of ostracism. Although Obama fell short of addressing the depth of the Rohingya issue in particular, he nevertheless reminded the government to institute greater measures to address the general human rights concerns in the country.

Unfazed by the recent outbreak of violence, in fact many American policymakers and international investors have sought to justify the move from sanctions to "principled engagement" on the pretext of promoting democracy and the rule of law.⁽¹²⁾ Additionally, as Pederson argues in the Woodrow Wilson report of 2012:

The [previous] curtailment of international trade, investment and aid has also caused several collateral damage, often hurting innocent bystanders. [...] While the generals [...] have undoubtedly lost more in absolute terms, personal consequences have been far worse for small-scale farmers, fisherman and workers who have been denied vital livelihood opportunities with grave implications for the life and health of themselves and their families.⁽¹³⁾

Notwithstanding the merits of the above argument, there are two major caveats with this approach. Firstly, this policy of principled engagement is formulated with broader oversight of the country's problems, namely the historical pro-democracy opposition against the military junta. In so doing, it does have specific applicability for the Rohingya community, which has its own unique context within Burmese society. Secondly, it overlooks the Burman-Buddhist hegemony in Myanmar, and the intricate web of inter-ethnic relations there.

Although international financial institutions (IFIs) and foreign governments have endorsed economic liberalization as the path to national development, the question of what the 'national' actually constitutes remains deeply contested in Myanmar. Since independence, Myanmar has been confronted with the challenge of defining an inclusive national ideology encompassing the breadth of its ethnic diversity. In the absence of alternatives, a Burman hegemony has largely been filled by an emphasis on Buddhism, the religion of 88 per cent of its population. Following the end of British colonialism, the political era of U Nu under a civilian leadership was characterized by a pragmatic Buddhist revival in order to ensure state expansion into the hinterlands. Although U Nu's emphasis on Buddhism over economic and infrastructural concerns could only go so far, heralding the 1962 *Tatmadaw* (military) coup, it

set a precedent for the involvement of Buddhism in state politics for the successive military regimes. General Ne Win, who succeeded U Nu, exercised greater control over internal monastic affairs, but nevertheless fashioned a civic religion that combined scripturalist, non-political sangha with popular piety of the Buddhist majority.⁽¹⁴⁾ The decade of the nineties further cemented the bond between Buddhism and Burmese national identity. Additionally, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which transformed into the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997, rigorously promoted the ‘Myanmarization’ of local cultures, which not only privileged Buddhism but also Burman linguistic identity over all others.

With some exceptions, ethnic minorities in Myanmar have not traditionally been at the forefront of the pro-democracy struggle, viewed as majoritarian in nature, and have opted to fight their own disparate struggle for autonomy. Now as Myanmar moves towards democratization — with all its limitations — many pro-democracy groups, including the National League of Democracy led by Aung San Suu Kyi, have chosen to pay lip-service to the reforms led by the ex-military regime and to maximize their efforts in garnering support for the upcoming elections of 2015. Although the government has followed a policy of instituting ceasefire arrangements with minority factions in the ethnic borderlands, so as to allow investment to flow in the area, the degree to which they represent the collective will of the constituents is questionable.⁽¹⁵⁾ Such alliances at the expense of the more marginalized communities — particularly the Rohingya community — can be gauged from the response of pro-democracy groups after the June and October violence. Tapping into populist rhetoric, prominent pro-democracy activist Ko Ko Gyi, speaking at a press conference in early June in Yangon (Rangoon), categorically denied that the Rohingya were an ethnic group of Burma. While conceding that ethnicity is not a requirement for citizenship, he blamed the communal violence on “illegal immigrants from Bangladesh” and “mischievous provocations from the international community.” “Such interfering efforts of powerful nations on this issue without fully understanding the ethnic groups of Burma, will be viewed as offending the sovereignty of our nation,” he said. Perhaps most significant was the response — or rather the silence — of Aung San Suu Kyi, who was on her first European tour in 24 years when the violence first broke out in June 2012. For the West, Suu Kyi is the icon of democracy, whose approval and green signal for engagement with the ex-military regime paved way for the removal of sanctions against Myanmar. After a period of initial silence, Suu Kyi finally characterized the communal violence in Arakan State as governments’ failure to enforce its immigration laws. As to whether the Rohingya should be considered Burmese, her response was ambiguous. “I don’t know.” She suggested “some of them” would meet the requirements of the citizenship.⁽¹⁶⁾

Considering the caveats above, it is questionable how equitably the benefits from international investment have been distributed. With national wealth still concentrated with the military, the filter-down effects of international engagement in Myanmar’s political economy, therefore, would be

restricted to a narrow elite, or remain uncertain at best. International development that is blind to existing differentials in society — political and economic — can potentially magnify the risks, instead of the opportunities, brought about by the fast pace of economic expansion. It is in this light that a recent Oxfam report on Myanmar has emphasized equitable development:

Governments, donors and businesses must act in ways that empower poor people to influence policies and gain access to markets that respect, uphold and promote basic rights, including land and water rights and gender equality; and that support the establishment of diverse markets that respond to varied rural contexts and needs. Crucially, political leaders must ensure an end to all human-rights abuses and address the underlying causes of ethnic conflicts, which threaten to undermine political and economic progress and stand in the way of long term social, political and economic gains.⁽¹⁷⁾

With Myanmar lurching towards unprecedented economic expansion with a projected rate of 6.3 per cent in 2013, the stage is simultaneously set for the majority of Burmese — living below the poverty line — to fight for their own place in the economic field. It is within this backdrop of the bigger picture that we now turn to the state of Arakan, home to the Rohingya community and the ethnic Arakanese population.

The provincial picture: The Arakan state & the Rohingya

Over the past decade, Myanmar has consecutively ranked as one of the poorest countries in the Human Development Index (HDI), despite carrying large swathes of natural resources, oil, gas and minerals.⁽¹⁸⁾ The term ‘resource curse,’ coined by economist Richard Auty in 1993 to describe the paradoxical underdevelopment of resource-rich countries, is typically used to characterize the situation of Myanmar. But more accurately, the term captures the country’s ethnic borderlands, where most of the natural resources are located. Myanmar’s western-most coastal province of Arakan, lying along the border of Bangladesh and India, is one such region. Geographically rich in oil and gas, Arakan ranks second in poverty among the 14 states and divisions of Myanmar according to a report published by UNDP in June 2011.⁽¹⁹⁾ Several Arakanese scholars have, in fact, described Arakan as a ‘colony’ of Myanmar. Explaining the high level of poverty in the Arakan state, Dr. Aye Chan writes: “All natural products and resources are being monopolized by the government and its forces. For example, the local residents have no right to fish in their nearby waters such as ponds, creeks, rivers and the sea, for their livelihoods without paying a huge toll and tax to them.”⁽²⁰⁾

Adding to the list of grievances of the ethnic Arakanese are a series of development projects launched by international and regional investors in partnership with the quasi-civilian regime. Since the advent of political reforms

in Myanmar, India and Bangladesh have revived talks over a joint Myanmar-Bangladesh-India pipeline in the Arakan region, a project that had been shelved in 2004-5 following a deadlock between the two countries.⁽²¹⁾ Two foreign-funded mega projects that are currently in operation include the Kaladan Gateway Project and the Shwe Gas Pipeline Project led by Indian and Chinese companies, respectively.

In December 2008, China and Myanmar signed a deal to construct an oil pipeline in the western coastal town of Kyaukphyu in the Arakan state. Subsequently on 30 November 2010, the China Development Bank and Myanmar Foreign Investment Bank signed a \$2.4 billion loan deal to construct the 1,060-km pipeline from Kyaukphyu, cutting across the northeastern townships of Arakan and the Chin state, to Kunming in Yunnan province, China. Construction on the pipeline began in October 2010, with Daewoo International, ONGC Videsh Ltd., GAIL, KOGAS and five other contractors from India, China and South Korea involved in the project. Although a parallel pipeline for oil is still under construction, the Shwe pipeline officially began piping natural gas across the Sino-Myanmarese border on 28 July 2013. The pipeline would allow China to directly obtain oil and gas from the Middle East (via the port terminal at Kyaukphyu), thereby avoiding shipping through the rather insecure Malacca Straits. It would also serve as a crucial asset for the development of South-west China.

The government of Myanmar has hailed the pipeline project as a means of boosting export revenues and contributing to the economic growth of the country. It has also reiterated that the project is being carried out with the enhanced consultation of the local population. Notwithstanding these assurances, however, the initiation of the project met with discontent from the local communities from its inception. Over time, local discontents have been fuelled by land confiscations, allegations of unfair compensation and environmental destruction.

Meanwhile, human rights activists have also indicated abuses in the construction phase of the project, particularly in the use of forced labour. Critics have also pointed out that the trickle-down effects on revenue have not been fairly distributed, and remain confined to a narrow elite the country alongside the international investors. The Myanmar-China Pipeline Watch Committee, for instance, has launched a signature campaign to urge pipeline authorities to act transparently and to review widespread concerns about the project's safety and equitable returns. "We just want transparency for the project," said Hnin Yu Shwe from the Myanmar-China Pipeline Watch Committee. "As far as we studied, the project has no transparency and will provide no benefits to locals who live along the pipeline, nor to citizens of the country who have had to suffer the consequences of the project, such as deforestation and environmental degradation. If the project is not transparent and doesn't provide benefits to the country, just stop it."⁽²²⁾

Simultaneously, the Myanmar-India Kaladan Transit Transport Project, initiated in 2010, is also under construction in Arakan. The project is designed to boost the economy of the two countries by connecting Northeast India with Southeast Asia. It aims to connect eastern Indian seaports, particularly the Kolkata seaport in east India, with the seaport in Arakan's capital, Sittwe. It will then link Sittwe, via northern Arakan, to the landlocked area of Mizoram in Northeastern India through river and road transport. The three phases of the project include: development of the Sittwe port to handle the future increase in shipping levels, dredging of the Kaladan river, and the construction of a 62-km highway en route the Arakan cities of Sittwe, Pauktaw, MyraukU and Kyauktaw.⁽²³⁾

But the project has raised concerns amidst the civilians living in townships alongside the Kaladan river, many of whom are fishermen or farmers relying heavily on the river for their livelihood. Local communities have complained about a lack of consultation; some of them have been forcefully relocated while others have had their lands confiscated.⁽²⁴⁾ To date, pressure has been mounting by civil rights activists that if the negative developments entailed by the Kaladan Project are not addressed, thousands of people will be forced to drastically adapt their lives without any compensation or assistance from the authorities. The developments along the river and around the Sittwe port area will damage and block access to fishing areas along the coast. If residents are unable to access and use the river as usual, both during and after construction, the travel and transportation of goods for trade will be almost impossible, since no alternative means of transport exist. "The Kaladan river is the primary source of water and transport, irrigation and fishing for our living in the area. We will find it really difficult for our daily survival if the river is blocked with larger vessels and dredgers," said a villager living along the river. The construction is also likely to damage the self-sustaining ecosystems on which locals depend, causing greater food insecurity in the region. "We have big concerns about the construction of the port, as all of the houses, restaurants and other government buildings including Sittwe's General Hospital along the Strand Road will be removed," said a resident of Sittwe. He continued: "According to those who have previously been relocated in Rakhine (Arakan) and other parts of Burma [Myanmar] usually no compensation is given to the owners. So we expect the same thing to happen to us when these buildings are removed. Without our houses we will lose a lot of business, as we mainly rely on our houses for doing business such as trading rice with rural folks and city dwellers."⁽²⁵⁾

With the majority of the Arakanese population being subsistence farmers, inadequate land compensation is severely damaging to their livelihood. To date, such investments have not benefited the locals, and with inadequate compensation, they have led to greater insecurity and outright land grabs. Indeed a report issued by the Transnational Institute of Burma in February 2013 cautions:

While regional investment could potentially foster economic growth and improve people's livelihoods, the country has yet

to develop the institutional and governance capacity to manage the expected windfall [...] So far, the liberal economic reforms that have been signed into law favour the urban elite and middle class entrepreneurs, despite the government's stated commitment to pro-poor policies and people-centred development to benefit the farmers who are the backbone of Burma's economy.⁽²⁶⁾

As Myanmar stands on the cusp of economic expansion, with heavy investment in the already volatile ethnic borderlands, it is useful to heed the lessons of Cambodia, where rapid economic growth led to greater income inequality, land grabs and conflicts between local communities and foreign firms. Oxfam cautions about the associated risks of such development:

For countries emerging out of decades of poverty and under-investment, generating growth alone is not enough. The type of private sector investment that a country encourages can have a direct impact on the quality of growth, and governments have a role to play in choosing investment that leads towards high-quality, equitable growth. Governments should give clear signals to investors about the type of growth they want through clearly and consistently articulating their priorities in domestic policy, regulation and incentives to attract FDI.⁽²⁷⁾

It is within this overall context of development with its associated displacement and discontents that the 2012-13 outbreak of violence in Arakan must be situated. Sittwe and Rathedaung, the two townships that have been overwhelmingly affected by development projects, were hit in both the June and the October violence. In October, Kyaukhphu, the southernmost port of the Shwe gas pipeline, also caught the rage of violence despite being relatively removed from the northern hotbeds. Similarly, many townships hit in the violence have been affected by development projects either directly, or indirectly through the influx of relocated villagers.

The larger context of development, therefore, explains how inequalities created between the centre and the periphery shaped the pattern of political allegiances that were forged in the violence that broke out in the Arakan state. One observes, for instance, the tacit alliance between the elites of the provincial (Arakanese) and central government during and after the violence. Simultaneously, the violence was accompanied, and at times, preceded by campaigns led by local politicians and leaders to portray the Rohingya as an existential and economic threat. A pamphlet distributed by monks in Sittwe, for instance, stated that the Rohingya "who dwell on Arakanese land, drink Arakanese water, and rest under Arakanese shadows are now working for the extinction of the Arakanese." It urged the people to socially and economically isolate the Rohingya to prevent the "extinction of the Arakanese."⁽²⁸⁾ In another statement issued by monks of the Rathedaung Township, the Arakanese were

called to avoid employing Rohingya in a range of jobs, including day labourers, carpenters, masons, and in farming. It also stated that the Rohingya should not be employed in government offices or by NGOs operating in the township, and that all NGOs providing aid to the Rohingya in the township must withdraw.⁽²⁹⁾ Many of the economic grievances of the masses were thus deflected from the elite to another unworthy opponent, i.e. the Rohingya. Much like Agamben's *homo sacer*, the Rohingya were caught as scapegoats in the 'resource-curse' of Myanmar, and sacrificed unheeded at the altar of economic expansion and development.

From Race to Religion: The discourse of violence

Although mainstream discourses associated with the violence of 2012-13 largely evoke a sense of 'communal' distrust and hatreds, the economic underpinning behind the violence is evident in the outcome it has generated: fierce land grabs, forced relocations of the Rohingya and the subsequent demographical and ethnic engineering in the mixed villages of Arakan. A recent two-child policy imposed on the Rohingya by the local government, with official blessing from the centre, once again betrays an overwhelming obsession with demographics. Amidst calls of xenophobic retribution, the *economics of hate* can be glimpsed in many of the associated policies and discourses surrounding the violence.⁽³⁰⁾

Given their economically marginalized status, the scapegoating of the Rohingya community may appear ironic, but in fact, it is directly tied with their racial and religious liminality within the Burmese context. While many Rohingya historians have emphasized an indigenous status that can be traced back thousands of years, Arakanese and Burmese nationalists argue on the contrary. For the latter, the Rohingya fall into the domain of 'foreigners' or 'immigrants' by virtue of being direct descendants of immigrants from Chittagong (east Bangladesh) during the time of British India in the 19th century. Still, a third group of scholars puts less emphasis on the 'origin' debate, focusing rather on the particular historical and socio-political factors that have given the Rohingya, as children of arguably diverse parentage, the cohesion of an ethnic group. Martin Smith describes the Rohingya as 'Arakanese Muslims' on the basis of territoriality, while A. Salimullah Bahar notes how the colonial and post-colonial encounters have given the Rohingya people a distinct sense of identity. For the third group of scholars, 'ethnicity' — or rather the myth of a unified ethnic group — is a question of political formation; rather than existing as a primordial category, it is incumbent on the processes through which social categories are reified, politicized and momentarily realized in practice.⁽³¹⁾

This amorphous nature of an 'ethnic group' identity is best demonstrated in the way a single trait or frame of reference becomes politicized and representative of a much larger group in times of social unrest. Although Myanmar has a diverse Muslim population including Burman Muslims and the Kamans, with the latter two recognized as citizens, little distinction is made

between them during times of conflict. Writing on the subject, Moshe Yegar argues that many Burman nationalists who define Buddhist faith as an essential part of their identity tend to include the various groups into a monolithic category of 'foreigners.' When resentment and frustration against outsiders stoked the anti-Muslim riots of 1938, these were directed as much against the Burmese-speaking Muslims in the north as against the Indian Muslims of Yangon.⁽³²⁾

In the aftermath of the Rohingya communal violence, there has been a similar upsurge of anti-Muslim and Islamophobic sentiments, catching many of the integrated Muslims in Yangon off guard. In March 2013, a Buddhist mob, provoked by a minor dispute in a Muslim-owned gold shop, tore through a town in central Myanmar, killing over 40 people, burning mosques and Muslim homes, and displacing thousands. In May, 1,200 Muslims in the country's northeast fled from their homes when throngs of armed Buddhists mobilized after unconfirmed reports that a Muslim man killed a Buddhist woman in the area. In late August, hundreds of Muslim homes were burnt by mobs in the Sagaing region of Myanmar, once again, over unconfirmed reports of a Muslim man involved in the rape of a Buddhist woman in Kanbalu.⁽³³⁾ A recent campaign called '969', launched by an influential Buddhist monk U Wirathu, has also been gaining ground in Myanmar. It calls for the promotion of Buddhist pride in the same breath as it advocates for the economic marginalization of Muslims in Myanmar. At the heart of the campaign is the view that Islam is threatening to 'overrun' Myanmar and that the Buddhists must stand up to 'save' their way of life.⁽³⁴⁾

Meanwhile, Myanmar's prominent politicians and ex-generals are doing little to stem the tide of xenophobia and Islamophobia raging across the country. But the current trend is hardly an aberration within the Burmese context, where historically the conception of national security has been driven by strong nationalism, notions of self-reliance and distrust of foreigners.⁽³⁵⁾ In fact, previous regimes have often found it instrumental to reify and stoke anti-foreign or xenophobic sentiments as a means of gaining legitimacy and deflecting attention from domestic economic concerns. In 1997, for example, the regime used anti-Muslim sentiments in Mandalay to deflect criticisms of Yangon's pro-China policies and the subsequent impact on domestic economy.⁽³⁶⁾ David Steinberg writes:

If there is one approach that would unite the peoples of Myanmar in a close authoritarian bond and justify this continuation of the garrison state it would be the threat of physical foreign intervention into Burmese affairs. There is always the danger, as we have seen in typical garrison state situations, that a regime may invoke, erroneously believe, or create the impression of external threats justifying continuity of power and repression in the interests of the national security — foreign powers aligning with minorities or opposition elements.⁽³⁷⁾

In the wake of growing international involvement in Myanmar's political economy, with benefits reaped only by a few, such sentiments have shifted from the 'external enemy' to the 'internal enemy' in the form of the Muslims. The post-9/11 scenario is further adding to a perception of threat associated with Muslims. Aung Zaw, a Burmese journalist in exile, describes his conversations with army officers and government ministers upon return, where they expressed fears that Muslims would force their religion on Buddhists and 'steal' Buddhist women.⁽³⁸⁾ Additionally, they expressed suspicion that Saudi Arabia was secretly financing Muslim businesses and that the Bengalis from Bangladesh were joining the Rohingya community in order to claim Myanmar's resources. "If we don't deter them, the western gate will break," one senior minister said referring to Arakan state that borders Bangladesh.⁽³⁹⁾

The unanimous rallying cry in the Muslim world in support of the Rohingya community has further accentuated perceptions of external involvement in Burmese domestic affairs. The Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) has been very vocal on the issue, and is also reported to have sent a letter to the White House encouraging President Obama to raise the Rohingya issue with the leadership of Myanmar during his visit to the country. Jusuf Kalla, former vice president of Indonesia and chairman of the Indonesia Red Cross, has led Indonesia's efforts in negotiating with the Myanmar government to settle the Rohingya issue. In the past two years, there have been varying reports of non-military aid provided to Rohingya refugees by the Gulf monarchies. In 2012, Saudi Arabia labelled the conflict as 'ethnic cleansing' against the Muslim Rohingya and King Abdullah ordered \$ 50 million in aid to be sent to the Rohingya community. Iran also called for swift action to stop genocide in the Arakan state.⁽⁴⁰⁾ But by and large, appeals from the Muslim world have fallen on deaf ears. Instead, they have merely reinforced local perception that Muslims cannot be trusted, and are allied with foreigners against Myanmar.⁽⁴¹⁾

But perhaps most detrimental to the cause of Muslims in Burma has been the advocacy of some al-Qaeda members on their behalf. There have also been periodic calls for a jihad against the military government, in response to the plight of the Burmese Muslims. For example, in the late 1970s, Abdulla Azzam, reputed to be Osama bin Laden's mentor and inspiration, published a document entitled 'Defending Muslim Territory Is The Most Important Duty.'⁽⁴²⁾ In this widely distributed pamphlet Azzam called for the expulsion of the infidels from Afghanistan to Burma/Myanmar. Meanwhile in Myanmar, a number of disparate Muslim insurgent groups have existed since independence, but they have constituted little threat for the regime and have largely petered out. One organization that still operates, albeit with limited influence, is the Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO), previously known as the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO). It was established to represent the interests of the refugees around Chittagong and Cox's Bazaar and advocate for an autonomous state along the Burmese-Bangladesh border. But despite notorious connection drawn between Burmese Muslims and terrorism by the local media,

studies have found little co-relation between them. Examining media coverage on the issue of Myanmarese Muslims and terrorism, Andrew Selth writes:

Reports of links between Burmese Muslims and extremist Islamic groups have caused concern in official circles, but care must be taken in considering their implications. Such connections are notoriously difficult to verify. Some have been inaccurately described, some have been based on unreliable sources, whereas others may even be figments of a journalist's or academic's imagination. Even where these connections do exist, it is hard to identify their exact nature. In light of the heightened sensitivities following the September 2001 attacks in the United States, any links between Muslim groups, no matter how faint or how innocent, run the risk of being seen as somehow terrorism-related. [...] There is some truth in the claim that, since 2001, the Rangoon regime has sought to use the rubric of the global war against terrorism to cloak a renewed campaign of discrimination against Burma's Muslim population.⁽⁴³⁾

Conclusion

The irony of 'development aiding violence' in politically volatile regions is the subsequent post-conflict measures taken by the international community in 'solving' the problem through economics alone. Rather the flaw in both the pre-conflict and post-conflict stages lies in divorcing the economic from the political. The contention of this paper is not that poverty necessarily leads to violent conflict, but how inequalities caused by inequitable development and investment can serve as intervening variables for conflict in an already fragile community. Conversely, policies centred on poverty-reduction or economic rehabilitation may help the marginalized, but remain counter-productive so long as the structural causes of the conflict are left unaddressed. In fact, much of the efforts by the international community suffer in that they are restricted to treating the symptoms rather than the root causes of the issue.

Over the past decade, the international community has made small inroads of success in tackling the myriad of human rights concerns in the country. But they have yet to develop a targeted approach in addressing the systematic exclusion of the Rohingya community in Burmese society. The International Labour Organization (ILO), for instance, has been working for the eradication of forced labour; despite the government's intransigence, it has succeeded in introducing some checks and balances, including the 2000 ban on forced labour and a complaint mechanism to investigate the claims of alleged victims.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Nevertheless, the practice continues informally, and in the aftermath of the violence in Arakan, it has particularly drawn its pool from the many displaced Rohingya, who are left without any alternatives for survival.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Meanwhile, the UNHCR has been doing its part to provide for the displaced refugees in overcrowded camps, where there is lack of sanitation, health services

or education. However, with no check to the refugee flow, such efforts are but piecemeal. Part of the problem is also structural, since the UNHCR mandate disallows intervention in sovereign politics. This tends to shift the onus to the host country as opposed to the country of origin.⁽⁴⁶⁾

Human rights, as Hannah Arendt once argued, are effectively rendered non-existent without membership in a state. The subsequent stateless individuals, much like Agamben's *Homo Sacer*, are left as perpetual outcasts in both societies. To date, an estimated one million Rohingya have fled Myanmar, often through tortuous agreements with smugglers and traffickers, and are living as refugees in South and Southeast Asia. Additionally, there are also a large number of unregistered illegal immigrants along the Mizoram border in Northeast India. There has been no closure to their pain, no end to the human misery of those displaced beyond their borders, and now living on bare minimum. Studies have indicated that many of the displaced Rohingya continue to face discrimination by their compatriots in refugee camps. In Malaysia, which is home to a wide range of Burmese ethnic minorities, efforts by refugees to organize coalitions to confront harsh living conditions exclude the Rohingya. Burmese opposition groups in Thailand regularly fail to include the Rohingya in their work as well. Donors who support these initiatives are reluctant to challenge these decisions out of respect for community decision-making, but as a result they reinforce the exclusion of the Rohingya.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Meanwhile, Myanmar's Western and South Asian patrons have demonstrated a strong commitment to foster economic relations with Myanmar, working for mutual benefits through trade and investment. But notwithstanding any good intentions on their part, there equally lies a moral responsibility to protect. With the 'protracted displacement' that now characterizes the condition of the Rohingya refugees, the neighbouring South Asian countries also face an economic and social liability. In Bangladesh, for instance, the influx of refugee population has sparked tensions within the local community living along the border. That the Rohingya are willing to work for lower wages than Bangladeshi labourers creates hostility, leading to sporadic clashes and a general sense of unrest in the area.⁽⁴⁸⁾ According to S. Lee, the more prolonged the residence of refugees in the host country, the higher is the rate at which land and resources are used up, a process that in turn accelerates greater competition between natives and refugees.⁽⁴⁹⁾ With many refugees pushed to utter despondency and despair, there is a risk of increased involvement in criminal activities, such as drug abuse and human trafficking. Compounding the problem is Myanmar's notorious reputation as the 'Golden Triangle' for narcotics and as being the second largest producer of opium in the world.⁽⁵⁰⁾ The ARNO, for instance, has gained most of its finances through criminal activity, in particular the smuggling of guns and drugs between Bangladesh and Arakan state. A scenario in which an increasing number of refugees serve as carriers or traffickers in the profitable 'narco-trade' would prove equally detrimental for Myanmar as it would for the neighbouring South Asian region.

The presence of a large stateless population outside the country of

origin can often lead to an internationalization of conflict, and consequently pose a threat to regional security. Although ethnographic studies have shown that few Rohingya refugees subscribe to militancy, the potential of radicalization and militarization increases with time. That a number of militant Islamist groups in South Asia and beyond have advocated on behalf of the Rohingya also increases the risk of their recruitment into such networks, whether it is voluntary or coerced. Groups such as the Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh, and its militant student wing, the Islami Chhatra Shibir, have long supported the Rohingya refugees, and in doing so, further strained domestic and transnational political relations.⁽⁵¹⁾ The consequences of militarization of refugees can be dire on the host countries, undermining its sovereignty and posing a threat to its stability. It can also present difficulties in the provision of the needy populations, and thereby obstruct international efforts for peace.⁽⁵²⁾

Amidst the relentless pain of human suffering, compounded by the economic and social costs for the neighbouring regions, it is clear that the plight of the Rohingya is not simply a Myanmar problem. The neighbouring region of South Asia and the larger international community, as they haste to invest in Myanmar's rich resources, are equal stakeholders in the crisis, with responsibility on their shoulders to advocate for equitable investment and a just political solution.

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