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Asia in the Waning Shadow of American Hegemony

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Elisabetta Basile
Nicola Mocci

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MYANMAR 2017: THE ROHINGYA CRISIS BETWEEN RADICALISATION AND
ETHNIC CLEANSING*

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2017 was Myanmar's annus horribilis. This essay revisits the 2017 Rohingya crisis and discusses its immediate triggers and background causes. It contends that the latest outbreak of violence should not be seen as a one-off occurrence, but rather be understood as part of a long history of anti-Rohingya state and community-led violence, which has intensified in recent years, especially since 2012. What emerged, in fact, was a shift in organisation and tactics on the side of some radicalised segments of the Rohingya community as well as the violent impact of the rampant rise in Buddhist nationalism. The crisis sparked an international outcry, but was met with callousness and denial inside the country, where anti-Rohingya sentiments are widespread and the military operations enjoy wide popular support. The Rohingyas are facing an uncertain future and problematic prospects of return. Among the fallouts of the crisis was the abrupt fall from grace of Myanmar's de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Showing a total lack of empathy over the human tragedy and, through her silence, condoning anti-Rohingya sentiments and violence, the state counsellor tarnished her international reputation. More than seven years after an unexpected political liberalisation Myanmar's progress has at best stalled or, quite possibly, shown its true colours: a non-transition in disguise. The Tatmadaw remains firmly in control.

1. Introduction

2017 was Myanmar's *annus horribilis*. The year was dominated by the Rohingya crisis.

A crisis of enormous proportions engulfed South-east Asia in the second-half of 2017. Through a build-up in organisation and military training, on 25 August the militant Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) launched 30 attacks on police posts and an army base in northern Rakhine state in what appeared to be the realisation of a self-fulfilling prophecy: a wave of radicalisation¹ among the local Muslim ethnic Rohingya population, which had until

*. The author would like to express his gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions and feedback to earlier versions of this article.

1. Janet Lim, 'Plight of the Rohingya: Fuelling Muslim Assertiveness', Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, RSIS Commentaries 9 October 2017. CO17171. Remy Mahzam, Muhammad Ansar, 'The Inevitable Jihad in Myanmar', Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, RSIS Commentary CO17163, 7 September 2017. Iftekharul Bashar, 'Myanmar's Rohingya plight faces jihadist hijacking', *East Asia Forum*, 10 January 2017.

then largely eschewed violence and militancy. South-east Asia may now be in the midst of a new insurgency.² The Myanmar military's response was brutal and unprecedented in scale and impact. A combination of indiscriminate killings, torture, mass rapes, and the burning of entire villages, drove hundreds of thousands – possibly up to 700,000 – of ethnic Rohingyas beyond the border with Bangladesh in one of the largest exoduses in modern times. With any significant presence in Myanmar now wiped out, Rohingya refugees are sheltered in the world's largest refugee camp near the Naf river (marking the Bangladesh-Myanmar border), in proximity of the city of Cox's Bazar. After suffering from decades of discrimination and persecution, Rohingyas were targeted in what has been described by United Nations Human Rights Commissioner Zeid Ra'ad al Hussein as a «textbook case of ethnic cleansing».³

This essay revisits the 2017 Rohingya crisis, analysing it against the background of a broader pattern of inter-communal and state relations. As it provides some historical context to the current conflict, it also briefly summarises the controversies surrounding the ethnonym and the reasons for the Rohingya's current predicament of statelessness. The article contends that the latest outbreak of violence should not be seen as a one-off occurrence, but rather be understood as part of a long history of anti-Rohingya state and community-led violence, which has intensified in recent years, especially since 2012. The events sparked an international outcry, but were met with callousness and denial inside the country, where anti-Rohingya sentiments are widespread and the military operations enjoy wide popular support. As military, government and the public are united on this issue, the Rohingyas – Myanmar's «significant other»⁴ – face an uncertain future and problematic prospects of return. The controversial 23 November 2017 agreement between the governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh, pledging to their return without creating the conditions for it, is no solution either. Among the various fallouts of the crisis was the abrupt fall from grace of Aung San Suu Kyi. Failing to condemn, let alone stop the military operations against the Rohingyas, and showing a total lack of empathy and fundamentally condoning the spread of anti-Rohingya sentiments and violence and, more generally, Islamophobia in the age of rampant Buddhist nationalism across the country,⁵ Suu Kyi's international reputation has been tarnished. More

2. 'Asia's new insurgency', *Wall Street Journal*, 19 December 2016. 'The world's newest Muslim insurgency is being waged in Burma', *Time Magazine*, 15 December 2016. 'Myanmar: a new Muslim insurgency in Rakhine state', *International Crisis Group*, Asia report 283, December 2016, p. 15.

3. 'Myanmar treatment of Rohingya looks like 'textbook ethnic cleaning, says UN', *The Guardian*, 11 September 2017.

4. Francis Wade, *Myanmar's «enemy within»: Buddhist violence and the making of a Muslim other*, London: ZED Book, 2017.

5. On the complex relationship between Islam and the state see Melissa Crouch, *Islam and the state in Myanmar: Muslim-Buddhist relations and the politics of belonging*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. With regard to Myanmar's various

than seven years after Myanmar embarked on an unexpected political liberalisation in 2011, its progress has stalled or, quite possibly, shown its true colours: a non-transition in disguise. The article's main contention is that the Rohingya crisis has revealed how, despite illusions to the contrary, the country's earlier political liberalisation cannot in any way be seen as a step towards democratisation.

The article is structured around the Rohingya crisis because of its centrality to Myanmar's politics in 2017, and proceeds as follows. First, it revisits the unfolding crisis, from the terrorist attacks that sparked its latest outbreak to the ensuing military operations and the refugee crisis that this engendered. A brief background to the Rohingyas and the relationship between the Myanmar state and its largest Muslim community follows so that the main contentious issues are teased out: the use of the Rohingya ethnonym, the contested immigrant origin of the Rohingya population, its legality (or not) in the country and its denied access to citizenship. The article then turns to a broader domestic and international fallout of the crisis, before touching on the other salient events of 2017, such as the crackdown on media freedom and Nay Pyi Taw's evolving foreign policy ties.

2. *The 2017 Rohingya crisis*⁶

At around 8pm on 24 August ARSA's leaders issued a call via the WhatsApp messaging service urging local cells to mobilise and rise against the authorities.⁷ In the early hours of 25 August some fighters and hundreds of local villagers, poorly trained and equally poorly armed (carrying farm tools) attacked 30 police posts and one army base in the townships of Maungdaw and Bothidaung in northern Rakhine state. The fighting left, according to

Muslim communities see Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 'Muslim minorities in transitional societies: Different Myanmar Muslim groups' different experiences in transition', International Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies, Chiang Mai University, Thailand, 24-25 July 2015, and Andrew Selth, 'Burma's Muslims: terrorists or terrorised?', *Strategic and Defence Studies Centre*, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia, 2003.

6. A short note on the sources used in this essay. In the reconstruction of the 2017 crisis I draw on the reports of humanitarian aid groups (Médecins Sans Frontières, *Myanmar/Bangladesh: Rohingya crisis - a summary of findings from six pooled surveys*, 9 December 2017, available at <http://www.msf.org/en/article/myanmarbangladesh-rohingya-crisis-summary-findings-six-pooled-surveys>), human rights (for Human Rights Watch's reporting on the crisis see <https://www.hrw.org/tag/rohingya-crisis>), and advocacy organisations (*International Crisis Group*, 'Myanmar's Rohingya crisis enters a dangerous phase', Asia report 292, 7 December 2017). Their access to the region was restricted and their credibility was fiercely contested within the country. For completeness of information I present the dominant Myanmar narrative later in this article, in section 2.3.

7. 'Myanmar's Rohingya crisis enters a dangerous phase', *International Crisis Group*, Asia report 292, 7 December 2017.

official figures, 14 security forces, one government official and 371 militants (many ordinary villagers among them) dead.⁸ What followed was a counter-insurgency operation by the Myanmar military, most notably a combination of trained special units, police forces and some *vigilante* groups made up of ethnic Rakhines. The security forces' reprisal consisted of arson (Rohingya villages were burnt to ashes), mass rapes and killings in an operation that went on for several weeks.⁹ Satellite images provided the evidence of the destruction in Rakhine state; a long human chain of refugees straddling the border between Myanmar and Bangladesh.

Partly, this is a story of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Ominous signs were clearly visible in 2016, as already reported in *Asia Maior* last year¹⁰ and, before that, in 2012. The exodus also had precedents, with a first wave of refugees leaving the country in 1978, then again in 1989-1990 and more recently 2013-2015. For decades Rohingyas have borne the brunt of state discrimination and persecution without resorting to organised violence. Until very recently, there were few, if any, signs of radicalisation, especially among local Rohingyas.¹¹ This began to change in October 2016 when members of the *Harakah ul Yakin* (Faith Movement, which in the intervening months adopted the English name of Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, ARSA¹²) attacked three border posts in Rakhine state, killing several border guards.¹³ That prompted an immediate crackdown by security forces – a standard *modus operandi* to deal with the Rohingya in Rakhine state – while also highlighting shifting modes of resistance and a degree of coordination and organisation within the ranks of Rohingya militant groups. In the intervening

8. 'Myanmar's Rohingya crisis', p. 6.

9. Richard Lloyd Parry, 'Burma carried on burning villages after deal to take back Rohingya', *The Times*, 19 December, 2017, p. 41

10. Matteo Fumagalli, 'Myanmar 2016: From enthusiasm to disillusionment', *Asia Maior* 2016, pp. 261-276.

11. This is not to say that there is no history of militancy among the Rohingya. Quite the contrary; this dates back to the early post-independence period in 1948 ('Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State', *International Crisis Group*, Asia report 283, 15 December 2016, pp. 3-4), although this has, thereafter and until very recently, mostly been based on the diaspora. What all previous efforts at radicalisation and militancy share is a history of splinter groups which was eventually detrimental to Rohingya movements. For a brief summary of both various radical organisations within and outside Rakhine see Ye Htut's account of the events, espousing the Tatmadaw's view, 'A background to the security crisis in North Rakhine', *Perspective*, ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, No. 79, 23 October 2017. What is interesting in his account, though, is an analysis of how specific policy changes by the Myanmar military deprived it, over the years, of crucial local sources of intelligence. For other – equally controversial – views see Jacques P. Leider, 'Rohingya: the name, the movement and the quest for identity', in Egress/Myanmar Peace Center (ed.), *Nation-building in Myanmar*, Yangon, 2014, pp. 204-255.

12. Arakan is the only name of Rakhine.

13. Matteo Fumagalli, 'Myanmar 2016'.

months it was evident that ARSA was preparing for larger attacks. Beyond a move from non-violence to armed resistance and militancy the Rohingya opposition differed from its predecessors in a number of other respects. First, while the Rohingya Salvation Organisation (ARSA/HaY's predecessor) operated within the Bangladeshi borders, ARSA brought the struggle inside Myanmar. Apart from local and some foreign fighters (and trainers), including its leader Ata Ullah, born in Karachi (Pakistan) who grew up in Mecca (and hardly conversant in Rohingya language), ARSA sought to turn local villagers into fighters. However, poorly trained and without firearms, they were sent to be butchered by Myanmar's armed forces during the attacks. Furthermore, a long-standing practice by Rohingya organisations of not harming civilians among the local population was abandoned, as civilians belonging to Buddhist Rakhine and Hindu groups were targeted in the ARSA attacks on 25 August.¹⁴ In the wake of the ARSA attacks the situation spiralled out of control. Across Rakhine state three areas were severely affected: Maungdaw was the worst hit by the security services' reprisal, both in terms of the damage to property and the human cost. Buthidaung, further to the south-east of that area was also severely affected. Rathedaung, closer to the central part of Rakhine and the state capital Sittwe suffered comparatively less but fearing for their own lives, local Rohingya villagers also left for Bangladesh.¹⁵ According to most reports, around 624,000 Rohingyas fled the country, on foot, across fields and hills, in the middle of the monsoon season across the border with Bangladesh.¹⁶ In the intervening weeks, throughout September – that is, well after Aung San Suu Kyi had announced the end of the clearance operations – the army continued to burn villages, with more and more Rohingyas fleeing the region.¹⁷ With an estimated 700,000 Rohingyas now in Bangladesh, the Myanmar armed forces wiped out the majority of the Rohingya community of Myanmar. Whether this was the result of a deliberate genocidal strategy is beyond the point: the security forces' actions drove the Rohingyas out, forcibly and through unimaginable violence. There was certainly a perverse irony in the timing of all this, as in August the Annan Commission presented the findings of its work and outlined its recommendations to the authorities for tackling the conflict in Rakhine.¹⁸

14. 'Myanmar's Rohingya crisis'.

15. 'Myanmar's Rohingya crisis'.

16. 'Myanmar/Bangladesh: Rohingya crisis - a summary of findings from six pooled surveys', *Médecins sans Frontières*, 9 December 2017.

17. Richard Lloyd Parry, 'Burma carried on burning villages after deal to take back Rohingya', *The Times*, 19 December, 2017, p. 41.

18. Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, *Towards a peaceful, fair and prosperous future for the people of Rakhine. Final report of the advisory commission on Rakhine state*. August 2017.

2.1. *The Rohingyas: a stateless nation*¹⁹

Among the world's most persecuted minorities, the Rohingyas are one – the largest – of Myanmar's many Muslim communities. In an ethnically and religiously plural society like Myanmar (where Buddhists make up over 87% of the population and the majority Bamar group only constitutes around 68% according to the 2014 census), Muslims represent about 4%.²⁰ Of these the Rohingyas make up about half (or at least they did prior to the exodus), the others being Muslim communities of Chinese and Indian origin – primarily settled in Yangon as well as Mandalay – and the Kaman (or Kamein) group in Rakhine state. Judging from the number of temporary documents distributed (the infamous 'white cards'), it appears that Rohingyas are primarily concentrated in northern Rakhine state, where they are settled in Maungdaw, Rathedaung and Buthidaung townships, although precise and reliable data are not available; a chronic problem in Myanmar. Rohingyas are ethnically related and speak a language close to their kins on the Bangladeshi side of the border. Rohingyas were estimated to be over a million in Myanmar prior to 2017,²¹ although they were not officially registered and counted in the 2014 census as they refused to be categorised as «Bengalis», as the government – and the public – call them. Accepting this denomination, something which they have always resisted, would have implied that they have no legal status in the country nor, consequently, a claim to citizenship. To be clear, Rakhine state is itself heterogeneous, both ethnically and religiously. In Rakhine, Muslim communities only represent about a third of the population, including the Kaman (who hold citizenship of Myanmar) and the Rohingyas. Buddhists, be these ethnic Rakhines or Bamars or others, form about 65% of Rakhine's population.²²

19. For more background see Azeem Ibrahim, *Rohingyas. Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide*. London: Hurst 2016; Wade, *Myanmar's «enemy within»*. Syeda Naushin Parnini, 'The Crisis of the Rohingya as a Muslim Minority in Myanmar and Bilateral Relations with Bangladesh', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2013, pp. 281-297. Jobair Alam, 'The Rohingya of Myanmar: theoretical significance of the minority status', *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2018, pp. 180-210. Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 'Muslim minorities in transitional societies'; and Andrew Selth, 'Burma's Muslims: terrorists or terrorised?'

20. Myanmar Information Management Unit (MIMU), *The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census*, 2014, available at www.themimu.info.

21. The 2014 census reports a rather dubious breakdown by religion of Rakhine state, including 96.2% of Buddhists and 1.4% of Muslims, out of a total population of 2,098,807. Once the non-registered 1,090,000 people are included (plausibly mostly Rohingyas) the balance becomes, as noted above, 63% (Buddhists) and 35% Muslims. The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, *The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census. The Union Report: Religion. Census Report Volume 2-C* (<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B067GBtstE5TSl9FNElRRGtvMUk/view>).

22. The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, *The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census*.

Although space constraints do not allow an in-depth discussion of this matter, Rohingya-related controversies revolve around the following issues:²³

- the legitimacy of their ethnonym (do Rohingyas exist as a separate ethnic group?);
- their indigenous or immigrant status in Myanmar;
- the legality of their presence on Myanmar's territory;
- access to citizenship.²⁴

When it comes to the Rohingya, terminology is fiercely contested. Reference to the existence of an ethnic group called Rohingya dates back to the writings of Francis Buchanan-Hamilton in 1799.²⁵ However, this source is as oft-cited as it is unusual in that hardly any other reference exists from that time to the group, as distinct from other Muslim communities living in the same region of Southeast Asia. Furthermore, Buchanan-Hamilton never actually made it to Rakhine state. The usage of the term intensifies in the 20th century, especially from the 1950s onwards. From Myanmar's side the very idea of the existence of a separate Rohingya ethnicity is rejected outright. The fact is that the Rohingyas speak a dialect very similar to that spoken in Chittagong and that in colonial times most Arakanese Muslims (Arakan being the old name of Rakhine) were referred to as the 'Chittagonians'. Instead, the term used to refer to the group is «Bengali», implying that the origin, and future, of the group lies beyond the Myanmar border. Under British colonial rule the immigration of Muslim communities from the Chittagong area to Rakhine was encouraged and increased significantly in the 19th century (from 1823 onwards) up to the early 20th century. Using the year 1823 as the discriminating factor in identifying those groups which are indigenous and those which are immigrant to the territory of today's Myanmar, the government has never accepted the Rohingyas as one of the 135 indigenous groups (or «national races», *taingyintha*, as they are called locally).²⁶

23. For a more detailed discussion of this issue and the extent to which, to varying extent, most people in Myanmar have over time suffered from restricted, denied, curtailed citizenship see Ian Holliday, 'Addressing Myanmar's Citizenship Crisis', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 44 No. 3, 2014, pp. 404-421; Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 'Unpacking the Presumed Statelessness of Rohingyas', *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2017, pp. 269-286.

24. Nick Cheesman, 'How in Myanmar «national races» came to surpass citizenship and exclude Rohingya', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 47, No. 3, 2017, pp. 461-483.

25. Md. Mahbulul Haque, 'Rohingya Ethnic Muslim Minority and the 1982 Citizenship Law in Burma', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 37, No. 4, 2017, pp. 454-469; Aye Chan, 'The development of a Muslim Enclave in Arakan (Rakhine) State of Burma (Myanmar)', *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2005, pp. 396-420.

26. That said, despite the authorities' current insistence on this number from 1990 onwards, this arbitrary figure has actually fluctuated over time, ranging from 45 (in 1960) 135 or 136 (1931), to 144 (1972) and even 160 (again 1960). Nick Cheesman, 'How in Myanmar «national races» came to surpass citizenship and exclude Rohingya', pp. 468-469.

This has made them illegal by design. The issue of the *taingyintha* is relevant to understanding the current situation because it shows how, as Cheesman insightfully observes, the Rohingyas have opted to play by the game of the authorities, fighting for inclusion, instead of rejecting the very assumptions underpinning it (that it is possible to come up with such a list of indigenous groups in the first place, and that this system determines which communities are entitled to legal status, including the path to citizenship, and which are denied). Because they are not part of these 135 national races, the Rohingyas have been denied, or better stripped of citizenship.²⁷ Up until 1978 most Rohingyas held de facto citizenship as they were in possession of national registration cards. The military junta began exchanging those documents, widely held by the populace regardless of their ethnic belonging Nyi Nyi Kyaw meticulously revisits the intricacies of post-independence citizenship and residence controversies, focusing on both laws on citizenship, foreign residence, the production of various of documents (registration cards of various sorts). There is a social hierarchy of ethnic groups in Myanmar which has resulted in different legal positions. The categories are citizens; associated citizens; natural citizens; and resident foreigners. Citizens belong to one of the ethnic groups whose ancestors were settled on the territory of today's Myanmar before 1823. This category includes the Bamar (Burmese), the Karen, Mon, Shan, and the Chin. Associate citizens may have one grandparent or ancestor before 1823 that was a citizen of a foreign country. Naturalised citizens are those that can provide conclusive evidence that his/her parents entered and lived in Burma before independence in 1948. Finally, resident foreigners have no citizenship rights at all. They cannot move freely around the country, they cannot enrol in higher education. They cannot hold government positions. The root cause of the Rohingyas' statelessness is typically ascribed to the 1982 citizenship law. While its provisions are highly discriminatory, Nyi Nyi Kyaw demonstrates how the current predicament stems from, paradoxically, a failure to implement that very same law. In 1989 the military government began exchanging the old national registration cards (which the Rohingyas held) with new colour-coded ones (pink for full citizens, blue for associate citizens, green for naturalised ones and white for foreigners).²⁸ The Rohingyas had de facto been rendered stateless in this process.

27. Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 'Unpacking the presumed'. One has to say that the position of Myanmar's authorities on these questions has varied somewhat over the years. Under Prime Minister U Nu in the 1950s there were attempts to include the Rohingya population – using this term – in the citizenry. However, from the time Ne Win took over in 1962 restrictions have increased.

28. Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 'Unpacking the presumed statelessness', pp. 274, 278-279.

2.2. Triggers and background causes of the crisis

The immediate triggers of the crisis are relatively well known. The army response was prompted by a series of attacks carried out by ARSA militants on 25 August 2017. Having said that, the deterioration of the situation in Rakhine state has a number of antecedents.

The attacks themselves had been preceded by mounting tensions throughout Rakhine state.²⁹ A number of incidents took place across Rakhine states between May and August that indicated that some members of the community had decided to mount an insurgency against the authorities. On 4 May 2017 an accidental detonation of an IED (improvised explosive device) during an ARSA explosive training in north Bothidaung township killed seven men as well as the Pakistani instructor. On 7 May Myanmar's security forces discovered a training camp and bomb-making materials, and a few days later found the bodies of five victims. On 20-21 June security forces killed three men while clearing an ARSA training camp. On 24 June more bomb-making material was found in north Maungdaw township and two ARSA members were shot dead.³⁰ Clashes led Rakhine Buddhist villagers to leave the area for Maungdaw town, fearing ARSA attacks. On 1 August another IED exploded at an ARSA safe house in Maungdaw township; more explosives were found. On 3 August members of the Mro ethnic group³¹ were killed in the hills of that region, with the government blaming ARSA militants. The already-high tensions grew further throughout the summer, with local Rakhines launching a boycott of Muslim products, and the village of Zay Di Pin was fenced with barbed wire blocking the local Rohingya population's movements. On 16 August ARSA leader Ata Ullah issued an ultimatum demanding that the army ceased its discrimination of the Rohingya community and demilitarised northern Rakhine. Interestingly, he also explicitly denied any links with transnational jihadi movements and claimed that the group (ARSA) had not targeted Rakhine civilians.³² The crisis very quickly escalated to international dimensions. The images of hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas fleeing persecution and violence in Myanmar captured the at-

29. Nick Cheesman & Nicholas Farrelly (eds.), *Conflict in Myanmar. War, politics, religion*. Singapore: ISEAS, 2016. Matthew J. Walton, *Buddhism, politics and political thought in Myanmar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017; Nick Cheesman, Nicholas Farrelly & Trevor Wilson (eds.), *Debating democratization in Myanmar*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2014; 'Buddhism and state power in Myanmar', *International Crisis Group*, Asia report 290, 5 September, 2017; David I. Steinberg, 'Myanmar's minority strife', *East Asia Forum*, 7 October 2017; Kyaw Zeyar Win, 'Myanmar's perpetual «other»', *East Asia Forum*, 25 March 2017.

30. 'Myanmar's Rohingya', p. 3.

31. The Mro are related to the larger Chin ethnic group, one of Myanmar's main ethnicities. They are settled in the areas straddling the Myanmar-Bangladesh border (Rakhine state and Chittagong districts, respectively).

32. 'Myanmar's Rohingya crisis', p. 5.

tion of many, although the actual response of the international community (whatever the term may mean) has been wanting (see more below).

As mentioned elsewhere,³³ this was not the first clash between members of the stateless and discriminated Muslim community and Myanmar's armed forces, nor the first Rohingya refugee crisis. Yet the latest military offensive was unprecedented in brutality and scale.³⁴ There were conflicts in October 2016 when another series of attacks by a Rohingya group on the Myanmar border policy sparked a crackdown and clashes.³⁵ And of course there were clashes in 2012. Following the 2012 crisis Rohingyas have been forced to live as internally-displaced people in camps, restricted in movement and access to basic services such as health and education. More broadly, the escalation of violence fitted into a broader pattern of deterioration in inter-group relations, fuelled by a rise in virulent Buddhist nationalism and anti-Muslim hatred and hate speech fed by some radical elements of the monkhood and the military.³⁶ What is clear is that the crackdown of 2017 brought about a drastic reduction of the local Rohingya population which was a desirable outcome for the local Rakhine groups and central government. The Rohingya population was being ethnically cleansed. Or the security forces were engaged in clearance operations to remove terrorists from the region. The next section examines these two narratives.

2.3 *Terrorism or genocide?*³⁷ *Government and international responses*

Two mutually incompatible narratives emerged, creating two parallel realities with little in common with each other, including the events' participants. Some authors had already suggested that the Myanmar authorities' treatment of the Rohingyas could be construed as approaching genocide prior to the 2017 atrocities.³⁸ The scale of the events of 2017 led a number of other organisations, from the UN to humanitarian groups, to refer to the events in a similar guise, at times alternatively using the term ethnic cleansing.³⁹ With very few exceptions (see below) the way the 2017 crisis was seen and framed outside the boundaries of Myanmar tended to prioritise the humanitarian catastrophe of the Rohingya people. Seen from inside Myanmar, however, this narrative may have well been a description of events on a different planet. The government promptly dubbed the ARSA attacks an act of terrorism and justified the security forces' re-

33. Fumagalli, Myanmar 2016'.

34. Matteo Fumagalli, 'How geopolitics helped create the Rohingya crisis', *The Conversation*, 21 September 2017.

35. Fumagalli, 'Myanmar 2016'.

36. For more on this see Walton, *Buddhism, politics*.

37. George Wright, 'Are the Rohingyas Facing Genocide? A single word; the most heinous of crimes', *East Asia Forum*, 19 September 2017.

38. Ibrahim, *Inside Myanmar*.

39. See the already-mentioned reporting by Human Rights Watch.

sponse as a necessary operation to crack down on an armed insurgency. Furthermore, Aung San Suu Kyi was both slow to reply – she spoke on 19 September and then again on 12 October⁴⁰ – and whenever she commented she was in a state of denial about events on the ground. In acts that added insult to injury she invited the villagers she spoke to in Rakhine to «trust the government» and to be patient. Publicly the authorities blamed «fake news» for spreading misreporting about violence in Rakhine.⁴¹ Retired general Htet Yu offered a perspective that is representative of that of the Tatmadaw (armed forces) focusing exclusively on the security threat posed by Rohingya militancy over the decades.⁴² While the mapping of various organisations and splinter groups and the policy evolution over time is useful, this view is entirely oblivious to the suffering of the local population, let alone reflexive of how Nay Pyi Taw's hardline position may have contributed to radicalise some elements of the Rohingya population. It is difficult to imagine a shared space to emerge between these two narratives so that some form of reconciliation may eventually emerge. This is not to say that critical voices from within Myanmar society are entirely absent nor that all «outsiders» share the same perspective. Scholars such as Jacques P. Leider and journalist Bertil Litner have been dissonant voices. Litner has shifted the emphasis away from Muslim-Buddhist dynamics towards the salience of illegal immigration and Rohingya militancy.⁴³ In his work Leider has gone even further, critiquing the use of the ethnonym Rohingya and positing that the term should be more appropriately used to describe a movement, not an ethnic group.⁴⁴ Inside Myanmar, with great difficulty, some voices critical of officialdom persist at considerable personal peril. The work of (Singapore-based) Nyi Nyi Kyaw is illustrative of this position, based on a meticulous scrutiny of Myanmar's historical and legal sources.⁴⁵

40. 'Aung San Suu Kyi says Myanmar does not fear scrutiny over Rohingya crisis', *The Guardian*, 19 September 2017; 'Aung San Suu Kyi unveils relief plans for Rohingya Muslims', *The Guardian*, 13 October 2017.

41. Rossalyn Warren, 'Aung San Suu Kyi once called for a free press. Now the dead are used for fake news', *The Guardian*, 23 December 2017. Lisa Brooten & Yola Verbruggen, 'Producing the News: Reporting on Myanmar's Rohingya Crisis', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 47, No. 3, 2017, pp. 440-460.

42. Ye Htut, 'A background to the security crisis'.

43. 'Rohingya refugees crisis: It's not Muslims vs. Buddhists, says writer Bertil Litner', *Scroll.in*, 11 December 2017.

44. Jacques B. Leider, 'Rohingya: the name, the movement and the quest for identity', in Egress/Myanmar Peace Center 'Nation-building in Myanmar', Yangon, 2014, 204-255.

45. Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 'Unpacking the presumed statelessness of Rohingyas', *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies*, Vol. 15, Issue 3, 269-286; Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 'Muslim minorities in transitional societies: Different Myanmar Muslim groups' different experiences in transition', International Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies, Chiang Mai University, Thailand, 24-25 July 2015; see also Han Ka, 'The Arakan/Rohingya crisis', *Tawai (Torino World Affairs Institute)*, Tnote n. 42, September 2017.

2.4. *The NLD government's predicament and Aung San Suu Kyi's fall from grace*⁴⁶

Despite hopes and illusions (delusions, perhaps) that the country was finally set on course to democracy following the 2015 parliamentary elections and the formation of an NLD-led cabinet, the crisis also served as a stark reminder of who is really in charge in the country. Formally, at least, Myanmar has a hybrid military-civilian government. State Counsellor and Foreign Minister Aung San Suu Kyi is in charge of, broadly speaking, economic policy and foreign policy. According to the 2008 constitution, the military directly appoints three ministers: home affairs, border affairs and defense.⁴⁷ The military also controls the National Security Council (NSC). What all of this means is that Aung San Suu Kyi does not have power over or control of the military. Consequently, it is not so much Suu Kyi's powerlessness that sparked outrage abroad, but rather her silence to speak out in defence of the stateless Rohingyas, and her callousness when she did, finally, comment on the crisis. There are several reasons why, from her perspective, speaking out may not have been so straightforward. For a start, there is a very precarious power-sharing agreement between the National League for Democracy (NLD) and the Tatmadaw. Thus, speaking out would have been inconsequential practically and, quite possibly, would have invited a military takeover. As Myanmar has a long history of military intervention in politics this scenario would not be far-fetched. Alternatively, the state counsellor may have seriously meant what she said in past interviews when she referred to herself as «just a politician»,⁴⁸ meaning that she represents the interest of her own people. The problem is that the Rohingya are not considered to be part of «the people» in Myanmar.

3. *Foreign policy*

The Rohingya crisis has brought home, vividly and tragically, the message that the traditional distinction between inside and outside is increasingly not just blurred but an outdated way of thinking about politics. A review of foreign policy issues necessarily needs to differentiate between

46. 'Nobel peace laureate who fell from grace', *The Straits Times*, 27 December 2017, p. 12. 'Reality bites for Aung San Suu Kyi amid surging violence', *Nikkei Asian Review*, 15 October 2016; Kang Siew Kheng, 'After Shaming Aung San Suu Kyi: Then What?', *RSIS Commentaries*, 5 October 2017.

47. The defense ministry has been in charge of the military operations in Rakhine state.

48. 'For Daw Aung San Suu Kyi politics is a vocation', *The Irrawaddy*, 31 January 2018; Ronan Lee, 'A Politician, Not an Icon: Aung San Suu Kyi's Silence on Myanmar's Muslim Rohingya', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 25, No 3, 2014, pp. 321-333.

the transnational dimension of the Rohingya crisis and other questions of Myanmar's foreign policy which were relatively unaffected by the crisis.

The Rohingya crisis also had clear geopolitical and foreign policy ramifications, both in its origins and timing. It revealed new «friends», put partnerships under strain and caused tremendous stress to Myanmar's neighbours. Thus, an account of the timing of the current crisis should consider how Myanmar's government found itself in such a «favourable» global environment, with its neighbours India and – crucially – China embracing the government's official narrative.⁴⁹ A politically-distant US administration, one that was distracted by domestic turmoil, a looming trade war with China and extremely tense relations with North Korea, was also convenient. Therefore, the Rohingya crisis needs to be seen in the context of a rapidly evolving geopolitical environment, where the government in Nay Pyi Taw felt it could bear the costs of a tarnished international image without incurring sanctions. This was made possible by two main factors.

The first factor, which made the routing of the Rohingya Muslims possible, was the unequivocal support of China, Russia and India. This emboldened Myanmar's generals and sheltered/protected Myanmar's international position. China was Myanmar's most important political, security and economic partner. Beijing's support was essential if Myanmar's many intractable conflicts were to be resolved, as «peace-building» (with all but the Rohingyas) was a priority of Aung San Suu Kyi's government. Although India had accepted a few thousand Rohingyas in the past and China had committed to covering part of the costs Bangladesh was incurring in the 2017 crisis, both New Delhi and Beijing firmly embraced the official narrative of Myanmar's government.⁵⁰ India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi stood very publicly beside Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi, sharing her security-driven narrative of the events.⁵¹ Similarly, Russia was also keen on shielding Myanmar from any international sanctions. Confronted with the possible – though not very likely in light of the considerations above – scenario of a UN resolution condemning the Myanmar authorities, the NLD government warned her international critics, indicating that she would turn to Russia and China's veto power, if needed.⁵² Apart from the different narratives embraced by various actors, the 2017 crisis laid bare the absence of any Rohingya/refugee policy by even those countries most directly affected such

49. Fumagalli, 'The geopolitics of the Rohingya crisis'.

50. 'China and Russia oppose UN resolution on Rohingya', *The Guardian*, 24 December 2017.

51. 'PM Modi tells Suu Kyi India is with Myanmar, but skips mention of Rohingya issue', *Hindustan Times*, 6 September 2017.

52. 'Rohingya crisis: Russia and China will block UN censure, says Suu Kyi aide', *The Times*, 8 September 2017.

as Bangladesh and, to a far lesser extent Thailand.⁵³ This omission exposed ASEAN's traditional dilemmas⁵⁴ between non-interference and the quest to take a stance by its Muslim member states (Indonesia and Malaysia), and even the readiness of local politicians to exploit the crisis for domestic political ends and shift attention, such as shown by Malaysia's government.⁵⁵

The second factor was the US's lack of interest in Myanmar. This was due to both contingent and more structural reasons. From the start President Trump's administration has been driven by other priorities, from North Korea's nuclear threat to its evolving relations with China. More broadly, however, the US's position can be explained by a pivoting away from Asia. In contrast, the Obama administration had been closely involved in shepherding the Thein Sein government on its way to political liberalisation. Although clashes and crises erupted in 2012, 2015 and 2016, the Myanmar authorities plausibly felt constrained by the much-needed international assistance that was crucial to political change. The lifting of most international sanctions in October 2016 opened the gates to a significant inflow of help in the form of aid, investment, trade and more generally, goodwill in the wake of one of Asia's most unexpected transitions. Actively supporting or defending democracy and human rights abroad did not feature highly in the Trump administration's list of policy priorities. Opportunity is key in politics, and a US policy shift compounded by a more immediate crisis in North Korea meant that a window of opportunity for settling the Rohingya question opened. Weeks after the flow of hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas into Bangladesh, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson conceded that Myanmar's behaviour could be referred to as ethnic cleansing.⁵⁶ This being in line with the predominant western narrative, it did not lead to any detectable change of course in terms of Washington's Myanmar policy.

3.1. *The Myanmar-Bangladesh repatriation agreement*⁵⁷

Bangladesh obviously deserves a separate mention here as it was directly affected by the crisis. Dhaka was bearing the brunt of the crisis, having

53. Maximillian Mørch & Mae Sot, 'The quandary of repatriating refugees along the Thailand-Myanmar border', *East Asia Forum*, 7 December 2017.

54. Mathew Davies, 'Is ASEAN a newfound voice for the Rohingya?', *East Asian Forum*, 28 March 2017. Arafat Kabir, 'Bangladesh should recalibrate its Rohingya policy', *East Asian Forum*, 21 February 2017.

55. Chan Xin Ying, 'Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia: Need for Policy Rethink', Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, RSIS Commentaries CO17156, 29 August 2017.

56. 'Myanmar's crackdown of Rohingya is ethnic cleansing, says Tillerson', *New York Times*, 22 November 2017.

57. James M. Dorsey, 'Rohingya Crisis: Breaking the Unending Cycle of Exodus', Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, RSIS Commentaries CO17186, 20 September 2017; Justine Chambers & Gerard McCarthy, 'Unpacking the politics of Rohingya repatriation', *East Asia Forum*, 6 December 2017.

taken in most of the refugees, with little prospect of their returning home in the foreseeable future. Although bilateral relations were occasionally bumpy (Myanmar and Bangladesh compete for international aid and investment, and cross-border crime such as drugs trafficking is a sore point in bilateral ties), political and economic ties between the two countries had been warming up in recent years. And despite domestic pressure to be more vocal on the Rohingya issue, Bangladeshi authorities refrained from actions that could endanger growing commercial ties, exposing Dhaka to both domestic and international criticism for failing to articulate a serious policy towards refugees.⁵⁸

In all fairness, tackling this challenge would be a tall order for any country, and is so especially for Bangladesh. On 23 November 2016 the two governments signed an agreement which would see the refugees return gradually to Myanmar from early 2018 onwards. This was to relieve pressure on a Bangladesh struggling to cope, and ensure that Myanmar resumed responsibility for people that, citizens or not, used to live on its territory. The agreement was, however, fairly controversial as it was remarkably parsimonious on detail. The repatriation and return of the Rohingyas might be a desirable outcome in principle, but the agreement did not specify the conditions under which this should occur, nor whether the process would be supervised by any independent party since there was little reason to believe that Myanmar's authorities would be keen to see all of them return. It was also unclear from where they would return, given that their villages had been burnt and any documents constituting proof of residence would have been destroyed or lost. As such, the deal constitutes little more than a political expedient for the two governments, specifying nothing on reconstruction, let alone reconciliation, reparation or, ultimately, justice.

4. *On road to nowhere?*

Beyond the Rohingya crisis little progress, if any, was made by the government, in addressing long-standing challenges confronting the country and the population.

Disillusionment had already begun to manifest itself among the population which was hardly surprising in light of the extremely high and unrealistic expectations that accompanied the post-2011 opening. In April the NLD lost 11 out of 19 seats in national by-elections, all in favour of ethnic parties in Rakhine, Shan and Mon states.⁵⁹ Similarly, hardly any progress

58. ANM Muniruzzaman, 'Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Bangladesh: Its Multi-Dimensional Implications', Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, RSIS Commentaries, CO17176, 26 September 2017.

59. Matthew J. Walton & Elizabeth Rhoads, 'Bridge-gate in Myanmar: Privilege or politics?', *East Asia Forum*, 12 April 2017.

had been made towards a peace agreement, even before the start of the crisis in August and September. On a more worrisome note, other developments shed light on fundamental problems of the NLD government. The «bridge-gate», erupted earlier in the year, when the government pushed ahead with the naming of a bridge in Mon state after General Aung San, the country's founding father (Aung San Suu Kyi is Aung San's daughter). Although the issue pales compared to whatever else has taken place in the country since then, it also well illustrates the NLD-led government's approach, avoiding consultation with ethnic minority groups (Mons are a Buddhist minority group living in the south-eastern part of the country) and insensitive towards society's ethnic and cultural diversity. Even more problematical has been the media crackdown which intensified as the year progressed.⁶⁰ Growing harassment against journalists seeking to report fairly on Rohingya-related issues and the situation in Rakhine state was being reported.⁶¹ In December two journalists working for Reuters, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, were arrested and charged under the Official Secrets Act, dating back to 1923. The charged was that of illegally acquiring information with the intention of sharing it with the foreign media.⁶² Beyond this case, the government intensified its control of the media. In what best illustrates an astonishing turn of events, commenting on the reporting of the military operations in Rakhine states, Aung San Suu Kyi advised her fellow nationals to believe government-owned media.

5. Conclusion

As calls for charging Myanmar's authorities of genocide begin to surface,⁶³ no realistic solution is in sight. Beyond the human tragedy what strikes most is the dissonance between the domestic narrative and the international one, highlighting a gap which will be difficult to bridge in the coming months and years. The unfolding of the Rohingya crisis in 2017 reveals two deeply disturbing realities. First, despite illusion and self-deception to the contrary, the international community should realise that Myanmar's transition has at best stalled or, in all likelihood, been a non-transition. The

60. Edward Parker, 'What is the Future of the Media in Myanmar? Myanmar's media is making progress, «two steps forward, one step back»', *The Diplomat*, 11 September 2017. James Gomez, 'A false dawn for media freedom in Myanmar?', *East Asia Forum*, 9 September 2017

61. Edward Parker, 'What is the Future of the Media in Myanmar?'; James Gomez, 'A false dawn for media freedom in Myanmar?'.

62. 'Two Reuters journalists arrested in Myanmar, face official secrets charges', *Reuters*, 13 December 2017.

63. Justin Rowlatt, 'Could Aung San Suu Kyi face Rohingya genocide charges?', *BBC News*, 18 December 2017.

military remains firmly in control,⁶⁴ with state counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi providing, until the crisis, a veneer of respect and credibility. This is gone and her international legitimacy has evaporated. Next, if Rohingya's role in Myanmar was ever disputed inside the country, their present and future therein is now critically endangered. It is difficult to see how, and why, they should return to the country unless there is a drastic change of circumstances. Beyond the Rohingya crisis, other problematic issues remain, from Aung San Suu Kyi's predilection for micro-management and the centralisation and personalisation of power. A terrible year came to an end. The repatriation of the Rohingya, according to the 2017 Bangladesh-Myanmar agreement, is expected to commence in 2018, although whether this is feasible, or even desirable, is open to question.⁶⁵ In the very fitting words of local historian Thant Myint-U, it is now time to «jettison the Myanmar fairytale».⁶⁶

64. Naing Ko Ko, 'Military legacy still stalling Myanmar', *East Asia Forum*, 26 September 2017; Austin Bodetti, 'What Is the Tatmadaw's Plan for the Rohingya?', *The Diplomat*, 14 October 2017.

65. 'Burma carried on burning villages after deal to take back Rohingya', *The Times*, 19 December 2017, p. 41; Trevor Wilson, 'No long-term solution in sight for the Rohingya crisis', *East Asia Forum*, 22 September 2017; Adam Simpson, 'Dark clouds over Rakhine State', *East Asia Forum*, 19 September 2017; Katherine G Southwick, 'Pulling Myanmar back from the brink', *East Asia Forum*, 18 September 2017. Furthermore, earlier instances of repatriation of refugees from Bangladesh to Myanmar do not bode well, as they were plagued with delays and difficulties as IDPs were expected to produce documentation lost or destroyed during their fleeing.

66. Thant Myint-U, 'It is time to jettison the Myanmar fairytale', *Financial Times*, 17 October 2017.