

Review of the Revised Edition of Azeem Ibrahim's "The Rohingya"

Derek Tonkin 1 February 2018

Azeem Ibrahim and I are dismayed by the persecution and victimisation of the Rohingya Muslims of Rakhine State, known to the British as "The Arakan". However, we differ fundamentally about the historical origins of the Rohingya people. My own views may be found in Chapter 8 of "Citizenship in Myanmar" edited by Ashley South and Marie Lall, available now for pre-order from Amazon.

While Azeem Ibrahim acknowledges that there was migration from India to Burma during British rule, he nonetheless concludes that: "None of this significantly involved the Rohingya who mostly carried on working as farmers and fishermen.....". My own assessment, quoting from British censuses, official reports and gazetteers, highlights the extent of migration from Bengal into Rakhine State between 1875 and 1930. I note that: "In the 1931 Census Chittagonian migrants from Bengal ('Indians') outnumbered indigenous Muslims in Arakan ('Indo-Burmans') by at least four to one." Taking into account illegal migration from Bengal into Arakan after Burmese independence between 1948 and 1978, I have concluded that probably less than 15% of the present population of Rakhine State could trace their ancestry back to before British rule which started in 1824.

The gulf between Azeem Ibrahim and myself on this basic issue is thus immense and, I fear, unbridgeable. The revision of history which Azeem Ibrahim appears to support and which rejects the entirety of British colonial archives can be traced back to the first year of Burma's independence when the Jamiat Ul Ulema, the Council of Muslim Scholars of North Arakan, associating the political leaders of the Muslim community, sought to assure Prime Minister U Nu in a statement delivered on 25 October 1948 that:

"We are dejected to mention that in this country we have been wrongly taken as part of the race generally known as Chittagonians and as foreigners. We humbly submit we are not. We have a history of our own distinct from that of Chittagonians. We have a culture of our own. Historically we are a race by ourselves....."

This denial of any historical association with Bengal does not seem to have impressed U Nu's political party, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL). Writing over 60 years ago in "The Guardian" monthly magazine of October 1954 under the pen name "Asmi", AFPFL political journalist U Thaug Myine observed:

"The Muslim leaders claim that the Muslim population are indigenous 'Rowangyas' descended from Arab settlers who took service under the Arakanese kings but there is little ethnological or historical evidence to support it. The apparent fact is that a greater number of Muslims than the Muslim leaders would concede belong to the annual influx of cheap Chittagonian labour brought in by the Arakanese landowners to help till the soil, harvest the paddy crop, transport and convey in the paddy trade, and permitted by the British administration to settle down in Arakan."

Azeem Ibrahim denies that any migration of substance into Arakan took place during British rule. Rohingya ideologues generally support this interpretation.

Azeem Ibrahim has been good enough in this revised edition to identify the Muhammad Yunus who wrote the Foreword to the first edition as the Nobel Peace Prize Winner of that name. I had wrongly supposed it was more probably the President of the militant Rohingya Solidarity Organisation who

has the same name. He has also listed in “Acknowledgements” the various sources for his information.

For a full account of the numerous errors of fact in this revised edition, which has corrected none of those in the first edition and about which Azeem Ibrahim was informed, readers may wish to see my 1 March 2017 detailed analysis at:

<http://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/Detailed-Examination-Misinformation-Azeem-Ibrahim.pdf>

I would once again assure Azeem Ibrahim that there was no “Emergency Immigration Act” in 1974 from which he quotes on several pages: the Act was in 1947 during the last year of British rule and is still in force; there was (Page 8) no census in 1961 and this non-existent census did not list “Rohingyas” as an ethnic group; the 1799 reference to “Rooinga” by Dr Francis Buchanan (Pages 24 and 25) is an isolated reference of doubtful interpretation, unsupported by any other independent sources, for those Azeem Ibrahim provides as supposedly additional sources all without exception explicitly acknowledge that Francis Buchanan is the sole source of their information.

Azeem Ibrahim notes on Page 6 that “the British Census of 1911 identified the Buddhists of Arakan (that is, the Rakhine) as having a population of 210,000 (compared to 60,000 in 1824) and the Muslims as numbering 155,000”. An examination of the Census however reveals the following:

1911 Census: Part II Imperial Table VIII Part B Pages 67-68

Akyab	302,597 Buddhists 178,381 Muslims
Sandoway	91,062 Buddhists 4,257 Muslims
Kyaukpyu	165,804 Buddhists 3,641 Muslims
Northern Arakan	1,785 Buddhists 0 Muslims

Total for all four Districts of Arakan 561,248 Buddhists [Azeem Ibrahim – 210,000]
186,279 Muslims [Azeem Ibrahim – 155,000]

Total Population of Arakan 839,896 (Part II - Imperial Table I Page 3)

It is not possible to say from where Azeem Ibrahim has derived his figures which are clearly wrong. The 1826 (not 1824) rudimentary headcount of the population in Arakan recorded 70,000 Buddhists, 60,000 Arakanese and 10,000 Burmese. This 1826 estimate however was little more than guesswork immediately after the cessation of hostilities.

The revised edition includes an Epilogue about recent tragic events which has resulted in the flight of some 700,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh. His criticisms of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi are in my view more than justified and I fully support the general thrust of his presentation. Nonetheless, his tendency to exaggerate events leads him to assert: “After the 2012-13 assaults on the Rohingya community, the great majority found themselves in internal refugee camps” which, if true, would not explain the flight of some 700,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh and the burning of many of their villages.

Whether we are witnessing the “genocide” of the Rohingya people, I doubt. Rather we are witnessing an attempt to expel them to where most of them came from over the centuries – Bengal. If “genocide” were the objective, many tens of thousands more would have been killed. They would not have been allowed, even encouraged to flee, as a Rohingya community.

I nonetheless welcome the publication of this revised edition as a text-book example for students of how spurious historical data can be assembled to provide a grievous misrepresentation of the Rohingya identity, which is only grist to the mill of hostile anti-Muslim forces in Myanmar.