

The Labyrinth of the Rohingya Conundrum: “The Burmese Path to Genocide”

Further Thoughts on the Special Exhibition in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum

On Saturday 25 September 1954 Burmese Prime Minister U Nu gave what we in Britain would call a “fire-side” chat on the Burmese radio. U Nu was a devout Buddhist, and **his homily** that Saturday was on religious tolerance, though it had a political message as well.

In his talk, U Nu quoted from the Burmese court playwright U Ponnya (1812-1867) on the importance of fixing a centre point when building a pagoda or drawing a tattoo. U Nu gives as an example building a house on land with depressions where the earth needs to be levelled to make sure the construction does not collapse. So too, U Nu continues, the construction of the State calls for equality among communities so that the majority will not treat the minorities arrogantly and arbitrarily, which is not the sort of country that he wants to build. After referring to the Kachin and Shan States where Christians and Buddhists live along the border with China and Laos, he mentions Arakan. My unofficial translation reads:

“In the southwest of the country is Arakan Division. In Akyab District ¹, there are the two townships Buthidaung and Maungdaw. These two townships are on the border with Pakistan. In these townships of Buthidaung and Maungdaw, the nationals [natives] who live there are ethnic Ruingya in the majority and they are Muslims. There is also a gang of rebels called the Mujahid. The main aim of this group is nothing less than to detach Buthidaung and Maungdaw from the Union and set up a separate Muslim state.”

U Nu continues by saying that the plans of the rebels have not yet materialized and that it is the duty of everyone in the country to defend the 2,000 miles-border. He praises the leaders of the Muslim community in Buthidaung and Maungdaw who have pledged their unshakeable loyalty to the Government. The moral lesson then follows:

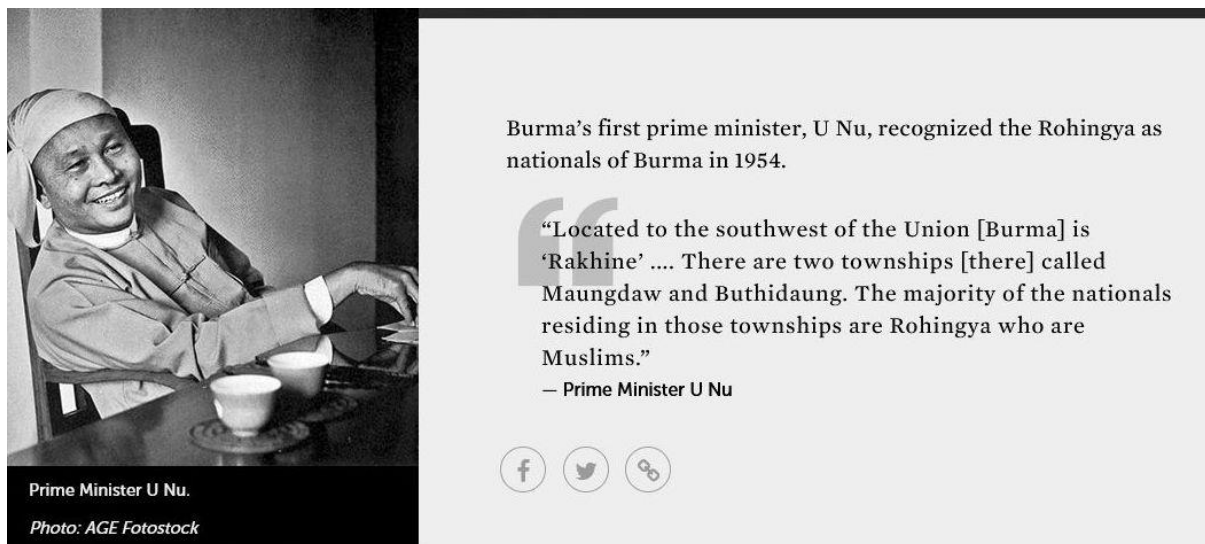
“This region would have been very unruly indeed, were it not for our policy of religious tolerance.”

U Nu’s remarks were not a statement of policy but were designed to curry favour with Arakan’s Muslim population. U Nu was anxious to secure the support of Arakan Muslims to counter **the insurgency launched in 1948 by the Mujahid** (who were in any case also mostly Arakan Muslims). At the time Burmese listeners would have interpreted his reference to

¹ Akyab District in Arakan Division (today Rakhine State) then included today’s Sittwe, Mrauk-U and Maungdaw Districts combined, or the whole of North-Central and Northern Rakhine State.

“Ruhingya” - one of several variations of the Bengali word for indigenous “Arakaner” Muslim communities in circulation - as no more than political support from the Prime Minister to Arakan Muslims whose representatives in Parliament invariably voted with U Nu’s APFPL (Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League) against his political opponents in Arakan, the Rakhine Buddhist ANUO (Arakan National United Organisation). The ANUO leader at the time, the British-educated former Indian Civil Service officer U Kyaw Min, **was well known for taking the APFPL to task**. To the best of my knowledge, U Nu never used the term “Ruhingya” again. One Ruhingya swallow during the years of U Nu’s premiership from 1948 to 1962 does not make a Rohingya summer.

This brings me to one of the exhibits in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum’s special exhibition: **“The Burmese Path to Genocide”**. One online collage disarmingly reads:



Burma’s first prime minister, U Nu, recognized the Rohingyas as nationals of Burma in 1954.

“Located to the southwest of the Union [Burma] is ‘Rakhine’ There are two townships [there] called Maungdaw and Buthidaung. The majority of the nationals residing in those townships are Rohingyas who are Muslims.”

— Prime Minister U Nu

Prime Minister U Nu.
Photo: AGE Fotostock

The text clearly comes from U Nu’s fireside chat of 25 September 1954, most probably paraphrased from a reported official translation ² released on 29 September 1954 and which reads:

“Southwest of the Union of Burma is the Arakan Division. Within that division are the two townships of Buthidaung and Maungdaw in Akyab District, and these are contiguous with the frontier of East Pakistan. The nationals of the Union in those townships are Ruhinjas who are Muslims. There are the Mujahids too whose aim is no less than to secede Buthidaung and Maungdaw from the Union of Burma and set up a separate Muslim state.” ³

² Compare this “official” translation with my own on Page 1 of this blog.

³ Taken verbatim from a now defunct blog by scholars Michael Charney and Maung Zarni.

The term “nationals” though is not related to nationality or citizenship (နိုင်ငံသားများ - ninengansarmyar), but to ethnicity (တိုင်းရင်းသားများ - tinerainnsarmyar) which is the word to be found in **the Burmese version** and is appropriately translated on Page 1 of this blog. Indeed, တိုင်းရင်းသားများ is not to be found at all in Burmese citizenship legislation, so it is quite clear that U Nu was not referring to their nationality/citizenship, but to their ethnicity. Furthermore, the word used in the original Burmese article for this ethnicity is “Ruhingya” (or “Ruhinja”) spelt ရူးဟင်ဂျာ which the Museum has “improved” to “Rohingya” spelt ရိုဟင်ဂျာ . This is, I regret, very much in line with what seems to me to be an ideologically motivated inclination to “improve” original documents when the “wrong” spelling in Burmese occurs, or of replacing the term “Arakan Muslims” with “Rohingya” wherever possible. Neither practice is conducive to historical accuracy.

My conclusion is that it is less than honest for the Museum to cherry pick a few phrases and to conclude in their caption that U Nu “recognized the Rohingya as nationals of Burma in 1954”. In any case, U Nu’s assertion, whether referring to ethnicity or citizenship, is inconsistent with the 1953/54 Census. The total of inhabitants in the eight towns of Akyab District (Akyab [now known as Sittwe], Myohaung, Buthidaung, Rathedaung, Maungdaw, Ponnagyun, Minbya, Pauktaw) in the **First Stage 1953 Census Report** (pages 152 and 153) are given as 68,458. Excluding the majority “Burmese” (mostly Rakhine Burmese) amounting to 44,636, the remaining 23,822 include 18,867 (79%) who are listed as “Indian and Pakistani Races”.⁴ This Indian and Pakistani presence in Arakan was recognised in 1949 by **“The Scotsman’s” special correspondent Michael Davidson** who reported from Akyab on 18 May of that year that: “Of the 130,000 Moslems here, 80,000 are still Pakistani citizens”. It is doubtful that a few years later the 80,000 mysteriously became descendants of an indigenous Arakan race. By any standards, the majority of Muslims in Maungdaw and Buthidaung in 1954 were not descendants of indigenous communities, but of British-era migrants from Bengal, though entitled to full citizenship by birth and by statutory right.⁵


The 1973 Census mirrors the 1953-54 incomplete Census. There is no mention of “Rohingya”. **My own analysis is at this link.**

⁴ “In Buthidaung town about per cent of the population are classified according to the current census as Pakistanis; in Maungdaw about 45 per cent are Pakistanis”. Source: Professor Hugh Tinker, quoting Census Release No. 3 of 1953 - “The Union of Burma” Page 357 OUP 1957

⁵ Section 4. (2) of the **1948 Citizenship Act** reads: “Any person descended from ancestors who for two generations at least have all made any of the territories included within the Union their permanent home and whose parents and himself were born in any of such territories shall be deemed to be a citizen of the Union”.

To add to the debate, **the ideologue U Ba Tha proclaimed in 1960** that the Muslim population in Akyab District were in fact “Roewhengyas” who were 95% of the Muslim population of Maungdaw and Buthidaung Townships. “Roewhengya”, U Ba Tha would have us believe, is a “mere corruption” of the Rakhine words “Rwa-haung-ga-kyar” which means “Tiger from Old Village”. U Ba Tha was to change his mind completely a few years later when he concluded that Arakan Muslims were in fact “Rohingyas”. **At this link** is my critique of the development of his thought 1959 - 1966. ⁶

Let us now look at another collage:



LEADING A NEW NATION

Burma gained independence from Great Britain in 1948. In the years leading up to independence, Rohingya played important roles in establishing Burma's new government.

Two Rohingya served on the country's governing body, the Constituent Assembly, in 1947. One was a member of the committee that laid out the fundamental rights and citizenship of the nation.

Rohingya and leaders from other communities meet in 1946. Burma's founding father, Aung San, is standing fourth from the left. U Nu, fourth from right, would become Burma's first prime minister. Rohingya leader M.A. Gaffar stands second on the right.

Photo: Nurul Islam

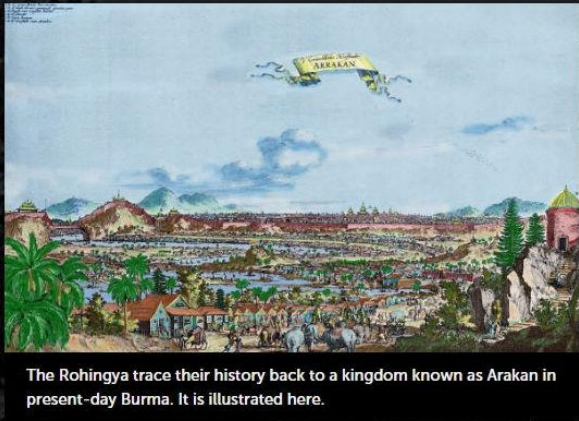
The captions highlight the close political connections between Aung San, U Nu and the Arakan Muslim leader Muhammad Abdul Gaffar. Abdul Gaffar and another Muslim leader Sultan Ahmed took political office in the Government formed on independence (4 January 1948) when Abdul Gaffar became Parliamentary Secretary for Health and Ahmed Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Minorities. (As I have already pointed out in a tweet, it was “The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland” which gave Burma its independence, not Great Britain alone, while the 1947 Constituent Assembly was elected to draft the Constitution, which is why the Governor Sir Hubert Rance and his Executive Council governed until Independence Day.)

But though in 1954 U Nu was to praise the “good guys” in the Arakan Muslim community and condemn the “bad guys” in the Mujahid insurgency, Abdul Gaffar **wrote a forthright memorandum in 1948** in which he was ambivalent if not supportive of the Mujahid as true

⁶ Section 3. (1) of the **1948 Citizenship Act** reads: “For the purposes of section 11 of the Constitution the expression ‘any of the indigenous races of Burma’ shall mean the Arakanese, Burmese, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah, Mon or Shan race and such racial group as has settled in any of the territories included within the Union as their permanent home from a period anterior to 1823 A. D. (1185 B.E.)”. But no list of sub-groups was ever published under this Act. Indigenous Muslim communities in Arakan included pre-1823 settlers.

patriots, while attacking the violence of Muslim gangs. At the same time Sultan Ahmed was not as blameless as U Nu might have thought, as a **SECRET Pakistani Intelligence Report** in late 1948 listed Sultan Ahmed as one of the four main leaders of the Mujahid insurgency. Abdul Gaffar used **the term “Rwangya”** during the 1950s to describe indigenous Arakan Muslims, though claiming that all Muslims in Arakan were “Rwangya”, which denied Chittagonian migration at all into Arakan during British rule. It is even alleged that U Nu cast a blind eye on illegal Bengali migration after independence in order to increase the number of Muslim voters in Arakan who generally supported U Nu’s AFPFL, though I have no actual evidence for this. But there is ample **evidence of AFPFL electoral skulduggery** in other reports.

Finally, we might look at this online caption:



The Rohingya trace their history back to a kingdom known as Arakan in present-day Burma. It is illustrated here.

WHO ARE THE ROHINGYA?

The Rohingya are a religious and ethnic minority in Burma. They are Muslim. Most Rohingya live in Rakhine State on Burma’s western coast. For centuries, they lived side by side there with the Rakhine Buddhist community. But in the last 200 years, Rakhine State was invaded—first by the British, later by the Japanese. These outside influences created divisions between the local communities that would later intensify.

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The historical reality is that the Mrauk-U Dynasty of the Kingdom or Arakan 1429 - 1794 was in its hey-day an aggressive imperialist power which gradually ceded land and influence to the Mughals until it was finally captured in 1794 by the Burmese Konbaung dynasty. Mrauk-U was known for its **piracy and slave trade** - indeed, most of the quasi-indigenous Rakhine Muslims were brought as slaves from outlying regions of the Arakan Kingdom. The Burmese invasion of 1794 was a cataclysmic affair which resulted in the deportation of thousands of Buddhist and Muslim residents (along with the prestigious **Mahamuni Buddha image**), the flight of many more to British India, and the deaths of many others in occupied Arakan. You would have thought that the Burmese invasion was worth a mention by the Museum. The British invasion of 1824 was welcomed by some as a deliverance, with armed support for the British Army from both Muslim and Buddhist militias recruited in Bengal.

The population of Arakan, depopulated as a result of the Burmese invasion, trebled during the first 25 years of British rule from 100,000 or so to more than 350,000 (352,348 recorded in the 1852 Annual Census). This was, as former Chief Commissioner of Burma Lt. Gen

Albert Fytche put it ⁷, "due to immigration from provinces under Burmese government, and notably from Pegu". This meant "the desertion of their own sovereign and country by these masses, and their voluntarily placing themselves under an alien rule, coupled with the vast increase of prosperity in every shape of the portion of Burma which has become British." These migrants were overwhelmingly Buddhist, not Muslim.

The victimisation and persecution of the Arakan Muslim community, known internationally in recent years as "Rohingya", over several decades since World War II has been highlighted in countless articles and reports. There has been debate over whether the atrocities committed against them amount to genocide. Ethnic cleansing may well have taken place, but the charge of "genocide" has yet to be tested in a national or international court, though cases are in action before the International Criminal Court, the International Court of Justice and the Argentinian Courts.

There is indeed more than enough good reason for the Museum to organise a special exhibition on the matter. Yet **as I have already shown**, I am concerned that the special exhibition is being used as a propaganda platform to disseminate a particular historical narrative of **the kaleidoscope of Muslim communities, Indian and Indo-Burman**, who have in recent years coalesced into the "Rohingya" community, an ethnicity in the making. Most Myanmar citizens, I believe, would find the exhibition controversial. It will not help to promote reconciliation between the Buddhist and Muslim communities in Rakhine State. Its implicit portrayal of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as somehow complicit in genocide is unfortunate and widely disputed, **however naïve and ill-informed she may well have been**.

It is for the Trustees of the Museum to decide whether to review the captions in the special exhibition on Burma. As I have not visited the exhibition, I do not know what other misleading historical assertions might be on display.

Derek Tonkin - 6 April 2022

[See also **"The Burmese Path to Genocide"** and **"The Presidential Determination"**]

⁷ Lt Gen Albert Fytche "Burma Past and Present" published 1878: Pages 256-7