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# **ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES AND INTEGRATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

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**Ooi Keat Gin and Volker Grabowsky**

## CHAPTER 5

# Transmutations of the Rohingya Movement in the Post-2012 Rakhine State Crisis

Jacques P. Leider

### Introduction

One of the striking aspects of Myanmar's recent political developments is the dissociation of the multilateral peace process from the political management of conflictual issues linked to the Rakhine State crisis.<sup>1</sup> The peace process comprises the negotiations between the government of Myanmar and the armed groups of ethnic minorities of Chin, Kachin, Shan, Karen, Kayah, Rakhine, and Mon States. It was conceived, necessarily, as a long-term process that should lead, through the signing of a nationwide ceasefire agreement, towards the production of balanced and mutually agreed relations between the central government and a range of political and military actors at the country's periphery with China, India, and Thailand. The expression "Rakhine State crisis," on the other hand, encapsulates a complex set of humanitarian issues (notably questions of internal displacement and resettlement), the contested status of citizenship of a large part of the Muslim population, deep political mistrust that divides the Buddhist and Muslim communities, and ongoing communal tensions that threaten peace building.<sup>2</sup> In Myanmar, these two sets of problems—the broader long-term peace process negotiations and the specific crisis in Rakhine State—are perceived by most people, more or less intuitively, as being essentially matters of a different nature. This perception is shared by foreign observers familiar with the country. As this chapter is only concerned with Rakhine State and not with the peace process, the reasons of this intuitive differentiation will not be examined here. One may note, however, that the descriptive terms in

the media underscore the difference in perception. While the negotiations that should lead towards the resolution of the conflict between the state and the ethnic armed groups are called a “peace process,” the central issue of the Rakhine State crisis is generally referred to as the “Rohingya problem,” vaguely suggesting an entirely different type of issue.<sup>3</sup> Comments upon the dissimilarity of the peacemaking challenges tend to be focused on the controversial issue of Muslim citizenship in Rakhine State, self-identification, and the problem of statelessness. The ethno-political dimension of this legal issue is the particularity of Rakhine State’s Muslims, who claim the distinct ethnic identity of Rohingya but never gained recognition by the state or the country’s ethnic groups. Others weigh in with arguments relating to the broader issue of Buddhist-Muslim relations in the country, which have deteriorated since 2013, practical considerations of processing negotiations, and fears that the Rakhine State crisis is actually an unsolvable conundrum while the prospects of the ethnic peace process appear more likely to be successful in the medium term.

The question of who the Rohingyas are calls for two answers, one including the various representations of the Rohingyas about themselves and another taking a critical historical and anthropological approach towards formulating a communal identity of Rakhine Muslims since the late 1940s. Muslims from North Arakan writing in the late colonial period suggested that the local Muslim community was made up of descendants of Arab and Persian settlers who arrived allegedly beginning in the seventh century CE, who mixed with indigenous people and formed a new ethnicity. More recently, a Rohingya writer has suggested that the Rohingyas are descendants of Aryans and associates them with the first millenium urban site of Vesali on the Kaladan River (Abu Aaneen 2002). Another writer has even suggested that they were descendants of South Indian Tamils. Historical artifacts and written documents provide no hard evidence to bolster such claims.

The available sources point to the cultural impact of the sultanate of Bengal in the fifteenth century and the presence of a Muslim community in the early modern period when the kingdom of Mrauk U became a regional power broker in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The

biggest part of the Muslim community at that time were people from Bengal deported into slavery and resettled on royal fields (Van Galen 2008). During the British colonial period, Muslims and Hindus from the neighboring region of Chittagong came to work in Arakan as agricultural laborers. Those who settled permanently increased the number of the Muslim community to a fifth of the total population of Arakan in the 1930s.

In conditions that remain unclear, in the late 1940s the old and new communities merged, and it is on the political ambitions of their leaders in the 1950s, namely, the creation of a separate Muslim zone, that the Rohingya movement built its own claims of political and cultural autonomy and ethnic identity. The Rohingya movement itself can be defined as a political movement whose foremost aim was the creation of an autonomous Muslim zone. It developed a mytho-historical discourse about Rohingya origins that minimized the cultural connections with neighboring Bengal. It stated dogmatically that the origins of Rohingyas went back to the first millennium and that they were a separate race. The Rohingyas not only validated the Muslim past of Arakan, but they also challenged the prevailing Buddhist narrative with an Islamic counter-narrative. The development of the Muslim project and the Rohingya movement will be presented in some more detail in the section that follows (Leider 2015a, 2015b).

The controversial issue of the Rohingya identity after 1948 points to one of many singular facets of Rakhine State in recent times. Yet, despite such differences, the situations in Rakhine State and in other border areas of Myanmar have a lot in common, too. They share a fundamentally political character pertaining to state-society relations, a track record of insurgencies, and finally inter-ethnic dimensions to the conflict they face.<sup>4</sup> Like anywhere else in the country, the origins of government contestation and armed conflict in Rakhine State reach back to the late colonial and early postcolonial period. For decades Rakhine State was home to communist insurgents, Rakhine independentist and federalist rebel organizations, and to Muslim secessionists (Smith 1991).

Taking stock of the historical background, the following sections will focus on some of the most recent developments. They will argue that the

Rohingya movement underwent important changes after 2012 and that these mutations produced a powerful new narrative of Rohingya persecution. The triangular matrix of dissent in Rakhine State (Burmese state vs. Buddhist Rakhine; Burmese state vs. Muslim Rohingyas; and Buddhist Rakhine vs. Muslim Rohingyas) has been displaced after 2012 by the interpretation of a twofold relationship where the state is perceived as the author of a long-term campaign of persecuting and potentially eradicating the Muslim community. The implications of the state's repression of the Muslims, rather than the historical alienation of the two religious communities, have been represented after 2012 as the exclusive concern that the international community should focus on.

This narrative shift bonds with the representation undertaken by human rights activists who have been acting as caretakers of the Rohingya cause. The activists perceive the Rakhine State crisis as a humanitarian and legal problem to be addressed by the government, a viewpoint that has been embedded in the international media landscape as an added, politically correct way to approach Rakhine State issues. The last section will further argue that the organizational and rhetorical changes that have taken place within the international Rohingya movement are an essential factor that explains how the local ethnic discontent and the condemnation of an oppressive regime have been transformed into international issues. It will be suggested that the internationalization of the Rohingya cause has been an important reason for the imbalance tilting the discussion on the roots of the conflict towards a pro-Rohingya narrative.

## **The communal violence in Rakhine State in 2012**

The rape and murder of a Rakhine Buddhist woman by three Muslims on May 28, 2012, provoked a brutal reprisal a few days later in which ten Muslims on a bus trip to Yangon were killed in southern Rakhine.<sup>5</sup> These criminal incidents sparked large-scale violence in the townships of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and the state's capital Sittway, where Muslims claiming a Rohingya identity form the majority of the population. Houses

were set on fire, dozens of people were killed, and over one hundred thousand people were displaced. The majority of the people killed or displaced were Muslims, but aggressions against Buddhist Rakhine took place as well, similarly resulting in loss of lives and livelihood.

The government security forces were heavily criticized for their failure to respond effectively to the outbreak of violence. Certain human rights activists even raised the threat of genocide, pointing to the long record of discrimination and persecution of Rohingya Muslims that they had been documenting since the 1990s (Cowley and Zarni 2014; Fortify Rights and Lowenstein 2015). They also underscored that the international community had been slow to acknowledge the core issues underlying the crisis, namely, the denial of a Rohingya ethnic identity by the government, the controversial official characterization of the Rohingyas as illegal migrants from Bangladesh, and decades of arbitrary treatment of the Rohingyas by the police and the border troops. In this context, Rakhine Buddhists were increasingly dissatisfied about being unilaterally portrayed by the media as racists. They argued that they defended their culture and ethnicity amidst a Muslim population that had been growing fast due to higher fertility rates and illegal immigration. A presidential commission was created in August 2012 to investigate the situation in Rakhine. Nonetheless, hate speech proliferated in the social media and an immediate initiative was taken to cool tempers.

In late October 2012, the communal violence was reignited, spreading over several more townships and resulting in more deaths and the displacement of a further forty thousand people, once again mostly Muslims (Human Rights Watch 2013). No major violence took place after, but monks from the 969 Movement that toured Rakhine State fanned the flames of dissent and the region has since been drowned in a climate of deep communal mistrust and fear. From 2012 to 2014, Myanmar also witnessed a series of ethno-religious confrontations between Buddhists and Muslims in other places. Anti-Muslim violence struck cities in central Myanmar (Meikthila, Yangon, Bago) and Shan State (Lashio). Mosques, shops, and houses were destroyed and many Muslims had to flee from their homes. These events were associated with the

anti-Rohingya violence in Rakhine State and reinforced the international perception of latent Islamophobia all over Myanmar. For a number of years, Muslims from the north of Rakhine State and neighboring Bangladesh had left the region on rickety boats to reach the south of Thailand and illegally enter Malaysia on jungle roads. The illegal migration and human trafficking often had disastrous consequences. With the crisis in Rakhine State, the number of boat people who fled discrimination and poverty sharply increased after 2013. When Thai authorities started to investigate mass graves in early 2015 and tightened border patrols along the coast, the measures provoked an even greater crisis with thousands of people abandoned on the high seas. As a consequence, the local Rakhine crisis grew in less than two years into a regional and international crisis that involved Myanmar's neighbor states and fellow ASEAN members, and pushed Muslim and Western states to demonstrate their support for the persecuted Muslim Rohingyas (Leider 2014, 2015b).

## **The Rohingya movement up to 2012**

At the end of World War II, a small elite of educated middle-class Muslims in Maungdaw and Buthidaung, many of whom had previously served in the British administration and fought with the Allied troops against the Japanese, went for a political project that should have ensured political and economic autonomy for the predominant Muslim community in North Arakan. Those Muslims who had migrated during the late colonial period from Chittagong Division to Arakan knew well that many Rakhine Buddhists disliked them. In early 1942, the British rule collapsed following the Japanese invasion and the tensions between Chittagonian settlers and Buddhists in Arakan had led to two waves of killing and ethnic cleansing. Muslims were forcibly driven out of the townships of Myebon, Minbya, and other neighboring areas while Buddhists had to flee the northern townships of Buthidaung and Maungdaw, fleeing either north into Bengal or to southern Arakan. In the minds of the Muslims, the 1942 violence confirmed the belief that no political deal could be done with the Rakhine Buddhists. However, the ambitious, yet

ill-conceived idea of an independent Muslim land or an integration of the north of Arakan into Pakistan lacked political acumen and pragmatism and was condemned to failure in 1947. Political autonomy, on the contrary, looked like a realistic project. However, it needed either the support of the British authorities before independence or the Burmese government's compliance afterwards. Therefore the local Muslim leadership, which had joined forces in the Jamiatul-Ulema (association of teachers) of Maungdaw, nurtured the hope of obtaining the concession of an autonomous zone either through the favor of the British or the understanding of the Burmese. Early attempts failed in both 1947 and 1948.<sup>6</sup> The strategy of appealing to powers outside of Arakan to promote the Muslim political project and interests (rather than addressing the political challenge as a domestic issue) set a pattern that became a defining mark of the later Rohingya movement.

The creation of a frontier zone or the support of a Muslim secessionist or autonomy movement at the border with newly founded Pakistan made no political sense for either the British or the Burmese, and both ideas were firmly rejected. The failure to obtain the concession of political autonomy via the status of a frontier region (in 1947) had a number of immediate and serious consequences. As in many other places throughout Burma at the time, political dissent often generated full-fledged rebellion as light weapons for arming militants were plentiful after World War II. The Muslim revolt of the Mujahids lasted until 1961, but it is said to have presented no serious military threat after 1954. Other local Muslim leaders chose the path of parliamentary politics and participated in the elections of 1951 and 1955, standing up for Arakanese Muslim interests. When one sets these events within the larger political context of Burma in the early 1950s, the picture of how local leaders pursued either political or military options to serve their ambitions appears as fairly common. It was indeed similar to developments that took place in the northern, southeastern, and eastern peripheral zones of the Union.

The main difference with other domestic conflicts was the relatively recent process of political identity-building of the Muslims in North Arakan. This process moved forward against the odds and took place under constraints and hostile conditions. In its initial stages, it was promoted not by a nationalistic

mass, but by an elite with an interest in securing political power. As it was stated above, the relatively newly formed Muslim community of Chittagonian origins was disliked by the Arakanese Buddhists because of their earlier pro-British stance, their outspoken territorial claims, and probably also because of their superior ability to organize resources and mobilize support.

The Muslim minority as a whole was largely concentrated at the border with the new country, Pakistan, whose political and cultural matrix was Islam. Burma's cultural matrix was Buddhism, but more than Buddhism, it was the country's multiethnic character and the need for communities to fit into the multiethnic grid that determined status within a political and ethnic hierarchy increasingly dominated by the majority Burmese after the British had left (Taylor 2015). To advance their claims for political autonomy, the Muslims of Buthidaung and Maungdaw needed to gain recognition of a status of national belonging, namely, the recognition that they were sons of the soil. Their de-indianization was never going to be an easy step as the Muslim communities in Arakan were the result of successive layers of migration extending over several hundred years, originating overwhelmingly though not exclusively in southeastern Bengal. The majority of these people, called Chittagonians at least until the 1950s, had come to settle in Arakan during the middle and late colonial period. According to the 1931 census, three-quarters had been born in Arakan, which might have prepared them well for integrating into the older, yet much smaller local Muslim society whose origins went back to the time of the former kingdom (before 1784). Nonetheless, the Muslims in Arakan were never a homogeneous group.<sup>7</sup> British census reports suggest that, at least during the early twentieth century, members of the old precolonial Muslim community of Arakan were keen to mark their difference from the new migrants, who were culturally akin, but newcomers nonetheless (Grantham 1923).

In their census reports, the British put all people in Burma who were linked to India by their racial origins in the category of foreign races. Thus *all* the Muslims in Arakan, however long they had been living there, were classified as belonging to a "foreign race" (*kala*).<sup>8</sup> To claim to be an ethnic group historically linked to the territory and have it accepted at a national

level, the Muslims in North Arakan had to discard the negative connotation of being “foreigners.” Opinions were divided on the best strategy for pursuing the political interests of the Muslim community within the country. The idea of adopting an ethnic name in addition to the Islamic label became popular. Nonetheless many were content with referring to themselves as Muslims or more precisely as Arakanese Muslims,<sup>9</sup> while others chose to specify their place of residence to mark internal community differences, such as Akyab, Maungdaw, Buthidaung. Still others advocated for clearly expressing a connection with the land Arakan, called “Rohang” in Bengali and “Ruaingga” in their own Eastern Bengali dialect. Opinions varied on how to spell the designated name. The Rohingya faction won against those who preferred Ruhangya, Roewhengyas, or Rohangya, all of which were linked to Rwangya, an obscure name used by Muslims who identified themselves as members of the old precolonial Muslim community. The variants are old, and the debate on how to spell them demonstrates that they were used only orally. With the exception of “Rooinga,” which appears only once in a British report of 1798, none of the other terms is found in British descriptions and administrative documents.<sup>10</sup>

After the surrender of the last Mujahids in 1961 and during the brief period when an autonomous Muslim zone existed, the Mayu Frontier Zone in 1961–64, the term Rohingya flourished among the politically engaged Rakhine Muslim community. However, it was vigorously contested by the Rakhine nationalists who, since the 1950s, have called for their own autonomous state and denounced the risks of Muslim separatism. The name Rohingya was mainly used within the narrow circle of educated and land-owning Muslims and it did not gain widespread national recognition, remaining unfamiliar to Burma observers and unknown to the many ethnic groups within the country.<sup>11</sup> Remarkably, the name Rohingya became a default name for Rakhine Muslims after the violence of 2012. Nonetheless, the semantic content of the name Rohingya—its ethnic, historical, and cultural meanings—remains a contested field. The self-perception of the first Rohingya writers focused on the concept of local Muslim cultural and historical specificity. Yet from the mid-1960s until the 1980s, the term

Rohingya was mostly associated with Muslim guerrilla organizations fighting against the Burmese government. In the early twenty-first century, the name Rohingya hints at a narrative of disenfranchisement and persecution in Myanmar, and for casual observers, it may suggest little more than the notorious problem of refugees, illegal migrants, and human trafficking evoked by dramatic pictures of people in rickety boats on the seas of the Bay of Bengal.<sup>12</sup>

When the Mayu Frontier Zone was suppressed and integrated into the Akyab (later Sittwe) District in 1964, a new chapter started where the name Rohingya survived as the name of rebel organizations along the border with East Pakistan (and later Bangladesh). They were resolved to fight, arms in hand, for an autonomous Muslim zone. In 1978, the Burmese army supported a campaign of Burmese immigration officials to check the identity of Muslims in border townships with Bangladesh (Operation Nagamin). The campaign triggered a massive exodus of a quarter million people into Bangladesh. A majority were repatriated in 1979, a move opposed by militant Rohingyas, who took advantage of the refugee crisis to shop for arms and try to gain military support in the Middle East. Still, the refugee crisis of 1978 did not generate an international reaction of support as did the violence in 2012. The crisis of 1978 was triggered by the brutality of security forces, who intervened in a mishandled immigration check by Burmese authorities. Of the two hundred thousand Muslims fleeing to Bangladesh in the first half of 1978, most were repatriated by the Ne Win government with UNHCR support between July 1978 and December 1979. Many refugees stayed on in Bangladesh, many others moved to Saudi Arabia where people from the region had settled since 1948. Pakistan provided passports, mostly with restricted validity. Bangladesh provided passports to migrant Rohingyas, though it is generally accepted that many identity papers were obtained illegally.

The events that took place from the late 1950s to the late 1970s conditioned two types of developments. First, individuals began to produce exclusive narratives to describe their history and identity. This widened the ideological gap between Muslims and Buddhists. History provided foundations for the

Muslim nationalism of the Rohingyas and the Buddhist nationalism of the Rakhine. Secondly, leaders of the Muslim diaspora of Arakan became the mainstay of the acclaimed Rohingya identity. Under the authoritarian regime dominated by the army from 1962 until 2010, self-government was politically taboo and the expression of cultural autonomy was discouraged. Security was the primary concern of the military rulers. The state could exploit communal dissent to keep control of the two rival communities, playing the resentment and the fears of the Rakhine against the demographic power and the cultural otherness of the Muslims. Still, the administrative and political failure to integrate the Muslim community of North Arakan into the nation and to establish efficient control over the border with Bangladesh to prevent illegal migration demonstrate the weakness of the authoritarian state.

The citizenship law of 1982 has been singled out by commentators as the one moment when the Burmese state deprived Muslims in Rakhine State of their citizenship rights, making them virtually stateless (Pugh 2013). Nonetheless the history of their social and political exclusion is not a streamlined account of victimizing. Facts and interpretations diverge. Some Rohingyas have stated that the Burmese state planned evil against their community after 1962, some cite evidence to prove that their situation went from bad to worse mostly during the 1990s due to the arbitrary policies of the Nasaka border guards, and others have said that communal relations were still reasonably good before the 2012 violence, while those who believe that a slow genocide is taking place designate 1978 as the key date from which the extermination began.

To make sense of the many inconsistencies that haunt contemporary Rohingya statements on the history of their persecution, a more detailed analysis is needed to clarify the historical record. For sure, after 1962, the government's failed economic policies paved the way to poverty for all the people living in Rakhine State. A history of oppression and exploitation has been shared by the two communities. Consequently the history of the Muslims in Rakhine after independence is first of all the history of a progressive political and economic decline caused by the incompetence of the state to establish fair and equal rule. Clumsy immigration policies and

restricting freedom of movement (prohibiting Muslims from officially leaving Rakhine State) stand out. The state established a reputation as a predator, being corrupt, inept, and untrustworthy. By increasingly denying rights to Muslims, it superficially played to the tune of Rakhine nationalists.

The Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO), founded in 1998, defines itself as “one of the representative organizations of the Rohingya people of Arakan, Burma.”<sup>13</sup> Historically ARNO is the successor organization of a series of militant Rohingya organizations based along the Bangladesh-Burma border that fought the government of Burma/Myanmar since the 1960s.<sup>14</sup>

From the early twenty-first century onwards, the Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO) spread a relatively moderate message, which may be interpreted as a break with its past of armed struggle fighting for a separate Muslim zone.<sup>15</sup> In 2015, it stated its political objectives as the introduction of democracy and the right of “self-determination” of the Rohingya people, the preservation of Rohingya history and cultural heritage, and the repatriation of Rohingya refugees from their places of refuge. What makes ARNO traditional is its strong affirmation of historical and cultural roots, which serve to confirm the claim that Rohingyas are an ethnic minority of Myanmar. Since its foundation, ARNO has been making efforts to denounce the hardship endured by Muslims in North Rakhine State (notably the demands made by the Nasaka Border Guard Force until 2012) and voicing the tragedy of refugees who identify as Rohingyas in Thailand and Malaysia. Nonetheless, the post-1988 political context did grant ARNO a little space for developing political projects of its own. The organization followed a strategy of associating itself (and the cause of the Rohingyas) with the general struggle of ethnic minorities in Myanmar and the democracy movement. ARNO representatives met Karen and Kachin interlocutors and joined ethnic events organized abroad. Yet, ultimately this strategy of moderation and showing solidarity with the struggle for freedom and self-determination in Burma did not produce any perceptible political results for the Muslims in Rakhine State in the 2010s. Paradoxically it was not the democratic opposition to the military regime that made promises

to the Rohingyas in North Arakan but the military government that lured the Muslim voters at the 2010 elections to support the regime party with promises of citizenship.

In hindsight, one can hardly criticize ARNO for this failure. It is difficult to imagine political alternatives to the discourse of moderation that it embraced after 2001 and which contained increasing references to human rights principles. Despite the political letdown, the move was significant. The association of Rohingya issues with the broader concerns of the pro-democracy groups that fought for regime change marked a further step in the internationalization of the Rohingya movement. It took the Rohingya movement in the diaspora out of its parochialism and saved it from oblivion and irrelevance (Leider 2013b). By showing photos of Aung San Suu Kyi in its pre-2012 publications, ARNO demonstrated concern for democracy in Burma/Myanmar, though it failed early on to gain acceptance by other ethnic parties. When one looks at the political situation in Myanmar three years after the 2012 communal violence, one can hardly imagine that any Rohingya politician in the country or lobbyist in the diaspora would still invoke Aung San Suu Kyi or the Burmese democracy movement as a beacon of hope for their cause.

Against this background, one may wonder why so little information about the tensions, state-society relations, and the security situation in Rakhine State had circulated outside of the country prior to the 2012 violence. There is a long list of possible and interconnected answers to such a question. One of the less obvious ones may be the tendency of the people of the region to self-isolate and default on building relations and investing in communication (Leider 2015a). Many of the Buddhist Rakhine are reluctant to engage with outsiders' opinions and tend to persist with their often narrow perceptions of what is Rakhine culture. As for Muslims, the Rohingya ideology has not been conducive to a firm alliance with political groups either in Myanmar or in Bangladesh. By claiming an ethnic identity that people in Myanmar consider as fake and that people in Bangladesh consider as foreign, Rohingyas have not made many friends in their neighborhood. Clearly this self-isolation did not prevent the expression of Muslim solidarity in Bangladesh or entirely

deny the benefit of occasional political bonds. Still, in political terms, the Rohingya organizations outside of Burma/Myanmar failed for decades to obtain any substantial political gains in terms of recognition (Leider 2015b). Reports on the plight of the Rohingyas were the work of foreign human rights and humanitarian organizations rather than the traditional Rohingya movement. The 2012 violence changed the configuration of the conflict as well as its perception by the outside world, demonstrating the role of communication in the making of global opinions.

### **Beyond the triangular conflict: Competing nationalisms and hostile communities**

At the moment of independence, the central state faced the challenge of a Muslim separatism that morphed into a Rohingya national movement that was not only perceived as a political threat by the state but also considered as illegitimate by the Buddhist Rakhine. This situation conditioned the triangular nature of the Rakhine State conflict (central state vs. Muslims vs. Buddhists), making it substantially different from the binary geometry of state-ethnicity relations in the rest of the country's conflicts (government and army vs. ethnic armed groups).

In Arakan/Rakhine State,<sup>16</sup> each party has been opposed to the other two as it tries to defend and pursue its own interests. At the same time, interests have overlapped and tactical moves have become entangled. Both Muslims and Buddhists have been claiming increased rights and autonomous development, perceiving the authoritarian state as a predator and oppressor. Yet Buddhist and Muslim political actors have generally been disunited in their opposition to the government, its ethnic policies, and its security administration.

Postcolonial Rakhine Buddhist nationalism, for its part, can be explained against this confusing background. It has emerged as a composite of historical nostalgia, anti-Burmese resentment, and radical opposition to the Rohingya Muslim project of creating a separate Muslim territory on the border with East Pakistan (Bangladesh after 1971). It has been thriving on the collective

memory of the independent Rakhine kingdom and the Buddhist cultural identity of the majority population. This Rakhine nationalist ideology is part of the mainstream federalist tradition and the somewhat more marginal independentist stance. The imagined community of Rakhine nationalists does not provide space for Muslim identities.

The project of a separate Muslim enclave, on the other hand, was similarly exclusive. The territorial claims were part of a political and cultural process within the Muslim political elite that propagated a distinctive Muslim identity. The Rohingya movement became the mature expression of a regional form of Muslim nationalism during the 1950s (Leider 2013b, 2014).<sup>17</sup> The interests of politically active Muslims became thus opposed to the ambitions of the Rakhine and to the interests of the centralizing state. To safeguard their communal and material interests within a persistently hostile environment, the majority of Muslims who were not drawn to rebel generally accepted political compromises in their interactions with the state. It was to little avail, because in the long run, the Muslims have been subjected to a lowering of their social and political status coupled with restrictions of movement and state harassment.

While Muslims were marginalized both socially and politically, members of the Rakhine community did not face ethnic exclusion and became embedded within the state's institutions, namely, the administration and army, on a local and national level, but not generally in Rakhine State. The Ne Win regime promoted multiethnic harmony under a de facto Burmese ethnic hegemony, but the ethnic subordination did nothing to reduce Rakhine nationalism or bring about the acceptance of a rival Muslim identity. Opposition to the claim of a separate Rohingya ethnicity was articulated in historical and cultural terms and has thrived undiminished since the 1950s. It gained further strength over the years with the real or imagined fear of uncontrolled Muslim population growth associated with arguments on illegal migration. From 1962 to 2012, the government and the army successfully prevented the outbreak of large-scale communal violence between Rakhine Buddhists and Muslims that would have undermined the political order and state security. Still, the record of the campaigns of Burmese security forces in

1978 and 1991–92 that led each time to the temporary exodus of a quarter million of Muslims to Bangladesh shows that the anti-Rohingya Muslim resentment was not only tolerated but also exploited by the state.

Migrations became a defining mark of the postcolonial history of the Muslim community. The accusation of illegal immigration, a staple argument of Rakhine Buddhist nationalists, has been largely denied by local Muslims, but it would warrant more detailed investigations relating to the changing postcolonial political and economic contexts. If the argument that people would not move from a poor country to a poorer country holds true, the reverse case is equally valid (Dapice 2014). Burma is a much less densely populated country than its neighbor East Pakistan/Bangladesh and in the 1950s Burma's economy was thriving. Transregional north-south migrations along the northeast coast of the Bay of Bengal have been a key historical factor since the early modern period and they are part of the historical experience of all the ethnic groups of the region. Migrations have been motivated by economic, social, and political factors and have neither been unidirectional nor irreversible.

Poverty, oppressive political conditions, and the lack of career opportunities have been powerful drivers for the rural masses. The steady flow of migration of the Muslim elite from Rakhine State to Yangon and eventually abroad is particularly noteworthy.

One may argue that the triangularity of the domestic conflict, despite its competing nationalisms and hostile communities, did not preclude its inclusion into a wider peace process. Couldn't a new deal of consensual power-sharing between the state and ethnically diverse minorities be struck in Rakhine State as well, paving the road towards social and economic progress and creating a security environment where human rights standards were going to be respected? Still, the configuration of the ethnic and political conflicts in Rakhine State has remained radically different from other situations in the country for more reasons than conflictual triangularity.

The crisis has been complicated by geopolitical dimensions that involve interests and policies of the states of Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar. Until 2012 the border region was virtually unknown to most people in

the world.<sup>18</sup> It looked as if news reports brought to light a hidden drama of ugly Buddhists persecuting helpless Muslims, oversimplifying the puzzle of communal tensions, historical frictions, institutional oppression, and demographic pressure. This narrative conditioned an international outcry about the humanitarian disaster and the disenfranchisement of the Muslims in the northern districts of Rakhine State. Still the calls for justice did not address the underlying complications of violence, social angst, and resentment that had prevailed for decades.

Both communities, with opposing political interests, have suffered from the experience of being treated unfairly by the state for decades. The Rohingya Muslims in North Rakhine State have denounced the fact that they have been increasingly excluded from the national community despite their claims of historical roots and loyalty to the state. The Rakhine have traditionally looked at the Burmese as the conquerors of their ancient kingdom and condemned the policy of Burmanization that aimed at culturally aligning the Rakhine with the majority culture.

The reaction of the international community was largely a response to the events of 2012 where the Muslim community throughout the whole state (including those like the Kamans who had been recognized since independence as full citizens) suffered enormously from the destruction of houses and forced displacement.<sup>19</sup> The discussion of the emerging state crisis focused exclusively on the humanitarian issues and the offending state policies, and it passed by many of the critical questions relating to the origins of the dissent that had broader political implications: migrations, rival political and economic interests, competing legitimacies, poverty, and irremediable suffering due to past injustice and violence. From the point of view of the government and the local Rakhine Buddhist community, the discussion appropriated by the international community was distorted. In the end, the debate about the Rakhine State crisis was no longer a matter of solving the problems and negotiating peace among domestic actors, because the terms and definitions of the conflict discourse went largely out of their control.<sup>20</sup>

Insufficient attention was indeed paid to the fact that the debate on the conflict and the conflict itself were not merely a national issue. Since

2012, the debate has been taken up unequally between a national pro-Rakhine Buddhist consensus in the country and an international block of pro-Rohingya voices. Neither side has held a uniform stance, yet broadly speaking, national interests, cultural sensitivities, and their truths have been pitted against international viewpoints, principles, and other truths. As a consequence, the high ground of interpretations has emerged as a field of confrontation within the ethnohistorical conflict and it has been dominated by the ethically referenced voices from abroad. Moreover, confrontational discussions and divergent interpretations have also demonstrated how perceptions (rather than certainties) can overrule facts and how beliefs can take the lead over political reason.

Nonetheless, the political management of Rakhine State did not slip from the iron fist of the government and input from the international community remained limited. Government administration and the security establishment have contested international interpretations of the conflict, but they have made regrettably few efforts to explain their policies after 2012. Rakhine Buddhists have criticized the international support for the Rohingyas as well. They were however ineffective in articulating moderate viewpoints and suggestions for solutions compatible with international standards. In 2012, a rhetoric of denial and a pervasive anti-Rohingya resentment displayed by hard-core Rakhine nationalists produced a negative image of the community as a whole.

The national conversation on political reforms and the need for policies based on equality and fairness have ultimately had little impact on the way that the government and Rakhine civil society have approached the situation in Rakhine State. Strikingly, the Rakhine have rarely defended their political positions with reference to international legal standards the way that pro-Rohingya campaigners have emphasized the implementation of human rights.

The rapid transformation of the local conflict (that had remained shut off from the attention of the world for decades) into a global cause (that was represented emphatically as a threat to the country's future) propelled one of the most neglected and isolated regions of Myanmar into the limelight of

global attention. As the Muslim Rohingyas became better prepared, thanks to the existing networks of their international diaspora, they could seize the new opportunities of global attention to present their victimhood in an international space dominated by international organizations, international nongovernmental organizations, and a web of diplomats and leaders with regional and transregional briefs.

### **Post-2012: New Wave Rohingya**

One could call the Rohingya movement before 2012 “traditional” to distinguish it from the important changes that it underwent since 2012. The expression “New Wave Rohingya” is used here to designate the recent developments within the international Rohingya network and to outline transformations that took place after 2012. Significant changes have included (1) the expansion of Rohingya associations and their activities in the Western diaspora, (2) the shift of the Rohingya rhetoric from historical and cultural coordinates to themes of Muslim victimization and solidarity, and (3) the spreading out of a Rohingya narrative structured by humanitarian and legal perspectives. New Wave Rohingya is an expanded worldwide Rohingya mobilization that has increasingly made use of the potential of global campaigning. The organizational growth that followed the international expressions of sympathy for the victims of the 2012 violence went hand in hand with the use of social media and the creation of websites that draw on portrayals of the situation of Muslims in Rakhine State.<sup>21</sup> Since 2013, the mobilization for pro-Rohingya campaigns has been dominated by the Arakan Rohingya Union (ARU), associated groups such as Burma Task Force, and more recently by the European Rohingya Council (ERC). These organizations are networking with sympathetic Muslim states and Islamic organizations, lobbying the EU and Western governments, and keeping alive the global awareness of Rohingya Muslim concerns. Since 2012, they have had an impact on the international perception of the Rakhine State crisis as well as on the discussion of Rohingya issues in the Western context, in the international Muslim context, and in a specifically regional ASEAN

context.<sup>22</sup> The post-2012 mutations within the international Rohingya diaspora have transformed the international issue of Rohingya refugees, debated since the 1990s, into a globalized concern for Muslim victimhood.

ARU is an umbrella organization of Rohingya associations founded in Jeddah in 2011.<sup>23</sup> Thanks to its media presence and international links, the ARU and people associated with its leadership have overshadowed the role of ARNO, the organization described above as the main representative of the traditional, historical Rohingya movement.

The ARU was the outcome of a series of consultation meetings of Rohingya groups that took place in Bangkok, Bangladesh, and Saudi Arabia in 2006, 2008, and 2010. The signing of the ARU charter raised great hopes among Rohingya militants.<sup>24</sup> In 2005, an international workshop on the pre-independence history of Arakan organized by the Institute of Asian Studies of Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok illustrated the huge divide between Rakhine Buddhist nationalists and Rohingya militants.<sup>25</sup> It also demonstrated the organizational disunity of the Rohingya militants. The scholarly part of the 2005 Bangkok workshop was followed by a “roundtable history discussion” where “issues of common concern” and a “strategy to resolve differences” were raised. Still, the conference failed to promote any kind of shared conversation that was able to engage participants in a political dialogue. Nonetheless, the Bangkok event marked the beginning of exertions led by Harn Yawngghwe, head of the Euro-Burma office (EBO) in Brussels, to bring rival Rohingya organizations together under a common program and leadership.<sup>26</sup> Harn’s efforts were subsequently supported by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

The ARU charter signed by twenty-five Rohingya organizations at the OIC headquarters may have appeared to some as a *déjà-vu*, because there had been earlier attempts to unify the Rohingya movement.<sup>27</sup> Such attempts had failed because of factionalism and competition among leaders. It seems that the creation of ARU was not an exception, and news about internal dissent circulated two years later on the web.<sup>28</sup> Yet the foundation of ARU has been historically important. It took place less than a year before the outbreak of the 2012 violence. Therefore it provided the Rohingya

movement with a mouthpiece to voice its grievances at an international level at the right moment, more efficiently and firmly than ever before. Unlike earlier federations of Rohingya organizations, ARU has enjoyed a strong OIC backing. Run out of the U.S., it soon gained prominent access to international organizations based in New York as well as political institutions in Washington.<sup>29</sup> Back in 2011, Wakar Uddin, an American professor of plant pathology who hails from a Maungdaw clan, had been elected as a candidate of compromise to head ARU. He was a new face within the Rohingya movement, unblemished by political gaming. He proved himself able to engage in numerous presentations on the tragic events of 2012 to both Western and Asian audiences while lobbying for Rohingya interests. As he became the recipient of Middle East funding, he could actively support the activities of new and traditional Rohingya organizations.

The institutional support of the OIC and the availability of funds from institutions and governments in the Middle East provided support that made a clear difference in the situation that the Rohingya movement in the diaspora had faced up until 2012. However, the creation of the ARU neither displaced ARNO nor eliminated other older and more traditional organizations.

Besides ARU, the most recent political activism of the Rohingya diaspora organizations is found in northern and northwestern Europe, particularly in the U.K. and in Scandinavia. A European Rohingya Council (ERC) was created on October 7, 2012, in Denmark and registered as a nonprofit organization in the Netherlands (December 11, 2012).<sup>30</sup> ERC's goals also reflect the dynamics of New Wave Rohingya and its activities have gained traction thanks to the prominent role of Tun Khin, the head of the Burmese Rohingya Union of United Kingdom (BROUK) and Mohamed Ibrahim in Germany. Greater unity to gain support for pro-Rohingya agendas and influence Western policies has been a welcome development for the wider Rohingya movement. Yet while the ERC wants to position itself as an organization dedicated to humanitarian issues, it still faces the typical challenge of creating a sense of togetherness and cooperation among

Rohingyas for the longer term. Recent efforts to cooperate are not novel and may be insufficient to sustain a lasting transnational initiative.<sup>31</sup>

To put it briefly, the Rohingya diaspora was able to mobilize itself at a critical juncture, connect to international organizations, and keep the Rohingya issue alive for Western powers engaging with the Myanmar government. International and national human rights bodies documenting the dismal living conditions in the IDP camps in Rakhine State supported public calls for the recognition of the Rohingyas as an ethnic group of Myanmar. These campaigns resonated in a global idiom that was well understood and largely accepted by mainstream public opinion around the world. The Rohingya cause also took advantage of the international muteness on Rakhine Buddhist viewpoints and the Myanmar government's lack of a communication strategy on Rakhine State crisis issues.

An impressive number of humanitarian and human rights' organizations have made reports on the Rohingyas since the 1990s, and many more after 2012. The aims and methods of these organizations vary. Some focus on raising public attention through the media, giving vocal support to the people they define as the victims, while others prefer institutional advocacy and take a more balanced approach. A few examples may illustrate the marked presence of their viewpoints in the wider context of the Rakhine State crisis. Human Rights Watch has issued occasional reports since the 1990s (for example, see Human Rights Watch 1996, 2012, 2013), clearly aiming at a strong media impact. The Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma (ALTSEAN) based in Bangkok and best known for the harsh rhetoric of its monthly reports has produced detailed accounts of human rights violations against Muslims in Rakhine State. Other reports include the 2012 *Arakan Report* of the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief, a Turkish NGO (Insani Yardim Vakfi 2012), the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation's report of 2014 (Dapice 2014), or the 2015 report of the Asian Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR 2015). Physicians for Human Rights (2010) has been following the situation for several years, while Fortify Rights is an NGO that has specialized in the Rohingyas since its foundation in 2014. Still, these are just a few examples

of human rights organizations that have produced reports over the last few years. Ideologically, they may differ considerably. While organizations like Fortify Rights or ALTSEAN pursue their agendas with strongly formulated language, others such as Arakan Project, founded in 1999, invest in long-term advocacy and prepare research papers that inform UN human rights mechanisms. Most organizations focus on humanitarian and human rights issues in Rakhine State itself, but rarely include the difficult situation of the hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas in neighboring Bangladesh. For reasons of confidentiality, the organizations do not reveal their field sources so that their actual connections with Rohingya organizations remain unknown. Therefore it is difficult to assess what segments of the wider Rohingya community—beyond the Muslim population in certain parts of Rakhine—find their own perceptions and interests represented in these reports.

The Rohingya organizations themselves have increasingly oriented their struggle towards a human rights-focused agenda. The traditional Rohingya movement looks back at a checkered history of factionalism, armed struggle, and shadowy connections with Islamist organizations in South Asia. Its flagship since 1998, Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO) polished its image after 2001, largely replacing a militant separatist agenda by claims that made direct references to the implementation of human rights. This strategic choice has also driven New Wave Rohingya outfits since their foundation. ARU, ERC, and associated groups have positioned themselves with politically correct and lean mission statements campaigning for justice and human rights, staying in line with international standards.

The mission statements of ARU and ERC overlap at many points in calling for the recognition of Rohingya ethnicity, the restoration of citizenship, and the arrest of those responsible for acts of anti-Muslim violence in 2012. Yet ERC's stronger link to ARNO is visible in its references to history and show of political pragmatism. ERC, unlike ARU, includes in its objectives the need to live "side by side in harmony with other ethnic groups" and to search for "permanent political and social solutions."<sup>32</sup>

In the U.S., pro-Rohingya activists have been moving away from the traditional type of purely Rohingya or national organizations towards the

building of campaign coalitions doing Muslim political advocacy. Wakar Uddin's home organization, the Burmese Rohingya Association of North America (BRANA), has been showcasing the international presence of its leader, but BRANA has apparently not been used as a campaign vehicle in itself. BRANA is part of Burma Task Force (BTF), a coalition of Muslim organizations created in 2013 at the initiative of Justice for All, a Muslim Illinois-based NGO.<sup>33</sup> The creation of Burma Task Force marked a further step in the internationalization of Rohingya concerns, but the contours of BTF's identity remain blurred. Its website, [www.burmamuslims.org](http://www.burmamuslims.org), does not contain general information on the situation of the different Muslim communities in Myanmar, but focuses exclusively on a pro-Rohingya agenda. On the other hand, the headline of "Burma Task Force-Donation" starts with the phrase "Burma Task Force is a united effort of American Muslims."

The creation of Burma Task Force demonstrates not only a new form of pro-Rohingya campaigning that builds on a wider and more dynamic mobilization of Muslim resources. It also marks a significant shift in rhetoric and ideology. In its mission statement, the BTF reduces the complex problems of the Rakhine State crisis to an exclusively Rohingya issue defined by its legal and humanitarian aspects. The historical background, the religious and cultural specificity, the geopolitical context, the socioeconomic framework, and last but not least, the existence of other ethnic communities in Rakhine State are neither presented nor explained. Accordingly, the goals of BTF separate the interests of the minority group (the Muslims) from the existential presence of the majority group (the Buddhists) while both claim and share the same territory. Regional political connections, such as border relations with Bangladesh and political and economic experiences shared in the past are absent and stifle critical reflection on the background situation in Rakhine State. Therefore BTF's mission statement hardly encourages the search for durable political solutions.

Ignoring the claims of the other community is a habit rooted in both communities. Buddhist Rakhine and Rohingya history writers have generally tried to deny the key historical claims of the other community. Buddhists are reluctant to acknowledge the role of Muslims in the old Buddhist kingdom,

while Rohingya Muslims have disconcertingly interpreted the history of the Buddhist kingdom as the history of a Muslim sultanate (Leider 2015a). Nonetheless the political rhetoric of the traditional Rohingya movement has generally referred to the “two sister communities”; it has stressed the patriotism and loyalty of the Muslims and embraced visions of cohabitation with their “Rakhine brothers and sisters.”<sup>34</sup> For decades the postcolonial Muslim identity process in North Arakan has not depended on South Asian but on local models, the Rakhine Buddhist model of an independent history previous to the Burmese and British rules and the Myanmar matrix of ethnic requirements to obtain political legitimacy.

Remarkably, the rhetoric of New Wave Rohingya has been doing away with the existence of the Rakhine as a factor to be included in the political equation. It not only drops the issue of contesting historical claims dear to the postwar generation Muslims who founded the Rohingya movement. ARU/BTF and also ERC statements first of all address an international audience with messages that focus their attention on the plight of a certain group of Muslims in Myanmar. Their ultimate target is the government of Myanmar and its practices of discrimination, not the ethno-religious intolerance of the Rakhine Buddhists, who remain an unnamed community. Even ERC’s promotion of dialogue points to interfaith activities rather than a political dialogue. Its criticism of Buddhist nationalists (in particular the 969 Movement) does not mention the Rakhine Buddhists.

In the aftermath of World War II, politically ambitious Muslims of North Arakan had first of all been fighting for the creation of an autonomous Muslim zone. The foundational thinkers of the Rohingya movement that evolved throughout the 1950s solidified this project with the claim of a distinctive, historical, Rohingya ethnic identity built on the pillars of myth, history, territory, and Muslim culture. In practical terms, this meant the acceptance of the amalgamation of Muslims from the past with the later inflows of Chittagonian Muslims during the colonial period. The suppression of the Mayu Frontier Zone left the Rohingya movement with the bitter political experience of losing the privilege of an autonomy that the Rakhine Buddhists were unable to obtain from the U Nu government

in 1962. At the same time, the political loss did not dispel the pride of the Muslims at having been able to make their ethnic claim and assert an identity that drew on prestigious episodes of local Islamic history.

New Wave Rohingya, on the contrary, does not boast such historical credentials. It has encouraged international solidarity by forging a Rohingya identity that has become mainly defined by victimhood. Like the Acehnese studied by Anthony Reid, the Rohingyas represent an Islamic idiom of “outrage at state humiliation” nationalism (Reid 2010, 119). The plight of the Rohingyas has also been presented as a distinctive Muslim cause, appealing to the compassion of co-religionists, a worldwide sense of justice, and the solidarity of a global audience. It is the narrative of human rights taking the place of historical narratives. Consequently, New Wave Rohingya has facilitated the participation and solidarity of those who might have remained unmoved by convoluted historical arguments. At the same time, the gap between the national (Myanmar) and the international (global) spaces of expression and reflection has widened. Muslims trying to stand up for the Rohingya claims inside the country were deprived of openly addressing a Myanmar national audience. Unlike the Rakhine Buddhists, they have not enjoyed the trust or solidarity of Myanmar’s ethnically diverse citizenry.<sup>35</sup>

In 2012, a global public of world leaders and academics internalized the image of victimized Rohingya Muslim masses, not an image of an obscure separatist movement with a militant past and a dubious political record. Rakhine Buddhist positions were understandably considered to be insensitive and aggressive but, unfortunately, as irrelevant as well. Myanmar government statements were discarded as untrustworthy or unacceptable.

## **Genocide narratives**

The international interpretations of past and present policies of the Myanmar state towards the Muslims in Rakhine State became even harsher after the outburst of anti-Muslim resentment in several Myanmar cities in 2013 and the vote of the restrictive legislation on marriage and religious conversion in 2015. One of the most forceful accusations made against the

government of Myanmar has been the allegation of genocide. Investigations were launched and conferences were convened from 2013 to 2015 to push for acknowledgment of the genocide narrative. Nonetheless international opinions have remained split on such a characterization of the historical record.

In fact, the genocide charge has been part of the rhetorical Rohingya repertoire since the movement's origins. The allegation that the Burmese government was trying to commit genocide against the Rohingya did not begin in 1978, as some would have it. More than twenty-five years earlier, the charter of the Arakan Muslim Conference (1951) began with the call, "Stop genocide of the Muslims who alone stand in between 'Communism' and 'Democracy' in Arakan." The June 1951 charter did not elaborate the genocide charge and the term may have been used as a hint to the conflict that opposed government troops and local Muslim rebels since 1948. In 1978, following the flight of an estimated two hundred thousand Muslims from Arakan to Bangladesh, the rebels of the Rohingya Patriotic Front raised the accusation of genocide as well, but at that time, it did not become the object of an international inquiry as the majority of people who had fled were repatriated up to December 1979. A number of non-Rohingya activists and scholars who have lately embraced Rohingya advocacy have tried to build a new set of arguments to bolster the claim of premeditated genocide (Cowley and Zarni 2014). Maung Zarni, a veteran Burmese anti-government activist and self-declared pro-Rohingya fighter has been instrumental in organizing a series of high-profile events where he specifically advocated for the description of Myanmar government policies in Rakhine State as a form of "slow genocide."<sup>36</sup> Penny Green, the director of the International State Crime Initiative at Queen Mary University in London, and her collaborators have characterized the conditions of persecution of the Rohingyas as "genocidal practice" despite the absence of mass killings (State Crime 2015).<sup>37</sup> Fortify Rights (2015) tasked the Allard K. Lowenstein International Rights Clinic of Yale Law School to publish a legal analysis that supports the genocide claim as well. Rohingya organizations and websites have widely quoted the genocide (also often called ethnocide) allegation sanctioned by legal

specialists. Burma Task Force states as its first goal “to stop the genocide of the Rohingya Muslim minority group.”<sup>38</sup> While the genocide charge was not very prominent in the 2012 declarations and statements, it became an integral part of the pro-Rohingya discourse in 2015. The accusation of genocide hits hard at the credibility of a state. It resounds loudly because many members of the global community have a clear perception of genocide in mind, be it in Nazi Germany, in Armenia, in Cambodia, in Rwanda, or in Srebrenica.<sup>39</sup>

In conclusion, thanks to the dynamics of New Wave Rohingya, the original Rohingya project of sociocultural and political autonomy has been successfully repackaged as a leaner humanitarian but more abstract and global cause. This mutation of the movement, the transformation of its organizational networks, and the adoption of an exclusively ethics and rights-based narrative, has important implications for the contextualization of the crisis itself. The final section will summarize some of the above points and include some political comments.

## **Internationalization and the ownership of the conflict**

The post-2012 developments within the Rohingya movement represent a further step in internationalizing the Rohingya cause. This internationalization has many aspects. One of them is the strategy of the Rohingya movement to advance its political and social interests by obtaining the support of foreign governments and international organizations and institutions. The changes summarized in this chapter using the moniker New Wave Rohingya confirm this strategy as a historical trend. The traditional Rohingya organizations had been only moderately successful in bringing their cause to the attention of a wider global audience. The creation of ARU and ERC represents more powerful dynamics that have taken advantage of the widespread international interest in Myanmar. Indeed the internationalization of the humanitarian cause of the Rohingyas has solidified opposing opinions on the Rakhine State Crisis.<sup>40</sup> After 2012, the international approach to the conflict has prioritized the “plight of the Rohingyas” as the central concern. The media emphasized the

humanitarian disaster, while the human rights organizations described the disenfranchisement of the Muslim community and ongoing state oppression as root causes of the violence.

We have seen that the Rakhine State dissensions were not included in the ethnic peace process in Myanmar. I pointed out the differences between the perception and the reality of the various conflictual situations. The Rakhine State crisis pitted a national pro-Rakhine Buddhist desire for action against internationally supported pro-Rohingya positions.<sup>41</sup> What does this disjunction of narratives and the changes in the modes of articulating the Rakhine State crisis mean for the region's political prospects?

Earlier I sketched the violent events that took place in Rakhine State and central Myanmar between 2012 and 2015 that were perceived as symptomatic of a strong anti-Muslim xenophobia and extremist tendencies by a Buddhist nationalist fringe. The dramatic scenes from May 2015 of boats packed with starved people drifting on the high seas have taught the lesson of regional cooperation. Narrow national approaches are insufficient to control the irregular maritime migration in the Bay of Bengal. There is a very real hope that the underlying social and economic problems in Myanmar will be faced in a more energetic and principled way by the new administration that takes over in 2016, but it may be short lived. In 2015, the prospects were not entirely encouraging despite strenuous efforts by the United Nations and a considerably improved understanding of the conflict by international institutions and government observers. One may wonder if the globalization of the Rakhine State conundrum and the plight of the Rohingyas is to be welcomed as a positive development. Viewed from the perspective of the Rohingyas, it certainly is. The Rohingya organizations received declarations of support from sympathetic Western and Middle East countries. Since the end of 2012, their account of Muslim victimhood in Myanmar established itself internationally as the politically correct narrative avoiding the complexity of Muslim diversity and the frustrations of the Rakhine Buddhists. The name Rohingya has been propelled to a level of popularity and acceptance formerly unknown. Simultaneously, the official administrative appellation of "Bengalis" that had raised no one's protest for

three decades, was discredited internationally. Never before in history did so many Muslims from Rakhine State claim the appellation Rohingya. The strong support of OIC and a number of Middle East countries for the ARU was surprising after decades of lukewarm backing of the Rohingya militants. Muslims in the Middle East have responded with enthusiasm to the calls for financial help for the Rohingya Muslims. The international wave of sympathy has thus indisputably benefited the worldwide Rohingya network and by extension their social and political cause.

However, the internationalization has not opened new ground in the domestic political arena where both Muslims and Buddhists have been silently longing for peace. The political prospects are dimmed by the domestic perception of this internationalization. It confirms some of the fears aired by Buddhists, namely, the alleged threat of an international Muslim alliance. There may be few grounds for such worries, and Westerners have generally been in a rush to discard them wholesale. Nonetheless, speculations about the total number of Muslims in the country have often been used to vent anti-Muslim sentiment or denounce the hypocrisy of the state for its supposed tolerance of non-Buddhist religions.

Myanmar is home to several Muslim communities of various ethnic backgrounds, each having their own religious and cultural network. The estimated percentage of Muslims has varied between four and seven. Muslims of Indian origin (broadly, but often pejoratively referred to as Kala) are divided along linguistic groups and found in urban centers all over the country. The Panthay of Mandalay are of Chinese origin going back to the eighteenth century. The Burmese Muslims (called Zerbadis before 1940) trace their origin back to the early modern period and only their religious practice and beliefs differentiate them from the Buddhist Burmans. A process of reidentifying as “Pathi” has emerged in recent years as the Burmese Muslims try to reclaim the unity as well as the antiquity of their community by using a term for Muslims found in the royal chronicles. The Muslims in Rakhine State who identify as Rohingyas have been the biggest Muslim minority in Myanmar since the late nineteenth century (Selth 2003). Their efforts to set themselves ethnically apart from other Muslims of Indian origin

and their strategy to gain the support of non-nationals for their cause has deprived them of national allies and left the community in a worse situation than other Muslims.

The mission statements of ERC and ARU are addressed to an international audience and based on the assumption that international pressure on the government of Myanmar will ultimately lead to a decisive change of policies towards the Muslims, namely, recognizing their ethnicity, restoring or giving them full citizenship, and providing them with economic and social benefits. The Rohingyas want to be rescued by the international community. Bearing in mind the failure of the policy of sanctions against Myanmar and the general move of the international partner countries to eliminate sanctions after 2010, the suggestion to renew pressure policies displays a lack of political realism.<sup>42</sup> Similar approaches seem even more unrealistic in the post-election context of November 2015, where the political game in Myanmar has been changed by the NLD winners. The unspecified stance that underlies the international Rohingya discourse is the assumption that the conflictual ecosystem can be unpackaged outside of the space of communal interaction. By doing away with the traditional ethnocultural configuration rooted in territorial claims and interpretations of the historical master record, New Wave Rohingya has escaped the need for a dialogue on coexistence, shared issues, and the roots of ethnic identity that are at the heart of the conflict.<sup>43</sup> When both history and historical contextualization are emptied of their social relevance, they become moot. This simple truth challenges not only the government authorities and administration, but also the responsibility and the capacity for political vision of Buddhist and Muslim leaders, whatever their geographical location. According to the 2014 census, the total population of Rakhine State was 3,188,963 (Ministry of Immigration and Population 2014, 2015). As Muslims were not allowed to identify as Rohingyas, they were not enumerated. The number of the “not enumerated” was estimated at 1,090,000 people. The two million Buddhists and over a million Muslims will ultimately have to find ways to live together.

The recent interpretations of the Rakhine State crisis have not disallowed the representation of the conflict in triangular terms (the state, Buddhists,

Muslims). But the triangularity sketches the Rakhine State crisis as an essentially domestic issue and this description is nowadays insufficient for understanding the stakes of the Rakhine State crisis in the post-2012 context. The role of other, mostly international, actors has already been sufficiently underscored: the indirect role played by the international Rohingya network; the prioritization of humanitarian and human rights agendas by international partner countries of Myanmar and international organizations; and the impact of the voices in public and social media on the minds of the people in shaping their opinions. Since 2012, Myanmar's traditional short-term approach of developing ad hoc policies to ensure the state's security priorities has not worked anymore. The international community has urgently called for more principled and comprehensive government approaches to deal with the humanitarian and legal issues. Moreover, bilateral issues, notably the movement of people between Bangladesh and Myanmar and beyond, have become weighty regional problems, including illegal migration and human trafficking, which involve Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and other countries where the presence of Rohingya refugees has raised domestic political challenges. Among international actors within the country who have had a better grasp of the complexity of the Rakhine State crisis during the years that followed the 2012 violence, a tacit consensus has prevailed that patient steps towards decreasing the tensions by socioeconomic initiatives and political trust-building could be more useful than sharpening the rhetoric. It is not difficult to dismiss such soft approaches with reference to events that entered the political chronicle in 2015: the suppression of the white (identity) cards and their replacement by a type of temporary (identity) card, the continuing existence of the IDP camps, urban segregation, the alleged bullying of people to accept the appellation "Bengali," the disenfranchisement of Muslims in general, and the exclusion of their political representatives from the electoral process as well as the shunning of Muslims by the political opposition, notably the NLD, a party that had been a beacon of hope for a long time.

The informal yet influential domestic anti-Rohingya front staffed by radical Rakhine Buddhists, government authorities, and a militant anti-Muslim fringe of the monkhood has demonstrated again and again that

it was not open to compromise, blocking by their protests tolerant and more open-minded approaches. Rakhine Buddhists have expressed their social and economic worries to international actors, but their fears have not attracted international support. Within the global discussion, the tendency of the Rakhine community to self-isolate along with the radicalization of opinions in Myanmar have created a perception of the Rakhine as an irresponsible and politically immature party in the midst of the conflictual ecosystem. In conclusion, can one criticize the Muslims for ignoring the Rakhine Buddhists? And vice versa, given the habit of ignoring each other quasi-methodically, can one blame the Rakhine Buddhists, inhabitants of the second poorest state of the union, for focusing their attention on their own interests? The answer is that self-centeredness may have been sitting well in the trend to self-isolate during the pre-2012 period, but it is no longer a politically sensitive response in the more open space of debate and discursive confrontation that Myanmar has faced since 2010.<sup>44</sup>

Myanmar has sorely lacked public intellectuals to inspire and charismatic political leaders and monks who meld their traditional moral messages with a critical and tolerant look at contemporary political challenges. International observers have relentlessly denounced the lack of respect for human rights in the country and advocated for human rights as a quasi-condition for further political progress. Such an approach is morally sound, but one may wonder if it is politically wise. In the history of Western countries, the practice of human rights has been the endpoint of a long historical development. In Myanmar as well, the practice of human rights will depend on an extended learning process within the institutions where actors need to unlearn bad habits of abusing power. Political change will have to go hand in hand with the multi-tiered acquisition of a human rights perspective. These political changes have generally been described as a necessary process of democratization, having elections, and alternating power-holders at the center. However, more importantly, the country will have to modernize its political institutions by moving from a leader-focused hierarchical model to a political and social order built on trust, the balancing of economic interests, and a fairer sharing of power at the regional level.

After 2012, the Rakhine political class did not prioritize the popular dissent with the Muslim population as its foremost issue. The Arakan National Party, founded in 2014, emerged from the fusion of the Rakhine National Development Party (which competed in the 2010 elections) and the Arakan League for Democracy (1990 elections). Since 2010 the Rakhine leaders have been exploring the new political space in the country. Economic, social, educational, and political issues of their own group have been central concerns of Rakhine civil society. They have tended to shut out of their political consciousness the issue of future coexistence with the Muslims in the same way that the Rohingya diaspora have passed over in silence the existence of the Rakhine. It is also this lack of political vision that has consolidated the management of Rakhine State by the central government and the security forces. The ANP's good showing in the November 8, 2016, elections will certainly open a new chapter in the post-independence saga of failed relations between Buddhists and Muslims and their discontent with the central state.

## Conclusion

Descriptions of the Rohingya issue and the Rakhine State crisis rarely display a comprehensive picture of the situation, with its multi-layered political background.<sup>45</sup> Prior to the 2010 elections, promises had been made by the government to the Muslims in North Arakan that they would eventually be granted citizenship. The events of 2012 and the rapidly polarizing positions on the Rohingya Muslim identity within the country wipes out such promises if ever they were meant seriously. The lesson to be learned from this episode, as from the recent changes in the international Rohingya network, is the irreducible ambivalence and dead ends entailed by simplifying the ins and outs of seven decades of post-independence history. What Myanmar needs is less ethnicized politics and more bottom-up integrative approaches towards the multiethnic complexity of the country (Taylor 2015). The political class in Myanmar and in Rakhine State has to understand that segregation extracts a higher economic price and generates neither social capital nor peace. Yet this is not the only challenge for social integration. A better record of

the authorities on human rights will not by itself ensure that the Muslim community in Rakhine State finds its place within the country and that the historical bitterness is overcome.

A political dialogue that will pave the way towards a peace process in Rakhine State is certainly possible, but it will need a tolerant yet fluid, a broader yet more accurate approach towards the historical experience of the people who are living in Rakhine State today. At present, neither the temptation of the Rakhine to focus solely on their own needs and expectations, nor the self-gratification of gaining international support for the Rohingya cause, are conducive to encompassing political visions. It often looks as if the actors in the Rakhine State crisis prefer to feel right about their own cause rather than exploring a broad-based political realism. This situation has created the impression that the Rakhine State crisis cannot be solved. Political interests remain embroiled with moral judgments and both actors and observers are entrapped in a rivalry of subjectivities.

The international community, for its part, is well advised to step back from entrenching itself in moral superiority and avoid being perceived as taking sides. Still, however strong the support from inside or outside is and however valid its credentials and aims, it seems extremely unlikely that one single community will be able to pursue a path of progress and development unless it provides space for the other community and their hopes for a better future. Integration needs, realistically, commitment from both sides. One of the important lessons of the peace process in Myanmar is the learning process among ethnic armed groups as they faced the government negotiators with a common voice. Similarly Rakhine State will only move towards peace when the main actors in the country have the courage to envision together a common future.

## Notes

1. The terms “Myanmar” and “Rakhine” are used in this chapter to refer to the contemporary Union of Myanmar and Rakhine State, as they have been officially called since 1989. The name “Burma” is still widely used to refer to the country in historical contexts. Similarly “Arakan” and “Arakanese” are terms

that refer to the geographical and historical shape of the former kingdom, the colonial province, and the union state, as well as to its majority people up to 1989. The terms will be used according to the chronological context.

2. The violent events of June and October 2012 in Rakhine State that led to over two hundred dead and the internal displacement of tens of thousands of people were triggered by racist propaganda and long suppressed resentment. The role of agent provocateurs remains as yet unclear. The violence took place in a conflictual context of state discrimination, poverty, social angst, communal tensions between Buddhists and Muslims, and unresolved political and legal problems that go back to the colonial period and the late 1940s. Nonetheless the humanitarian problems created by the 2012 violence, notably the huge number of people that were relocated in camps, the de facto segregation of people in urban and rural environments, the sudden international interest in the situation of Muslims in Rakhine State, and the strong pressure on the government of Myanmar to amend the situation according to international principles have produced new challenges and an entirely new situation for all the actors.

3. In “Counter-Narratives on the Rohingya issue,” Nasir Uddin pointedly writes, “the premise whether “Rohingya” is a *problem*, and if so for whom, should be resolved first before any further discussion. In fact, the notion of “problem” itself is problematic since it involves multi-typed interests of multi-layered stakeholders concerned” (Uddin 2013, 11).

4. The wish of Muslims to participate in the political process has been repeatedly underscored by the Rohingya organizations. Most recently the declaration of the Second European Rohingya Conference (Esbjerg, August 1–2, 2015) has stated: “The conference reiterated that . . . political and democratic process in Burma should be all-inclusive and Rohingya must be a part of it.” See “Declaration of the Second European Rohingya Conference” (2015).

5. This paragraph draws on Leider (2015b, 27–32).

6. “Representation by the Muslims of North Arakan Claiming for an Autonomous State in the Buthidaung and Maungdaw Areas, 24 February 1947.” (Government of Burma Home Department 1947). <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF18/Representations-1947-rev.pdf>; “Address Presented by Jamiat Ul Ulema North Arakan on Behalf of the People

of North Arakan to the Hon'ble Prime Minister of the Union of Burma on the Occasion of His Visit to Maungdaw on the 25th October 1948." Government of the Union of Burma, Foreign Office, 1948, accessible at <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF19/J-U-25-October-1948.pdf>.

7. The idea of a historically homogeneous Muslim community is a twentieth-century retroprojection that obfuscates the actual historical record. It is essentially an ideological claim necessary to sustain the belief that all Muslims (with the exception of the Kaman, a community with a distinct history going back to the late seventeenth century) ought to be considered as ethnic Rohingyas. The creation of a political identity should not be confused with the cultural identity of Muslims in Arakan, which has so far been poorly studied. After 2012, the failure to distinguish between the political profile of the Rohingyas and the larger issue of Muslim identities throughout Arakan/Rakhine State has reinforced the gap between Buddhists and Muslims.

8. For reasons of space, the state policies and Burma/Myanmar's constitutions and citizenship laws are not reviewed here. The relevant documents are searchable in various Internet databases, for instance, <http://www.networkmyanmar.com/rohingyamuslim-issues>.

9. The term "Arakanese Muslims" is found in several descriptions of the population of Arakan in the nineteenth century. See for example Phayre (1844). It is unclear how many among the Muslims in Arakan still prefer this appellation. Even in human rights reports that have given very strong support to the Rohingya claims, for example the ALTSEAN reports, "Rakhine Muslims" was used until 2006.

10. The term *Rwangya* was not widespread and was apparently only used orally by a part of the Muslim community. It is found in a few documents of the late 1940s but not recorded in any colonial source or British census report. One may hypothesize that it emerged as a term coined by the older Muslim community to differentiate itself from the newly arriving Chittagonians. See Tonkin (2014a). The term *Rooinga* was recorded a single time by Francis Buchanan-Hamilton, a British doctor, during his stay in Amarapura in 1795, where he interviewed Muslim deportees from Arakan to enquire about their language.

11. Rohingya political identity formation took place below the surface of political and military events during the 1950s and blossomed in the early 1960s, when the creation of the Mayu Frontier Zone gave Muslim leaders and students the free space to express their conception of a Rohingya identity within their own community and a small circle in Rangoon. The idea of a Rohingya identity remained the intellectual property of restricted political circles, who failed to reach out at a national level due to rapidly changing political conditions after 1962, and it never entered public awareness inside or outside Burma. Printed references to the term Rohingya that have frequently been cited after 2012 mostly date from the early 1960s. After 1964, the name Rohingya appeared rarely in the international press. The magazine *Asiaweek* used Rohingya in its February 21, 1992, issue on the Myanmar army's campaign against rebels of the Rohingya Solidarity Organization and the brutal attempt to resettle Muslims. Reports of the UNHCR and human rights organizations made the term relatively better known throughout the 1990s.

12. It is worthwhile to recall the multifaceted profile of the name, because it reflects both the complexity of the Muslim identity process that is so deeply contested by the Rakhine Buddhists and the sudden emergence of the political situation of self-defined Rohingya Muslims into global awareness after 2012.

13. Information on ARNO quoted in this paper is derived from texts posted on [www.rohingya.org](http://www.rohingya.org) and last accessed in July and August 2015.

14. Little detailed information is available on organizations such as Rohingya Independent Force (RIF), Rohingya Independent Army (RIA), Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF), Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), and Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF) that have emerged, occasionally merged, and waned since the 1960s. The best overview is found in Selth (2003).

15. One of its member organizations, the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), reputedly cooperated with Islamist organizations in Bangladesh and Afghanistan in the 1980s (<http://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/rohingya-solidarity-organization-rso>). RSO was founded in reaction to the 1982 citizenship law that denied the recognition of citizenship to many Muslims from North Arakan. News about the negotiations of ARNO representatives with al-Qaeda were reported by CNN (<http://ireport.cnn.com/docs/DOC-803422>).

16. Until the spelling reform of 1989, Rakhine State was known as Arakan, a term still widely used in the historical literature. When Burma became independent in 1948, the ethnic Rakhine (or Arakanese) failed to obtain their own state. Arakan State was created only in 1974. This paper will use both terms, either singularly or together to mark historical distinctions between the recent period and more distant times.

17. For the Muslims who self-identify as Rohingyas, it means the belonging to a separate ethnic group of Muslims living in the north of Rakhine State that see themselves as an indigenous group and the successors of the precolonial Muslim community of the ancient Buddhist kingdom. I have defined Rohingyas by their origins as a political and militant movement whose foremost aim was the creation of an autonomous Muslim zone. See Leider (2013b). The expression "Rohingya movement" is meant to cover a variety of often competing organizations that share similar aims. The political agenda that emerged during the parliamentary period of the 1950s largely ceded its place, since the late 1990s, to advocacy work calling for the national and international recognition of a Rohingya identity and the implementation of human rights in Rakhine State. See Leider (2013a).

18. Even during the post-1988 period, the ethnic tensions in Rakhine State and the situation of the Muslims in particular did not raise major interest in the English-language press worldwide. A rare reference to Arakan (Rakhine State) is found in an editorial of *Asiaweek* of August 28, 1998: "Yet the Yangon authorities continue to mistreat and oppress Muslim minorities in the eastern Arakan region." It should obviously be "western" Arakan region.

19. The Kamans are an indigenous Muslim community that traces its origins back to a few hundred soldiers, aides, and noblemen who accompanied Shah Shuja, a former Mughal governor of Bengal when he had to take refuge in Arakan in late 1660. After a revolt when Shah Shuja was killed, the surviving followers were variously employed as guards at the court or resettled by the Arakanese kings on the island of Ramree (or Yanbye). They have spread to other places in Rakhine State as well. *Kaman* means "archer."

20. Since 2012, peace negotiations between the Union Peace-Making Working Committee (UPWC) and the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination

Team took place under the direction of Minister Aung Min of the president's cabinet, with support of the Myanmar Peace Center and input from separate ethnic groups, organizations, and concerned parties, as well as the media. These peace negotiations received strong international support, but they took place within a national political matrix and have therefore been owned by the national actors.

21. The oldest Rohingya news website is Kaladan Press Network (<http://www.kaladanpress.org/>), with news in Bangla, Burmese, and English. Rohingya news websites that were created since 2012 include Rohingya News Agency (2012, <http://www.rna-press.com>), with news in Arabic, English, Urdu, and Burmese; Arakan News Agency (2015, <http://www.arakanna.com>), with news in Arabic and English; and Burma Times (2012, <http://burmatimes.net/>), with news in English and Burmese.

22. Rohingya associations throughout the world run websites that fulfill different functions. They serve community needs by providing a platform to articulate their Muslim group identity and share information within their communities about various social activities and services on offer. A typical example is found on the website of the Canadian Burmese Rohingya Organization (<http://rohingya.webs.com/>). Several websites are run by politically active associations that use the Internet as a means to spread news about events in Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Rakhine State. They voice their views through press releases, conferences, and round-table participations, and by lobbying Western governments. Not all of these websites are well maintained and up-to-date. Some of the most active between 2012 and 2015 were Rohingya Blogger (<http://www.rohingyablogger.com/>) run by the activist Nay San Lwin, based in Germany since 2013, and the website of the Burmese Rohingya Association of the United Kingdom (<http://brouk.org.uk/>) headed by Tun Khin.

23. The main source for information on ARU is its website (<http://ar-union.org/>), which bears this mission statement: "Arakan Rohingya Union is a non-profit global umbrella organization representing various Rohingya organizations worldwide with a mission to seek a political solution to the issues faced by the Rohingya ethnic minority in Myanmar/Burma, to reclaim their citizenship

that guarantees their political and human rights, to foster relations between Rohingya and fellow ethnic groups of Myanmar, and to advance the Rohingya people through improvement of social, economical, cultural, and educational infrastructures.”

24. “The aimless and helpless Rohingya activists/groups were scattered all over the world for years in disunity and lack of support from Muslim Ummah to spearhead the peaceful struggle of suffering Rohingyas, however, by the grace of Almighty Allah the OIC and EBO came forward with helping hand to unite the Rohingya leaders, activists and organization with strong OIC member countries’ resolution and finally, an umbrella organization in the form of Arakan Rohingya Union (ARU) was formed on 30th May 2011 with Representatives of twenty-five organizations and senior Rohingya leaders by the joint efforts of OIC and EBO which has become a symbol of Rohingya unity . . .” Quoted from <http://www.rvisiontv.com/worldwide-rohingyas-demand-to-postpone-the-oic-supervised-2nd-aru-congress/>, accessed March 25, 2015.

25. The conference took place at First Hotel, Bangkok, on November 23–25, 2005. The title of the conference (“The Forgotten Kingdom of Arakan”) and its subtitles (“A Public Seminar on the People of Present Day Arakan State of Myanmar: Their History, Identity, Culture, and the Challenges They Face”) reflected an extremely ambitious historical-cum-political agenda. Some of the organizers had the aim to give the Rohingya organizations a place within the ethnic front opposed to the military government. A background paper stated the goal of the workshop was “to bring together Burmese and international scholars to overview Arakan history with different perspectives and academic work, creating shared knowledge.” It made reference to an idea of “several professors of New York University” in 2000 to “hold a history workshop concerning the Arakan State of western Burma”; the “idea for a history workshop concerning Arakan” circulated at a Burmese donor meeting in Oslo, Norway in 2003; and a workshop supported by the National Reconciliation Program and held in Chiang Mai in 2004.

26. Efforts to engage with the communal situation in Rakhine State go back to the creation of the Euro-Burma Office itself, in 1997, with the financial support of Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, and the European Union “to

promote democracy and human rights, and to help the people of Burma prepare for a transition to democracy” (Harn Yawngwe in a letter to Maung San Win, general secretary of the Association of Arakan National Council Supporting Committee [Malaysia] of August 15, 2012). The National Reconciliation Programme set up by EBO also included invitations to Rohingya groups. EBO rejected allegations that its initiatives had been funded by OIC donations.

27. Rohingya associations exist in many countries where Muslims originating from the north of Arakan/Rakhine State have migrated for over seventy years or have been resettled in recent decades. Some associations are essentially social and religious organizations catering to the various needs of their members. They have not all chosen to develop political activities.

28. The activities of the ARU director Wakar Uddin were contested by other leaders (Anonymous 2013, Ibrahim 2014). In 2013, only eight organizations were allegedly invited to take part in its second general meeting. Wakar Uddin himself has stated that the ARU membership was enlarged to 61 members at the July 2013 meeting (email to the author, October 26, 2015.)

29. Interpretations of developments in Rakhine State that are supportive of Rohingya views have dominated public opinion in the U.S. Wakar Uddin was invited to the U.S. Congress Foreign Affairs Asia Sub-committee hearing “An Unclear Roadmap: Burma’s Fragile Political Reforms and Growing Ethnic Strife” on September 19, 2013. On May 7, 2014, the U.S. House of Representatives adopted House Resolution 418, calling on the government of Myanmar to end the persecution of the Rohingya minority. Rakhine Buddhists failed to get their own perception of the conflict aired in Western media.

30. A source of information on the ERC is its website <http://www.theerc.net>.

31. One hopes that insiders will one day explain in some detail the formation of the organizations mentioned in this chapter. ARNO leader Nurul Islam’s presence in London, the tireless activism of BROUK’s Tun Khin, and the role of activists in Scandinavian countries in cooperation with their sympathizers likely played noteworthy roles. Despite the rivalries of their leaders, Rohingya groups in Europe, Bangladesh, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East have been cooperating again and again to release declarations, make public statements,

and join forces in managing local campaigns. To a certain extent, activism in the form of loose cooperation is rather a mark of the traditional Rohingya movement. It shows the need to react both to the vicissitudes of the lives of Muslims in northern Rakhine State and to inner political pressures, namely, the legitimacy of the leadership in the diaspora.

32. Quoted from ERC's mission statement on [www.theerc.net](http://www.theerc.net).

33. See the statement on its website, <https://www.burmamuslims.org/about-us>: "Burma Task Force is a united effort of Muslims to stop genocide of Muslims in Burma. The following organizations are part of this coalition: Burmese Rohingya Association of North America, Free Rohingya Campaign, Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago (CIOGC), Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA NY and Canada), Islamic Council of New England (ICNE), Islamic Organization of North America (IONA), Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), Justice For All, DawaNet, Majlis Shura of Atlanta, Michigan Muslim Community Council, Muslim Alliance of North America (MANA), Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), Muslim Ummah of North America (MUNA), Muslim Leadership Council of New York and Muslim Peace Coalition," accessed on August 22, 2015.

34. It is true that similarly conciliatory rhetoric would be hard to find in any Rakhine Buddhist writing.

35. Besides the Muslim specificities that need to be taken into account when dealing with the Rakhine State crisis, nuances need to be considered when describing the attitudes of the Buddhist Rakhine, whose political positions have sometimes been summarized in an altogether negative way.

36. The events included Zarni's presentation, "The Slow Burning Genocide of Myanmar's Rohingya," at the International Conference on Refugee Studies, Oxford University (March 24–25, 2014); the organization of "Decades of Persecution on Rohingya: A Genocide," a conference at the London School of Economics (April 28, 2014); Amartya Sen's lecture, "The Slow Genocide of the Rohingyas," at the Harvard Global Equality Initiative (November 4, 2014); the seminar organized by the Swedish Rohingya Association in Stockholm (February 11, 2015); "The Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar—2015 Elections and

Beyond,” the Annual Owen M. Kupferschmid Lecture given by Maung Zarni at the Holocaust and Human Rights Project at Boston College Law School (April 13, 2015); and “End Myanmar’s Persecution of the Rohingya,” a conference held at the Nobel Institute in Oslo with the participation of seven Nobel Peace Prize winners (May 26–28, 2015).

37. See the press release “Humanitarian Crisis Affecting Rohingya Muslims is the Product of Genocide” of May 16, 2015, at <http://statecrime.org/state-crime-research/press-release-humanitarian-crisis-affecting-rohingya-muslims-product-genocide/>, accessed on September 1, 2015.

38. [www.burmamuslims.org](http://www.burmamuslims.org).

39. The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (voted by the UN on December 9, 1948) defines genocide as “any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group, as such: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; [and] forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.” Organizations like Genocide Watch that inform, document, and report on genocide and mass atrocities generally view genocide as an ongoing process; they have established criteria to assess and describe in various ways the steps towards destruction. A repertory of genocide prevention organizations is found at <http://www.genocidepreventionnow.org>.

40. It is important to note that the great number of displaced people (over 140,000) drew the international media attention from the situation of the Muslims in northern Rakhine State (where the majority of the Muslims identifying as Rohingyas live and where there have been no refugee camps) to the IDP camps in Sittway and elsewhere.

41. I do not suggest that the Rakhine Buddhist perception of the crisis is identical with the approach of the Myanmar government. Media reports have generally conveyed the impression that they share the same interests and that there is a de facto alliance between the two. For reasons of space, this important point cannot be discussed here. Rakhine nationalists underscore the long

standing dissent with the Myanmar government and decry the failures of its policies.

42. In an interview with *Equal Times* on September 4, 2015, Nay San Lwin, a Rohingya activist running the website “Rohingya Blogger,” reiterated the need for foreign pressure on Myanmar and deplored that Western countries had dropped sanctions. Referring to Aung San Suu Kyi, at that time the leader of the main opposition party who was steering away from any kind of Muslim connections during the electoral battle, he expressed his resignation on Rohingya lobbying prospects.

43. On the other hand, proponents of the genocide thesis seem to view the Rakhine Buddhists to a certain extent as victims themselves, being merely instruments of a government-designed genocidal project.

44. In the interview of Wakar Uddin by Voice of America on August 26, 2015, the director of ARU does not mention the existence of the Rakhine Buddhists, sticking to the narrative that the government of Burma has followed a “genocidal policy” of “ethnic cleaning” since 1962.

45. Bangladeshi scholars working with the Rohingya community in Bangladesh have developed more complex and encompassing approaches (Uddin 2013).

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