

# **The Rohingya Issue: A Thorny Obstacle between Burma (Myanmar) and Bangladesh**

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## **Introduction**

Though the political and economic relationships among the countries of the sub-region of Eastern South Asia have been strengthened since 1990s, the ties between Burma (Myanmar) and Bangladesh have often been disrupted by the Rohingya issue. The Rohingyas, a Muslim minority group residing in the northwestern part of the Arakan (Rakhine) State<sup>1</sup> in Burma, have not been recognized as a national minority by the state since 1974 when the Ne Win government denied their citizenship officially. They have suffered from oppression under the Burmese government and the Burmese Army (*Tatmadaw*). They fled en masse to Bangladesh twice by crossing the Naf River on the border. The Rohingya refugees numbered between 200,000 and 250,000 in 1978 and more than 250,000 in 1991. These exoduses largely were resolved through agreements on the repatriation between the two governments and relief operations by the United Nations as well as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). However, Burmese military government has no intention to accept those returnees as a national minority and instead classifies them as foreigners or illegal immigrants. The Government of Bangladesh which fears of accepting another mass exodus of refugees has been strengthening the border patrol system, but has actually not been able to stop the daily continuous trespassing of the Rohingyas from Arakan to Bangladesh. There seems no guarantee that another exodus may not happen in the future.

Since the latter half of 1990s, the two towns, Maungdaw (of Arakan) and Teknaf (of Bangladesh) between the Naf River, have been identified by the two governments as the future strongholds for promoting the border trade<sup>2</sup>. However, it is evident that without any solutions to

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<sup>1</sup> Arakan (Rakhine) is one of the states of the present Burma (the Union of Myanmar), having approximately 275 km-long border with Bangladesh. The name Arakan has been historically used calling this area, while the name Rakhine has been used by the Buddhist Arakanese as well as the present Burmese government.

<sup>2</sup> This information is based on the presentation given by Dr. M. Rahmatullha titled "Economic and Political Relations between Bangladesh and the Neighboring Countries" at the "Workshop on

the Rohingya issue these two towns will never become a stable area for profitable border trade. It is symbolic that an expected gas pipeline route (which appeared in public in 2005) from Burma's Shwe field to Kolkata (India) via the plain of Bangladesh passes through a circuitous way of the mountain area of the northern Arakan, Mizoram and Tripura of the northeastern India<sup>3</sup>. It is expected to avoid passing by the shorter seashore route through Maungdaw and Teknaf where the Rohingya refugee problems exist as a serious matter.

Taking these facts into consideration, this article attempts to deal with the present situation of the Rohingyas by presenting a historical background of the issue, which is an obstacle in the normalization of relations between Burma and Bangladesh. I will first summarize some basic points about the issue and then look into the two confronting discourses on the identification of "Rohingya" within the history of Arakan, which have been written by the Rohingya and the Arakanese protagonists respectively. Then I will make a comparison with the third person's analysis on this matter, and point out how the confrontation between the Buddhists and Muslims in Arakan became serious, though they had been able to coexist generally for more than a few hundred years. Finally, as a conclusion, I will provide a suggestion for a solution of the problem.

## **1. What is the Rohingya Issue?**

The Rohingyas are a Muslim ethnic group residing in the Buthidaung and Maungdaw Townships of the northwestern part of the Arakan State, Burma. This area, which is adjacent to the Naf River as boundary from Bangladesh, is also called the **Mayu** region. They live here as the majority together with the Buddhist Arakanese and Burmese. Since no accurate census has ever been taken, the population of the Rohingyas is unknown. However, the numbers seems less than one million, though they themselves insist that it is between one to two million including the people living in exile (Smith 1991, p.30)<sup>4</sup>. Their occupations consist of rice farming

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<sup>3</sup> See an article titled "Shwe Pipeline Agreed" on *The Irrawaddy*, January, 2005, Vol.13, No.1.

<sup>4</sup> Yegar writes that the total numbers of the Rohingyas were estimated at 300,000 in 1961 (Yegar, 2002, p.25). If this estimation is correct, it is unrealistic to think that their population increased up to more than one million by 1990s, which was just in thirty years, even if we take the natural increase of their population into consideration. Moreover, when they fled to Bangladesh as mass refugees in 1991, the numbers of those people were approximately 250,000. It has been said that more than a half of the Rohingya population left Arakan at that time. These factors lead us to estimate their present population as less than one million.

peasants as the majority, and others such as traders, fishermen, woodsmen, craftsmen, mariners and sailors, and laborers.

Though the naming of "Rohingya" seems to have come about only recently<sup>5</sup> (around the beginning of 1950s), the Muslims in Arakan have a long history since the beginning of the Mrauk-U dynasty (1430-1785) of the Arakan Kingdom. There is a possibility that they even resided there before the emergence of the Kingdom. However, since Arakan and Tenasserim were occupied by the British after the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26), the confrontation between the Muslims residing in the northwestern part of Arakan and the Buddhists as the majority in central and southern Arakan became tense, because a large scale Indian immigration was encouraged by the British. The immigrants coming into Arakan included many Muslims from Chittagong. They were classified as the Chittagonians or the Mahomedan by the British officials. The confrontation came to a head during the Japanese occupation period (1942-45), when Japan armed the Buddhist Arakanese in order to fight against the British and the British used Muslim forces for counterattack. It resulted in serious Muslim/Buddhist clashes and both communities experienced heavy damage. The situation did not change even after independence of Burma in 1948. There were some attempts at building a stable and peaceful coexistence of the Muslims and Buddhists in Arakan, but it ended in vain after Ne Win's coup in 1962, which brought Burma into a strongly centralized socialist state under the monopolized control of the Army.

The present military government (the State Peace and Development Council: SPDC) authorizes altogether 135 ethnic groups as Burmese nationals. Among them, Burmans<sup>6</sup> are the majority (69% of the whole population in 1983), followed by another seven major minorities (Shans, Karens, Arakans (Buddhist Arakanese), Kachins, Chins, Kayas and Mons), together with other

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<sup>5</sup> The exact date of the naming is unknown, but one of the first uses of "Rohingya" can be found in the official address presented by a group called the Rohingya Elders of North Arakan to the prime Minister U Nu on his visit to Maungdaw on 10 March, 1950 (Jilani, 1999, Appendix-3, pp.462-463). Another example of the use can be found in an article written by Abdul Gaffar, a Rohingya MP elected from Akyab North Constituency, which appeared in an English paper in Burma, the Guardian Daily, on August 20, 1951. We should notice, however, that not all Muslims in Arakan agree with to be called Rohingya. There are some Arakan Muslims who do not want to be called themselves as Rohingya, such as the Kamans (an ethnic national group recognized by the Burmese government, which is the descendants of Muslim mercenaries served under the Arakan Kingdom who now live in Ramree Islands and several villages near Akyab).

<sup>6</sup> In this article, the term "Burmans" is used when referring to the ethnic Burmese people, while "Burmese" is used as a name of the whole nationals living in the present Burma.

small groups. In the Arakan State, though the Arakans are the majority, there are also another authorized ethnic groups, which are Kamans, Kamis, Daingnets, Mayagyis, Myoes and Thets, but Rohingyas are excluded. They are considered illegal immigrants who had settled in Burma during the British colonial rule. Treating the Rohingyas in this way began at first under the rule of Ne Win government (1962-1988). Though the U Nu government (1948-58, 60-62) recognized the Rohingyas as an ethnic national group of Burma<sup>7</sup>, the Ne Win regime stripped the Rohingyas of their nationality and rendered them foreigners by enacting the 1974 Emergency Immigration Act. The government also enforced the 1982 Burmese Citizenship Law, which distinguished between three categories of citizenship as follows<sup>8</sup>:

The first category, ordinary citizens, is the people who belong to the eight major ethnic groups as mentioned above as well as other indigenous people who were considered to be present in Burma before 1823 (a year ahead of the First Anglo-Burmese War). These people are recognized as the "genuine" citizens. The second category, associate citizens, is the people who obtained the Burmese citizenship according to the previous 1948 Union Citizenship Act, which was in force for only two years (1948-50). The most of these people are offspring of mixed marriages between the immigrants after 1823 and to spouses of indigenous Burmese. The third category, naturalized citizens, is the people who have been naturalized after the suspension of the 1948 Union Citizenship Act. Among these three categories, the associate and the naturalized citizens have restricted legal rights to some extent<sup>9</sup>.

The Rohingyas are not included in any of these three categories as they are considered foreigners. Instead of being issued National Registration Certificate (NRC), which every Burmese national who is fifteen years old and above has been legally enforced to carry it every time everywhere<sup>10</sup>, the Rohingyas are given Foreign Registration Certificates (FRC). However,

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<sup>7</sup> There existed not only a few numbers of Rohingya MPs elected from northwestern Arakan but also a radio program aired by Rohingya language through the state shortwave broadcast service three times a week (Jilani, 1999, pp.188-195, Thainyindha Lumyou-su Bawa-thi' Htuhtaun-yei Pati, 1989, p.30)

<sup>8</sup> As for the English version of the 1982 Burmese Citizenship Law, see A.Razzaq, M.Haque, 1995, pp.196-208.

<sup>9</sup> For example, they have no rights to serve in any office, no qualifications to enter any medical or technical universities (Yegar, 2002, pp.61-62). The author also have known a Chinese offspring in Rangoon who had entered the Rangoon Institute of Technology in 1984 but was dismissed in 1988 due to his national category as an associate citizen.

<sup>10</sup> Holding a National Registration Certificate is quite important matter in Burma. If a person fails to produce it whenever asked to do so by the authorities, he/she will be suspected or prosecuted. Moreover,

some of them tactically receive NRC by registering themselves as a people of other authorized Muslim ethnic groups, such as Kamans<sup>11</sup>.

The two exoduses occurred in the following circumstances. The first one (1978), which happened four years after the enforcement of the 1974 Emergency Immigration Act, was a reaction against an operation carried out by the Burmese immigration officials in northwestern Arakan. This was called Operation "*Naga Min*" (Dragon King), which was an organized census started from May 1977 in the areas where the government considered that many illegal immigrants were living. Those areas included several parts of Kachin, Chin, Rangoon, and Arakan (Akyab and the **Mayu** region). It was carried out in order to register and classify all the residents as to whether they were Burmese citizens, legally residing foreigners, or had entered the country illegally (Yegar, 2002, p.55). When the immigration police reached the **Mayu** region in February 1978, many Rohingyas abandoned their houses and fled across the Naf River towards Teknaf and Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh. Although Burmese government in May 1978 declared that 35,590 people, all Bengali, fled leaving 6,294 empty houses behind them, the results of the *Naga Min* operation in Arakan in actual led to 200,000 to 250,000 Muslims refugees fleeing into Bangladesh (Medecins Sans Frontieres-Holland, March 2002, p.5 and 10, Yegar, 2002, pp.55-56). Many of them referred to acts of torture and atrocities carried out by the Burmese authorities. In the end of April 1978, Ziaur Rahman, the President of Bangladesh, criticized the Burmese government for the inhuman removal of Burmese Muslims from their country, but the Burmese government insisted continuously that those who were expelled were Bangladesh citizens who had illegally entered Burma (Yegar, 2002, p.55-56). Finally, on 9 July 1979, under the strong influence of the United Nations (UN), UNHCR, Governments of Saudi Arabia and India, and the World Muslim League, bilateral agreements were made between the two governments, which agreed to the repatriation of 200,000 refugees to Arakan<sup>12</sup>.

However, the situation of the Rohingyas in Burma had not changed upon their return to hometowns, since they were still denied their Burmese citizenship and many of them became

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NRC is also important for their daily lives, since one cannot buy even a train ticket or an admission ticket for a movie theatre without producing it.

<sup>11</sup> It is impossible to know how many of them have got the NRC in this method. However, most of the Rohingyas living in exile seem that they registered themselves intentionally as a person belonged to any of authorized Muslim ethnic groups in Burma in order to get a Burmese passport in a proper way.

<sup>12</sup> As for this agreement (Agreed Minutes between the two governments), see A.Razzaq, M.Haque, 1995,

landless. After the failure of nationwide movement for democracy in 1988, which brought the birth of Burmese military government<sup>13</sup>, the Army's presence in northwestern Arakan increased dramatically. The Burmese Army commandeered the Rohingyas for road constructions and the military government initiated to settle the Buddhist Arakans into the Townships of Buthidaung and Maungdaw. Inevitably, confrontations occurred between the Muslims and the Buddhists communities in those townships and the Burmese Army backed the Buddhists by committing robbery, rape, murder against the Muslims and the burning of mosques (Medecins Sans Frontieres-Holland, March 2002, pp.10-11, Yegar, 2002, p.63).

This brought the second Rohingya exodus, which occurred between April 1991 and May 1992<sup>14</sup>. The numbers of the refugees this time rose to over 250,000<sup>15</sup>. In February 1992, corresponding to the strong request of international assistance given by the Government of Bangladesh, UNHCR started a broad relief operation in 20 camps along the road between Teknaf and Cox's Bazar. In April 1992, the Governments of Burma and Bangladesh signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on setting the terms of the repatriation program and allowing limited involvement of UNHCR. However, the Government of Bangladesh carried out repatriation by force without UNHCR involvement from September to December 1992, which brought protests from the international community. Although Bangladesh provided asylum for the Rohingya refugees, they intended to encourage their immediate return. In May 1993, MOU was signed between UNHCR and the Government of Bangladesh, which guaranteed protection of the refugees in the camps and voluntary repatriation through private interviewing of refugees. Another MOU was signed between UNHCR and the Government of Burma, allowing the UNHCR access to the returnees, the issuance of identity cards, and freedom of movement for the Rohingyas (Medecins Sans Frontieres-Holland, March 2002, p.5, A.Razzaq, M.Haque, 1995, pp.49-51).

The repatriation of Rohingyas began, but since their distrust against the Burmese government was strong, the numbers of the returnees did not rise immediately. It was no more than 60,000 of

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pp.209-211.

<sup>13</sup> The official name of the government was the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) at first, but they changed it to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in November 1997.

<sup>14</sup> In May 1992, the government of Bangladesh closed the camps to additional Rohingya arrivals (Medecins Sans Frontieres-Holland, March 2002, p.5.).

<sup>15</sup> One source indicates that the figure reached 265,000 by mid-1992 (A.Razzaq, M.Haque, 1995, p.22).

the entire 250,000 refugees who went back to their homeland by 1994. The Medecins Sans Frontieres, an international medical NGO, called attention in March 1995 that a survey among refugees found that 63% of them did not want to return to Burma, and 65% were not aware of the right to refuse repatriation (Medecins Sans Frontieres-Holland, March 2002, p.5). The pace of repatriation, however, was accelerated in 1996, and approximately 200,000 people returned to the **Mayu** region by the end of 1996 (Yegar, 2002, p.66).

Although it was an improvement for the Rohingyas that the continuous monitoring of the returnees by UNHCR was at least allowed by the Burmese military government, the situation which they were put into did not change fundamentally. The Rohingyas have been treated as special foreigners who are just allowed to stay in the limited space as un-welcomed guest by the military government. National Registration Certificates have not been issued to them yet. They are not allowed to move from the Townships of Maungdaw and Buthidaung unless they pay a large deposit<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the settlement of Buddhist Arakanese into the Mayu region has been still going on through government sponsorship. The recent news tells us that there is much trespassing by the Rohingyas yet from Arakan to Bangladesh, which produces a problem for the security force and police in Teknaf (*The Daily Star*, 23 June, 2004). There even exist illegal human trafficking businesses in Bangladesh, which support the Rohingya refugees and trespassers to move to India and other countries (*The Daily Star*, 9 July, 2004).

## **2. Who are the Rohingyas?**

Though the Rohingya issue actually exists, it is not so simple to answer the question who the Rohingyas are. One Rohingya historian who is an activist in Bangladesh explains that the origin of the name "Rohingya" derived from "*Rohan*", "*Roham*" or "*Rosham*", which in all cases were the old name of the capital of the ancient Arakan Kingdom, Mrauk-U, that is present Mrohaung. He explains that those names have changed to "*Roshangee*" and finally to "*Rohingya*" (Jilani, 1999, pp.52-53). It is an interesting explanation but we cannot find enough historical or linguistic proofs for this argument. As I have already mentioned before, the naming of

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<sup>16</sup> Two Rohingya residents in Rangoon whom I met in August 2002 mentioned that the Rohingyas had to pay 200,000 Kyats (equivalent to three-yearly income of an average government servant in those days) as a deposit to get permission to move outside Buthidaung and Maungdaw Townships. They said that those deposit would never be paid back.

"Rohingya" by themselves seems to be a relatively recent event, which was around the beginning of 1950s. If we just stick to this fact, they should be called a would-be Rohingya. In fact, Martin Smith, a British journalist who wrote a detailed book on the topic of ethnic minorities in Burma, mentioned them as "Muslim Arakanese (sometimes known as Rohingyas)" (Smith, 1991, p.30).

However, even if the name "Rohingya" was just a recent "invention", the history of the Muslims in the northwestern part of Arakan is not short at all. Though their history will be discussed later, I will look into the two opposing discourses on their history first.

The Rohingyas have already written their own history in a few books, though all of them were written and published abroad by the Rohingyas in exile<sup>17</sup>. The typical discourse of their history written in English is found in AFK Jilani's *The Rohingyas of Arakan: Their quest for justice*, which was published in 1999. Five crucial discourses can be pointed out from this book:

- (1) Islam reached Arakan before 788 A.D. Since then the Rohingyas seem to have been residing there. The Rohingyas are not the British Era settlers. The history recounts that Arakan was the land where originally the Muslims lived as the majority. Rohingya language was the original lingua franca in Arakan used by both the Rohingyas and the Buddhist Arakanese.
- (2) The Kingdom of Arakan (the Mrauk-U dynasty, 1430-1785) was a Muslim dynasty in essence, though they had some Buddhist influence.
- (3) The Buddhist Arakanese were called Maghs in origin. Since they disgraced their name by themselves through committing piracy and dacoitry against Hindus and Muslims for more than two centuries, they started calling themselves Rakhines in order to avoid their infamousness of the past.
- (4) Although the British promised to make the Rohingya state out of Arakan, it was not materialized.
- (5) Buddhist Arakanese MPs in the post independence parliamentary era (1948-62) were always

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<sup>17</sup> This does not mean that their historical discourse reflects only of the Rohingyas in exile. Whether Rohingya or not, it is almost impossible for any ethnic minorities residing in Burma to publish their own history inside Burma unless they pass through the censorship of the present government which obtains Burman-centric and the Burmese Army-centric views on history of Burma. Not only the minorities but also the Burmans as the majorities face with the same situation. The people of Burma can only discuss their history freely outside Burma.



unfriendly against the Rohingyas throughout their tenure by branding Rohingyas as Chittagonians and never regarded them as fellow human beings.

This Rohingya-centric historical discourse has been strongly criticized by the Buddhist Arakanese historians and activists. Those are seen on several printings which were published by the Buddhist Arakanese in Japan. A typical one is a book written in Burmese published by the Arakan National Association (Japan) in 2003. The title of the book itself symbolizes the contents: *Criticizing the Falsification of the History written by the Bengali Immigrants who were the Descendant of the Chittagonians using the name "Rohingya" under a False Name of Human Rights*<sup>18</sup>. This book, which includes a short article written in English by a Japan based Buddhist Arakanese historian, Dr. Aye Chan<sup>19</sup>, was published to give a counterargument towards a book written in 2001 by a Rohingya refugee in Japan, Zaw Myint Htut<sup>20</sup>, who was an ex-student activist for democracy in Burma. His book (in Burmese) titled *The Union of Burma and Ethnic Rohingyas* consists of mostly the same discourse which Jilani mentioned in his aforesaid book *The Rohingyas of Arakan*. The counterargument of the Buddhist Arakanese in the above-mentioned long-titled book can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Zaw Myint Htut abused the history of Arakan for political purposes, producing a false image of Arakan as if it was the land originally influenced by Islam.
- (2) The Rohingyas are not an indigenous ethnic group of Burma but are direct descendants of immigrants from the Chittagong District of East Bengal in the 19th century. During the British colonial rule, they were classified as "Chittagonians" by the British officials.
- (3) It is illogical speculation that the Muslims have lived since the ninth century, since there is

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<sup>18</sup> The reason why the title includes "under a false name of human rights" is that when several Rohingyas stood for the 1990 election in Burma and won four seats, their party's name was the National Democratic Party for Human Rights (NDPHR). They used this name since the military government prohibited to mention the name of Rohingya. However, the Buddhist Arakanese considered it as "a false name". The Buddhist Arakanese on the other hand run for the election by establishing the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD) which won eleven seats. Both parties (NDPHR and ALD) were abolished by the military government in 1991.

<sup>19</sup> He is an expert of the history of Burma who received Ph.D. from the University of Kyoto (Japan) and has been teaching Southeast Asian studies at the Kanda University of International Studies. Though he was not an activist, he had an experience of a prisoner of conscience in Burma for several years in 1990s.

<sup>20</sup> Zaw Min Htut is an activist who serve as the president of the Burmese Rohingya Association in Japan (BRAJ), which is a political group formed in August 1994 aiming at the restoration of democracy in Burma and getting equal rights for the Rohingyas. He later published another book in English titled *Human Rights Abuses and Discrimination on Rohingyas* in 2003.

no documents supporting that the crews of the shipwrecks on Arakan in those days were Arabs or Muslims<sup>21</sup>.

- (4) The earliest Muslim settlers in Arakan were some Bengali retainers of King Saw Mun in the 15th century and their numbers were not many.
- (5) The Muslims under the Arakan Kingdom (Mrauk-U dynasty) were minorities. They consisted of mercenaries, itinerant merchants from Persia and Golkonda, and some Bengali captives. They have been living in Arakan since the early 17th century, speaking Arakanese dialect, and never claim themselves being Rohingyas. They are not Rohingyas but Arakanese Muslims.

When we compare these opposing discourses of the history of Arakan given by the two sides of protagonists, the crucial difference can be pointed out in two matters. The first is their different understandings of how long and in what depth the Muslims in Arakan have lived. The Rohingyas insist their long history that begins more than one thousand years ago together with their deep commitment in political, economical, and cultural arenas in Arakan. On the other hand, the Buddhist Arakanese emphasize a comparatively limited length and depth of the Muslims in the history of Arakan. The second is the question on whether the Muslims who have been resided in Arakan since the period of Mrauk-U dynasty (or before that) are equivalent to the present Rohingyas. The strongest confrontation exists at this point. The Rohingyas understand that those Muslims who had resided in the pre-colonial period were definitely their ancestors, but the Buddhist Arakanese clearly differentiate between those Muslims residing since the pre-colonial period and those who immigrated into Arakan from Chittagong area under the British colonial rule (after 1826). They identify the Rohingyas to the latter group, that is to say, the "Chittagonians". It is also important to indicate that the Buddhist Arakanese adopt the same criterion as the present military government of Burma does: recognizing the people who came into Burma after 1823 (a year before when the First Anglo-Burmese War began) as non-indigenous people. In other words, the year 1823 is understood by both the military government and the Buddhist Arakanese as a meaningful criterion to differentiate the people residing in Burma between "us" and "them", which is the same standard shown in the 1982 Burmese Citizenship Law.

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<sup>21</sup> Though Jilani speculates that the Muslims seem to have resided in Arakan since the late 8th century when the Islam reached there, Zaw Myint Htut wrote that they were the descendants of Arab castaways from shipwrecks on the Arakan around the ninth century.

Besides the histories written by the protagonists, there also exists a study of the history of Rohingyas from the third person's viewpoint. Moshe Yegar, an Israel national, wrote it in his book titled *Between Integration and Secession: The Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, and Western Burma/Myanmar* (published in 2002). Though the title of the chapter dealing with western Burma is cautiously named "The Muslims of Arakan", Yegar gives a picture of the history of the Rohingyas through describing three stages of the formation of Muslim community in Arakan. The first stage is an accumulation of the Muslim immigrants into Arakan under the rule of Mrauk-U dynasty from various places of Mughal Kingdom (1526-1857) of India (especially from Bengal). He realizes that this was the origin of the Rohingyas. The second stage is a huge immigrants from Chittagong area to Arakan in the 19th century, which was promoted by the British colonial regime. Yegar writes that these Bengal Muslims integrated into the local Rohingya community by means of intermarriages between the Chittagong and the local Rohingyas. The third stage is another wave of the huge immigrants from Chittagong after the World War II. They have also integrated into local Rohingyas. The Rohingyas was formulated throughout these three stages in Arakan (Yegar, 2002, 19-36). On the other hand, he argues that it is convincing to think that the Muslims first reached in Arakan in the 9th century. He writes that those were probably seafarers from Bengal, who traded in the areas of Arakan and the coast of Burma (Yegar, 2002, p.19)<sup>22</sup>. However, he does not refer to whether these first Muslims were the origin of the present Rohingyas.

Yegar also writes about the language of Rohingya. He mentions that though it had been not yet cultivated enough by the end of 1950s, their language consisted a combination of Arakanese, Bengali, and Urdu (Yegar,2002, p.51). Here, we find another question: could it be possible to consider the language of Rohingyas a mixture of those three languages? Though I am not an expert of linguistics at all, one can raise a question how these languages were able to merge and produce another distinctive language. Bengali and Urdu belong to Indo-European, while Arakanese belongs to Tibeto-Burman. Actually, there exist neither dictionaries nor grammar books or studies on "Rohingya language" up to the present. Even Jilani, an author of a Rohingya-centric history discussed above does not refer to any details about their language. A

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<sup>22</sup> However, we should notice that since it was only after 1203 that Bengal itself became a Muslim land (as Yegar too mentions in his book), one cannot imagine with confidence that these Bengal seafarers in the ninth century had already been the Muslims.

linguist recognizes it as a Chittagong dialect of Bengali<sup>23</sup>. There is a document which shows that Urdu was used in order to give public notices to the people residing there when the armed Muslims corps named Force V which the British had dispatched from Chittagong to northwestern Arakan during the Japanese occupation period occupied the area (OIOC, R/8/9). This makes us naturally think that Urdu was a common language in that area at least up to the 1940s. It may be difficult to give a definition of the Rohingyas from a linguistic point of view, though this does not mean that they are not a distinctive ethnic group of Arakan.

The Rohingyas have been coming up against discrimination and prejudice given not only by the Burmese military government and the Buddhist Arakanese but also by the Buddhist Burmans (the majority of Burmese national), even those who are active in democracy movements. One example can be given through how the Burma Office Japan (BOJ), an umbrella organization of the political groups of Burmese exiles in Japan, corresponded to a group consisted of the Rohingya exiles (Burmese Rohingya Association in Japan: BRAJ)<sup>24</sup> when the latter officially requested to become a member of BOJ in 2000. The Burma Office Japan rejected BRAJ by giving a reason that it was still questionable whether the Rohingyas were an indigenous people of Burma.<sup>25</sup> It seems that the Rohingyas have very few people among the Burmese nationals who recognize them as a national group.

### **3. Muslims and Buddhists in Arakan: How they became antagonistic**

In order to place the Rohingyas in the history of Arakan (and Burma) as fairly as possible, it is indispensable to look into how the two Muslim and Buddhist communities became antagonistic there, though they once coexisted with mostly few political or religious confrontations. Here, I will point out some crucial matters related to this matter.

The question remains whether the beginning of the first settlement of the Muslims in Arakan can be traced back to the 8th-9th century, but it seems not unnatural to think that they were already residing there when the Mrauk-U dynasty was founded (1430), though their numbers

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<sup>23</sup> Information given by Mr. Keisuke Fujiwara, a Ph.D. student in linguistics (University of Kyoto) who is specialized in the languages of the present Bangladesh.

<sup>24</sup> BRAJ has approximately 50 members. See also footnote No.20.

<sup>25</sup> Based on my own experience as serving as a moderator for the negotiations between the two sides in

were questionable. The period from the latter half of the 15th century to the end of 17th century is described as the age of commerce in Southeast Asia by Anthony Reid<sup>26</sup>, which many parts of its area prospered by maritime trade. The Bay of Bengal too flourished by the trade between Arakan and India. It is convincing that the Muslims immigrants should have formed their community first in Arakan during this period.

It has been known that the first eleven kings of the Mrauk-U dynasty (which was from 1430 to 1531) owned the Islamic titles as well as Arakanese name. Jilani describes that these kings as well as seven other later kings were all Muslims (Jilani, 1999, p.84-85), but Charney suggests that many of those so-called "Muslim" Arakanese kings were highly devoted to Buddhism and permitted the exclusion of Muslims from the most important activities (Charney, 1999, pp.71-72). He discusses that it was a political strategy of "borrowing" things Islamic which had been recognized as highly prestigious and universal in those days (Charney, 1999, p.73). Charney concludes that religious identities (on Theravada Buddhism and Islam) developed over time and along an uneven trajectory throughout the early modern period in Arakan, since the Arakanese royal court was indifferent to the religious identities of rural Arakanese, and sectarian competition existed within the Arakanese *sangha* (Charney, 1999, p.304). The kingdom was strongly influenced by the two external states, the Mughal and Burman empires, and by 1785, when the Arakanese court was overthrown by the Konbaung dynasty (1752-1885), the Arakan Littoral was effectively divided into two parts: northern Arakan being absorbed by an essentially Muslim and Indian polity, and central and southern Arakan by a Theravada-Buddhist, Irrawaddy Valley based polity (Charney, 1999, p.304). After the beginning of Burmese rule, Arakan became more Burmanized. Charney points out that perhaps 20 to 25% of Arakan's population (which consists of tens of thousands of the Buddhist Arakanese and some portions of Muslims) moved north of the Naf River because of increased taxation and labor demands under the rule of Burmese kings. At the same time, many Buddhist Arakanese artisans and other skilled labor groups were deported to central Burma (Charney, 1999, pp.264-265).

However, the rule of Burmese kings in Arakan did not continue so long, as Burma was defeated in the First Anglo-Burmese War and the land of Arakan was occupied by the British since 1826. When colonial rule began, two crucial things occurred. One was an enormous influx of Muslim

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immigrants coming into Arakan from Chittagong in Bengal, as a result of disappearance of the political barrier between both sides of Naf River. After the Second and Third Anglo-Burmese War (1852 and 1885), which finally brought a whole Burma into a province of British India, the influx of immigrants increased dramatically as the British encouraged Indian immigration to supplement the lack of labors and cultivators in order to develop the country under the colonial system. British Muslims from Chittagong, who made up a large segment of those immigrants, made their homes in port towns such as Akyab and its surrounding areas (Yegar, 2002, p.27). This has inevitably brought tensions between the local Buddhist and newly arrived Muslim immigrants, though the local Muslims were able to integrate with them. Another crucial thing occurred after the beginning of colonial rule, namely the taking census by the British officials. The way of thinking about religion by the British officials was that everyone should be defined according to one religious identity or another, which meant no "unknown" or "undecided" category for religious affiliation is allowed (Charney, 1999, p.305), and thus the census classified clearly the Muslims and Buddhists in Arakan. It is natural to consider that these factors strengthened religious identification on both Muslims and Buddhists communities and provide fertile ground for confrontation.

When the Japanese invasion into Burma started, northern Arakan became one of the worst areas where religious and ethnic confrontation exploded<sup>27</sup>. In order to occupy and keep Arakan effectively as a front-line for the future invasion into India, the Japanese Force took advantage of the Buddhist Arakanese and organized the Patriot Arakan Force. The British were defeated but soon initiated a counterattack through setting up the Muslims into a guerilla troop named Force V in April 1942 and dispatched them into Maungdaw and Buthidawn Subdivisions. The Force V consisted of the Muslims of Chittagong together with those who fled from their homeland in Arakan due to the attack by the Japanese Force accompanied with a portion of Buddhist Arakanese. A British report of 13th November 1942 mentions that all traces of Buddhism in Buthidaung Subdivision were eradicated by the Force V, and proclamations were made in Urdu and people abandoned Burmese and Arakanese languages in common speech (OIOC R/8/9). It seems that the fight was against the local Buddhist Arakanese rather than the Japanese Force itself as for the members of Force V. After a year and a half of confrontations

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<sup>26</sup> See Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, Volume I (1988) and Volume II (1993).

<sup>27</sup> Another area was Myaungmya in the Irrawaddy Delta, where the local Karens and Burmans clashed in 1942.

and fights, northwestern Arakan was recaptured by the British in January 1944. However, the local situation had deteriorated and the confrontations between the Muslims and the Buddhist did not end at all.

Even after the Japanese defeat, public security did not recover under the re-established British control in Arakan. An official report recounts that U Tun U, a Buddhist Subdivisional officer of Maungdaw was murdered by six Muslims in August 1947, while Buddhist bandits had been harassing the Muslim villagers in Myohaung (Mrohaung) Township in June 1947 (FO 643/74, 207/GSO/47). The same report also describes that there were about 200,000 Muslims in Buthidaung and Maungdaw Townships and many of them were newcomers from the starving millions of Bengal (FO 643/74, 207/GSO/47).

In Arakan, before and after independence of Burma, political confusion reigned in both communities of the Muslim and of the Buddhist Arakanese. The Muslims leaders were split into a group which supported the Anti-Fascist Peoples' Freedom League (AFPFL) which Aung San (1915-47) led, and another group which sought to engage in armed struggle with the Muslims residing in Bengal. The latter group became to be known as Mujahideen, which encouraged rice smugglings into East Pakistan (the present Bangladesh) and the illegal immigration of thousands of people from Chittagong to Arakan until the beginning of 1950s<sup>28</sup>. On the other hand, the political leaders of the Buddhist Arakanese split into two factions: the one that joined with AFPFL, and other which took anti-AFPFL attitude based on a strong Arakan nationalism. The activities of the Red Flag Communist Party<sup>29</sup> also exercised a complex influence upon the political situation in Arakan.

After independence, the U Nu government was requested by the Buddhist MPs elected from central and southern constituencies of Arakan to establish the State of Arakan within the larger Burmese Union, such as Shans and Kachins had already obtained. On the other hand, the

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<sup>28</sup> There was a surplus population in East Pakistan and the Mujahideen's interest in those immigrations from East Pakistan was as workers who would cultivate abandoned land and grow rice on it (Yegar, 2002, p.45). However, those land might have included the Buddhist Arakanese properties which they had to abandon during and after the war. The armed struggles of Mujahideen for the separate state of the Muslims continued until the beginning of 1960s.

<sup>29</sup> An ex-faction of the Burma Communist Party (BCP) led by Thakin Soe. They split from BCP in early 1946 and organized the Communist Party, Burma (CPB). Though the party was illegalized soon, it has considerable political footholds in Arakan.

Muslim MPs elected from northern constituencies of Arakan (who had already started using the name Rohingya to identify themselves) strongly disagreed since it would obviously bring Buddhist Arakanese rule to the whole area of Arakan. They demanded that their regions should not be incorporated into the proposed State of Arakan. In 1961, U Nu finally decided to establish the Arakan State, but in order to receive support from the Muslims, he decided to separate the Mayu region (which consisted of **Buthidaung and Maungdaw Townships** and western Rathedaung) from the State of Arakan and put that region under the direct control of the central government. **It was named the Mayu Frontier Administration**. After careful consideration, the Muslim (Rohingya) MPs agreed to the arrangement (Yegar, 2002, pp.49-51).

The Mayu Frontier Administration came into force on 1st May 1961, but the legislation to establish the State of Arakan was delayed and consequently deadlocked by a military coup led by General Ne Win in March 1962, which toppled the U Nu government<sup>30</sup>. The Mayu Frontier Administration remained until it was put under the Ministry of Home Affairs in February 1964 (Jilani, 1999, p.164). In 1974, when the Ne Win's military administration (the Revolutionary Council) changed itself to the government of the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma, the State of Arakan materialized, but it was given only a nominal status in the way six other states with no political or economical autonomy allowed. The ex-Mayu Frontier Administration which had become under the control of the Ministry of Home Affairs disappeared and was put into the new State of Arakan where no Rohingyas could be given power. The situation of Rohingyas after 1974 has already discussed before.

## **Conclusion**

Although this article did not discuss the armed activities of the Rohingyas which have existed up to the present days<sup>31</sup>, they have exercised only very limited influence. The only armed organization which remains today is the **Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO)**

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<sup>30</sup> "State" of Arakan was finally materialized in 1974 under the Ne Win administration, but it was a nominal status as same as other six "states" with any political or economical autonomy permitted.

<sup>31</sup> There have existed altogether six major armed organizations which used *Rohingya* in their name. Those were the Rohingya Independence Force (RIF) which was active from 1963 to the middle of 1970s, the Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF) which was in action between 1975 and the beginning of 1980s, the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF) and the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) which existed from the beginning of 1980s until 1998 when they both merged into the Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO) which is active still in the present days.



which has no more than 200 members in the border of northern Arakan and Bangladesh (Maung Maung Oo, 2001, p.11). Most of the Rohingyas do not depend on these armed struggles. In such situation, I would like to convey the following understandings and constructive suggestions as a solution for the Rohingya issue.

Whether the exact beginnings of Muslim settlement in Arakan is still to be determined, it is reasonable to understand that they have been residing there since the period of the Arakan Kingdom (Mrauk-U dynasty). They were the origin of the Muslims in Arakan. Also it has been questioned whether those Muslims are equivalent to the present Rohingyas, Yegar's discussion is convincing: that those Muslims who had resided since the days of Mrauk-U dynasty and the Muslims from Chittagong who immigrated into Arakan in 19th and 20th century were integrated to some extent and comprised the present Rohingyas. **The naming of Rohingya by themselves is a relatively recent invention, but there is no reason** to deny their existence as an ethnic group whether their naming was old or new.

Taking these understandings into consideration, the Rohingyas have a right to be recognized as a national group in present Burma and to be treated equal to other ethnic nationals. Even if a strong image of the ex-immigrants from Chittagong sticks on them, it is meaningless to avoid those people as foreigners. **There is no rational reason to put the year of 1823 as a criterion for dividing the people in Burma between indigenous and non-indigenous.** In order to change the situation in the border of Burma and Bangladesh from an explosive area of another possible exodus to a stable area where the border trade can be increased and prospered, the first step to be taken is to "qualify" those Rohingyas as a Burmese national ethnic group. Without taking this measure, nothing will be improved and a thorny obstacle may remain for another uncountable decades. Not only the Government of Bangladesh but also the international community in all are expected to make efforts to persuade the military government of Burma to accept the Rohingyas into their national community.

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