

The Plight of the Rohingya

The Rohingya crisis entered its sixth year and there appears no end in sight. It has now been over a year since the 1st February 2021 military coup and Myanmar remains in deadly civil conflict. The lack of commitment, sporadic killings in refugee camps and foreign interests all remain major obstacles to solving the crisis.

Myanmar's oppression of Rohingya Muslims is historical. During the late 1970s military operations were launched in the Rakhine state to expel the 'foreigners' (a term for Rohingyas always endorsed by the Myanmar military junta), which triggered the first Rohingya refugee problems. In 1982, the Citizenship Law after the repatriation of Rohingyas further deteriorated the situation of the Rohingya people. Following elections in 1991, the military launched another operation against the Rohingyas. Later, bitter Buddhist nationalism driven by sectarian violence led to more Rohingyas being displaced in 2012. But, Tatmadaw's late 2016 and mid-2017 military operation crossed the limits of past atrocities with around 800,000 Rohingya Muslims being displaced and becoming refugees in neighbouring Bangladesh.

During the crisis in 2017, Bangladesh and Myanmar agreed on a joint working group for the refugee repatriation. Later in November 2017, both parties reached a deal regarding repatriation of Rohingya Muslims to Rakhine state. But the verification process led to the repatriation program not working. A secret UN-Myanmar repatriation deal in May 2018 was later disclosed by Reuters that provided no explicit guarantees of citizenship and freedom of movement.

The Rohingya Muslims are sandwiched between Myanmar's discriminatory domestic politics along with ethnic fault lines and vested interests of major powers namely, China and USA. From the very beginning of its independence, Myanmar has been a fractured country with a staggering 135 ethnic groups. It has 21 major ethnic armed groups, some of which maintain large militias and control areas roughly the size of Belgium, a direct result of the divide and rule strategy of the colonial era. Myanmar's military junta saw its main challenge of unifying the country by controlling its restive mountainous region. The majority of Myanmar's populations are Bamar, but ethnic groups make up nearly 30% of its population. This means if any ethnic group gained sufficient strength it could threaten Naypyidaw. The Junta government found a solution in isolating itself and pitting its various ethnic groups against each other.

Buddhist nationalism has played an important role in the Junta's quest for unification of the nation. 90% of Myanmar's population including several major ethnic groups are Buddhist. Buddhism has been in a historic conflict with the Muslims of Bengal. Although Buddhism's natural birthplace was in the Indian subcontinent, subsequent Indian Hindu kings went to war against the Buddhists that led to the near extinction of the religion. This is why from the Rakhine state of Myanmar to South East Asia, Buddhism has maintained a continual presence rather than its birthplace, India. The Rakhine state has become the hot point of contention between Rakhines

and Rohingyas. Rakhine's close proximity to Bangladesh is what gives it the higher concentration of Muslims in Myanmar. The Rohingyas are almost one third of the total population of the Rakhine state, which is a major concern for ethnic Rakhines. Rakhines believe if the Rohingyas are recognized then their political power will decline.

China sees Myanmar borderlands as a strategic buffer for its distant Yunnan province and an alternate supply route to the Indian Ocean to reduce dependency on the vulnerable Malacca Strait. The BRI's pipeline project and Special Economic Zone are the greatest example of Chinese interest in Myanmar. Historically, China supported both Myanmar's ethnic insurgency groups and Naypyidaw, keeping both as pressure points against each other. After the military junta's five decades of continual reign, it opened up to the world through democratic election in 2011. After this, China lost its influence over Naypyidaw that it once had. On the other hand, the military also drifted towards the west and India to reduce its dependency on China. After the 2017 refugee crisis, when the international community was raising the slogan of human rights against the military junta, China again regained its influence in Myanmar. China's role as mediator between Bangladesh and Myanmar is also noticeable.

The Rohingyas find themselves in a vicious cycle of geopolitics involving both regional and international powers, as well as internal forces. The Muslim rulers across the world have done little to help their plight, despite the outpouring of emotion from the Muslim Ummah. The Rohingya have become the latest victims of the Ummah who have been left to fend for themselves whilst they are oppressed for being Muslim.

**Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by
Adnan Khan**