Rohingya: The Foundational Years

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Myanmar's Rakhine State ('Arakan' until 1982) borders on Bangladesh and the Bay of Bengal. Muslims of diverse origins and occupations were acculturated since the times of Buddhist kings, and their descendants lived on near the old capital Mrauk U and along the coast.[1] The growth of a majority Muslim community in North Arakan down the border with Bengal's Chittagong district, however, was brought forth by the expansive agriculture under British rule. Complicated by geography, migratory backgrounds, and social stratification, much of the history of Muslim communities in these coastal borderlands remains to be explored.

The Rohingyas, today the largest Muslim community in Myanmar and estimated at one third of Rakhine State's mixed population (census 2014), form a distinct chapter of the region's post-independence history. They became known to a global audience as a discriminated minority following communal riots in Rakhine State in 2012. Their mass flight to Bangladesh in 2016-17 (the third one in 30 years) burnished the group's image of ongoing victimhood grounded in a record of rights violations and a process of legal exclusion accelerating after 1982. Atrocities generated accusations of genocidal intent on behalf of the security forces.[2] Narratives of Rohingya victimhood commonly start with the putsch of General Ne Win in 1962 and designate the army as an inveterate perpetrator. But requests for their recognition as an ethnic Muslim community with ancient roots in Rakhine State go back to the aftermath of World War II.

The claim of being 'sons of the soil' was first made in a 'welcome address' by Muslim leaders of North Arakan to Prime Minister U Nu in October 1948, the year of Myanmar's independence.[3] The 'welcome address' provides a clear date to investigate the political situation and domestic developments relating to North Arakan Muslims *before* and *after* independence. It marks a moment of political orientation on a path already well engaged during World War II with the awakening of North Arakan Muslims to the need of standing up for their interests. It also marks a new beginning, the emergence of a Rohingya movement which articulated political and ethnic claims

of Muslims in Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships and pursued political lobbying at the centre of executive power throughout the 1950s. The creation of the Mayu Frontier Administration (MFA) as an exclusive Muslim area in 1961 was considered an outstanding success of the fledgling movement.

The following sections of this policy brief contextualize the foundational period of the Rohingyas between approximately 1947 and 1964. They present political and cultural aims, mobilization, achievements, and implications of the territorialization and self-identification process. The brief does not aim at giving an exhaustive account, but puts forward a concatenation of contexts and events as a basis for further discussion.[4] The entrenched contestation of the Rohingya identity by the Myanmar state, heavily criticized internationally, does not only raise the issue of reified ethnicity, but also questions the perception and failed communications on adaptive political strategies, assimilation *within* Muslim populations and *externalized* identification as an evolving process.

1. Political Mobilization

In expectation of the visit of Prime Minister U Nu to Maungdaw scheduled for 25 October 1948, the Jamiat ul-Ulema, 'Council of religious experts' and North Arakan's political voice since 1936, presented a 'welcome address' which explicated Muslim demands in view of the Regional Autonomy Commission created by the government.[5] The Jamiat wished for "a separate administration unit within the Union of Burma […] under the direct control" of the Union government or, in the case that Arakan itself would be granted an autonomy status, "a separate district with local autonomy on equal Region of Arakan" [*sic*], implying that Buddhist Arakanese would be excluded from playing a political or administrative role in the north.

The Jamiat's members were speaking with a humble voice but from a position of implicit strength. In late 1948 the entire province was engulfed by insurrections and the situation was deteriorating, during the following year, nation-wide but also locally: Red Flag communists in southern Arakan, the rebellion of U Seinda, a monk, and his leftist allies in the centre, and the Mujahid rebels in the North. The government had effective control only of the towns, with its troops' seasonal campaigns failing to establish effective law and order. The Muslim villages of North Arakan were firmly in the hands of the Mujahids, and the Jamiat was seen by some as the civil

1   The old Muslim minority was estimated at five per cent in the 1860s. See Jacques P. Leider, "Rohingya: The History of a Muslim Identity in Myanmar", in David Ludden (ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 5.

2   Jacques P. Leider, "Mass Departures in the Rakhine-Bangladesh Borderlands", Policy Brief Series No. 111 (2020), Torkel Opsahl Academic EPublisher, Brussels, 2020 (http://www.toaep.org/pbs-pdf/111-leider/).

3   Government of the Union of Burma, Foreign Office, "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", 25 October 1948 (https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/zews4c/).

4   For an excellent overview, see Martin Smith, "Arakan (Rakhine State): A Land in Conflict on Myanmar's Western Frontier", Transnational Institute, Amsterdam, 2019, pp. 18-35.

5   Due to a flight problem, U Nu could not make the trip to Arakan. The Jamiat ul-Ulema was "the first movement to seek a distinctive representation for Muslims in Arakan", Smith, 2019, p. 18, see above note 4.

front of the rebels.[6]

Rebellion or negotiation? Opinions were divided on the best political way forward. In early 1945, when the war had ended, local Muslim leaders hoped that, in return of their auxiliary support for the Allied troops, they would be granted a territory of their own. This hope faded and some, after founding a local Muslim League in May 1946, wanted to join Pakistan and turned to Mohammad Jinnah. He reiterated his refusal to revise the borderline when he met Aung San, on his way to London for independence talks, in Karachi in January 1947. When Aung San reached an agreement with ethnic leaders from the Frontier Areas at the second Panglong Conference (February 1947), the Jamiat ul-Ulema promptly reacted by asking the British to grant Maungdaw and Buthidaung either the 'Frontier Area' status or include them, nonetheless, in East Pakistan.[7] This request was refused because the region had never been a frontier area during a century of British rule. When Burma became independent on 4 January 1948, Burmese and Arakanese administrators replaced local Muslim officers, and accusations of humiliations and extortions added to other griefs such as the return of Arakanese landowners chased away during the war.[8]

Jafar Kawal, a singer, had already preached *jihad* and the creation of a Muslim state in North Arakan before collecting men in great numbers. The rebellion he led spread from April 1948 onwards, estimates of the Mujahids varied between 2,000 and 5,000 men.[9] When the Jamiat wrote to the Prime Minister, both were looking for a way out of a political mess. Following its stance in 1947, the Jamiat's arguments marked an about-face, now stating that "on behalf of our people, we wish to [...] declare that we as a whole never want to be seceded from the Union" and "wish to express [...] unstinted loyalty and devotion to the Union of Burma".

Even before the Mujahids were eliminated in stages as a military threat, the 'loyalist' faction within the Muslim leadership took the upper hand over the 'secessionists'. The 'welcome address' had already stressed what became articles of faith of the Rohingya movement. First, the Jamiat rejected any identification as "Chittagonians and as foreigners": "We humbly submit that we are not. We have a history of our own [...] We have culture of our own". Secondly, arguing that Islam had arrived in the region in the tenth century CE, it traced the origins of the local Muslims to descendants of early Arab settlers "known as *Ruwangyas* or *Rushangyas*", using variants of 'Rohingya', a spelling that became firmly established after 1960. 'Rohingya' was an endonymic yet obscure term denoting 'Arakan/Rakhine' in the local dialect, and prominently used as 'Rwangya' after independence for an intra-communal differentiation between the old Muslim minority and the more recent Chittagonian immigrants and their descendants.[10]

According to the 1931 census, 80 per cent of the Muslims in Arakan were identifying as being of Chittagonian descent, and as Sultan Ahmed, the president of the Jamiat, recalled in a memorandum in June 1948, the question of whether North Arakan Muslims were an indigenous population enjoying citizenship rights had been raised ahead of the elections for the Constitutional Assembly (April 1947). Still, after independence, Muslims considered as aliens were struck off voters' lists.[11] Despite Sultan Ahmed's protests, post-World War II immigration termed illegal was reputedly "on a vast scale".[12] In a message of 8 February 1947 to Frederick Burrows, the Governor of Bengal, Burma's Governor Rance complained about no less than "63,000 illegal entries to Buthidaung and Maungdaw".[13] The Mujahids were also said to bring people over the border.[14] In this early context of contested citizenship, the issue of adopting an old, but rare name to highlight the claim of indigeneity was still of second rank.

In 1951, an "Arakan Muslim Conference" taking place in Alethangyaw, south of Maungdaw, published an open letter to the government entitled "Charter of the Constitutional Demands of the Arakani Muslims". Its demands closely resembled those of September 1948 attributed to the Mujahid leader Jafar Kawal (such as a "Free Muslim State" equal to Shan or Karenni State, and the use of Urdu as official language), but extended to the whole of Arakan. The charter displayed empowerment and self-confidence. Each community should have its own area of government but ensure a "common defence" and a "common administration of Akyab Port". Independently of the fact that Muslims formed only a quarter of the total population, the authors called for parity because Muslims were "much superior in fighting qualities, political and economic strength". The administration of the capital Akyab should be run with a rotational system, alternating Muslim and Non-Muslim mayors. The creation of a ministerial position at government level to represent North Arakan Muslim interests, a "Statutory Muslim Council" to run religious institutions, and the introduction of Shari'ah law were further requests.[15]

On the side of the Arakanese Buddhists, a call of "self-determination for Arakan as an Autonomous State" was made in early 1947 by an All Arakan Representative Working Committee in Rangoon. After the 1951 elections, efforts of Buddhist parliamentarians to gain Muslim support for an "Arakan State" with specific guarantees for the Muslims failed because of "deep-seated distrust".[16] The project still did not gain much traction following the success of a nationalist party at the elections of 1956, the Arakan National Union Organisation. U Nu's government, depending on the support of Arakan Muslim parliamentarians, opposed an Arakan State.[17] But following General Ne Win's Caretaker government (1958-60), U Nu changed his mind ahead of the April 1960 elections and, after winning, appointed a commission of enquiry. The prospect of an Arakan State raised the alarm among the Muslims. As Moshe Yegar put it, "from 1960 until 1962 Rohinga and Arakani Muslim organizations con-

6 Significantly, a copy of the 'welcome address' was included in the file "Muslim insurrection" of the Police Special Branch. Omra Meah, a Jamiat member in 1947, became one of the leading Mujahids.

7 Jamiat ul-Ulema Maungdaw, "Representation by the Muslims of North Arakan Claiming for an Autonomous State in the Buthidaung and Maungdaw Areas", 24 February 1947 (https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/7yyn0s/); Government of Burma Home Department; Immigration Inspector of Maungdaw, "Fortnightly Report", 15 May 1947 (https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/70cj9i/).

8 Jacques P. Leider, "Territorial Dispossession and Persecution in North Arakan (Rakhine), 1943-43", Policy Brief Series No. 101 (2020), Torkel Opsahl Academic EPublisher, Brussels, 2020 (http://www.toaep.org/pbs-pdf/101-leider/).

9 Moshe Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession: The Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, and Western Burma/Myanmar*, Lexington Books, Lanham-Oxford, 2002, pp. 37-41.

10 Richard Adler and Virginia Thompson, Minority Problems in Southeast Asia, Stanford University Press, 1955, p. 154; National Archives ('NA'), James Bowker, British Embassy Rangoon, to Ernest Bevin, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, FO 371-75660, 21 December 1949.

11 Sultan Ahmed, "Memorandum to the Government of the Union of Burma 18 June 1948", in "Rohingya belong to Burma", *Arakan Monthly News and Analysis of the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation, Arakan (Burma)* 6 (2009), no. 1, pp. 10-12.

12 Adler and Thompson, 1955, p. 154, see above note 10.

13 NA, Hubert E. Rance, Governor of Burma, to Frederick Burrows, Governor of Bengal, FO 643/61/4, 8 February 1947.

14 Yegar, 2002, p. 34, see above note 9.

15 Arakan Muslim Conference, "Open Letter to the Leaders of the Burmese Government and the Democracies. Charter of the Constitutional Demands of the Arakani Muslims", 1951 (https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/b89bn0/).

16 Yegar, 2002, p. 49, see above note 9.

17 Sultan Mahmud, an Arakan Muslim, was Minister of Health in 1956, and Sultan Ahmed, President of the Jamiat ul-Ulema, was Parliamentary Secretary.

ducted feverish activities on the subject of the status of Arakan".[18] They were however divided between, on the one hand, the Jamiat ul-Ulema's rejection of an Arakan State if it would include the majority-Muslim areas and, on the other, Sultan Mahmud's Arakan Muslim Organisation (AMO) representing Muslims of Akyab and southern Arakan who were open for compromise if Muslim interests were safeguarded. A year before presenting, in February 1962, a project on Arakan State, Prime Minister U Nu ceded to Muslim demands. In May 1961, he created the Mayu Frontier Administration emphatically greeted by the Rohingyas as the fulfilment of what they had been fighting for. Scared, however, by the prospect that North Arakan might still be included in U Nu's Arakan State project, Rohingya organizations kept on agitating for separate autonomy.[19]

2. Cultural Mobilization

The Muslim leaders who called for the recognition of a Rohingya ethnicity were aware of the novelty of their endeavour. When, in the 1950s, Rohingya lobbying for a separate area moved into action, there was a need to explain and to flesh out the political goals with historical references that could be communicated internally to raise solidarity and inform a wider Burmese audience, too. This task was notably fulfilled by Mohammad Tahir Ba Tha's writings published between 1959 and 1966.[20] Ba Tha wanted to put Arakan (via the assumedly Arabic origins of Arakanese Muslims) on the map of Islamic history. By drawing liberally on Arakanese Buddhist chronicles, Islamic lore, and colonial knowledge, he tried to fit the local Muslims into Arakan's ancient history as it had been interpreted by administrator-scholars like Phayre, Harvey or Collis.[21]

By stating that Hanif, the son of the fourth caliph Hazrat Ali, had arrived in Vesali and fought a battle in Maungdaw against Koyapuri, the queen of the cannibals, he integrated local places into a story that validated the presence of Muslims in North Arakan. Hanif's marriage with the subjected queen, who was converted to Islam, creatively reproduced the myth found in comparable Buddhist stories about the triumph of civilizers over dark and unruly forces. Ba Tha also emphasized the role of local Muslim art production, including calligraphy, architecture and music.[22] With ornate interpretations he validated a Muslim continuum under the name of "Roewengyas" by connecting them to regional contexts that were both prestigious and historically ascertained. His contributions to *The Guardian Monthly* revealed his anxiety about how to carve out a local Muslim history that had never been written. Ba Tha did not, however, touch upon territorial controversies or the political ambivalence in the aftermath of Burma's independence. He rather relocated the emerging Rohingyas in an ennobling distant past outside the narrow frame of their real lives made of hardship and communal tensions. He glorified the country's Hindu past and praised the Buddhist kings for their benevolence towards Islam, suggesting past harmony.

Ba Tha's was a history to believe, but not to argue, a colourful patchwork to engage with emotionally and imaginatively. The language of human rights' activism and an essentializing narrative of Rohingya victimhood have only recently displaced this Rohingya historical *imaginaire* which was a major source to reference the identification of the Rohingyas until the mid-1990s.

3. Mayu Frontier Administration

The implementation of the Mayu Frontier Administration ('MFA') on 1 May 1961 created enthusiasm among the Rohingyas.[23] The Mayu Frontier District included Maungdaw, Buthidaung and a part of Rathedaung township west of the Mayu River. The MFA was not autonomous, because it was ruled by army officers. It appeared as an administrative accommodation of the Frontier Areas Administration ('FAA') established by General Ne Win during his caretaker regime (1958–1960). The establishment of the FAA regime in Arakan, like the border agreement with Pakistan in 1961, were measures to fight rampant smuggling and unchecked border-crossing.[24] Over ten thousand Muslims, assumed to be Pakistanis, had been pushed back in mid-1959 during a national registration process.[25] The creation of the MFA also helped the army to solve the "perennial problem" of the remaining hundreds of Mujahid rebels who had turned into "dacoits and robbers".[26] Their surrender was celebrated in the news and bolstered the Jamiat's credentials for law and order.[27]

After the re-integration of the Mayu Frontier District into the Akyab district by the Revolutionary Council in 1964 – meaning the *de facto* suppression of the exclusive Muslim area – Rohingyas treasured the memory of the MFA. Why? To put it in the words of the Jamiat in a letter of 1963, they felt that "their racial status [had] been recognised by the Government". Martin Smith further explains their optimism about the MFA summing it up in name recognition, more jobs and improved freedoms.[28]

While between 1954 and 1964, attempts were made, as illustrated above, to enhance name recognition, most efforts took place during the period of the MFA. The United Rohingyas Organization published *A Short History of 'Rohingyas' An Indigenous Race of the Union of Burma* (Rangoon, 1960) and Ba Tha his *Rohingyas and Kamans* (Myitkyina, 1963), both in Burmese. Several organizations, notably among university students in Rangoon, proudly carried the name Rohingya.[29] Rohingya were included in the indigenous peoples' language programme broadcasting from May 1961 to October 1965, and the entry on the MFA in *Myanma Swayson Kyam*, an encyclopedia launched by the Prime Minister, mentioned its Rohingya population.[30] Two public citations reached an iconic status over the years. The first one was a radio talk entitled "Lesson on religion" by U Nu on 25 September 1954, and the second one was the speech given on 4 July 1961 by Brigadier General Aung Gyi at a festive event celebrating the surrender of a batch of Mujahids captured and resettled by the army.[31]

In his talk, Prime Minister U Nu opposed the law-abiding Rohingyas to the secessionist Mujahids which the army had eventually

18 Moshe Yegar, "The Muslims of Burma", in Ralph Israeli (ed.), *The Crescent in the East – Islam in Asia Major*, Curzon Press, London, 1982, p. 115.

19 Yegar, 2002, pp. 49-51, see above note 9.

20 A famous example is M. Tahir Ba Tha, "Roewengyas in Arakan", *The Guardian*, vol. 7, no. 5, May 1960, pp. 33-36.

21 Arthur P. Phayre, "Account of Arakan", in *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1841, vol. 2, pp. 679-712; Geoffrey E. Harvey, *History of Burma*, Cass, London, 1925; Maurice C. Collis and San Shwe Bu, "Arakan's Place in the Civilization of the Bay", in *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, 1925, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 34-52.

22 For a rare example of contemporary research on local arts, see Kazi Fahmida Farzana, "Music and artistic artefacts: symbols of Rohingya identity and everyday resistance in borderlands", in *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 2011, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 215-236.

23 Smith, 2019, p. 34, see above note 4; Tha Htu, "The Mayu Frontier Administrative Area", *The Guardian Monthly*, vol. 8, no. 2, February 1962.

24 Leider, 2018, p. 10, see above note 1.

25 NA, Difficulties between Pakistan and Burma, FO371-144475, August 1959; Leider, 2020, see above note 2.

26 NA, A.N.S. Walker, Visit to Akyab, FO371-143859, February 1959.

27 Yegar, 2002, p. 51, see above note 9.

28 Smith, 2019, p. 35, see above note 4.

29 Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims in Burma*, Harassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1972, p 102, footnote 2, has a list of Rohingya organizations.

30 Nurul Islam, "Rebuttal to U Khin Maung Saw", 2 November 2011 (available on the Rohingya.org web site).

31 Aung Gyi, "Address delivered by Brigadier General Aung Gyi Vice Chief of Staff (Army), The Union of Burma Armed Forces, Mujahid Insurgents' Surrender Ceremony", in *Khit Yay (Current Affairs)*, *Mayu Special Issue*, vol. 12, no. 6, 15 July 1961, pp. 8-10, 23-26.

crushed and he referred to the Rohingyas as *amyotha,* nationals.[32] When Brigadier General Aung Gyi gave his speech, he noted that, similar to situations along the Chinese frontier, one ethnic group (*lu myo*) could exist on both sides of the border, and likewise Muslims living on the western side were called "Pakistani" while those in Arakan were called "Rohingya". He appealed to the Rohingyas to be loyal citizens of the Union. One surely needs to evaluate the significance of these citations considering the intention of both speakers to reach out to the North Arakan Muslims. Both speeches were given in specific security-related contexts following successful action against rebels gone rogue. But while Rohingyas have extolled their assumed recognition by the government during the MFA, it is artificial, to a certain extent, to oppose the MFA embedded in General Ne Win's army-ruled FAA to the post-1962 authoritarian Ne Win regime because the military who ruled the borderlands of North Arakan were really the same. Because policies changed, as they did from responsive to xenophobic, we may wonder how much formal state recognition there was in the occasional use of the name 'Rohingya'. Moreover, as experts point out, the terminology expressing ethnic belonging and national categories, rigidly fixed today, was less dogmatic sixty years ago.[33] Truth is that Rohingya activists have generally considered the public utterance of the name not just as a show of polite respect, but as a validation of their ethnic claims, in sum, as a political gesture. The name issue is therefore not a marginal detail. Iteratively connected to the short-lived MFA, the name's actual diffusion and resonance also warrants further documentation. When the first mass flight to Bangladesh took place in 1978, the term 'Rohingya' appeared for the first time in international newspapers, but the UN staff facing the refugee crisis in Southeast Bangladesh met with an array of terms and overlapping statements on the identity of Muslims fleeing from Rakhine. The profile displayed in the pamphlets of the Rohingya Patriotic Front, an armed organization, was one among several.[34]

4. Implications of Rohingya Territorialization and Self-Identification

The foundational period saw an ongoing effort by a faction of North Arakan's Muslim elite, first, to make a collective political commitment to the Union of Burma in a move to reject the allegation of secessionism and undo their association with British colonial rule. Second, to gain cultural legitimation with a historicizing semi-mythical narrative of origins and references to pre-colonial Muslims, and by strictly minimizing the colonial-period roots of most Muslims in North Arakan.

Political lobbying transformed short-term ambitions into perceptible, though fragile, gains, such as the MFA. The territorialization of the Rohingya identity was explicit in the struggle for an autonomous area in *North Arakan* for the Muslim majority. It singled out the Rohingyas among other Muslim communities in Burma. Today, territorialization remains entangled with any discussion on the Ro-

hingyas.

The foundational period was most significant in the long-term process of gaining acceptance of Rohingya self-identification. This process was first conditioned and impacted by the breaks and challenges of World War II, communal riots, civil unrest, and rebellions. It was then co-determined by the ethno-political rivalry with the Rakhine Buddhists and the evolution of its self-portraying in the liberal environment of U Nu's premiership. Still, why did the idea of a Rohingya imagined community in Myanmar fail? Reasons are multiple, but *conflicting* territorialization, rooted in the 1947-64 period, is probably one of them. The imagined Muslim past conjured up the political centre of the early modern Buddhist monarchy (Mrohaung/ Mrauk U), whose old Muslim communities were *not included* in the territorial project of North Arakan (Maungdaw and Buthidaung).

Rohingya territorialization and self-identification had important consequences. These can be theorized in processes of assimilation and dissimilation. Assimilation includes social and cultural forms which strengthened practices of belonging, as well as developments which took, or were meant to take, the Rohingyas closer to their goal of political and cultural autonomy. Dissimilation denotes processes of differentiation which led to conflict, and lack of communication in regard of relations with the Buddhist Rakhine, other Muslim communities, and the state. Some of these are relatively better known as they form part of the grinding process of disenfranchisement. Neither can psychological factors be overlooked. Communal resentment was mutual and pervasive. Feelings of injustice ran deep. But they remained subdued during the period under review because Buddhists and Muslims were both competing for favours and attention from the government.

To conclude, a study of the Rohingya foundational period reveals an emancipating elite of North Arakan political actors successfully fighting for its goals. Nonetheless, its achievement was precarious and, from their inception, Rohingya territorialization and self-identification were fraught with contestation and threats of denial. Studying the textual sources of this period is rewarding and an antidote to the de-historicization of Rohingyas and other Muslims of Rakhine State passing political complexity, social change and ideologization into oblivion.

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32   Aung Gyi, *ibid.*
33   E-mail exchange with Rakhine scholar Kyaw Minn Htin, 16 November 2020.
34   United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Geneva archives), Refugees from Burma in Bangladesh, 100.BIB.BMA, 1979-1980, Central Registry, Box 56 ARC-2/A42.