

Islam in Myanmar – Research Notes

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Myanmar is a non-secular Buddhist majority country. The Theravada Buddhists and Christians are the two main religious communities groups in Myanmar with the Muslims being the third, enumerated population of Burma tells that, Buddhists make up 89.8 percent of the population, Christians 6.3 percent and Muslims 2.3 percent.

The Burmese Muslim community is largely a community of traders and ulama who are economically well but with poor levels of human resources development in the professional fields of education, science, engineering, medicine, technology and business management. Yet, there are several prominent law specialists among them.

As a hard and a difficult country, Myanmar was born out of the ashes of the murder of its integrationist freedom fighter leader General Aung San, the father of Aung San Suu Kyi, he was assassinated on 19 July 1947 a few months before the independence of Burma on 4 January 1948. His legacy of seeking integration and the legacy of violence associated with his murder alludes Myanmar until today.

In its 69 years of existence, Myanmar is dominated politically by the Bamar Buddhist majority which espouses a Bamar racist interpretation of Buddhism. The Bamar and other 135 distinct ethnic groups are officially grouped into following eight “major national ethnic races” viz., Bamar; Chin; Kachin; Kayin; Kayah; Mon; Rakhine and Shan who are recognized the original natives of the country of Myanmar. Others are classified as outsiders or illegal immigrants as in the case of the Rohingya Muslims.

The Muslims in Myanmar are divided into 4 groups:

1) The India Muslims known as Chulias, Kaka and Pathans were brought by the British colonizers to administer the colony. They resided largely in the colonial capital city of Yangon which at one time had 56% Indian population. Comprising mostly of factory and dock workers, gems traders and owners of businesses, they did economically well. The Indian Muslims speak Urdu and follow the Indian Muslim religious traditions of the Barelwi, Deobandi and the Tabligh Jamaat. They are led by the maulvis and often give only Indian style madrasa education to their children. The male graduates of which take on the management of family businesses and the women folk become house wives.

After seizing power through a military coup in 1962, General Ne Win expelled 300,000 Indians from Burma to India as a part of nationalization process.

Among the prominent Muslims of Burma are:

1.1) The last Mughal king Bahadur Shah was exiled by the British to Rangoon after the Indian Rebellion of 1857. His mausoleum is located at at No. 6 Theatre Road in Yangon. It has become a Sufi shrine.

1.2) Mr. U Razak (1898 – 1947) was a prominent secular Burmese politician of Tamil ancestry who deeply loved Burma and called for unity between Burmese Muslims and Buddhists. Being an educator, he learned Pali and Theravada Buddhism and founded the Mandalay College now Mandalay University). He was the Minister of Education and National Planning in General Aung San’s pre-independence interim government and also the chairman of the Burma Muslim Congress. U Razak was assassinated, along with Aung San on 19 July 1947.

2) Pathi or Zerbadee – are the Burmese Muslim off springs of the intermarriage between Persian and Indian Muslim men and Burman and other women. They see themselves different from the other Muslim groups both racial and culturally and as being closer to Buddhist Burmese ethnically and culturally. They distance themselves from the Indian Muslims whose religious lives are influenced by the Indian theological schools of Bareilwi and Deoband. The Zerbadee Muslims being ethnically Burmese Muslim minority within a minority are caught between the Burmese Buddhists with whom they share same racial and cultural identity but not religious identity.

3) Panthay or Hui Muslim of Chinese background are culturally Chinese engaging in business and trading occupations. They mostly migrated from the south-western Chinese province of Yunnan during the 13th century and also fleeing from the 1949 Chinese communist persecution, they are settled around the northern city of Mandalay.

4) Rohingya numbering around 1 million are natives of the Rakhine state which was formerly the Arakan kingdom. The Rohingya are designated as illegal Bengali migrants from Bangladesh and are discriminately referred to as the “kalla” – dark skinned people. The Rohingya also known as the Arakan Muslims have a long historical presence since the times of the ancient Arakan kingdom along with Arakan Buddhist which is now denied and effaced thereby weakening the legitimacy of their claim to Myanmar citizenship.

The historical presence of the Arakan Muslims in today’s state of Myanmar is rooted in the historical past of when there were no-state borders and there was free movement between Chittagong in Bengal. Politically, it is connected to the time of Kingdom of Mrauk-U which existed from 1430 until 1785 which ruled over much of present day Bangladesh and

Burma. Its founder and the last king was Naramikhla Min Saw Mon, a Buddhist also known as Suleiman Shaof Mrauk-U Dynasty of Arakan. He became king in 1404 but was driven out in 1406. He lived as an exile in Bengal for 24 years, regaining his throne in 1430 with military support Sultan Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah of the Sultanate of Bengal.

From 1430 to 1531 Mrauk U was a protectorate of the Bengal Sultanate, as a vassal state the Buddhist kings of Arakan, the court officials and military leaders held Islamic titles. Islamic gold dinar coins from Bengal were legal tender within the kingdom. The king Naramekhla minted coins with Burmese characters on one side and Persian characters on the other. In the 16th and 17th Mrauk U was an important maritime port which could be reached by large trading ships in the Bay of Bengal.

In 1784, the Bamar king Bodawpaya invaded and conquered the Arakan kingdom and incorporated into his kingdom. The British annexed Arakan in 1826 after the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26) the British colonial era was marked by a large influx of Indians into British Burma to assist in administration and in the business and labour sectors. Their descendants today are among the economic elites of Myanmar.

The Rohingya constitute approximately 1.3 million out of 3 millions population of the Rakhine state. It is estimated that currently there are 1 millions Rohingyas inside Myanmar of which 140,000 live in refugee camps as IDPs the Rakhine state since the eruption of 2012 ethno-religious clashes. And there are 1.5 million Rohingya living in exile in Bangladesh, Pakistan; Saudi Arabia; UAE; India, Malaysia; Thailand; UK, USA and Australia.

In 1940s during the period of independence struggle and the separation of India into two Pakistans, there was an insurgent group named Mujahids who desired to join East Pakistan and separate from Arakanese Buddhists and Burmans. They sought help from Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan. Jinnah discussed this matter with General Aung San who assured their protection in new Burma, Jinnah was not supportive of separation.

In June 1989 as per the, “Adaptation of Expressions Law” (Law 15/89) 1989 the name of the state of Arakan was changed to Rakhine state and came to be identified as an only Rakhine Buddhist dominated state.

Myanmar is a country of restive ethnic minorities which are also defined along religious lines has a three-tiered system of 1) Full Citizen; 2) Associate Citizen; 3) Naturalized Citizen, as per 1982 citizenship law the second and the third types of citizenships subject to revocation. The Rohingya are denied all 3 types of citizenship by law.

The delegitimization of the Rohingya began during the 1970s military regime of General Ne-Win. The promulgation of the 1974 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Myanmar and the 1974 Emergency Immigration Act laid the basis for ethnic citizenship. It invalidated The National Registration Certificates issued as per the 1947 legislation which were possessed by the Rohingya. The new laws began the process of delegitimization the citizenship state of the Rohingya, it culminated in the 1982 Burmese Citizenship Law which created four types of citizenship: citizen; associate citizen; naturalized citizen and foreigners, as per this law the Rohingya were declared as being foreigners. The final stroke at making the Rohingya totally stateless happened in 2015, following the 2012-13 violence and under pressure from the 969 Burmese Buddhist nationalists, the Thein Sein government declared that the White Cards identity held by the Rohingya null and void, the Rohingya were declared to be outsider “Bengalis.” The Rohingya are the only stateless people in Southeast Asia.

In light of oppression and violent conflict between the Burmese army and the Rohingya since 2012, the democratically elected government led by state counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi , in 2016 established an Advisory Commission on Rakhine State led the former UN secretary general, Kofi Annan with a mandate to examine the Rohingya issue and propose recommendations. The commission was “not mandated to investigate specific cases of alleged human rights violations.” In its report released on 24 August 2017, the commission recommend the state of Myanmar to scrap restrictions on movement and citizenship of the persecuted Muslim Rohingya minority as a solution to avoid the conflict from spiraling into radicalization within both communities.

In 1998, the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) and Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF) jointly founded the Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO) and its Rohingya National Army (RNA). The most recent Rohingya resistance group currently engaging with the Burmense army is the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA).

Apart from Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces) there are also several Arakan Buddhist nationalist groups of the Rakhine state who view the Rohingya as Bengali Muslims and a threat to their state because of their Muslim faith. These groups include the Arakan National Party (ANP); the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP) and its Arakan Liberation Army (ALA) and the United League of Arakan (ULA) and its armed wing the Arakan Army (AA).

Apart from the Rohingya issue, of recent Myanmar has also witnessed the rise of non-violent extremist nationalist movement of Buddhist nationalist monks called the Ma Ba Tha or 969 movement. In 2015, it pressured the former military led regime of President Thein

Sein to pass the “Protection of Race and Religion” targeting the country’s Muslim minority. The law imposes compulsory “birth spacing” for women; monogamy laws; marriage laws requiring Buddhist women to register their marriages in advance if marrying a non-Buddhist man; and a law regulating religious conversions. The 969 movement sees Muslims as dangerous people.

Ashin Wirathu, the leader of the Ma Ba Tha or 969 movement began by protesting against and calling for boycotting of Muslim businesses. It invented the 969 numerical symbol written in Burmese numerals and not Arabic numbers representing the ‘Three Jewels’ – the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha as cosmological powerful symbol to combat the Indian Burmese Muslim use of the Arabic numbers of 786 as reference to the Qur’anic verse “In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful” which is often displayed at Muslim business and in transaction slips. Ashin Wirathu and others premise that the addition of the $7+8+6 = 21$ is a symbol of a Muslim plot to conquer and convert Myanmar to Islam in the 21st century.

Recent months has seen increased anti-Muslim campaign in Myanmar. During November 2015 in anticipation of the 2016 Myanmar election, the Ma Ba Tha nationalists issued a 12-point policy statement calling upon the voters public to consider alleged threats to support the protection of race and religion when voting. The group has also called for a ban on wearing of Islamic headscarves and the ritual slaughter of cows during the Eid al-Adha festival.

Since its independence in 1948 independence Myanmar has failed to become a multicultural society of ethnoreligious equality and plurality.

On the regional front, there are also media reports of the forming of a Buddhist-Hindu transnational anti-Muslim alliance the comprising of the Ma Ba Tha of Myanmar; the Bodu Bala Sena BBS of Sri Lanka and Rashtriya Swam Sevak Sangh (RSS) the Indian Hindu nationalist movement main political force behind the present Hindutva led Indian government of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of prime minister Narendra Modi.

In view of geo-politics, Muslim-Buddhist fault lines in Southeast Asia and the rise of global religious nationalisms, I anticipate the rise of Asian Islamophobia soon.

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