

Theoretical reflections of Tamil ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka and Rohingya group in Myanmar

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Abstract: Bangladesh was praised internationally for sheltering the fleeing Rohingyas. But, there was little international involvement in repatriation process. The roles of its friendly countries, China, India, Russia, Japan, the regional economic and military powers, have been disappointing. The role of China, in particular, is crucial. Bangladesh government lacked diplomatic skills to convince the international community, including its friends, to get them involved in multilateral negotiation and, to create pressure on Myanmar.

One school claims that ethnic and national identities are constituted by common objective pre-existing characteristics, such as language, race, religion etc. These characteristics are shared and constitute the basis of unity of people, and distinguish from other people with different characteristics. Another view perceives ethnicity and nationality as ideologically socially constructed and, politically manipulated by elites for control over resources and privileges. Thus language, religion, and territorial affinity acquire their importance when they are used as a basis for awareness creation and social mobilization. The Tamils in Sri Lanka are an example.

Keywords: Politically manipulated, repatriation, Rohingyas, Tamils.

Introduction

The Rohingyas in Myanmar, one of most persecuted minorities in the world, went through recurring crackdowns over years, since 1978.¹ An overwhelming majority of them were forced to leave the country. The latest crackdown in August 2017 left nearly a million homeless. 730,000 found their shelter in Bangladesh.² With 400,000 refugees who arrived during last four decades the number reached more than a million.³ The host country, despite being densely populated, accepted such a huge number of refugees, on humanitarian ground. The people showed courage and tremendous compassion.

Two years after the crackdown, the fate of the Rohingyas appears to be more uncertain than ever. Repeated efforts to repatriation failed, allegedly, owing mainly to lack of sincerity of Myanmar government.⁴ Myanmar, not only failed to create a situation where the refugees would feel secure but, has taken various actions that adversely affected the

¹With military coup in 1962, the Rohingyas lost their status and rights as Burmese and discriminatory policies followed, the government effectively institutionalized discrimination through restriction on marriage, education, employment, freedom of movement. Chris Lewa, Arakan Project, Thailand. Direct assaults on them started in 1978, repeated systematically over years, in 1991, 1992, 2012, 2015, 2016. Amnesty International.

²The figure used by UN independent investigators. Marzuki Darusman, the Chair of the UN fact-finding mission claimed that there was an ongoing genocide in Rakhain. Source: The Guardian, 27.02.2019.

³BBC: Myanmar Rohingyas: What you need to know about the crisis, 16 January, 2018, access online <http://www.bbc-com/news/world-asia-4156656>, 22nd February, 2018. The mass exodus has been described by UN officials as a classic case of ethnic cleansing: CNN, March 13, 2018. Forced Migration of Rohingya: The Untold Experience, OIDA, Ontario, Canada

⁴New York times wrote – “Rohingyas don't want to return. Because Myanmar doesn't want them back. And because foreign governments don't much care. New York Times, 24.09.2019. Such a perception is widely shared by International community, mass media and humanitarian organizations.

repatriation scheme. In the after of 2017 crackdown, Myanmar has taken various measures in use in order to prevent Rohingyas from coming back to their home. Rohingya properties and establishments were vandalized by the military eliminating all the signs of Rohingya settlements.⁵ The government has confiscated lands and houses, owned by Rohingyas, and constructing buildings on lands of the displaced Rohingyas. There are reports of continued repressions against those who still are in the area. Individuals, families, children are systematically mistreated. Following the UN investigation teams, there exists a situation of continued genocide in Rakhain.⁶ The military also placed land mines along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border.

The Rohingyas in various camps in Bangladesh demand their citizenship rights and recognition of their identity before they would return to Rakhain. Myanmar rejects both these demands, and the Rohingyas remain stateless. Their “statelessness is direct consequence of systematic discrimination, persecution and exclusion by Myanmar law and practice over decades”.⁷

Clearly, condition in the Rakhain state is volatile. Myanmar refuses to recognize the Rohingya identity and guarantee their citizenship rights. Understandably, Rohingyas are not willing to go back, it's fear and lacking trust that holding them back in the camps. This is a major concern, both of Bangladesh Government and of the United Nations. For Bangladesh government, decision-making on repatriation became more complicated. However, Bangladesh has chosen the policy of not sending the Rohingyas back to Rakhain against their will. The irony is that Myanmar now blames Bangladesh for failed repatriation bid.

In the absence of multilateral effort, Bangladesh agreed on a bilateral repatriation scheme, which seemingly appears to be sluggish and painful for Bangladesh. With time passing, the Rohingya crisis became more complicated. Apparently, the problems of repatriation don't lend themselves quick solution. The general perception is that, and the media views “the repatriation bids are designed to fail”.⁸ The conditions set by the Rohingyas does not make the situation easier. The cost of compassion, apparently, came to be very high.

The role of international community and Bangladesh diplomacy, the subject matter of international relations, is beyond the scope of this paper. It rather makes an (armchair) analysis of the stand-still repatriation bids that resulted in multifarious problems engulfing Bangladesh and the local community in particular, as well as the unintended consequences for the Rohingyas in the camps.

The obvious impacts of such a huge number of refugees living in congested camps for more than two years are quite visible on the lives of people, animal in the area and on environment. For government, the burden of supporting such a huge number of refugees came to be unbearable. Rohingyas are living in densely make-shift camps in the difficult terrain in few tiny areas. They lack access to safe drinking water, health services, proper sanitation, and they are exposed to health hazards. Without proper education for the children, there is a risk of a lost generation. The livelihoods of more than 500,000 people in the local community are threatened since the arable lands are being used for camps. Forests have been razed, hills destroyed, wildlife threatened and crimes have increased.

The collateral damage of the hosting more than a million refugees had unintended consequences and extend far wider. The future of the persecuted Rohingyas uncertain. Their fate now hangs, by a thread- between a uncertain future in the camps and their desire for a life in their homeland. The host community in southern Bangladesh now starts feeling the price of compassion. The people around the camp areas there losing their patience without seeing any sign of repatriation. There were a few untoward incidents, including Rohingya involvement in drug smuggling, the killing of a local leader, allegedly, by a group of Rohingya men, human trafficking etc. Local people, who showed hospitality, are now expressing frustration and their compassion seems to be waning. The government imposed restrictions on Rohingya movements and on internet in the camps. Uncertainty and fear, as experienced in the Rakhain state, now returning to Rohingya camps.

⁵Amnesty International reports #My world is finished” and #Caged without a root”; Save the children report “Horrors I will Never Forget”.

⁶ Sources: Reports Doctors without borders; UN fact-finding mission report; The Daily Star, Dhaka, 18th September, 2019.

⁷Amal De Chickera, Statelessness and identity in Rohingya refugee crisis, 2018.

⁸Though there was no international involvement in the repatriation process, however, according to analysts with International Relations background claims that the role of China, in putting pressure on Bangladesh regarding bilateral bids, had impacts on the bid designed to fail. Such a claim also endorsed by the national media in Bangladesh.

To the long list of unintended consequences we may add the possibility of emerging militancy. Rohingyas, persecuted in Myanmar and living under restrictions in Bangladesh, may end up pressed into activities that would likely have impacts on vital security issues, both in Bangladesh as well as in the region. Neither Myanmar, nor its allies, seem to have thought about what may be untoward impacts of the stand-still repatriation process.

In the following, the adverse effects of massive influx on Bangladesh and, the consequences of the sluggish repatriation process on the Rohingyas are elaborated, analyzed and discussed. The (arm chair) analysis concludes with the question: Is there any end to the plight of the Rohingyas?⁹ and, advances the arguments for multilateral initiatives to attain a sustainable repatriation bid.

The situation in Rakhain, Myanmar, bears similarities and differences to the humanitarian community's systematic failure in the final stages of the conflict between Tamils and Sri Lanka government. During the war thousands were held against their will in internment camps that were fully paid and serviced by international humanitarian institutions. The Rohingyas were forcefully evicted from their homesteads, who found shelters in camps where their movements and communication beyond the camp areas are restricted.

In many countries, large population groups do not recognize the political community which has been forced upon them by the state, for instance Tamils in Sri Lanka and the Sikhs in Punjab, India. Other population groups do recognize the sovereignty and legitimacy of the state, but at the same time perceive themselves as disfavored minorities or even suppressed people, for instance the Rohingyas in Myanmar. Tamils in Sri Lanka demanded independence, but the Rohingyas demand their identity be recognized and citizenship rights.

Some theoretical reflections

In very many South Asian countries, the process of state formation took place in the colonial era. That time external powers established themselves as states within territories that were rarely demarcated either in accordance with objective attributes of the populations (such as language) or in accordance with the inhabitants' perceptions of affiliation and community. In many cases, what emerged were state- nations, rather than nation-state, that refers to most Western democratic nation states . In most south Asian countries, the kind of ideology that came to dominate could be referred as state-nationalism, rather than popular nationalism with a strong basis in civil society and the political community, that Stavenhagen claimed. The lack of congruence between the state and the nation has placed a considerable burden on the political systems and has often negatively affected economic and social development, mainly by diverting resources from development efforts to conflicts between the state and people, or to border disputes. There, the relation between society and state demonstrates that large ethnic communities co-exist within the same state territory, but without having strong feelings about belonging to the same nation. There are two major schools of thought on nationality and ethnic identity and their origins, how those are formed and achieved political significance, and how ethnic identities are politicised.

One school claims that ethnic and national identities are constituted by common objective pre-existing characteristics, such as language, race, religion etc. These characteristics are shared and constitute the basis of unity of people, and distinguish from other people with different characteristics. Another view perceives ethnicity and nationality as ideologically socially constructed and, politically manipulated by elites for control over resources and privileges. Thus language, religion, and territorial affinity acquire their importance when they are used as a basis for awareness creation and social mobilization. The Tamils in Sri Lanka are an example.

A third view claims, as Barth contends, ethnic identity is not pre-given but may be chosen, voluntary and constructed, invented and imagined. Rohingyas in Myanmar is a case in hand. Ethnic identities as political movements created by elites, be they political, military, economic, who through the manipulation of symbols, to muster as much support as possible for their own narrow interests. The Rohingya case demonstrates that the Myanmar government manipulated religious identity of the Rohingyas and Buddhists as opposing characteristics of national identity. The Myanmar military elite made efforts to secure its share of power and control over resources, mobilizing people support for the military.

A brief historical narrative of the Rohingyas in Myanmar may be an empirical evidence of such a proposition. There Arakan Rohingyas and Indian Rohingyas. For the first category, Rohingyas in Arakan is as old as Arabs in India. The second category refers to those who arrived in Arakan during Bengal Sultanat era, Mughal era, and the British colonial era. Throughout the British colonial era many Indians arrived as soldiers, civil servants, construction workers and traders. With Anglo-Burmese community, the Indians dominated commercial and civil life in Burma.

⁹ The (arm chair) analysis draws on reports, news and views in the media.

Burmese resentment was strong and vented in violent riots that paralysed Yangon on occasion all the way until the 1930s. Some of the discontent was caused by disrespect for Burmese culture and traditions such as the British refusal to remove shoes when they entered pagodas. Buddhist monks became the vanguards of the independence movement. U Wisara, an activists monk died in prison after a 166-day hunger strike to protest against a rule that forbade him to wear his Buddhist robes while imprisoned.

In 1940 just before Japan formally entered the 2nd World War Aung San formed the Burma Independence Army in Japan. Within months after 1942, Japan entered the wa, and Japanese troops advanced on Rangoon and the British administration had collapsed. Beginning in late 1944, allied troops launched a series of offences that led to the end of Japanese rule in July 1945. Japanese lost some 150,000 men in Burma and 1,700 prisoners taken.

Many Burmese fought for the Japanese as a part of the Burma Independent Army. But many from the ethnic minorities including the Rohingyas served in the British Army. The Burma National Army and the Arakan National Army fought with the Japanese from 1942 to 1944 but switched allegiance to the Allied side in 1945. Under Japanese occupation, 170,000-150000 were killed.

In the 1960s, soon after the military seized power, it ordered tens of thousands of people of Indian origin to leave the country. The Indians had lived in the country for centuries, and many brought to the country the colonial rulers when the country was a part of British India, during the 19th and early 20th centuries. It is estimated that more than 300,000 people were forced to leave and their properties and lands were nationalized. The Burmese Indian refugees went back to India.