

## THE CAUSES, DIMENSIONS AND PARADOXES OF THE ROHINGYA CRISIS

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**Abstract.** *The Rohingya Muslims, an ethno-religious minority group from Myanmar, are one of the most persecuted minorities in the world. The atrocities committed by Myanmar security forces against the Rohingya, including mass killings, sexual violence and widespread arson, are considered crimes against humanity. The global community has reacted against these persecutions and described the situation as a case of ethnic cleansing, even genocide. This paper will try to examine the facts that led to these oppressions, the reasons behind the Rohingya's loss of citizenship under the 1982 Citizenship Law and its consequences. It will also present their long history of severe discrimination, the numerous restrictions they were subject to and the unimaginable horrors they have experienced.*

**Keywords:** *nationalism, Buddhism, discrimination, ethnic cleansing, genocide, refugee, human rights.*

### Introduction

Myanmar<sup>1</sup>, the largest country in Southeast Asia, is characterized by great ethnic and cultural diversity. The country officially recognizes 135 ethnic groups, each having its own language, culture and a history of autonomous self-governance. The Bamar is the largest ethnic group, representing the majority of the population, about two-thirds, and it controls the military and the government. The minority ethnic nationalities, among which: Kachin, Kayah (Karenni), Karen, Chin, Burman, Mon, Rakhine, Shan, Kaman, or Zerbadee, live mainly in the border areas and hills of the country (Chingchit, Makisaka, Barron, Bernard, 2017: 106). About 90 percent of the 50 million population of Myanmar is Buddhist, while the Muslims represent a religious minority of only 4 percent of the population. The Rohingya represent the largest group of Muslim minorities. They are located in Rakhine State<sup>2</sup>, a region characterized by poverty and poor infrastructure, situated on the western coast of Myanmar, bordering Bangladesh to the north. According to estimations, there are around one million Rohingya living in Rakhine State, the majority being concentrated in North Rakhine<sup>3</sup>. Their language is distinct to other languages spoken in Rakhine State and throughout Myanmar and it is similar to Chittagonian language, which is a dialect of Bangladesh (Mannan, 2017: 35-36).

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<sup>1</sup> In 1989, the ruling military government changed the name from Burma to Myanmar. However, most people continue to use both names interchangeably, *Myanmar* being the literary, written name of the country and *Burma* being more colloquial.

<sup>2</sup> Rakhine State corresponds to the historical Kingdom of Arakan.

<sup>3</sup> *Myanmar Rohingya: What you need to know about the crisis*, in BBC News, 23 January 2020, [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41566561], accessed in January 2021.

Rohingya Muslims have been subject to extreme violence and discrimination, they have been marginalized, persecuted and abused not only by the Buddhists living in the Rakhine State, but also and especially by the Myanmar's government. Over the years, the conflicts between the two communities, amplified by the military's interventions, often led to serious ethnic clashes, which turned the old region of Arakan into a bloody battlefield. This paper will examine the elements that led to this Rohingya crisis and all the aspects that influenced the Myanmar's authorities to act in the way they did and still do against the Rohingya. In the first part of this paper, I will analyze the historical background that shaped the present day situation in the Rakhine State, then, in the second part, I will present the long history of severe discrimination, the numerous restrictions the Rohingya were subject to and the unimaginable horrors they have experienced. In the third part of this paper, I will present the position of the International Community and the Myanmar government's reactions to the decision of the International Court of Justice from 2020. In the fourth part, I will analyze the three dimensions of this crisis: religious, geopolitical and economic, showing that the Rohingya are only poor victims of a corrupt State and of its business interests.

### **Historical background**

Before analyzing the Myanmar's colonial period, which is considered to be the starting point in the Rohingya crisis, it is important to mention the long history of this minority in the Rakhine State. The Rohingya are followers of Islamic traditions, they are descendants of Muslims groups who have been present in the region for centuries. In this sense, the term *Rohingya* would be the historical name for the Muslims living in the Arakan (Rakhine) region, the term deriving from the old name of the Rakhine State, originally known as *Rosanga*. It was discovered that both Hindu and Muslim Bengalis living in *Rakhaing* even since the sixteenth century used to call themselves *Roainga* (Charney, 2005). Therefore, the use of the term Rohingya, because of its historical connection to the indigenous population of the Rakhine State, is extremely contested in Myanmar. The majority of the Buddhist population rejects this terminology and prefers to refer to the Rohingya using the term *Bengali* (originally from present-day Bangladesh), considering them illegal immigrants, with no cultural or religious bonds to Myanmar and with no legitimate claim to reside in the state (Mannan, 2017: 35-36).

In order to fully understand this Rohingya crisis, we need to look closely into the country's past, into its colonial period and try to observe how this period influenced the country's decisions and its policy during the years that followed its independence. In this sense, the historical background of Myanmar is relevant to our understanding of the Rohingya situation as it gives an insight into the root of their discrimination. Because of the rich natural resources of the country, Burma began to attract the British starting with 1824. At the end of the three Anglo-Burmese wars (1824–1826, 1852–1853, and 1885), Burma became part of the British Commonwealth. In order to encourage a great number of people from across the Indian Empire to come into the region and work in the fertile Arakan fields, the British put in practice an *open door* immigration policy, which determined many labourers from today's India and Bangladesh to migrate into the region (Chan, 2005: 399). This increased migration was roughly criticized by the Buddhists and it eventually led to the emergence of the Burmese nationalism. This nationalism intensified following the events that occurred during WWII and immediately afterwards. Under Japanese occupation, Buddhists and Muslims fought in different camps: Buddhists

in Arakan were recruited to fight on the side of the Japanese while the local Muslims were used by the British in their fight against the Japanese forces (Rosenthal, 2019).

The conflictual situation between the two major religious groups escalated after Myanmar's independence in 1948. The country struggled with armed ethnic conflict and political instability. Shortly after the independence, Rohingya Muslims mobilized and demanded autonomy of the region of Rakhine, but with no success, as their rebellion was strongly pushed back by the government (Mahmud, Md Khaled, Fariba, 2019: 3319). This rebellion was cruelly punished by the authorities in the following years. Therefore, although post-war Burmese independence recognized the Rohingya's indigenous status, things started to change dramatically for the Rohingya after the 1962 military coup in Myanmar. In 1962, the army seized power from the civilian government and set out violent campaigns against the Rohingya population. Beginning with the 1970s, the Rohingya had to suffer rape, detention, destruction of mosques and villages, and seizure of their lands. Hundreds of thousands Rohingya fled across the border to Bangladesh and became refugees. The Muslim population remaining in the Rakhine State were confined by the security forces to their villages, obliged to live in improper camps, with no freedom of movement and deprived of the basic rights (Head, 2018).

### **The stateless Rohingya**

Though they have been living in the South East Asian country for generations, the majority of Rohingya in Myanmar are stateless<sup>4</sup>, deprived of citizenship. The 1982 Citizenship Law<sup>5</sup> does not include them on the list of 135 recognized national ethnic groups, as the country considers them migrants settled in Myanmar during the colonial rule. Therefore, according to this 1982 Citizenship Law, a Rohingya and any other ethnic minority is eligible for citizenship only if he/she can provide proof that his/her ancestors have lived in the country before the British colonization, meaning prior to 1823. Because of the impossibility to obtain the adequate documentation and the right papers (often unavailable or denied to them), meant to prove their ancestry in Myanmar, the vast majority of Rohingya became stateless Muslims, migrants considered to have settled in Myanmar only after the Anglo-Burmese Wars and during British colonialization.

Not being eligible to full citizenship, Rohingya Muslims, instead of obtaining the National Registration Certificate, given to all categories of Myanmar citizens above the age of 15 (Nithya, 2018: 2), received some identity cards called *white cards*, cards that offer them the status of *temporary citizens*. These *white cards* confer them limited rights, meaning that they need to have the government permission in order to travel outside their villages, to get married or have children<sup>6</sup>. Although, at the beginning, these *white cards* offered Rohingya the right to vote, in February 2015, Buddhist nationalists protested to this Rohingya's right and put pressure on the president at that time, Thein Sein, who canceled their temporary identity cards and along with them their right to vote.

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<sup>4</sup> The 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons defines a stateless person as someone “*who is not considered as a national by any state under the operation of its law*”, available at: [[https://www.unhcr.org/ibelong/wp-content/uploads/1954-Convention-relating-to-the-Status-of-Stateless-Persons\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.unhcr.org/ibelong/wp-content/uploads/1954-Convention-relating-to-the-Status-of-Stateless-Persons_ENG.pdf)]. This definition is now part of customary international law.

<sup>5</sup> Burma Citizenship Law 1982, available at: [<http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b4f71b.html>].

<sup>6</sup> *Rohingya Quest for Citizenship in Myanmar A Fact Finding Mission Report*, published by South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR), in Sri Lanka, 2018, [[http://www.southasianrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Report\\_of\\_FFM\\_on\\_Rohingya.pdf](http://www.southasianrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Report_of_FFM_on_Rohingya.pdf)], accessed in January 2021.

Consequently, the 2015 elections had no Muslim parliamentary candidate (Albert, Maizland, 2020).

Citizenship is a legal status that gives a person the right to live in a state and to be under the protection of that state. Besides this legal status, citizenship also implies a feeling of identity, of *belonging*, it implies social relations of reciprocity and responsibility<sup>7</sup>. On the other side, lack of citizenship brings about implications at multiple levels, as those deprived of citizenship are not entitled to be part of civil service, they are deprived of the basic rights and of the security that a state offers to its citizens. Consequently, they become subject to abuses, to extreme violence and they suffer great losses and discriminations: loss of one's home, loss of government protection, loss of the right to movement, opinion, freedom, education and eventually life.

Hannah Arendt, in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1968), observed that the greatest problem is not that stateless people are deprived of specific rights, such as the right to life, liberty, pursuit of happiness, freedom of opinion. Their *rightlessness* is far more worse as it consists in the non-existence of any laws for them and in their not belonging to any community. There is no place where their opinions become significant and their actions effective (Arendt, 1968: 296). Once people became stateless, they lack the very *right to have rights*, as this supreme *right* can be achieved only in a political community in which people can transcend their characteristics given at birth, where they acquire recognition and become equal within a group, through their actions and opinions. "We are not born equal; we become equal as members of a group on the strength of our decision to guarantee ourselves mutually equal rights" (Arendt, 1968: 301).

In a world that has become a "completely organized humanity", being deprived of home and of political status means being expelled from humanity (Arendt, 1968: 297). This expulsion, this alienation and marginalization of the Rohingya community exposes them to the greatest tragedies. The moment they lost their citizenship, the moment they were deprived of a particular socio-political identity, Rohingya ceased to be treated like human beings and became victims to a wide range of human rights violations: restrictions on freedom of movement, lack of access to livelihood, food, health care and education. The Rohingya's statelessness leaves them vulnerable, as they belong to no system that is meant to protect them. They become a target for extortion and their own confessions expose us to a world of oppression and unimaginable horrors, where human beings are being beaten, raped, abused, displaced and killed by the very system supposed to offer them protection:

"After entering our home, the army raped my two sisters, 14 and 17 years old, before the eyes of my elderly parents. They were raped collectively by at least eight army men. They had severely beaten my parents prior to raping my sisters." (a 22-year-old resident of Myaw Taung) (Canal, 2017)

"I was at home with my 13-year old uncle, when the army broke into the house [...] They beat us with sticks, metal rods and kicks. We were crying, pleading for mercy[...]We were dragged out of the house, which was set on fire. My uncle, who attempted to flee was caught, beaten and thrown into a burning house." (Canal, 2017)

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<sup>7</sup>*Citizenship: What Is It and Why Does It Matter?*, 28 March 2011, [<https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/primers/citizenship-what-is-it-and-why-does-it-matter/>], accessed in January 2021.

The 1982 Citizenship Law was the final act of a long series of discriminations against the Rohingya and it embodied the deep-rooted hatred against this minority. Indeed, even before 1982, starting with the 1970s, the Rohingya have been target of violence perpetrated by both the state as well as by Buddhist nationalist groups. During the Operation King Dragon, launched in 1978 by the military government, the Rohingya were subject to all forms of persecutions: arbitrary arrest, torture, rape, kidnapping and even death. To escape the extreme violence they faced, 200,000 Rohingya deserted their homeland and took refuge in Bangladesh. In 1991, after a second military operation, another 200,000 Rohingya crossed Myanmar border and fled again into Bangladesh (Akins, 2013).

The conflicts between the Buddhists and the Rohingya Muslims in the Rakhine State began to escalate starting with 2012 and they became more and more radical and violent throughout the years, with the emergence of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army in 2013 (ARSA), formed by members of the persecuted Rohingya. The unfortunate incident from June 2012, when a young Buddhist woman was raped and murdered by three Muslims, determined the local Rakhine activists to take action against the whole Muslim community from the Rakhine State: Rohingya homes were burnt, 280 Rohingya people killed and tens of thousands displaced. Myanmar government intervened in the conflict and declared a state of emergency in Rakhine, allowing the military to step in, in order to secure the protection of the country from terrorist attacks. The aftermath of this military intervention was catastrophic for the Rohingya: 650 Rohingyas killed, 1,200 missing and more than 80,000 displaced (Rahman, Anusara, Chanthamith, Hossain, Al Amin, 2018: 13-14).

Another attack from October 2016 against the Myanmar-Bangladesh Border Guard Police, that caused the death of nine Myanmar police officers, determined Myanmar military to intervene again. Although the attackers proved to be ARSA insurgents, Myanmar army engaged in indiscriminate violence against Rohingya villages: places of cultural significance to the Rohingya population were deliberately destroyed, houses were burnt and educated Rohingya members were arrested<sup>8</sup>. The government of Myanmar justified each time the military's persecution as the country's right and duty to protect its citizens from terrorist attacks and foreign intruders.

Claiming they were carrying out campaigns in order to fight against the ARSA terrorists so that stability in the country's western region could be reinstalled, Myanmar's security forces committed serious human rights abuses: indiscriminate killings of women and children (at least 6700 Rohingya were killed among whom 730 were children who were under the age of five), burning of Rohingya villages, torture, sexual violence, forced displacement, destruction of property and livelihood. Following these abuses, the conflict between the Rohingya and the Myanmar's security forces intensified and in 2017, the world witnessed one of the largest refugee crises in Southeast Asia: approximately 725,000 Rohingya sought asylum in southern Bangladesh, in the Cox's Bazar refugee camps<sup>9</sup>, another 40,000 took refuge in India, 5,000 in Thailand, 150,000 in Malaysia, 1,000 in Indonesia, 350,000 in Pakistan, 10,000 in UAE, and 200,000 in Saudi Arabia,

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<sup>8</sup> *Rohingya Quest for Citizenship in Myanmar A Fact Finding Mission Report*, published by South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR), Sri Lanka, 2018 [[http://cgsdu.org/wpcontent/uploads/2019/03/Report\\_of\\_FFM\\_on\\_Rohingya.pdf](http://cgsdu.org/wpcontent/uploads/2019/03/Report_of_FFM_on_Rohingya.pdf)], accessed in January 2021.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

according to a report by Al Jazeera Channel<sup>10</sup>. The Rohingya exodus became the largest one in the 21st century.

The stateless Rohingya's tragedy is amplified by the fact that, because of their deprivation of nationality, they are not recognized and welcomed anywhere. The discrimination they are subject to in their home state extends beyond the borders of this state. Not only they lost their homes, but also this statelessness made impossible for them to find a new one. In order to prevent this mistreatment of human beings, the international community assembled a set of guidelines, laws and conventions to ensure the adequate treatment of refugees and protect their human rights. Therefore, in July 1951, a diplomatic conference in Geneva adopted the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. The 1951 Convention<sup>11</sup> clarifies the definition of a refugee and it defines the legal obligations of the states who decide to sign the document. Unfortunately for the Rohingya, Bangladesh has not acceded to the 1951 Convention or its 1967 Protocol, so there is no law that regulates the administration of refugee affairs in Bangladesh or guarantees the rights of refugees. This situation leaves the Rohingya exposed to serious restrictions and risks inside the refugee camps: no freedom of movement, no permission to work, no access to education, exposure to abuse and exploitation, lack of adequate health services and, in some cases, drug shortages, all these elements leading to a climate of despair<sup>12</sup>.

Despite all these abominable living conditions and despite the "arrangement" between Bangladesh and Myanmar on the "return of displaced persons from the Rakhine state,"<sup>13</sup> refugees still refuse to return to Myanmar. They say that if they were to go back, they would do so only if they received assurances of safety and security, return of their property, freedom to practice their religion, as well as accountability and justice for the atrocities committed against their men, women and children.

### **Myanmar's policy towards Rohingya Muslims and the position of the International Community**

Beginning with 2010, after years of military rule, Myanmar headed towards a gradual liberalization that ultimately led to the installation in 2016 of a civilian government led by veteran opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi<sup>14</sup>. Aung San Suu Kyi, a human rights activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner, is the daughter of Aung San who led the Burmese Liberation Army in the Second World War and won independence from the British. After spending 20 years under house arrest and after years of fighting for democracy in Myanmar, she returned to politics in 2010 and she succeeded together with her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), a great electoral victory in 2015. However, because of the 2008 Constitution, the military remains in power, still controlling the operations of the armed forces, security apparatus and bureaucracy. It continues to appoint a quarter of the Parliament and many key institutions, such as: Defence, Border

<sup>10</sup>*Who are the Rohingya?*, April 2018, [<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2018/4/18/who-are-the-rohingya>], accessed in January 2021.

<sup>11</sup>*The 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol*, UNHCR, the United Nations agency for refugees, Available from : <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/1951-refugee-convention.html>, accessed in January 2021.

<sup>12</sup>*Bangladesh*, [<https://www.unhcr.org/474ac8da11.pdf>], accessed in January 2021.

<sup>13</sup>*Rohingya crisis: Bangladesh and Myanmar agree repatriation timeframe*, 16 January 2018, [<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42699602>], accessed in January 2021.

<sup>14</sup>*Myanmar country profile*, 3 September 2018 [<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-12990563>], accessed in January 2021.

Affairs and Home Affairs, remain under the control of the Commander-in-Chief (Paddock, 2018). Aung San Suu Kyi was not allowed to take control of the government after winning the 2015 elections, instead, she was given the title of State Counsellor and became Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Fearing the emergence of separatist movements inside the country, as there had been the case with the Rohingya from Rakhine before the 1962 military coup, the Myanmar military together with the State Chancellor, Aung San Suu Kyi, carry out violent campaigns against this minority, claiming to fight against the ARSA terrorists. They refuse to recognize the Rohingya as an ethnic group, they reject all accusations and abuses against the Rohingya and they restrict access to the Rakhine State for journalists and aid workers (Nithya, 2018: 7-8). Moreover, the government of Myanmar is using the religious dimension in order to manipulate people to act with violence and hatred against the Rohingya Muslims.

Following the 2017 events, the international community declared Rohingya the "most persecuted minority in the world" (UNHR, 2017). The Secretary General of the UN, António Guterres, accused Myanmar military of mass killings with "genocidal intent" (Mahmud, Md Khaled, Fariba, 2019: 3314), demanding the State Chancellor, Aung San Suu Kyi, and the country's security forces to put an end to the violence. Several rights groups, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have also criticized the ethnic cleansing going on in Myanmar against the Rohingya. The US urged Myanmar's military to respect the rule of law and to stop the violence against the civilians from all communities, and the UK has suspended training courses for the Myanmar military (Nithya, 2018: 8).

In November 2019, the Gambia, acting with the support of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation which includes 57 member states, used Article IX of the Genocide Convention and filed a lawsuit at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against Myanmar, accusing the country's army of launching "clearance operations" in Rakhine and claiming it was committing "an ongoing genocide against its minority Muslim Rohingya population"<sup>15</sup>.

"The aim is to get Myanmar to account for its actions against its own people: the Rohingya. It's a shame for our generation that we do nothing while genocide is unfolding right under our own eyes," (Gambia's Justice Minister, Abubacarr Tambadou, at a news conference at The Hague, Netherlands) (Krishnankutty, 2019)

The panel of 17 judges at the International Court of Justice voted on 23 January 2020, unanimously, to order Myanmar to take "all measures within its power" to prevent genocide and declared that the country had "caused irreparable damage to the rights of the Rohingya" (Swart, 2020). The measures imposed by the ICJ are binding and not subject to appeal. However, the ICJ has no way of enforcing them. What the international community can do at this point is to put political pressure on Myanmar following this ICJ decision.

Although Western nations and humanitarian groups recognize that Rohingya is among the world's most persecuted minorities, the government of Myanmar and the

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<sup>15</sup>*The Gambia Files Lawsuit Against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice*, November 2019, [<http://globaljusticecenter.net/press-center/press-releases/1178-the-gambia-files-lawsuit-against-myanmar-at-the-international-court-of-justice/>], accessed in January 2021.

majority of its population consider Rohingya as foreigners with separatist intentions that threaten the security of their country. At the International Court of Justice in The Hague, in December 2019, Aung San Suu Kyi, once a hero of democracy, defended her country against accusations of genocide and accused the foreign observers of exaggeration. Moreover, during her discourse, she refused to use the word *Rohingya*, adhering to her government's position that no such ethnic group exists (Simons, Beech, 2019). Internationally, Aung San Suu Kyi has been roughly criticized for not having stood up for the rights of the oppressed Rohingya, after years of insisting that human rights are a universal birthright, and for her decision to support and to justify the crimes of the Myanmar military<sup>16</sup>.

The country's Independent Commission of Enquiry (ICOE) carried out its own investigations and concluded that the Myanmar security forces committed "serious human rights violations, and violations of domestic law", but the commission found no evidence of genocide<sup>17</sup>. Whether the government admits or not the existence of a genocide, the International Community demands the country to put an end to this conflict, to grant the Rohingya Myanmar nationality, a legal status and civil rights such as the right to education and freedom of movement. Although Myanmar's authorities say they are ready to receive the Rohingya that return from Bangladesh, the refugees are reluctant and they refuse to go back until the Myanmar's government recognizes them as an official ethnic group and until protection and a safe return to their original villages and lands are ensured (Paul, 2019). Unfortunately, there is no evidence that the Myanmar's government is willing to meet these requirements very soon, fact that leaves the Rohingya crisis with no immediate solution.

### **Religious, geopolitical and economic dimensions**

"As a Buddhist, I feel sorry for them. But these Muslims living in Myanmar, we can't just look at their human rights. They're not qualified to be citizens under our citizenship law ... If we let them out, the terrorist attacks will increase in Myanmar. There are 57 Islamic countries in the world, so if the leaders of those countries would take these people into their countries, there will be no problems in our country at all." (Buddhist monk U Par Mount Kha)<sup>18</sup>

The monk's confession above brings in an important factor to the Rohingya crisis in Rakhine State: the deeply-rooted Islam phobia among the Myanmar population. The geographical position of the country, surrounded by Islamic countries: Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia, together with the deeply-entrenched Buddhist nationalism that emerged during the British colonial rule, coupled with sentiments such as disbelief, hatred against the Muslims, transformed the Myanmar Buddhist society, traditionally perceived as peaceful and harmonious, into an extremely violent one.

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<sup>16</sup>*Aung San Suu Kyi: Myanmar democracy icon who fell from grace*, January 2020 [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-11685977], accessed in January 2021.

<sup>17</sup>*Myanmar Rohingya: What you need to know about the crisis*, 23 January 2020, [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41566561], accessed in January 2021.

<sup>18</sup>*The Rohingya: Silent Abuse*, August 2017 [https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/aljazeeraeworld/2017/07/rohingya-silent-abuse-170730120336898.html], accessed in January 2021.



By identifying themselves as Rohingya, the ethnic Muslims from Rakhine group claim their connections and ties to the region. They created their own identity based on their historical journey throughout the centuries and based on their ancestors' settlement in the Arakan State. Therefore, by denying the Rohingya name, Myanmar government denies their history and their identity, considering them a recent invention created for political reasons, aimed to legitimize the Rohingya's possible fight for autonomy. Stripped of their identity and of their name, subject to many forms of discrimination, they are deliberately excluded from being citizens of Myanmar. In this violent exclusion and marginalization, some see the country's intention to build a mono-religious nation (Ullah, 2017).

However, the Rohingya crisis is not only about religion. A fight for resources and development of Myanmar makes matters worse for the Rohingya. Since the 1990s, the military has been taking away land from small landholders from different ethnic and religious groups without giving any compensation. In 2011, Myanmar instituted economic and political reforms, which turned Myanmar in "Asia's final frontier" and opened the country up to foreign investment. Since 2011, foreign investors entered the country bringing about their "development" projects: military base expansions, natural resource exploitation projects, agricultural projects and extraction, all to the detriment of the Myanmar farmers, who have become poorer or even lost their lands (Sassen, 2017).

Coastal areas of Rakhine State, one of the poorest of Myanmar's states but rich in natural resources, are of strategic importance to both India and China, countries neighboring Myanmar and both in search for such natural resources. In Rakhine State, Chinese and Indian interests turn around the construction of infrastructure and pipelines. China National Petroleum Company (CNPC) began operations in September 2013 for a transnational pipeline connecting Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine, to Kunming, China, the pipeline being completed in August 2014<sup>19</sup>.

Seen from this angle, we can easily make connections between the economic and political reforms from 2011 and the series of violent conflicts that shattered the Rakhine state beginning with 2012. Therefore, this geopolitical dimension forces us to put questions about the Myanmar government's real reasons for the persecutions of the Rohingya. Forcing them to flee and leave their houses behind means freeing up land and water for further investments. Indeed, the reality is that a third of Myanmar's vast forests are gone and, with the purpose of further development, the government has allocated millions of hectares, including a significant allotment in Rakhine state<sup>20</sup>. The religious conflict and the hatred against the Rohingya, sustained and amplified by the government, prevent Myanmar population from interfering with the government's business and from putting pressure on it in order to stop evictions of all smallholders. Therefore, the religious focus has seized the attention of the national and international community, leaving other important dimensions of the conflict away from the public debate.

## Conclusions

The tragedy of the Rohingya is that they have become collateral victims of a larger political struggle, victims of colonization and victims of a long, historical ethnic

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<sup>19</sup> Sino-Myanmar Gas Pipeline, in Petroscaz Oil and Gaz [http://www.petroscazinspection.com/sino-myanmar-pipelines-latestpost-detail-32.aspx], accessed in January 2021.

<sup>20</sup> *Religion is not the only reason Rohingyas are being forced out of Myanmar*, September 2017, [https://theconversation.com/religion-is-not-the-only-reason-rohingyas-are-being-forced-out-of-myanmar-83726], accessed in January 2021.

conflict going on in Myanmar. What is surprising about this Rohingya crisis is the existence of some paradoxes that characterize it and amplify at the same time its dramatic dimension.

Peace and justice, but not for all peoples? Aung San Suu Kyi, a human rights activist, admired by people around the world, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, has dedicated many years of her life fighting for democracy in Myanmar. Nevertheless, when in position to react and to do something for the abused ones, she refused to speak out, to stand by the Rohingya and to ease off their plight. Once on the side of the unfortunate and weak ones, now on the side of the strong ones, of those who had previously imprisoned her, she managed to destroy, at the international level, her image of peace icon and symbol of human rights.

*Human rights*, but for who? Deprived of their citizenship, the stateless Rohingya have nothing left but their humanity. Once they are nothing more but human beings, they are being stripped of their human rights. Although the Rights of Man are supposed to be inalienable, in reality we notice that these rights become *alienable* once they are outside the political context. Unfortunately, the Rohingya have found themselves caught in one of the most devastating consequences of this *human rights* paradox.

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