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*The Securitization of Burma’s Rohingya*

The following paper will investigate the contemporary persecution of the Muslim Rohingya population in Burma through a constructivist securitization framework. I will argue that the Buddhist extremist group, the “969 Movement”[[1]](#footnote-1), with the tacit support of the Burmese government, acts as an authoritative voice in society, painting the Rohingya ethnic group as an existential threat to the majority population. This paper will make use of Buzan and Waever’s securitization framework as a means of understanding the discursive relationship between the “969” group, the nation’s Buddhist population and the Rohingya. This triangular relationship will be explored through the analysis of “969” discourse and corresponding episodes of communal violence occurring in Rakhine state. While I do not propose that a neat temporal relationship exists between “969” speech acts and mob violence, I will argue that inflammatory language serves as both a catalyst and justification for episodes of intercommunal violence. First, this paper will provide the reader with a background on the history of ethnic conflict in Burma. Secondly, I will devote a section to the exploration of Buzan and Waever’s securitization thesis, along with the relevant secondary literature in the field. Next, I will detail the plight of the Rohingya in Rakhine state with a particular focus on recent episodes of intercommunal violence from 2012 to the present. Finally I will evaluate the prospects for ethnic reconciliation in western Burma within the context of a possible “democratic opening”.

For the first time since the military coup of 1962, Burma is formally under non-military rule. In 2010, the military government turned over power to civilian leader Thein Sein in elections that were neither free nor fair. Critics of the regime have argued that Sein and other former military members have merely exchanged their military uniforms for suits. The Sein government has committed itself to improving relations with ethnic minority groups around the country’s periphery. It has also pledged to take slow, but deliberate steps toward lifting legal restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom of the press. Progress in both areas has been slow and uneven, as cease-fire agreements with major ethnic militias in the eastern part of the country have been observed, while government security forces continue to launch military operations against militias in the north and west.

In terms of civil liberties, the government has released a group of detained journalists and given the democratic opposition party (NLD) permission to run for office in November elections. As a result of these small steps forward, Polity IV, a democracy index funded by the Center for Systemic Peace placed Burma as a -6 on its scale. This value puts Burma in the “closed anocracy” category, making it the first time since the 1962 coup that the state has been labeled as anything other than authoritarian (systemicpeace.org). In addition, the United States government lifted its regime sanctions and restored full diplomatic relations with Burma in 2012. According to the U.S. Department of State, “The Obama administration has employed a calibrated engagement strategy to recognize the positive steps undertaken to date and to incentivize further reform” (state.gov).

Despite the appearance of a possible democratic opening, the Burmese government has made little or no progress on ending widespread human rights violations committed against the Rohingya population. During President Obama’s meeting with Thein Sein in 2012, Sein enunciated 11 principles for reform, one of which was meeting humanitarian needs in Rakhine state. A spokesman for United to End Genocide writes, “The only decisive action the government has taken in Rakhine has been decidedly negative. Some 140,000 ethnic Rohingya continue to live in deplorable conditions in displacement camps. The top UN official for human rights in Burma reported recent concern about the proposed Rakhine State Action Plan would lead to “permanent segregation”. (Sullivan, 2014) Currently, The Rohingya are living in concentration camp-like conditions with a host of restrictions placed on their freedom of movement. Since 2012, large numbers of Rohingya have fled to neighboring Bangladesh and even Malaysia and Thailand. Those who actually survive the journey typically find themselves in refugee camps with little hope for integration into the broader society. Particular episodes of violence committed against the Rohingya will be discussed later in the paper.

*Burma’s Ethnic Tapestry*

Burma is incredibly diverse, as over 130 distinct ethnic groups are thought to live within the state. Chizom and Smith write, “Over 2,000 years of cross border migration and intermixing between cultures has led to the development of diverse ethnic settlements and communities residing both in mountainous frontier zones and lowland plains areas of the country” (Chizom and Smith 2007,1). Since the British colonial period, religion has played the role of reinforcing communal divisions. While over two-thirds of the population residing within Burma are Buddhist, significant numbers of Christians live in the eastern provinces, while a growing number of Muslims (roughly 4%) live mostly in the west. For both administrative, and political purposes, as we shall see, the Burmese government only officially recognizes 7 ethnic minority groups. The Muslim Rohingya, since 1982, are not formally labeled as an ethnic group, and as such have no claim to citizenship in Burma. Burma also has a two child policy that only applies to the Rohingya (Hunt, 2013).

Ethnic violence, at both the communal and state levels, has plagued the country since its independence in 1948. Despite a brief period of parliamentary democracy from 1948-1962, ethnic power-sharing institutions eventually broke down, with the military stepping in to restore law and order. Since the 1962 coup, wars fought in ethnic or religious terms have also manifested as a product of historical memory. During the colonial period, minority ethnic groups were more likely to support the British, which turned into material support for the latter during World War II. During the Japanese invasion, the Burmese allied themselves with Japan, with independence leader General Aug San having received his own military training from the Japanese. The alliances forged during this war were not forgotten in the collective consciousness. Since 1962, the military regime has initiated battles against ethnic militias and ordinary citizens alike. Gravers, writes “Differences in ethnicity and religion had been so deeply ingrained into nationalism that every political action had to be placed in relation to past stereotypes and violent events. He goes on to say, “Fear that someone is planning to take revenge or taking undue advantage is enough to bolster xenophobia and provide a fertile ground for political paranoia” (Gravers 1993, 49). Christina Fink writes, “By the 1980’s, Burma had instituted a surveillance state which targeted political dissidents and ordinary civilians with the assistance of a sophisticated informant network. Finally, the military government pursued an infamous policy known as the “four cuts”, targeting ethnic minorities on the state’s periphery[[2]](#footnote-2) (Fink, 125).

The Burmese military (Tatmadaw) have a special role in the country’s history. As the consolidators of the independence movement, they retain a certain respect with the country’s majority Burmese population. Perversely, by fighting a number of ethnic wars they can remind citizens of their historical role in keeping the country together. In other words, the Burmese military can claim that if it weren’t for their presence, the country would disintegrate into civil war. Apart from military operations taken against ethnic minority groups, the military also uses a certain discourse of threat to mobilize support in an otherwise underperforming state riddled with corruption. Transparency International places Burma as 156 out of 175 countries in its 2014 index (transparency.org). According to Oxfam International, over 20 percent of Burma’s citizens still live under the poverty line, despite robust GDP growth in recent years (oxfam.org) In response to persistent economic underdevelopment, the military and its sponsored government must be able to convince the Burmese population that ethnic threats are salient and in need of emergency response. The narrative promoted by the Burmese authorities serves as an example of a securitizing move, a topic discussed at length in the following section.

*Securitization Theory*

The literature on the topic of security is both expansive and contentious. Prior to the 1980’s, security was typically conceptualized in narrow terms. Traditionally, in mainstream international relations the referent object for security has been the state. Typically threats to states either came from within, through domestic revolutions or civil wars, or from without, through the threat of interstate war, and more recently nuclear war. For these scholars, almost always members of the realist tradition, there was a recognition that any theoretical analysis of security must be parsimonious enough to permit meaningful generalization. Since states were thought to functionally alike with similar security interests, objective and dispassionate research was both possible and desirable. Yet, as early as the 1960’s certain scholars thought it proper to expand the notion of security to better capture the complexity of the subject matter itself. Arnold Wolfers famously wrote of security as “the absence of threat to acquired values” (Baldwin, 13). While his definition itself is purposely expansive, it gets us closer to understanding security as something subjective. Security is inherently more complex than physical threats to the state apparatus. Critical security studies presents the argument that traditionalists are guilty of reifying the state and thus ignore the processes that constitute and reconstitute authority in a particular territory. Security wideners have traditionally been more concerned with expanding the concept of security beyond the state. Their own work formed the foundation for the growth of the human security literature, which places the individual as the referent object of security.

For Barry Buzan and members of the Copenhagen School the term “security” is value laden, and intersubjective. In other words, there is no single concept of security, but rather it is an inherently contestable concept. Buzan and his colleagues can be properly labeled as security “wideners” since their idea is not to simply endorse the traditional view of security as a matter of military threat to the state. In *People, States and Fear* Buzan writes, “the domination of the concept by the idea of national security, and the militarized interpretation of security, to which this approach easily, though not necessarily gave rise, was criticized by several authors as excessively narrow and hollow” (Buzan 1991, 28). Despite their broader concept of security discussed in the next section, Buzan and his colleagues still rely on the state as the most important referent object, a point that serves as a matter of contention among critical security theorists.

In Buzan and Waever’s *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, the authors argue that securitization is a phenomenon outside the bounds of normal politics. They write, “Security” is the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or above politics” (Buzan et al. 1998, 23). Existential threats are what motivates securization, though what actually connotes an existential threat is intersubjective. It is important to note that the threat itself may not exist objectively, but can be spoken into existence. In Buzan and Hansen’s *The Evolution of International Security Studies*, they write, “Subjective approaches to security emphasize the importance of history and norms, of the psychologies of fear and (mis)perception and of the relational contexts (friends, rivals, neutrals, enemies), within which threats are framed” (Buzan and Hansen 2009, 33). This particularly line of thinking resonates with constructivist insights regarding the importance of speech acts. In *World of our Making*, Onuf argues “We should recall that speech acts make language performative. By making an assertion, one does something social, at least if one’s utterance meets with a response-any response” (Onuf, 1989, 86). In Buzan and Waever’s account, the discursive security process moves through three steps. In the first case, an authoritative voice identifies an existential threat that requires extra-political action. This message is targeted at the referent object, or a particular audience for this discourse. In the second case, emergency action is proposed, and taken. The third step is the effects on referent objects themselves (Buzan et al 1998, 26). The last part of this process is critical as the audiences’ acceptance of the securitization rhetoric is really what matters. In this sense, a threat cannot be made real until the audience accepts it as such.

While the reference for Buzan and Waever remains the state, they also argue that securitization can be also imagined in societal terms. Buzan and Waever argue “The abilities to maintain and reproduce a language, a set of behavioral customs, or a concept of ethnic purity can all be cast in terms of survival” (Ibid, 23). In addition, long-term patterns of societal hostility can effectively institutionalize security threats, making them seem natural and hard to reverse. In such a scenario, the need to use dramatic language decreases as the message becomes accepted and normalized. In such an atmosphere, popular stereotypes can drive the process of politicization and securitization. In societal securitization, there is always a need to construct and define what one’s own identity or ethnicity means in a particular context. In an ever changing political and economic environment, one may emphasize a particular identity at certain times while downplaying at others. Thus, as a fluid process, identity is subject to reinterpretation, often fueled through the work of ethnic entrepreneurs, or those who have an authoritative voice. Taureck writes, “In practice, securitization is thus far from being open to all units and their respective subjective threats. Rather, it is largely based on power and capability and the means to socially and politically construct a threat” (Taureck 2006, 55).

Marianne Stone, in “Security According to Buzan; A Comprehensive Security Analysis” argues that societal security is a difficult concept with which to work. She writes, “It is also important to stress that the notion of “societal security” is difficult to apply since it deals with identities and cultures – essentially subjective and contextual constructions – it can easily lead to politics of discrimination and exclusion” (Stone 2009, 6). Here, it is important to separate securitization as an analytical framework from the consequences of speech acts themselves. While securitizing moves, particularly on the societal level, are certainly able to create and at times magnify existing divisions, the point of the theoretical framework is to understand how this process works, not make a normative judgement regarding the outcome of particular securitization acts.

While McDonald agrees with the discursive logic of securitization, he argues that the concept is too narrow and exhibits a state-centric bias. He writes, “The default position here is therefore a focus on the political leaders of states and their designations of threat. The methodological focus on speech acts might also be seen as relevant to this bias” (McDonald 2008, 574). In other words, the Copenhagen School, by focusing only on dominant discourses, disregards the discursive contributions of marginalized actors as part of the broader securitization process. While this is a fair critique, and one frequently expressed in the post-colonial literature, it is important to understand the discursive and normative power behind a securitizing act. A securitization move acts on a particular audience because the latter assumes that the speaker, rightly or wrongly, is a legitimate securitizing actor. For historical reasons, the actor who has typically held this type of discursive authority has been the state.

With slight alterations to Buzan’s theory, Thierry Balzaq in the “Three Faces of Security” argues that “securitization is best understood as a strategic (pragmatic) practice that occurs within, and as part of, a configuration of circumstances, including the context, the psycho-cultural disposition of the audience, and the power that both speaker and listener bring to the interaction” (Balzaq 2005, 172). Here, the process is not merely driven by a mechanical speech act, but rather the securitizing agent is using speech in an instrumental way. The securitizing agent is fully aware of the implication of their speech, and is using it to foster a particular outcome. While this is a fascinating take on “speech acts”, it complicates analysis, as it is always different to read motives in instrumental accounts. In other words, is the securitizing agent fully aware of the power of their speech, or are they unconsciously parroting certain tropes based on their own socialization process?

While Buzan and Waever argue that one cannot escape from the role of language in securitization, this also requires an acknowledgment that analysts and political scholars also harbor the possibility of bringing security threats into existence through their research and publication. Huysmans writes, “The normative dilemma thus consists of how to write or speak about security when the security knowledge risks the production of what one tries to avoid” (Huysmans 2002, 21). In this sense, securitization is something more than an analytical tool, but is a constantly shifting discursive process. It is eminently possible in studying securitization, that we unintentionally activate or bolster an existing securitization process. As we are all bound by the constraints of language, such outcomes are regrettable, but unavoidable, without abandoning the study of security wholesale.

Overall, a lack of academic focus on the process of societal securitization is problematic, and is certainly worthy of further attention. A deeper and more thorough analysis of this process would accept that securitization can also performed by non-state actors, a phenomenon that is important to study, particularly in weak states that do not have a monopoly over the legitimate use of force in their territory. In such places, the discursive interaction between state and non-state actors is an interesting phenomenon to study. In which ways do these actors collaborate, either intentionally, or unintentionally on securitization moves? In territories with a history of ethnic conflict, the relationship between the state, ethnic entrepreneurs, and referent securitization objects is crucial to understand. Interesting parallels could be drawn between the Burmese case and violence in the Balkans during the 1990’s.

*Violence against the Rohingya*

During 2012, a series of mob attacks erupted in Burma against the Rohingya, The violence was documented in some detail by Human Rights Watch. They write, “The October (2012) attacks were against Rohingya and Kaman Muslim communities and were organized, incited, and committed by local Arakanese political party operatives, the Buddhist monkhood, and ordinary Arakanese at times directly supported by the state security forces” (hrw.org 2013, 4). The attacks themselves left dozens of Muslims dead, accompanied by the razing of two villages. The October 2012 violence was allegedly triggered by the rape of an Arakanese woman at the hands of a Rohingya man. However, there is no solid evidence to support that the rape actually took place. Whether or not the story is true, it is important to look at the events leading up to the attacks. HRW writes “On October 18, just days before the renewed violence in the state, the All-Arakanese Monks’ Solidarity Conference was held in Sittwe. The monks, who hold very high moral authority among the Arakanese Buddhist population, issued a virulently anti-Rohingya statement that urged townships to band together to “help solve” the “problem.”(Ibid, 45) According to local Rohingya, the attacks that occurred on October 23 appeared to involve many Arakanese who were not from the immediate area” (Ibid 46). The aforementioned discourse is suggestive of a premeditated plan of action, rather than a spontaneous outbreak of mob violence. According to Human Rights Watch, “In many areas, the groups targeted the local mosque first, and then nearby homes, easily flammable structures of bamboo and wood. The burning of entire villages to the ground was a signature tactic of these attacks” (Ibid, 47). Such an event would have impossible without the complicity of the Burmese security forces, who maintain a strong presence in Rakhine state. According to Human Rights Watch, during the October massacre, an Arakanese eyewitness reported, “I didn’t see any police or army. I didn’t see any soldiers when the violence started.” Another Arakanese woman added, “On that day the police or military were not stopping the violence.” (Ibid, 52).

The most recent attacks build on a history of animosity between the government, the Arakanese, and the Rohingya. While some Rohingya trace their lineage in Burma back centuries, many Muslims families in Rakhine State migrated to and settled in Burma during the British colonial period. Martin Smith writes, “Rohingya whose families settled in the region during the colonial period would be eligible for less-than-full citizenship but are in effect excluded because of their inability to provide conclusive evidence of their lineage. Even those Rohingya whose families settled in the region before 1823 face the onerous burden of proving this to the satisfaction of the skeptical authorities, making it nearly impossible to secure Burmese citizenship”. (Smith, 1997, 114). In 1978, the Burmese military forced over 200,000 Rohingya outside the country. In 1991, the military repeated its actions, this time sending over 250,000 Rohingya to Bangladesh. In 2001, violence continued as mobs attacked Rohingya mosques and schools with assistance from state security forces. Within the past decade violence against the Rohingya has been justified in terms of combating religious extremism, despite the historical absence of Islamic terrorism in the state. Human Rights Watch reports, “Although Burma has a long and continuing history of ethnic armed movements, no insurgent group has made much progress in the Muslim community” (Ibid, 18) Non-state armed groups called the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) and the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF) were established in northern Arakan State in 1982 and 1987, respectively. Yet, “Smith and others agree these groups and others never posed a serious threat to the Burmese military state, their principal target, nor to Burmese society” (Ibid, 28). Despite evidence to the contrary, the anti-terrorism narrative is gaining ground across the country. An Arakanese elder in Sittwe said: “About 50 percent of the so-called Rohingya Muslims are Taliban minded. They study in the madrassas [Islamic religious schools]. Their ideology is the same as the Taliban. The police know this and discuss it [with us].” (Ibid, 29)

The government response to the Rohingya massacres has been uneven. In some cases they provided security, at other times they stood by idly as Rohingya were killed, on other occasions they actively supported Arakanese mobs. It is difficult to tell whether or not this is a result of conflicting orders on behalf of the military’s top generals, or a product of decisions made further down the chain of command. In either case, military responses to intercommunal violence in Rakhine State have been consistent in their direct or indirect support for the local Arakanese ethnic group. Following the massacres of 2012, the government in its own press statements maintained its conviction that the Rohingya are foreigners in need of expulsion. A month after the June violence, on July 12, President Thein Sein called for “illegal” Rohingya to be sent to “third countries” (Marshall, 2013).

Anti-Rohingya Discourse

In this section the discursive process of securitization will be discussed with reference to the Burmese and the Buddhist “969 Movement” as co-constituted authoritative voices capable of engaging in securitizing moves. Specifically, the focus will be on examples from official government statements, as well as those broadcast in print and visual media from the “969 Movement”. It is a key premise of this paper that anti-Rohingya narratives cast in existential terms effectively mobilize violent mobs into action. While this discourse cannot be demonstrated as purely instrumental, as it is unknown whether or not the hate speech is intended to promote violence, the mob episodes themselves are likely linked to the inflammatory language used by respected voices.

While much has been already discussed concerning the Burmese state’s role in politicizing the Rohingya in terms of citizenship, the “969” as local actors in western Burma must also be taken seriously. The “969” itself is part of a larger group of politically-minded monks who hold a position of high respect in the majority Buddhist state. In the Burmese Buddhist tradition, monks are not only moral guardians for the society, but are in some cases also believed to possess certain mystical powers. The label “969” is intended to refer to a cosmic numerology embodied in certain Buddhist circles (Bookbinder, 2013). With this type of spiritual authority, it is little wonder that their political views are also revered. The unofficial spokesperson for the “969” is Wirathu, a monk who was jailed for religious incitement in 2004. After serving a prison term for 8 years, Wirathu has taken center-stage in Burma, oddly referring to himself as the “Burmese Bin-Laden”. According to the Guardian, “It would be easy to disregard Wirathu as a misinformed monk with militant views, were it not for his popularity. Presiding over some 2,500 monks at this respected monastery, Wirathu has thousands of followers on Facebook and his YouTube videos have been watched tens of thousands of times” (Hodal, 2013). His message builds upon both a local and international stereotypes regarding Muslims. Mosques are imagined as hotbeds of Islamic terrorism. There is the popular anxiety about Muslim birthrates that is also echoed by radical elements in the Israel/Palestinian conflict. Another prominent “969” monk, Wimala Biwuntha, “likens Muslims to a tiger who enters an ill-defended house to snatch away its occupants” (Marshall, 2013). He says, "Without discipline, we'll lose our religion and our race. We might even lose our country." (Ibid). Martin Smith writes, “Although for the most part, locally contained, Buddhist-Muslim tension is undoubtedly the most violent communal problem Burma faces today and has not been helped by a series of articles in the government-controlled press entitled “We fear our Race May become Extinct” which has accused ‘Kalas’ (Indian foreigners) of taking ‘Burmese wives’ giving birth to ‘impure Burmese nationals’ and having a faster birth rate” (Smith 1997, 113).

Within Burma, there is a widespread fear that Muslims will demographically replace Buddhists as the largest group. The argument has to be cast in deliberately in religious terms, since ethnicity is such a problematic concept in Burma. Buddhist Nationalism is also problematic as many of the ethnic minority groups also feature large numbers of Buddhists. For example, the Karen in eastern Burma, who have been fighting the central government since 1948, are a majority Buddhist group with a large Christian minority. Traditionally, however, the Karen have been painted as Christian collaborators with the west. Thus ethnicity and nationalism in Burma is concept that requires a certain amount of creativity and reinvention.

We can see glaring similarities between the government’s rhetoric and the “969” Movement. This is documented through the government’s own behavior toward the “969” groups. Reuters traces “969's” origins to an official in the dictatorship that once ran Myanmar, and which is the direct predecessor of today's reformist government. Marshall writes, “The “969” movement now enjoys support from senior government officials, establishment monks and even some members of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), the political party of Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. Sein himself has said that Wirathu is a “son of Lord Buddha” (Marshall, 2013). In this case it seems evident that the “969” actually provides the Burmese state with the moral justification to continue exclusionist policies toward the Rohingya. The government’s own support for these radical ethno-nationalist monks is an essential step toward maintaining the legitimacy of the state. Radical Buddhist organizations were also instrumental in the government’s approval of the highly inflammatory “Race and Religion Protection Laws”, under which inter-faith marriages are restricted (Carroll, 2015).

Violence against the Rohingya has continued throughout 2014. In a frightening turn, anti-Muslim violence has also spread to the central part of the country. A correspondent for the Atlantic magazine writes, “The violence is spreading, and non-Rohingya Muslims elsewhere in Burma are being targeted. In the central town of Meiktila, home to the country's largest air force base, attacks on Muslims starting on March 19 claimed some 40 lives”. (Bookbinder, 2013).

Conclusions

The preceding analysis shows how the triangular relationship between the Burmese Government, the “969 Movement” and the Buddhist Arakanese audience effectively works to imagine the Rohingya as a threat to existential security. Viewed as perpetual foreigners, the Rohingya are accused of “invading” the country in order to establish Islam as the dominant religious tradition. Capitalizing on harmful global stereotypes of Muslims in general, namely, their association with extremist violence, high birthrates, and their inability to be trusted, effectively politicizes the threat. The extra step is taken once the government, or the “969 Movement” argues that the Rohingya will destroy the majority Buddhist population. In such an atmosphere of constructed threat, a simple triggering event is all that is needed to mobilize a receptive population to violence. In the case of the October 2012 violence, the occasion was the alleged rape of an Arakanese woman. Despite widespread international condemnation, both the government and the “969 movement” have maintained a hardline position on the Rohingya, by refusing to deal with the “Bengali” problem. The problem is unlikely to disappear in the near future, despite the government’s current reformist agenda.

The democratic opening in Burma may bode well for the lowering of restrictions on civil rights and liberties. However, it is unclear that minority ethnic groups will fare any better in a new Burma. The major opposition party, the NLD has not shown any more of a progressive view toward the plight of the Rohingya. In the most recent parliamentary elections, the NLD failed to field a single Muslim candidate. In fact, some of the same stereotypes about the Rohingya are prevalent among members of the NLD. According to Marshall, certain NLD members have been implicated in the distribution of 969 materials (Marshall, 2013). Institutionally, movement on this issue is also likely to be slow as the Burmese military retains a permanent 25 percent of seats in the parliament. Since it takes 75 percent of parliamentary votes to change the constitution, the military possesses an effective veto.

International pressure on the Rohingya situation has been growing both on a state and NGO level. President Obama’s visit to the country in 2013 revealed his commitment toward moving this issue forward. Importantly, he used the term Rohingya in his speech which was perceived as an affront to the current regime. At the same time, The U.S. state department has insisted on a gradualist approach to Burma. While pushing for democratic openings, the Department of State has also argued that Burmese civil society is not sufficiently developed for widespread democratization to take place. There is a real fear that sudden reforms might actually destabilize the country, and in turn reestablish the military’s prominence in providing for law and order. Finally, NGO’s have been granted access to Rakhine state for the first time since the events of 2012. The Burmese government has also taken steps to provide greater investment in the region, though there is a widespread fear that a de facto segregation between Arakanese and Rohingya will continue to perpetuate the problem. With restrictions on Rohingya freedom of movement, many find themselves living in villages with poor sanitation and few economic opportunities. For those Rohingya that have been forced out of the country, and chosen to live abroad in Bangladesh, they haven’t exactly encountered a welcoming atmosphere. Many Rohingya who were displaced in 2012 have been forced to return to Burma, others are living in overcrowded refugee camps abroad.

As alluded to earlier, there is a persistent paranoia emanating from the majority Buddhist camp that they will lose their country to ethnic minority groups. However, since the 1990’s ethnic minority groups have stopped making independence claims. Rather, the only real possibility from these groups perspective is autonomy within a loose federal structure. From the government perspective, long-wave patterns of inter-ethnic violence have had an obvious destabilizing effect on the country. Ethnic reconciliation is likely to be a lengthy and uneven process. At the moment, the country may not be ready for formal inter-ethnic politics, though there is always the fear that the persistence of ethnic parties may be an obstacle to reconciliation, as both violent and non-violent conflict is constantly couched in terms of ethnic grievances. Despite the complexity inherent to ethnic problems, Burma’s recent reforms have resulted in the lifting of western sanctions, as well as their current leadership of ASEAN. The Burmese government has also demonstrated a growing willingness to separate themselves from Chinese influence. Recently, the government nullified a Chinese offer for a massive natural gas pipeline, an issue that has stoked ethnic tension in Burma’s Northern provinces. While Burma has been more apt to challenge China, this does not mean that it is pivoting closer to the United States.

As per its engagement with the international human rights regime and the west, it is unclear whether or not Burma is genuinely committed to the issues, particularly a managed democratic transition, or are making token reforms in order to attract greater investment from wealthier states. Burma’s transition from formal military rule to civilian rule is best understood as type of “disciplined democracy”. Marco Bunte writes, “The generals’ transition ensured a return to civilian rule without relinquishing de facto military control of the government. The military still remains the arbiter of power in the country, though it has created new political institutions that might develop some autonomy of their own in the future. Currently, the military dominates all important state institutions: The cabinet announced in March 2011 includes 26 retired military officials or former junta ministers and only four civilians.” (Bunte 2011, 17). While the military retains both institutional and psychological control over the country, “disciplined democracy” represents a challenging balancing act for the government. How many reforms can the government institute, before pressure starts to build on the society level? Furthermore, in the coming years, as the Burmese economy continues to grow, will an emerging middle class begin to push for more freedom?

Perhaps the most important task for both international NGO’s and citizens of Burma alike is in finding ways to change the dominant anti-Muslim discourse within the country. Specifically, where does Islamophobia in Burma actually originate, and why is it so salient given the complete absence of radical Islamic violence in the state itself? Reshaping the conversation in Burma is an incredibly challenging, but important task nonetheless. As very few in Burma outside of the western states actually know Muslims personally, it is important to encourage institutional opportunities for inter-faith dialogue, assuming of course that the political space opens up sufficiently for these types of interaction to take place. Secondly, the Burmese government must come to the recognition that despite their anti-citizenship claims, the Rohingya population will be staying in Burma. While politically convenient in the near term, continued persecution of minority ethnic groups will present obstacles to development in the region and may result in the resumption of western sanctions.

Third, neighboring states, despite a persistent norm of non-intervention in the region, must also push Burma on human rights reforms. Malaysia, Thailand, and Bangladesh all have a vested interest in this process, as they continue to retain thousands of refugees who have fled Burma as a result of ethnic and religious persecution. As a regional organization, ASEAN, will gain greater international credibility by holding their own member states to higher standards when it comes to human rights violations. Finally, the United States should continue its policy of engagement with the Burmese government. President Obama, as the first sitting U.S. president to visit Burma, initiated a process that could potentially result in the re-introduction of Burma as a state with good international standing. While the United States ultimately has limited leverage over Burma, it (along with the rest of the international community) should continue to hold the government accountable for its progress as well as instances of backsliding.

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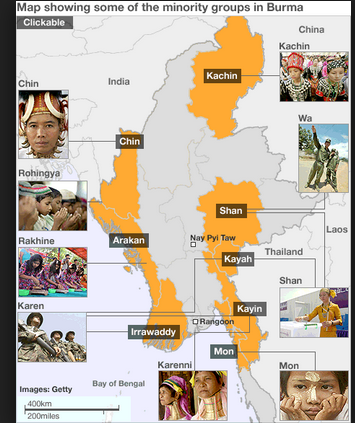
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Appendix A: Burma’s Ethnic Minority Groups



Courtesy of BBC Online

1. Recently, the “969” Movement has been superseded by a related group, called Ma Ba Tha. While the name has changed, the core membership and ideology remains the same. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a territorial map of Burma’s ethnic groups please refer to appendix A. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)