

American University

Assessing and Understanding The Rohingya Genocide

Francesca Gill

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Dr. Dylan Craig

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Introduction

Since February 2021, the country of Myanmar, previously known as Burma, has endured a slow intra-state conflict over the control of its repressive military rule. The state has suffered decades of previous oppressive leaderships, poverty due to years of isolationist economic policies, and civil war with ethnic minority groups. While the transition to civilian leadership in 2011 has ignited hope for democratic reforms in the state, the state military, known as the Tatmadaw, has gained strong control over the government, escalating forces into performing ethnic genocide on the Rohingya, an ethnic minority group of Myanmar (Maizland 2021). It is apparent from the ongoing conflict in Myanmar that intra-state conflicts do not have one cause for conflict; rather, they have multiple layers. As a result of the various contributors to the conflict, human rights abuses, genocide, violence, and tensions in political power have brewed within the country. While Myanmar is just one example of these existing outcomes of conflict, I can make meticulous observations about the conflict to objectively analyze and understand the dynamics of intra-state conflicts. In doing so, peace and conflict studies scholars can do the same and apply their expertise to a variety of conflicts in the international system.

Political Architecture

Myanmar's multilateral intra-state conflict has three prominent domestic parties present: the Rohingya, one of Myanmar's many ethnic minorities; the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's military; and the National League for Democracy (NLD), a collaboration with between pro-democracy and ethnic party leaders in the struggle against military rule. The Rohingya ethnic group accounts for roughly one million people in Myanmar and accounts for the largest percentage of Muslims in Myanmar; most live in the Rakhine state, situated on the western coast (BBC 2020). The Tatmadaw, led by General U Ne Win, had risen into power after the creation of the 2008 constitution, which included several provisions to protect the military's dominance and political

power within Myanmar's parliament. The NLD, led and co-founded by independence leader Aung San Suu Kyi, gained huge popular support in the late 1980's and early 1990's. The political party won more than eighty percent of the parliamentary seats being fought for in the election of 1990. However, the results of the election were declared invalid by the military in 2010, causing huge civic uproar in Myanmar (Maizland 2021). The actions and behaviors of these domestic actors derive from Myanmar's systemic discrimination, lack of economic opportunities and development in their regions, minimal minority group representation in government, and abuses at the hands of the military. Even before the state's independence, discrimination has been ingrained in Myanmar's laws and political system for years, which have been heavily reflected in the attitudes of the Rohingya, Tatmadaw, and NLD (Maizland 2021).

Of the foreign parties present in Myanmar's conflict, there are: the United States (US); China; the United Nations (UN); and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Historically, the US has boosted humanitarian aid, encouraged peaceful ties, imposed sanctions on top military commanders in Myanmar, and encouraged democratic ideals. China, which borders Myanmar, has been feared of protecting the efforts of the Tatmadaw military group. China has strong ties with Myanmar and has been found funding infrastructure and energy projects throughout the country as part of its Belt and Road Initiative, in addition to exporting goods and services to Myanmar in return for its imported raw materials. China has additionally used its role on the UN Security Council to protect its economic interests in spite of the genocide in Myanmar. The UN has the objective of facilitating peace efforts to alleviate the conflict by any means. ASEAN lastly wishes to keep peaceful economic relations with Myanmar; in light of this, the states do not wish to directly intervene with Myanmar's state affairs.

Structural Antagonisms

The following is at stake for the various domestic actors in the Myanmar conflict: for the Rohingya ethnic minority, it is their lives, beliefs, human rights, and representation in government; the Tatmadaw, it is by means to keep its military power in government; and the NLD, its efforts to bring democratic ideologies and freedoms to Myanmar. For the foreign actors, the following is at stake: for the US, it is by means to effectively facilitate Myanmar's conflict through its promotion of democratic ideals; for China, its economic interests and relationship with Myanmar; and the UN, its capacity to bring peaceful resolution to Myanmar.

Of the stakes mentioned, there are particular stakes that should be acknowledged within certain alliances. The Myanmar and China alliance has their economic interests aligned to encourage economic growth for both countries through imports, exports, and project fundings. The US, NLD, and UN alliance has a great challenge of combatting the brutal violence and genocide exhibited in Myanmar through peaceful and democratic ideals. In spite of these concrete alliances, the rivalries contain a complexity that influences the Myanmar conflict. This causes worries for the UN and US, as both are advocating against the Rohingya genocide. The nature, lastly, of the domestic stakes pertain to political ideologies and government power. On the other hand, the nature of the foreign stakes pertain to multilateral negotiation and conflict resolution. Overall, the previously-listed stakes represent a positive-sum in nature; for the Myanmar conflict is a tension which will leave particular ideologies dominating the political international system.

Cultural Institutions

The Tatmadaw first seized power and exhibited human rights violations when ethnic communities in Myanmar began performing peaceful, civil protests. Over time, the military group's actions and behaviors grew more brutal as civil strikes grew more intense, resulting in

genocide. Protesters have been fighting for their longing of ethnic acceptance, human rights, and political participation in parliament, considering Myanmar's history of anti-democratic ideologies. In spite of the NLD party winning eighty-three percent of its parliament's available seats, the military had refused to accept such results, exclaiming the results were fraudulent. Due to these tensions, the Tatmadaw coup was then born, which resulted in: censorship and suspensions to television broadcast, telephone, and internet in major cities; domestic and international flight cancellations; and closures in the stock market and commercial banks (Goldman 2021).

To remain in power, the Tatmadaw continued to suppress civilian resistance by targeting areas called the People's Defense Force, which are homes to armed civilians. According to resident accounts, the military coup traveled in large groups, firing rocket launchers, burning down homes, cutting off food supplies, and shooting at fleeing civilians, with more than 12,000 heading to neighboring India. In performing these acts of violence, the Tatmadaw has been able to maintain its political power in parliament to destabilize the country, commit ethnic cleansing on the Rohingya community, and strike fear into the hearts of Myanmar civilians.

Key Factors

Systemic Ethnic Discrimination

Since the late 1940's, the Rohingya population has struggled with obtaining citizenship, equal rights, and fair treatment under Myanmar's parliamentary rule of law. The 1948 Burma Citizenship Law, one of the many discriminatory and arbitrary laws in Myanmar, were highly exclusionary towards non-Burmans. Therefore, many Rohingya people have been deprived and denied citizenship. Later in 1962, the Tatmadaw was able to gain political control, stripping the Rohingya access to full citizenship. Until recently, the Rohingya had been able to register as temporary residents with identification cards, known as white cards, which the Tatmadaw began

issuing to many Muslims, both Rohingya and non-Rohingya, in the 1990's. While the white cards have provided limited rights to the Rohingya, their documentation did not provide proof of citizenship (Albert and Maizland). Hence, most of the Rohingya people have no legal documentation, ultimately providing them with no equal rights, fair treatment, and citizenship in Myanmar.

Despite Myanmar's recent efforts of officially enacting its 2008 constitution in 2011, peace talks have continued to dwindle amongst national leaders as Rohingya resistance movements continue to battle the Tatmadaw in northeastern and western Myanmar. It is apparent that Myanmar has struggled to shape a unified, national identity since their independence in 1948. In spite of Myanmar's goals of wanting to achieve ethnic diversity and equality statewide, the country has historically privileged the Burmans, the state's majority ethnic group, which has pushed the Rohingya to civil unrest ("Identity Crisis: Ethnicity and Conflict in Myanmar"). In light of Myanmar favoring the Burmans, scholar Matthew Walton conceptualizes being Burman into an idea of "Burmaness" as a form of institutionalized dominance, which can be similarly compared to "Whiteness" in the US. Walton argues that "Burmaness" has heavily contributed to the ongoing systemic ethnic discrimination in Myanmar. He supports his argument with points similarly made by critical race theorists, who claim that racism cannot be dissolved without those, who are white, recognizing their privileges. This same philosophy applies to the Burman population in Myanmar. Without the Burmans recognizing their privilege in society, ethnic minorities, like the Rohingya, will continue to suffer and stray further away from fair and equal treatment under law, in addition to being victims of human rights abuses. Walton also notes that Burman privilege even extends to avoiding the worst elements of violent repression of minority ethnic groups, because it is not part of *their* everyday reality. Given this information, it can be said that recognizing Burman privilege in Myanmar can help Burman citizens to better understand why the Rohingya genocide is occurring in Myanmar. In light of this, however,

recognizing Burman privilege will not be enough to change the political environment surrounding citizenship for non-Burmans.

To explain why Burmans receive more citizenship privileges than the Rohingya, scholars have looked back to the 1960's Burmese independence movements and have found that Burmans and non-Burman populations have always had tensions due to their differences. After decades of civil feuds and bloodshed, the Myanmar government began shaping policies that institutionalized differential treatment for Burmans and non-Burmans. Over time, laws and policies have progressively generated a set of privileges for Burmans to enjoy because of their ethnic identity. Burmans therefore continued to fight for their beliefs and rights simply because they thought that their skin color defined them with a higher social standing in society than others. These ideas around privileges can be compared to those that whites receive, which come with economic and social benefits (Olson 2002, as cited by Walton, 2012).

Geoeconomic Independence

For years, the Tatmadaw has attempted to ease economic dependence with China because it desires greater autonomy from unwanted foreign interference. From 1962 to 1988, Myanmar experienced a socialist market economy that was dominated by their military. Within this revolutionized system, top military officers were able to make high profits and trade contracts with foreign capitalists. Through these economic practices, Myanmar was able to make currency through the sale of raw materials, like tropical hardwoods, minerals, and seafood, as well as oil. This helped the Tatmadaw modernize and advance its military to keep up with other nations around them. Through this open economy, Myanmar's military was able to live a prestigious lifestyle through even illegal international narcotics trade purchases. All in all, the main purpose of this open market economy was to not necessarily promote economic growth and industrialization for Myanmar, but to use the economy to consolidate the military's power.

In 1988, however, Myanmar was interested in non-aligning its interests with its neighbors in Asia (Seekins, 526). The Tatmadaw were later in need of economic and military assistance from China in the late 1980's and early 1990's, as the nation dug itself into isolation and stagnation. Apart from wanting economic prosperity, Myanmar had its desire to build and maintain friendly relations with its neighbors of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to move its economic dependence away from Beijing (Seekins, 526-527). In spite of Myanmar's successful progressive so far, the country runs the risk of jeopardizing their economic security as they wish to become more involved in the international system. In spite of China being considered one of Myanmar's greatest trading partners, data suggests that China did not have the largest economic presence in the country during the mid 1990's. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, Japan was the single largest national source of imports, with 28.6% in 1992-93, while Southeast Asian nations, principally Thailand and Singapore, provided 32.1%. China had only provided 17.6% in that same period (Seekins, 529).

With the encouragement of the Asian Development Bank, as well as leaders in the Yunnan Province, the most southwestern province in China, the idea of a "Golden Quadrilateral" was encouraged. Within this square trade system, Yunnan, Upper Burma, northern Thailand, and Laos would engage in more trading and foreign investing with each other to promote regional and national economic growth. The development of this would energize local commerce and industry, as well as connect transportation from the interior of China to the Indian Ocean by way of Myanmar's ports. Considering Myanmar's undeveloped industry, the "Golden Quadrilateral" trade system might encourage China to tighten their economic control over Myanmar and harden the already dependent economic relationship, bearing in mind that Myanmar has become a central exporter of raw materials to China, who is also a large provider of manufactured goods to Myanmar (Seekins, 531).

In spite of the Tatmadaw's plans to reduce its dependence with China, both countries will always be neighbors and have some sort of politico-economic interactions, especially with the member states of ASEAN. While China remains as Myanmar's longest-lasting trading partner, its biggest foreign investor in 2020 was actually Singapore. Japan, South Korea and Thailand have also poured money into Myanmar, making it seem less economically isolated than it was under the Tatmadaw rule (Myers and Beech). Any prolonged instability, or complete alienation made by the Tatmadaw, can jeopardize the economic interests of Myanmar *and* the member states of ASEAN.

Analysis

It is apparent from the Rohingya genocide that both systemic ethnic discrimination and geoeconomic independence are the key factors driving the Tatmadaw's political and human rights abuses on the Rohingya. To best dismantle systemic ethnic discrimination exhibited in Myanmar, the US, NLD and UN should collaborate and discuss reform for Myanmar's existing structure, and most importantly, the amount of power granted to the Tatmadaw to prevent parliamentary overthrow in the future. In doing so, Myanmar could remove ethnicity background as a central determinant of citizenship, rights and legal protections, and representation in party politics. Myanmar officials could then begin changing their use of language and when discussing ethnicity in state affairs to create a more inclusive space for ethnic minorities and their lived experiences ("Identity Crisis: Ethnicity and Conflict in Myanmar"). To best resolve the competing economic dependency interests between the Tatmadaw and China, scholars should consider unpacking the "ripeness" of the conflict with intentions to formulate a bilateral solution that will benefit both actors. In spite of this initiative, the means to resolve this economic component of the Rohingya conflict will only be carried out for a longer time, considering both the Tatmadaw and China have an ample supply of resources and technology that will keep

themselves afloat in the conflict. As peace scholars have noted, that more technology unlikely leads to a quicker resolution in a conflict.

War Studies Perspective

Through the use of a war studies perspective, it can first easily justified that the Rohingya genocide is organized and political. Such ethnic cleansing practices and acts of genocide made by the Tatmadaw are to not only performed to create violence, but to be used to create an environment of fear against those who wish to go against the military's rule. This idea stems from Thomas Hobbes' perspective of violence, that it is used to be a tool for threatening others. Carl von Clausewitz, a Prussian general and war studies scholar, has coined a cohesion of politicians, people, and the army as "The Marvelous Trinity," which can clearly be exemplified through Myanmar's NLD, the Rohingya community, and the Tatmadaw. By using his lens into conflicts, peace and conflict studies scholars can better understand the structure of the Rohingya genocide. Of the three actors involved in Clausewitz's "Marvelous Trinity," the people represent *emotion*, the army represents *chance*, and the politicians represent *reason*. By unpacking each of these sectors of war, scholars can focus on the nature and essence of war for a variety of conflicts. The people are the voices of opposers or supporters of the war, who have great influence into continuing or discontinuing the conflict. In the case of Myanmar, the Rohingya people are resisting the political efforts of the Tatmadaw to out-fight their acts of human rights violations and genocide. The army, in any conflict, is to minimize randomness and chance in battle, with the support of its politicians and the people. In the case of Myanmar, however, the army has no support from neither the people nor parliament - the army has betrayed its people and politicians by going against the values of the state. Finally, the politicians in a conflict seek to minimize reasons to go to war, which include stopping irrational wars and being strategic in judging whether engaging in war is worth it. In the case of Myanmar, the politicians have

unfortunately been overthrown by the Tatmadaw, and have lost their voice in state political participation.

Scholar Martin Van Creveld went further beyond Clausewitz's ideologies, and has argued that: as there is an increase in abused civilians and commitment in horrible war crimes, the costs of war will therefore increase the intensity of the conflict. He further argues that wars are a battle between the super powerful, like the Tatmadaw, and the non-powerful, like the Rohingya population, for a means of power. While the Tatmadaw are fighting for political power in parliament through acts of ethnic cleansing, the Rohingya are fighting for societal and legal power by resisting the Tatmadaw's abusive practices. Scholar Mary Kaldor has even stressed that most contemporary wars are due to violence monopolization and human rights abuses, which is obviously exhibited by genocide on the Rohingya. Even so, distinguishing between interstate and intrastate wars have blurred, considering their complexities and nuances within the conflict. In light of complexities and nuances, scholar Charles Tilly distinguishes the difference between war and genocide. These two forms of conflict differ by the coordination and capacity of the state, as well as the amount of damage exhibited in the conflict.

Peace Studies Perspective

Considering the mass complexity of intra-state conflicts, scholar William Zartman aims his peace studies on working *towards* peace, rather than steering away from war, by creating resolution through an outcome-oriented approach. Through such an approach, scholars investigate why or what explains the particular conflict. In the context of Myanmar, the Tatmadaw are gaining political dominance in Myanmar's parliament to reap the most power and economic benefits. In addition to wanting economic wealth, the Tatmadaw also want to become economically independent from China, a key trading partner and ally to the country. In spite of no "official" call of an economic war between Myanmar and China, there are tensions looming

within their relationship. As scholar Thomas Hobbes has put it, that even when peace is present, war can be present as well. Hence, Johan Galtung argues that peace studies need to be studied more as an absence of war, but what instances of peace look like in war. Within the larger context of Myanmar and China's economic disputes, peace could look like economic independence for Myanmar while China has other economic trading partners who can import raw goods and materials to the country.

To best resolve the human rights abuses and ethnic cleansing in the Rohingya genocide, two courses of action could be made to push the nation towards peace, that is: conducting reform to Myanmar's existing constitution, providing the Rohingya population equal rights, fair treatment, legal protections, and political representation in parliament; and end the Tatmadaw's impunity of abuses through judicial action in national and international courts. In doing both these actions made by both national and international leaders, like the NLD and the UN, the country can work towards a peaceful future by holding the Tatmadaw accountable for their prejudiced actions and behaviors towards one of Myanmar's ethnic minorities. While it may take longer to remove the Tatmadaw from parliament power, as they are equipped with government intel and weaponry, steps can still be taken in the short run to hold the military responsible for their injustices on the Rohingya population. Because the Rohingya are losing more of their people every day, it is imperative that the Tatmadaw's destructive societal behavior is heavily reduced before national and international leaders take any further action to stop their political reign. By prioritizing the lives and rights of the Rohingya population, Myanmar can move one step closer to peace, rather than steering away from the variety of issues exhibited in the conflict.

Generalizability

In summary, the Rohingya population has struggled with obtaining citizenship, equal rights, and fair treatment under Myanmar's rule of law for decades since its independence due to

systemic ethnic discrimination and Tatmadaw's desire for geoeconomic independence. Despite Myanmar's recent efforts of officially enacting its 2008 constitution in 2011, peace talks have continued to dwindle amongst national leaders as Rohingya resistance movements continue to battle the Tatmadaw in northeastern and western Myanmar. To explain why Burmans receive more citizenship privileges than the Rohingya, scholars have looked back to the 1960's Burmese independence movements and have found that Burmans and non-Burman populations have always had tensions due to their differences. Nonetheless, the Tatmadaw has attempted to ease economic dependence with China because it desires greater autonomy from unwanted foreign interference to gain larger economic benefits.

Given the plethora of information about the Rohingya genocide and its factors driving this conflict, scholars in the field of peace and conflict resolution should consider and reflect on the complexity and power dynamics within intra-state conflicts. As seen from the conflict, the Rohingya genocide exhibits a variety of state and non-state actors that hold unique qualities and powers that interact in the conflict. In light of the different roles between the Tatmadaw, Rohingya community, NLD, US, China, UN, and members of ASEAN, the Rohingya conflict brings a great opportunity for scholars to discuss how contradictory beliefs, interdependence, and interconnectedness interact simultaneously within the international system. Should the Rohingya genocide fail to be studied and understood, the liberal international order faces greater issues for multilateral cooperation and peaceful negotiations in the future. Nonetheless, it is important to dissect all components, contexts, and key factors within the conflict to better understand the motives and behaviors behind action made to assess how actors are either positively or negatively contributing to the conflict.

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