

History and Victimhood: Engaging with Rohingya Issues

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ABSTRACT *Since the late 1990s, the public representation of the Muslim minority of Rakhine State (Myanmar), widely known as Rohingyas after the 2012 communal violence, has focused on their status as victims of state oppression following an extended track record of human rights violations. As Rohingyas form huge migrant and refugee communities in several countries of the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, victimhood has increasingly come to define their identity as a persecuted minority. The present article argues that, while victimhood does not preclude the agency, the hegemonic role of a postulated passive victimhood invariably posits one community (and the state) against the other and hampers the possibility of open conversations about rivaling perceptions of the past and ultimately the prospect of political dialogue.*

In today's world, the immediacy of humanitarian crises tends to bar a deeper interest in the complexity of the historical roots of a conflict. The deteriorating situation of the Muslim minority in the Rakhine State of Myanmar, a group now widely known as the Rohingya, is a case in point. They have been presented as one of the most persecuted minorities in the world due to a track record of human rights violations, while the local Islamic history and the emergence of Muslim nationalism at the margins of Muslim Bengal (East Pakistan/Bangladesh) and Buddhist Burma (Myanmar) has barely begun to inform international understanding of the regional conflict. The present article argues in favor of historical research as a prerequisite both for understanding the nature of the conflict and for keeping opportunities for competing historical interpretations alive. It also contributes to the ongoing question of collective representations of "voiceless" non-Western victims as deprived of political agency.¹ The article supports the argument that victimhood is a form of agency, but, as in the case of the Rohingya crisis since 2012, it bears the risk of encapsulating people and isolating them from their historical context.

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The Rohingya entered the awareness of a global audience in 2012 when communal violence led to the internal displacement of tens of thousands of Muslims

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Mainstream account of a binary conflict between a Buddhist state's security apparatus backed by xenophobic nationalists on the one hand, and a disenfranchised Muslim population on the other has supported a description of Rohingya victimhood that today holds a hegemonic grip over Rohingya-related debates and conversations

and the death of several hundred in the Rakhine State of Myanmar. Thousands more died in mid-2017 under the brutal onslaught of military attacks. Muslim Rohingya victimhood due to human rights violations blamed on the Myanmar state was thereafter firmly anchored in the minds of millions of people who had never heard about the claims and grievances of the Rohingya. Given the pervasive lack of knowledge about the region and its multi-ethnic population, partly due to the limited body of existing scholarship, one might have expected a surge in inquisitiveness and public interest in the socio-political

history of the Muslims, no less the Hindu and Buddhist communities living at the border that connects South and Southeast Asia. Yet it did not happen. Over the last five years, it has looked as if international decision-makers and the general public were largely satisfied by echoing sensations of horror and engaging in a mix of protests and condemnations, as the media highlighted the humanitarian plight of the internally displaced people in Rakhine State. The coverage illuminated a dismal record of human rights violations and more recently, the dramatic episodes of the third mass flight in thirty years, in which several hundred thousand Rohingya crossed the border into Bangladesh. Between 2012 and 2017, outrage became the norm and Rohingya victimhood became conspicuous with headlines on their discrimination, the humanitarian disaster and a lingering crisis that bears important regional dimensions –the boat refugee emergency in the Andaman Sea in early 2015 is still fresh in the mind.

Outside the country, the rationale behind the crisis has been loosely structured as a narrative that sets the Myanmar state, and more particularly its security apparatus, allegedly driven by racist motives, against a religious minority deprived of basic rights and a proper livelihood. Having grown accustomed to a relentless, repetitive news cycle of gloom and despair depicting the condition of the Rohingya in Myanmar, the public in the Middle East, the West, Southeast Asia and beyond, did not recognize much change for the better after the first democratic elections took place in late 2015. Although no communal violence took place in Northern or Central Rakhine between October 2012 and October 2016, the international perception was that the situation was not improving. The military interventions that followed violent attacks led by a new Rohingya militant organization triggered a mass flight of several hundred

thousand in August-September 2017. These latest events enhanced the portrait of the desperate Rohingya people, and Myanmar's Buddhists came collectively under fire. It was not just the army, indicted as cruel and unrepentant, and not just a government, run since 2016 by a former political opponent, described as politically inept and ethically challenged, but the majority of the country that was suspected of latent Islamophobia and accused of actively or passively condoning the military's counter-insurgency strategy. More specifically, members of the Buddhist population of Rakhine State, sporadically evoked in the news, have been portrayed as nasty henchmen of the military.

This mainstream account of a binary conflict between a Buddhist state's security apparatus backed by xenophobic nationalists on the one hand, and a disenfranchised Muslim population on the other has supported a description of Rohingya victimhood that today holds a hegemonic grip over Rohingya-related debates and conversations among diplomats, political leaders, the media and the international public. Worked up by human rights defenders, the accounts of Rohingya victimhood early on led to calls for retributive justice targeting the state and its security forces.

Claims of victimization have a long tradition in the political discourse of the Muslims of Northern Rakhine State and reach back to the period of the Second World War. However, victimhood was not the defining marker of the ebullient Rohingya movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Only in the 1970s did their self-projection as victims of an unfair state become a key element of the political rhetoric of militant Rohingya organizations. They called for ethnic recognition by the Burmese state, but also increasingly for international recognition of their discrimination and victimhood. In contrast to the 21st century, victimhood had not yet become the most prominent marker of Rohingya identity.

In its evolution since the 1970s, the shaping of Rohingya victimhood has followed contemporary trends. It is one more example of identity and memory politics in today's world. As a legal construction drawing on universal human rights, it reflects the growing judicialization of politics. The present essay does not contest these trends, but argues that victimhood as the sole entry point to the Rakhine State conflict slows investigations into the recent history of the complex relations between Buddhist and Muslim communities and the state in post-independence Burma/Myanmar. It claims that more critical assessments of the historical record and more comprehensive analyses could lead to a better understanding of the actors' political agency, and move beyond the schematic set of perpetrators and victims. While the international community seems strongly positioned to sanction the Myanmar state, I argue that doing history in the sense of what truth commissions do when they care for transitional justice, would be a better instrument with which to promote peace and reconciliation in the years and decades to come. Peace and reconciliation may

Myanmar State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi visited the Rakhine State for the first time, an area that has seen most of its Rohingya Muslim population subjected to fierce oppression by the government.

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appear as delusory goals in the current environment of international debates, where “ethnic cleansing” and even “genocide” are widely accepted as proper descriptors of the recent events. Yet, on the other hand, it is stunning that issues such as peace and reconciliation have been painfully absent from conversations on communal relations in Rakhine State, while they have formed the core of political conversations on promoting democracy in Myanmar’s ethnopolitical eco-system for many decades.

Victimhood

A victim is a person who suffers harm and injury from an adverse or hostile force. This may relate to traumatic experiences of aggression and a persistent loss of security. The victim evokes feelings of sympathy and empathy and may be entitled to legal protection. Victimhood is a complex term that implies both explicit and implicit understandings of a violent relationship in which not only one, but several parties may claim simultaneously victimhood. It is this complexity that we need to have in mind when critically investigating the victimhood of the Rohingya.

Efforts to attain international recognition of the victimization of Rakhine Muslims claiming a Rohingya identity have been raised by Rohingya political organizations for over 40 years. Due to the feverish international attention for

the perceived injustice endured by the Rohingya after Myanmar's process of political opening in 2011, international recognition of Rohingya victimhood has been widely established, in particular for those people who have left or been driven out of the country in recent years.

This was not the case in 1976 when the Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF) deplored in a pamphlet that "to our greatest misfortune the outside world is still quite unaware of the savage and covert plan of the Burmese government to exterminate us from our homeland in a barbaric and illegal way contrary to all norms of International Law and The Universal Declaration of Human Rights..."²² One may note that this text was written years before the ratification of the 1982 citizenship law that severely reduced the access of many Rakhine Muslims to citizenship. Texts, such as the RPF, draw attention to the fact that the subjectively emotional victimhood of the Rohingya and their victimization by an oppressive state as a legal construct are historically layered and reflect a complex process that has not yet been investigated.

The RPF quote shows that victimhood has formed part and parcel of the political struggle of Rohingya for a long time. Victimhood was not, however, the only tool to articulate their identity and their increasing marginalization under Myanmar's military regime. The activities of armed militant movements, such as the RPF, the RSO and others, national parliamentary politics, and the nationalist publications and lobbying activities of associated groups in exile reflect the many dimensions of Rohingya political agency. This complex picture started to change in the mid-1990s when Western NGOs began representing the Rohingya as victims of an oppressive state, brushing into silence the Rohingya political activism and coping strategies that had emerged to deal with economic and social issues in the Bangladeshi diaspora.

The international media often points out that major humanitarian disasters all over the world do not get sufficient recognition, and this was certainly true for the people of Rakhine State. However, this situation changed after the dramatic developments that followed the explosion of communal tensions in mid-2012. The unprecedented global attention that Rohingya victims suddenly received was due to an increased interest in Myanmar's political opening and its democratization process, the sheer scale of the country's internally displaced people, the horrific aspects of boat people trafficking in the Andaman Sea in 2015,

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the departures to Bangladesh linked to the October 2016 border attacks by Rohingya rebels, and finally the mass flight in 2017.

Post-2012 accounts on the Rohingya built on the track record established by the Western human rights reports of the 1990s, which had commodified Rohingya victimhood after the exodus of 1991-1992 as a narrative of a helpless and discriminated Muslim minority. One may note that before 2015, the international media did not focus on the people in the Rohingya heartlands at the border of Bangladesh, but exclusively on the conditions of the internally displaced people (a majority of whom were Muslims, both Rohingya and indigenous Kaman) in the camps in central Rakhine State. Academic papers and news editorials underscored the disenfranchisement of the Rakhine Muslims in legal comments, especially when, in early 2015, the white cards (a piece of identification for non-citizens) were abolished and, following a decision by the Constitutional Court, anyone self-identifying as Rohingya could no longer participate in parliamentary elections. The disclosure of the Rohingya's near-forgotten cause had a peculiar global appeal. There was also a streak of sensationalism in the recurrent insistence on the fact that these were *Muslim* victims of a predominantly *Buddhist* state. This irony may explain the unique and uninterrupted intensity of international media attention after 2012.


The resulting essentialization of Rohingya victimization furthered an international perception of Rohingya identity as an identity of primordial victimhood that seemingly lifted their condition beyond a need for historical contextualization. Questions about their name and their historical background were assimilated with the Rakhine Buddhist contestation of their ethnic claims and frequently dismissed as attempts to undermine their right to self-identification. The entrenched description of the Rohingya as “the most persecuted minority” in the world –wrongly attributed to the UN, as the UN does not rank levels of persecution around the world– cemented passive victimhood as the default interpretation of Rohingya ethnic identity. Emotional pictures of crying women and children not only illustrated Rohingya victimhood, but they also powerfully gendered their disempowerment. Firmly set in expressions such as “the plight of the Rohingya,” victimization was rhetorically hardened by descriptions such as “harrowing,” “unending,” or “worsening.” Yet, paradoxically, while the unparalleled global attention may have been seen as a welcome development on their behalf, Rohingya political activists and international human rights defenders voiced their dismay at the insufficiency of international responses and called for more proactive stances by international governments despite the unprecedented media campaigns.³

Considering “victimhood” as a tool within political discourse, and bearing in mind Bismarck's description of politics as “the art of the possible, the attainable...,” one may step back for a moment and wonder if the victimhood status

of the Rohingya in the worldwide media has done the Rohingya cause any political good. Sure, *outside* of Myanmar the greater public awareness may be rated as a political bonus. But within their country of birth, the answer to that question is simply “no.”

The articulation of Rohingya victimhood has never had an impact on the Myanmar government’s assessments of the Rakhine State conundrum, or on Myanmar public perceptions of the self-described Rohingya. Officially, their identity is an anathema.⁴ Why is this so and why has this not changed over the last decades? Why have the Rohingya obtained support from all over the world, and after 2012, more so than ever before, but never among ethnic groups in Myanmar, not even among the various other Muslim communities, not during the parliamentary 1950s, not under the military regime and not following the recent political opening? The common explanations presented in Myanmar regarding the Muslims of North Rakhine are all built on or constructed around the alleged foreignness of their community: rejection of their ethnic claims, opposition to their self-identification, criticism of their lack of social and linguistic integration, the threat of political separatism, and illegal immigration from East Pakistan/Bangladesh. By contrast, any criticism of the failure of the state to (even try to) accommodate the biggest Muslim community within the corpus of the nation has never taken shape among policy-makers. Central state policies under the junta were meant to divide groups, in this case Buddhists and Muslims, not to unite them: “making enemies,” as political scientist Mary Callahan noted in the title of her famous book.⁵

The political rationale of army rule was to control the territory and rein in centrifugal ethnic groups. The heavy military repression in August/September 2017 should also be seen as a response to a loss of regional control over the border region after 2012. Between 2011 and 2017, the state authorities under President Thein Sein and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi did not put in place any structured approach to provide space for remediation or debate on the historical truth of the allegations and counter-allegations that had been running back and forth about the Rohingya for years. The muteness and perceived stubbornness of official positions on the “Bengali” (as the Rohingya are officially called) issue, and the incoherence of state policies after the riots of 2012 –paired with unpredictable parliamentary politics– further hampered the process of open discussion, while stoking nationalist leanings and leaving the field open to outsider critics. The state’s performance in the Rakhine State crisis has been weak, inconsistent, and clueless. Notably, it has failed to convey to the world beyond Myanmar the rationale of its own policies.



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Rakhine State, situated in the western coast of Myanmar and populated mostly by Rohingya Muslims, has faced a fresh outbreak of violence that caused hundreds of thousands of Rohingya civilians to flee to Bangladesh.

SHUTTERSTOCK

The multiple failures of the Myanmar authorities to streamline their responses to the crisis, coordinate communication and counter foreign disapproval with informed policy briefings, have created a vacuum that is now filled by an internationally accepted account of Rohingya victimhood. This account is updated and corroborated in the eyes of newcomers to Myanmar affairs by what they perceive as not just Rohingya-phobia, but deep-seated Islamophobia among the Burmese, freely interpreted in association with the anti-Muslim riots in the cities of central Myanmar in 2013-2014, the non-acceptance of the Rohingya among an imagined number of 135 indigenous people, and the reiterated allegations of pre-planned designs by the state-military complex to exterminate the Rohingya as an ethnic community. One should realize that these explanations rest dubiously on the present and most recent past –the official introduction of the “135” number, for example, goes back to a military official’s speech in 1989. They lightly omit the complexity of the older social and political background as they overlook communal relations after independence, the political assets of the Muslim community in the early political contest, and the competing Buddhist and Muslim nationalisms of the Rakhine State that have driven policies and resistance in post-independent Burma. From an academic perspective, the historical gist of contemporary Muslims in Rakhine cannot be reduced to the sole history of their marginalization and the loss of their rights. The *rise* of the modern Rohingya and the ethnifying *process* leading to an imagined community of North Rakhine Muslims belong to the regional Muslim narrative as well.

The recent disdain for the historical investigation into the Rohingya conundrum is paradoxical: why have the powerful resources of cultural and political



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history not been further utilized? Memory and victimhood have formed an indelible pair in many contexts where victimized groups have competed for state recognition. In the case of the Rohingya however, the status of victimhood has drawn on interpretations of the near present, but not on an exploration of the movement's historical roots in post-independence Burma. Temporal expressions in introductions of the Rohingya, such as “for generations” and “for centuries,” have been recurrent, but they are shallow and bloodless. They have at best helped to shroud history in an indefinite past to convey a sense of timeless victimhood that ignores Rohingya agency. In recent reports, the staging of the present desolation of passive victimhood has consequently surpassed the legacy both of past injustices and inter-ethnic and state-ethnic power contests.

After 2009 (the year of the Thai navy scandal linked to the Rohingya boat people in the Andaman Sea), but much more so after 2012, the conflictual situation in Rakhine State has conditioned the rise of new Rohingya organizations, such as the Arakan Rohingya Union (founded in Jeddah, 2011) or the European Rohingya Council (registered in Amsterdam, 2012), lobbying in the U.S., Europe and the Middle East.⁶ A wave of new leaders abandoned the intricate set of historical arguments used by their predecessors and powerfully stressed the specific *Muslim* victimhood of the Rohingya.⁷ The successful switch from dwelling on an obscure chapter of local history towards disseminating a globally understood message of victimization has certainly been a major reason for making history-bound discourses irrelevant among the Rohingya organizations themselves.

Another reason behind history's fading was the rise of a new front of international Rohingya caretakers (NGOs, think tanks, academics, and legal experts) who have used a purely human rights-based approach to indict the Myanmar authorities about their discrimination of the Rohingya Muslims. For them, there was no need to highlight that the political history of this Asian borderland was largely a *terra incognita* and they felt no pressure to investigate history. They proceeded on a basis of legal criteria applicable to the present

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situation, demonstrating that the Myanmar authorities were committing ethnic cleansing, and even a ‘slow genocide.’⁸ This shift towards human rights as a supra-valid set of criteria has been in the air for some time. In her study on French legislation regarding the victims of slavery and colonization, Stina Loytomaki recalls that “in present-day discourse, victimhood increasingly is

constructed according to the criteria of universal human rights,” and that “law is a means of empowerment in struggles for recognition.” She also reminds us that “claims for recognition and tolerance... necessarily have a social, political and public character,” and that gaining recognition by obtaining a victim status “should be understood as a political activity that is characteristic of contemporary societies.”⁹ In the unfolding of the Rakhine State crisis, human rights defenders are unquestionably perceived as political actors who reiterate the centrality of the normative high-ground of human rights, not only denouncing present injustices, but also interpreting past developments, including the victimization of the Rohingya. It is therefore not exaggerated to say that now the human rights-informed representations of Rohingya or Rakhine issues in general enjoy a quasi-monopoly on politically correct interpretations. The latest report of the International Crisis Group, based in Brussels, typically starts with the sentence, “While the current crisis is rooted in longstanding discrimination and denial of human rights...”¹⁰ The stripped-down chronologies in many such reports have henceforth become placeholders for shrunken or absent historical accounts.

There’s another reason why history has a difficult stand. The dominating position of human rights analysis has not met with any serious competition in Myanmar. Reacting to the inept communication strategy of the public authorities, foreign experts and expat journalists have eagerly embraced a language that they speak and understand themselves: the global language of diplomats, the social media, the UN, and to a certain extent, the post-colonial jargon of the Western academy. Needless to say, Myanmar’s moderately Anglophone middle class was rapidly outdone by the relentless analytical and rhetoric pressure of foreign experts. Besides, social scientists and figures with moral credibility within the Myanmar academy did not muster the strength and the resources to provide culturally sensitive and politically viable rights-based “inputs” to criticize, revise, enrich or complete the foreign assessments that dominated the international media. Lest we forget, human rights activism is a boon to human societies, no doubt about that; however, it cannot escape politics of interest and power itself, and should therefore be assessed as a part of the conflict

ecosphere. In the case of Rohingya victimhood, the organized human rights discourse has never spoken “just on its own.” Quotations of like-minded statements from other acknowledged authorities – a UN report, a *NYT* editorial, another HR organization, a leading Western politician, etc., – have produced a wall of moral certainty about normative interpretations of Rohingya victim issues, continually reified by a cycle of reaffirmed and re-authorized positions. This tightly knit web of overlapping and self-confirming views have kept the human rights discourse aloof from internal and national debates about differences in historical interpretations, memory wars and sensitive linguistic and cultural facts. Yet such debates cannot, in the end, be eschewed. Thanks to the rhetorical stridency of the advocacy outfits that joined the Rohingya victim-campaigns late, that is after 2012 (less vociferous discussions were the rule before), accusations of ethnic cleansing and genocide entered the mainstream discourse on Rohingya victimhood. Perhaps inadvertently, the human rights-based discourse on Rohingya victimhood has relegated the legitimate expression of resentment, anger, and contestation from non-Rohingya actors to the level of discredited and reprehensible forms of expression (“hate-speech”). To be sure, and this is remarkable, human rights activism has transformed the grieves of a poorly known minority nestled in an obscure spot along the Bay of Bengal into a global cause. However, it has not driven positive change at the level of government or civil society, it has not engaged the country and its multi-ethnic society, but has resulted instead in a hardening and widening of nationalist positions in Myanmar.

By the end of 2017, there seemed to be a widely held belief among the international community that putting pressure on the Myanmar authorities (and particularly the military) is the only way to enforce the return, the security and the implementation of basic rights for the Rohingya, while backing the elected government to proceed with the recommendations of the Kofi Annan Advisory Commission report.¹¹ It looks as if the narrow, normative approaches that had dominated Western policies and journalism on Myanmar in pre-2011 times have been recently tested and are now reset, apparently still considered valid despite the country’s ongoing political changes. Calibrated punishment is therefore once again under discussion as the preferred response. The incoherence of this stick-and-carrot approach is sobering, considering that the heavy foreign criticism of the army’s campaign in Rakhine State has already united public opinion in the country around a consensus that plays against the Rohingya, despite the fact that a fifth of the population considers sectarian violence as one of the three biggest problems of the country.¹²

For many leaders of the Rohingya, on the other hand, this trend is a positive sign, because the quest for “foreign-alliance” or “outside-support” has been a core policy since independence. The Rohingya elite share a consensus that only international pressure can aid the Rohingya by giving them (back) their rights

When the Rohingya nationalist movement emerged in the 1950s, fighting for an autonomous Muslim region, its historians were keen to sketch a history of the Muslims that could sustain their ethnic claims

and potentially helping them realize their political dream of an autonomous Muslim zone. Symbolic political gestures (Noble Prize winners speaking up or His Holiness the Pope pronouncing the word “Rohingya” in his prayers) have taken on an oversized proportion. Concrete efforts at the grassroots level (for example, aid provided by Muslim countries) have seemingly mattered less than the public vali-

dation of Rohingya victimhood. One needs an excessive dose of optimism to hope that targeted sanctions will cajole the military into concessions or reverse public opinion, and one must be very sanguine indeed to see a self-ruling Rohingya zone emerging from the current disasters. What keeps such beliefs and dreams alive is precisely the essentialization of a passive Rohingya victimhood, with its corollary that Rohingya Muslims need international caretakers and protectors and will reach their goals only with their support.

I follow Sissel Rosland in her study of victimhood, identity and agency in the early Northern Ireland conflict, when she notes that passive victimhood is a “static non-historical category” that “conceals the dynamic dimensions of the relationship between victimhood and agency.”¹³ Rosland recalls that victimhood can drive a process of exclusion, what John Mack called, “the egoism of victimization.”¹⁴ Even a casual look at the ethnically divided political landscape in Myanmar shows that victimhood does not unite groups: it keeps them apart. The Rakhine Buddhists have been alternately described by Rohingya ideologues as “our Rakhine brothers and sisters” or the archenemies of the Rohingya, colluding with the Burmese. Rakhine Buddhists perceive themselves as victims of the Burmese conquest that put an end to their kingdom in 1784, as well as victims of British colonization that let Chittagonian settlers (“guests,” as they saw them) take possession of their territory, victims of a ‘Burmanization’ process that denied their cultural heritage, victims of illegal migration, and currently under threat by the rapid demographic growth of a conservative and self-centered Muslim society. Buddhists and Muslims are in a sense competing victims, and if one adopts for a moment this somewhat cynical scenario, one group’s victimhood has outperformed the other’s in scale and resonance.

Victimization is a sign of our times, and the Buddhist and Muslim subjectivities of victimhood both reflect contemporary trends of defining identities through public recognition of victimhood. These subjectivities and their – more or less successful– public dissemination will not be discussed here, but



A view of a refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, for Rohingya people who have fled from the oppression of ongoing military operations in Myanmar's Rakhine State.

AA PHOTO /
FIRAT YURDAKUL

the competition of victims bluntly reveals that victimhood is manifestly linked to the agency and should be seen as a form of historical agency.

History

Historical research is an academic approach to investigating the past, but in the context of this article, 'history' is primarily referred to as a succession of past experiences shared by competing communities, which have invited contradictory interpretations due to rivaling political interests. History contains all that we can know about the past independently of varying ways to select, identify, assemble and construct particular moments, events and periods. Yet history is also the performance of remembering, and may be broadly viewed as a social practice of humans who focus on what they see as their roots and their origins. While constructing their history, actors define sites of memory. History, in that sense, may be viewed as popular in many ways, and it matters in the eyes of its owners. However, it has also been criticized as a distraction from the legal, humanitarian, moral and political aspects of *contemporary* issues.

For example, the question has been raised whether history is a moot point, when crass human rights violations drive global headlines and calls are made for international intervention, as in Rakhine State. Is historical research just a liberal academic distraction when people are systematically being oppressed and the diagnostic of a 'slow burning genocide' has become popular?¹⁵ Before

trying to address these questions, let us highlight what ‘history’ means in this context. The methodic investigation of the past is not a prerogative of academic historians. History is widely and often brilliantly practiced by non-historians who write down the sum of collective memories, local accounts, and individual stories. People undertake such projects because they feel that there is a duty to remember. Rarely does someone take a pen to write when there is no compelling motive to save “facts” from oblivion. It is the transmission of memory that produces and sustains collective identities. Educated Buddhists and Muslims of Rakhine figure prominently in a long tradition of the chronicles and annals in South and Southeast Asia that goes back at least five hundred years. The modern Rohingya, for their part, have followed the records of Buddhist Rakhine chronicles and British colonial historiography to compile a history of diverse Muslims in Rakhine, whom they refer to as their ancestors. They did so long before the now-famous quotation of the word “Rooinga” by Francis Buchanan in 1799 was shared in discussions by Rakhine history specialists in the early 21st century.¹⁶ Recent research into Persian, Dutch and Portuguese sources, little studied when the Rohingya movement was born, has now considerably enriched the tableau of Islamic profiles of the early modern period. Rakhine Buddhists are passionate about the history of their ancient Buddhist kingdom ruled from Mrauk U, which gained little recognition under the Burmese and British regimes. This lack of recognition feeds their dismay about the loss of an independent kingdom and the ethnic pride that opposes them to their Burmese conquerors. The diverse Muslim communities which came to ancient and colonial Arakan, mostly from East India and Bengal and marginally from the Middle East, played a vital role in the history of the predominantly Buddhist region. Although such ethno-religious historiographies often have little to say about foreigners, and the role of Muslims or Christians in the politics and the economy were largely ignored, it is nonetheless clear that this particular historiography did not feed contemporary Islamophobia.

When the Rohingya nationalist movement emerged in the 1950s, fighting for an autonomous Muslim region, its historians were keen to sketch a history of the Muslims that could sustain their ethnic claims. Strongly aware of the glorious role of a Muslim elite at the Buddhist court in the 17th century, they paid little attention to accounts of the mass of Bengali slaves that tilled the royal fields. More significantly, the Rohingya youth similarly drew a veil over the relatively recent arrival of most North Rakhine Muslims to the region. The colonial migration of Bengali labor from the area of Chittagong rapidly became a taboo in Rohingya historiography. Rohingya historians referred to the steady flow of migrants after the opening of the Suez Canal (1869) as mainly seasonal labor, although in 1931, the British census report certified that 80 percent of the Muslims in Arakan (Rakhine) were Chittagonians, and that three quarters of them had already been born in Arakan. In North Arakan, newer and older residents mixed in conditions that have never been investigated. Concentrated along the

border with Bengal (later East Pakistan), their sense of forming a group of their own was reinforced by an explosion of extreme inter-ethnic violence in 1942. In that year, during the months of anarchy between the departure of the British and the arrival of Japanese invaders, Buddhists pursued and killed Muslims fleeing north, and Muslims took their revenge and persecuted Buddhists who took flight to the south. Even today, both groups keep separate memories of these tragic events that were barely recorded, and which no historian has investigated in depth. Each speaks of genocide.

While victimhood creates certain political truths rooted in claims of moral integrity, doing history in the form of competitive dialogues offers the chance to question the past, undermine certainties, corroborate shared experiences, improve public discourses, and re-orient thinking about the present and the future

The memory of these and later events has been robust, but often, the body of textual evidence is slim and academic research nil. Memories are divided, representations are hampered by selective perspectives and critical analysis is immensely challenging. However, the salient features that emerge from this sketch of modern history emphasize that history matters, because it roots people in a geographical environment and in a cultural space. The contemporary political and economic conditions have cut off, divided, and isolated groups of people, redefining national frontiers, politicizing their linguistic space, and antagonizing them through the imposition of repressive and inept administrative regimes. These processes have resulted in the emergence of new identities shaped by ideologies (nationalism), shared religious belonging (Islam, Buddhism) and oppression (authoritarian rule).

Therefore, merely acknowledging the right of people to tell their story, to own their history and build their identities on the legacy of their memories may not be enough. While victimhood creates certain political truths rooted in claims of moral integrity, doing history in the form of competitive dialogues offers the chance to question the past, undermine certainties, corroborate shared experiences, improve public discourses, and reorient thinking about the present and the future. Walking down the stony road of further investigations on history, culture, religion, and society raises calls for academic expertise as well. Currently there is no level field for discussions on Rohingya issues.¹⁷ Prejudice and partisanship rule. While there is no well-assessed and reliable information on how the Rakhine Buddhists and the Muslims (Rohingya as well as others) fared in their isolated state from the 1940s down to the 1990s, there is presently no dearth of cast-iron, partisan certainties that determine historical interpre-

tations of this period. Compounding this problem, the chronology of the deterioration of communal relations and the shift of social and political power under the impact of state policies is only superficially understood.

When communal violence broke out in 2012, media professionals turned to Rohingya readings of Rakhine history. These were mainly derived from the essentialist Rohingya historiography produced during the 1980s and early 1990s whose main proponent was Mohammed Yunus, founder of the Rohingya Solidarity Organization.¹⁸ Baseless statements about the no hyphen origins or the arrival of Muslims in the region have been blindly acknowledged, and uncertified facts of “Rohingya history” have been validated as truth in political and moral comments about the Rohingya victims. No one will call such faults “dramatic” or inexcusable in light of the human tragedies the writers have tried to highlight, yet five years *after* the communal riots of 2012, the absence of a measure of factual seriousness and a readiness for a fair level of complexity in a region of utter complexity are a scandal. The second argument in favor of doing history is therefore the need to increase knowledge and information that does not stop with the events from a few weeks or months ago. There is also a need to promote a level field for debates where both the partisan Muslim views and the partisan Buddhist Rakhine views can get a hearing and are understood, breaking ground for straightforward questions about the ‘known knows’ and the ‘knowable unknowns’ of the investigated matter.

In the long run, the victimhood discourse alone promises no future for the Rohingya people. Representatives of the group need to take stock of a much broader reality of people who self-identify as Rohingya and who live outside the national frontiers of Myanmar. These include a diversity of communities that are part of a transnational network in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Saudi-Arabia, and the UAE, as well as Malaysia and a number of other countries in Southeast Asia, the West and Australia. Muslims from North Rakhine have been leaving the region since the end of WWII, which means that migration took place many years before, and during, the time when the modern Rohingya movement developed, before the military junta took power in 1962, and before the 1982 citizenship law was passed. These migrations raise questions about drivers and motives and intermittent changes. No comprehensive information is available in Western languages on the life of migrants to Saudi-Arabia, and data on the size of the group commonly known as “Burmese Muslims” was only made public by the authorities in Jeddah in 2013. Only a few articles and rare biographic accounts have shed some light on their miserable existence in the Middle East.¹⁹

The Rohingya have been most outspoken in Western countries where their numbers are few, but where freedom of speech allows much greater opportunity for doing advocacy. Yet the considerable diversity of styles of life, political conditions, levels of tolerance, range of legal or semi-legal status, and

degree of access to partial or full citizenship varies greatly between different countries, and socio-economic conditions in the host countries display a diverse socio-religious environment, not a monolithic refugee community bearing an identical profile, as the media and political propaganda seem to suggest. Incidentally, one may take note that the same level of ignorance also prevails for our knowledge about the diaspora of the Rakhine Buddhists spread over various countries in lesser, but still significant numbers. Better knowledge and a more transparent assessment of numbers may frighten some, but can ultimately contribute to fairer judgments. The third argument, therefore, in favor of doing history is the need for sociological and anthropological studies of these communities. Before superficially comparing the Rohingya to the Palestinians, or to victims of genocide in various other contexts, the world needs to get an understanding of what the community as a whole stands for and how its ecosystem of support, networking and self-protection functions. This is not just an academic exercise, while looking at the suffering of thousands on the high-grounds above the rice-fields of Cox's Bazaar District in Bangladesh today. It is a most relevant way forward to reflect on the chances for the future of the region.

The collective description of the Muslims as illegal Bengali migrants is as wrong-headed as the wholesale denial of illegal migration. After Burma's independence, even local Muslim leaders did not deny illegal immigration, which was widely considered an indisputable factor in the 1970s. Describing all Rakhine Muslims as terrorists is another example of how the debate has been poisoned and distorted. On the other hand, the description of the passive victimhood of the Rohingya refugees during recent years starkly contrasts with the earlier history of what is, admittedly, the biggest, but also the most politicized Muslim community in Myanmar. Stressing the political character of the origins of the Rohingya movement in Maungdaw and at the University of Yangon in the 1950s, so vividly illustrated in their publications at the time, is neither a denial nor a distraction from the ongoing, but relatively recent process of communal identity formation among a historical variety of North Rakhine Muslim groups. Ironically, and bitterly, the real triumph of the Rohingya movement came with the communal violence in 2012, when the global community was ready to accept the identity claims of the group qua their alleged statelessness, their deprivation of rights and the refugee status of many of them. To call oneself a Rohingya was always more important outside than inside the country, because it represented a political cry for international recognition that had no chance of



To call oneself a Rohingya was always more important outside than inside the country, because it represented a political cry for international recognition that had no chance of gaining support within the country

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the very different roads taken by Muslim communities in Burma/Myanmar after the anti-Indian and anti-Chinese riots in the 1960s need to be explored as well. The individual and collective choices of Muslims in a country that was set to become more isolated and more nationalist at that time were also driven by the political orientations of their leadership. Therefore, such a study needs to be done *comparatively* to highlight the choices made by religious and political leaders in North Rakhine, and to explain their ensuing failure.

This essay does not intend to diminish the weighty accusations of ethnic cleansing by diluting human tragedies in an academic discourse on political history and allusions to a mysterious past. It has rather tried to address the fact that demonstrations of victimhood rest tenuously upon scant awareness of the human, social and political stories, and the complications of competing identities that underpin the history of migrants in the Bangladesh/Myanmar border region. This situation has perversely eased the production of comfortable truths that feed only on victimhood, self-righteousness and moral prejudice. Myanmar is a country that still hurts itself. The recent mass migration was the outcome of ill-guided policies that will harm both the country's long-term national interests and Rakhine State's social and economic development. Within the international community, the mismanaged situation has nourished the naïve determination that retributive justice will pave the way to enforcing the interests and rights of one group against a purportedly rogue state. This is wrong in my view.

Needless to say, there is no easy solution at hand, yet the investigation of the vicious circles of history that I invite us to study could hardly be called premature. To unpack the history that burdens the conflict will hail no vision of pristine harmony and political resolution *per se*, but it will pave the road towards a more transparent and fact-based engagement with Rohingya issues.

gaining support within the country. After 2012, the collective agency of the Rohingya Muslims regressed to victimhood as conditions in Myanmar left no space for expression. The rise of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) in late 2016 resurrected the militant tradition, not as a political movement with a defined program, but rather as a renewed effort to gain acceptance as a representative ethno-nationalist organization among other such politically active groups in the country. In this context, questions regarding

Conclusion

In conclusion, this critical look at the monopolizing tendency of victimization narratives contains two major lessons. First, this discourse represents victims as collective groups deprived of historical functions while emphasizing the character of the perpetrators in a non-negotiable way. Thus exclusive self-identification as victims harms the long-term interest of victimized individuals and groups to be perceived as actors in their own way. Secondly, it seemingly deprives outside actors and observers alike the chance to step back and look at competing interpretations and understandings of history as part of a diverse reality and an inevitably frictional process to search for truth and safeguard an open space for political dialogue. Along these lines, the present article joins voices that have criticized the depoliticization of victims and their perceived lack of agency, and tries to contribute to public awareness of the importance of historical investigations, both as a potential tool for self-critical deportment and a way to recognize agency and maintain human dignity.

What we should bear in mind is that Myanmar is a traumatized country that will need decades to heal. The victimhood of its citizens is mirrored in multiple pathetic and apathetic conditions. Steadily ignored by most of the global community for 45 years, the victimhood of the Rohingya was singled out by foreigners in 2012. Their binary narrative, which I sketched at the beginning of this essay, threatens to dump historical complexity for the sake of legal and moral clarity. Yet human rights are important concepts in a language that authorities and masses alike still have to learn, and a practice they have yet to internalize. Designations of victimhood offer a safe zone of protection and a short-term promise of redress, but it is only the painful dialogue through history and culture, the one language that people have spoken for centuries, that can heal and promote reconciliation in the long run. It has never been started, it has never been mediated, it has never even been imagined in this border area. The outlook is bleak, but this is the challenge. ■

Endnotes

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