

Myanmar's minorities: "The most persecuted group in Asia"

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THIDAR HTWE's short life was not much older than Myanmar's democracy movement. After a quarter-century of struggle the movement has scented victory of a kind, taking seats in parliament just this year. But now the untimely death of Miss Thidar Htwe, a 26-year-old from Thapraychaung village, has ignited a tinderbox of ethnic tensions. Violence is flaring around the western state of Rakhine. The president, Thein Sein, warned in a televised address that it could hinder the nascent reforms. As one of the worst episodes of communal violence the country has seen in decades, it also raises hard questions about the rights of minorities in a new Myanmar.

On May 28th, Miss Thidar Htwe, a Buddhist of the Rakhine ethnic group, was raped and killed, allegedly by three young Rohingya Muslims, as she made her way home from a nearby village. Six days later a mob of 300 Buddhist-Rakhine vigilantes stopped a bus carrying Muslim pilgrims was stopped in the town of Taungkok. The passengers were taken off the vehicle and ten of them were clubbed to death, and one of the women was sexually assaulted. The mob then poured alcohol on the corpses, in desecration. According to some accounts, one of the victims was a Buddhist, mistaken for a Muslim.

The local authorities in Thapraychaung had claimed to have detained the three rapists several days before the bus incident. The victims of the bus attack were not from Rakhine state, and were returning home to Yangon, the country's commercial capital. Soon gruesome pictures of the victims were circulating the internet and small protests erupted within Yangon's Muslim community.

This was not to prompt a moment of national soul-searching. Rather it marked the first salvo of fresh bigotry, unleashed against Myanmar's Muslim minority on the internet and beyond. Discrimination against the Rohingyas has never been subtle. They are not allowed to travel within Myanmar, nor to serve in the police—technically, they do not even have citizenship (though this has been questioned in parliament). But their persecution has suddenly turned fervid.

It was evident in the state-run press. The Myanmar Alin, a newspaper, referred to the murdered Muslims with the derogatory term *kalar*, a word derived from Sanskrit which means "black". In Myanmar it is used as an epithet for people with South Asian appearances, such as the Rohingya. More surprisingly, dozens of Burmese human-rights activists (many whom are themselves granted status as asylum-seekers by the West) have rounded on the country's loosely defined community of Muslims—which includes plenty of ethnic Burmese, as well as Rohingyas and the descendants of South Asians.

Regarded by activists as the "most persecuted ethnic group in Asia", the Rohingya inhabit the impoverished borderlands between Myanmar and Bangladesh. Much like their Buddhist-Rakhine neighbours they traverse both sides of the border. Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya have crossed into Bangladesh since Burma's independence, fleeing racial and religious persecution not just at the hands of their Buddhist countrymen, the Buddhist Rakhines, but also the Burmese national authorities.

Rakhine state was once independent. Burma annexed it in 1784, when the British had barely set foot in the Irrawaddy delta. At the time the conquering Burmese induced Buddhist Rakhines to seek shelter in Bengal, to the west. There they established the town of Cox's Bazaar, with the help of a British East India Company official, Hiram Cox.

In 1977, almost two centuries later, the independent government of Burma conducted a notorious military operation, codenamed Nagar Min ("Dragon King"), which forced hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas to flee across the border to the part of Bengal that had become Bangladesh. One of the victims of that putsch, now resident of Khutapalong camp near Cox's Bazaar, told this correspondent that she fled only after Burmese soldiers butchered her eight-month-old child, on the grounds that she could not produce a permit.

Rakhine state's tensions have a long history. They were on the simmer earlier this month. The statewide police presence had been increased since the massacre of the bus passengers at Taungkok. On June 8th, as Rohingya gathered for prayers, an incident between a Rohingya boy on a bicycle and a Rakhine on a motorbike turned ugly and attracted the police's attention. Soon they turned to riot gear, and the angry street turned to stone-throwing. The police force that moved in with reinforcements already had a reputation for the near-genocidal purges against the Rohingya.

After Friday's violence the government declared a Section 144 criminal order and by Saturday it was a curfew. According to Chris Lewa, an expert on regional affairs, the order to stay in doors applied only to Rohingyas. It did nothing to stop Buddhist Rakhine mobs looting and pillaging. They were filmed burning Rohingya villages, apparently with impunity; they were happy to speak before video cameras while houses burned in the background. The mobs seemed to rage without any fear of police action. At least one Rohingya woman was raped in the mayhem.

Fearing a new influx of refugees, Bangladesh meanwhile tightened security on its border. As many as 1,500 fleeing Rohingyas were stranded, left waiting on boats that idled in the Naf river, unable to land. Bangladesh is already home to perhaps 250,000 Rohingya refugees. Their presence in that crowded country has long been a cause of political bickering.

By Sunday Thein Sein had declared a state of military emergency under Section 413 of the country's 2008 constitution: the first since its nominally democratic government took office in March 2011. The previous criminal order was deemed to weak, so once again the army rules in Rakhine. The UN pulled out the small staff it keeps in the area, which were held to be the last neutral observers on the ground.

Rioting spread quickly to Sittwe, the state capital. Local reports describe Rakhine and Rohingya mobs torching houses and being dispersed by armed police.

Tin Soe, the editor of the Rohingya-run Kaladan news network, welcomes the military state of emergency; he lacks faith entirely in the civilian police force. On the road between the main Rohingya urban centres, Buthidaung and Maungdaw, Tin Soe claims, the streams were clogged with dead bodies. He asserts the mobs' killing of Rohingyas was done in concert with the police, who were Buddhists siding with their co-religionists.

Tin Soe once petitioned for the end of military rule and the release of all political prisoners. But now one of the most prominent of the former political prisoners, Ko Ko Gyi, a member of "the '88 generation students", has blamed the violence in Rakhine state on elements coming from "across the border". The implication, as ever, is that the Rohingya are not a legitimate people of Myanmar. Indeed, Ko Ko Gyi made it explicit: the Rohingya are not an "ethnic group" of the country, he says, and so somehow they must be to blame. The same rationale is not applied Myanmar's other ethnic groups, many of whom have a "more Burmese" racial appearance (ie, they look less like South Asians).

Ko Ko Gyi's sentiments were echoed by the popular press, which has taken to calling Rohingyas "Bengalis", and publishing vile comments on pictures of refugees. Many of the comments posted online call for ethnic cleansing. One thing shared across the spectrum of religious and political hues is a sense of deep foreboding. Leading activist from among the ethnic Chin minority expressed the fear that in Myanmar "we might go back to the dark age before we have even stepped into the path of light."