

Fate of Rohingya Muslims may be in Arakan Army's hands



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OPINION

In late May, reports emerged that tens of thousands of Rohingya have been forced to flee their homes in the townships of Buthidaung and Maungdaw, northern Rakhine State, Myanmar.

The United Nations said it had collected witness testimonies about the killings of Rohingya civilians and the systematic torching of homes. It indicated that these crimes started after the Myanmar military withdrew from these townships and the rebel Arakan Army (AA) advanced.

If it is proven that AA was responsible, this would not bode well for the future of the Rohingya community. As a major force in the Brotherhood Alliance, a coalition of rebel forces fighting Myanmar's junta, the AA has made considerable advances in Rakhine State. If the rebels prevail, the AA would have significant influence over the region's affairs, including any decisions regarding the repatriation of Rohingya refugees.

Involvement in atrocities against the Rohingya would mean that the AA's rhetoric about upholding this Muslim community's rights does not hold water. That is why the international community needs to take action if it wishes to see the Rohingya refugee crisis resolved.



A woman cooks next to destroyed houses and burned trees following fighting between Myanmar's military and the Arakan Army in a village in Minbya Township in Rakhine State, Myanmar, on May 21, 2024.
● AFP

A history of tensions

Since Burma (Myanmar's old name) gained independence from Britain in 1948, various ethnic groups have sought territorial independence or increased regional autonomy, challenging the dominance of the Bamar ethnic group in the country's governance.

The military's seizure of power in 1962 intensified persecution against these groups, prompting armed resistance. Today, despite being labelled "separatists" or "insurgent groups" by the military junta, these groups are leading a struggle against the junta that is widely seen as a "fight for democracy".

The AA was established in April 2009 in the border area between Myanmar and China. It was overwhelmingly supported by the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), which trained AA's first recruits in Kachin State.

The AA's declared objective was "the struggle for national liberation and the restoration of Arakan sovereignty to the people of Arakan (Rakhine)".

Before 2017, the Rohingya and the AA did not have a comfortable relationship let alone close ties. While both occasionally faced atrocities and crackdowns by Myanmar's security forces under the pretext of counter-insurgency operations, they hardly collaborated.

The Rohingya harboured significant mistrust towards the AA, mainly due to the Muslim-Buddhist religious divide in the Rakhine state. Predominantly Muslim, the Rohingya view the largely Buddhist AA as part of the dominant Bamar community. This association has led some Rohingya I have interviewed to accuse the AA of involvement in the 2017 genocidal campaign by the Myanmar army.

The AA, for its part, largely accepted the Myanmar government's narrative that the Rohingya are migrants and do not belong in the country.

Post-coup rhetoric

In 2021, the Myanmar military seized power again in a coup, triggering widespread protests and massive mobilisation of armed resistance forces. The Three Brotherhood Alliance, which was formed in 2019, allied itself with the civilian National Unity Government (NUG) and became the biggest rebel force challenging the junta. It is fighting side by side with the People's Defence Force (PDF), NUG's armed wing.

In October 2023, the alliance launched Operation 1027 and quickly advanced against the Myanmar armed forces in several states.

Seeking international legitimacy and support from local communities, the AA has tried to appeal to the Rohingya, affirming that it recognises the human and citizenship rights of all resi-

dents of Rakhine State. However, even before the attacks in May, past statements by some of its leaders cast a shadow of doubt over this rhetoric.

In a 2022 interview with Asia Times, AA leader Major General Twan Mrat Naing said: "We recognise the human rights and citizenship rights of all residents of Arakan (Rakhine), but a massive repatriation of refugees in the current situation could unleash a new wave of unrest."

He also raised questions about the Rohingya identity, saying, "A major issue for most Arakanese would also be the name with which the refugees would want to be identified. 'Rohingya' is not a term that most Arakanese accept. They find it offensive as they feel that it deprives them of their history."

Such statements reveal that the AA leadership has not renounced the narrative

that the Rohingya are "illegal Bengali migrants".

The junta has sought to exploit the inter-communal tensions between the Rohingya and the Buddhist Rakhine. It has engaged in forced recruitment among the Rohingya and pressured communities to stage anti-AA demonstrations. Rohingya recruits have been used to attack Buddhist communities, fuelling anger. According to one report, the attacks in late May were revenge by the AA for alleged Rohingya involvement in similar attacks in April on Buddhist communities.

Securing Rohingya rights

Many believe that if the military dictatorship falls and democracy resumes, the Rohingya will be allowed to go back to their homes, as Myanmar embarks on building an inclusive society.

While I recognise that there have been some positive changes within the pro-democracy political leadership, under the current circumstances, I remain sceptical about their ability and willingness to carry out Rohingya repatriation. The NUG has recognised the Rohingya identity and has already appointed a noted Rohingya activist, U Aung Kyaw Moe, as deputy minister in its Ministry of Human Rights. But it seems to me that these actions are just showmanship and are aimed at securing international support and recognition for the NUG.

What's more, armed groups like the AA will inevitably play a significant role in managing the situation in Rakhine state. Their positive rhetoric towards the Rohingya is even less convincing, given the latest reports of attacks on the community.

Recognising these realities, Rohingya diaspora leaders are urging the Rohingya people, "to unite and form their own force capable of joining the federal army and the People's Defence Force (PDF) ... to initiate meaningful political dialogues with the AA, the National Unity Government (NUG), and other ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) to ensure recognition of Rohingya ethnicity and federal rights". If the international community wants to solve the Rohingya refugee crisis, then it needs to play its part as well.

It should make its support for and recognition of the NUG conditional on rigorous guarantees for the repatriation of Rohingya refugees residing in Bangladesh and elsewhere. It should also demand that the NUG leadership negotiate with the AA and ensure the safety of the Rohingya currently living in the Rakhine State.

As things stand now, unless there is consistent pressure applied from outside, the prospects for Rohingya repatriation remain bleak.



Rohingya people from Buthidaung township, Myanmar, are assisted by the forces of Arakan Army (AA) as they flee from armed clashes to AA-controlled areas on May 8, 2024.
● UNITED LEAGUE OF ARAKAN

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