



## ARAKAN ROHINGYA UNION

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### **U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific Hearing: “An Unclear Roadmap: Burma’s Fragile Political Reforms and Growing Ethnic Strife.”**

Thursday, September 19, 2013

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### **The post-election political situation in Burma**

The political climate in Burma has not fundamentally improved over the past two years, despite great expectations by the people of Burma and the international community for a genuine change, after half a century of dictatorial rule. The national election in October 2010 was largely manipulated by the military establishment and was deemed neither free nor fair by both the international community and people of Burma. The most significant example of this is the continuing grip on power that the ruling junta maintains. The junta’s strategy of maintaining the “status quo” was effectively implemented through the national election in 2010. An overwhelming number of military hardliners in the junta simply shed their uniforms to continue their grip on power as civilians without changing their philosophy of governance. In fact, the “transition to democracy” has been used as a vehicle to drive the hardliners’ agenda in central, state, and local government. The parliament has a significant number of members from the military establishment, and while it discusses national issues, and these debates are not genuinely reflects democracy.

The current Burmese government’s path to democratic reform is reminiscent of the Revolutionary Council of the former military regime’s “Burmese way to socialism” in the 1960s. Then, the junta used the “Burmese way” as a tool for ruling the country with a dictatorship philosophy. Today, the military-dominated government is again manipulating the “transition to democracy” to fulfill its agenda that is rife with strategies for deprivation of ethnic minority rights. In its socialist ideology in the past, the regime’s military apparatus used “guns and forces” to deprive ethnic minorities of their rights. Similarly, today the military-dominated government uses the so-called “people’s desire” to abuse ethnic minorities through humiliation and terror. The hardliners in the government use radical monks as tools to mobilize the Buddhist Burmese population in support of Burmese Buddhist nationalism through the preaching of hate and bigotry against ethnic and religious minorities. The best example of this is the apartheid-style campaign known as “969” led by the monk Ashin Wirathu, the self-ascribed “The Burmese Bin Laden” who international media and analysts have called “The Face of Buddhist Terror”. It is shocking that Ashin Wirathu has touted to the international media “I am proud to be the Burmese Bin Laden”, while the Burmese Government remains silent. Furthermore, there is no Buddhist

voice of conscience except probably that of U Gambira, leader of the Saffron Revolution, who is condemning ethnic cleansing against Rohingya. Although the primary targets of the “969” network are the Rohingya and Burmese Muslims, it may not take much longer for the Buddhist nationalist movement to turn their fire and machetes against the Christian Kachin and other ethnic and religious minorities.

The impact of the false democratic process has disproportionately impacted the ethnic minorities including Rohingya, Kachin, and Myanmar Muslims over the Burmans (known as *Bamma* in Burmese language), the ruling class/ethnicity of the military. The overwhelming majority of political prisoners who were released, including Noble Laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, were Burman. Today there are over a thousand Rohingya prisoners of conscience languishing in various prisons throughout Rakhine/Arakan state. Recently, the Burmese government in coordination with Rakhine State and local officials reportedly designated the Rohingya prisoners as non-political prisoners. Although the overwhelming majority of Rohingya prisoners have been arrested arbitrarily without charges, recently many have been falsely charged with inciting violence or participating in violence against Buddhist Rakhine. But the vast majority of these Rohingya prisoners were in fact the *victims* of violence by Rakhine mobs backed by Burmese forces, particularly the Rakhine police and Nasaka force (now reconstituted as the Lon Htein force). Many of the Rohingya prisoners have lost their homes, property, businesses, and in some cases, family members. The reason for suddenly bringing charges against the Rohingya prisoners is to exclude them from inclusion in the “political prisoner” category because the Burmese government has reportedly been working on releasing political prisoners due to mounting international pressure. In recent days, hundreds of Rohingya prisoners (ages 12 to 60+), have been sentenced to life imprisonment or extended terms such as 20, 17, 10, and 7 years.

The military junta’s imposition of its apartheid policies for Rohingya such as travel restrictions, marriage restrictions, land confiscation, deprivation of education, deprivation of freedom to worship, closure of places of worship, confiscation of national registration cards and/or evidence of ancestral residency, and non-issuance of birth certificates, have not changed during the past two years. In fact, there has been further tightening of these impositions on the Rohingya in recent months in Rakhine/Arakan state. The Burmese government has made clear its intentions to rid Burma of Rohingya Muslims not only through policy but also through public statements. President U Thein Sein reportedly told UNHCR that all illegal Rohingya should be sent away to a third country or kept in camps because they are a national security threat. Currently, there are some elements within the Burmese Government colluding with Rakhine/Arakan state officials to make the internally displaced persons (IDP) camps permanent. A segregation policy in Rakhine/Arakan state is reportedly being developed, though segregation is already being imposed by means of Muslim ghettos and IDP camps. Currently, there are nearly 140,000 Rohingya in IDP camps in Rakhine/Arakan state and some thousands in central Burma. The long and deep-rooted ethnic cleansing policy based on hate and bigotry against Rohingya by Burmese government officials has even spilled over to Burmese communities and diplomatic missions overseas. The description of Rohingya by a diplomat in the Burmese mission in Hong Kong as “ugly as ogres” is not very diplomatic. Such expressions go a step beyond the commonly used derogatory term “Kala” (used to describe people with physical features similar to those of Indian descent) that is used against Rohingya by the general Burmese society. The government currently uses “Bengali” for Rohingya, which is also a derogatory term.

Among the ethnic minorities, Kachin nationals have also suffered among the worst human rights violations over the past two years. During one brutal offensive, the Burmese Army reportedly killed hundreds of innocent Kachin civilians during Christmas and New Year

celebrations in 2012. The ongoing peace dialogue with the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) is not genuine; it is another insincere overture to the Kachin people and the international community by the Burmese government in an effort to secure the lifting of the remaining US sanctions while the Burmese military continues its attacks.

The Burmese government has effectively lured the international community into its business/investment schemes with the opportunity to profit from its unexplored natural resources in the country. It has shown the international community some cosmetic changes such as relatively more freedom of the press. However, the media is still not free for most people. Certain groups of people enjoy these rights more than others due to their connections or influence over the local or central government. For example, journals owned by cronies or people whose interests are somehow not contrary to the political interests of the government are allowed to write or produce most anything they wish. Some media operations such as Eleven Media, the Voice, and others have taken advantage of the freedom of press and have promoted hate propaganda against minorities such as the Rohingya and Burmese Muslims. For example, Eleven Media is responsible for publishing false news against Rohingya. Their journalists cooperated with Burmese police forces that shot Rohingya and Myanmar Muslims. Although Rohingya MPs are elected lawfully from the Rohingya community, the Rakhine National Democratic Party (RNDP), in collusion with the Burmese government and the Ministry of Immigration, has introduced legislation in the parliament to launch a re-investigation into the Rohingya MPs' ancestral background. Rohingya political parties are at risk as the RNDP leaders and Immigration Minister are jointly working on an amendment to the political parties registration law to block Rohingya from forming political parties and electing MPs in future.

### **Obama Administration easing sanctions and overall engagement with Burmese Government**

The Obama Administration has moved too quickly in easing the sanctions on Burma. We believe that moving too quickly to ease sanctions is shortsighted. The relaxation of the sanctions should have been more gradual and firmly incremental with benchmarks. The Burmese government should meet each expectation by the international community before the second bar may be lifted. Despite the US Administration's apparent engagement with the Burmese government in good faith, the Burmese government has failed to deliver on promises that it has given to the United States and the international community. Most of the reforms by the Burmese government have been superficial and partial, benefiting mainly the ruling Burman class in central Burma. Very little to none of the ethnic minority issues have been concretely addressed by the Burmese government despite its rhetoric geared toward ensuring the international community that the government is serious about solving ethnic minority issues.

The Burmese government is maneuvering in the international arena to have it both ways: maintaining the traditional strong ties with the Eastern bloc, particularly China, and also attempting to improve relations with the West in order to have sanctions lifted, particularly those implemented by the United States and Europeans. The ruling hardliners in the government remain as deceptive as they were during the reign of the military junta by showing off their "openness" and "market-oriented emerging economy". For example, the Burmese government has failed to find a solution to the Kachin crisis despite assurances given to the international community. Meanwhile, the number of internally and externally displaced Kachin persons has reportedly increased dramatically during the past two years to over 100,000.

The plight of the Rohingya people dates back to 1962; however, they experienced the worst violence and bloodbath in Rakhine/Arakan state in 2012 and 2013. The violence and massacre of Burmese Muslims in central Burma in 2013 follow the anti-Muslim attacks in central Burma in 2001, 2003, and 2006, but this year's attacks were far more dramatic. Another piece of evidence for the Burmese government's dishonesty about reforms is its move to release Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and then disqualify her from running in the national election. President U Thein Sein's letter to the Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-Moon, addressing the citizenship issue of the Rohingya before the visit of President Obama to Rangoon is another example of the government's attempt to buy time and silence the international community. But this resulted in the government's ongoing hostile verification program that has motivated massive arrests and torture of Rohingya people who refuse to write "Bengali" in the verification form.

The government's failure to properly address escalating human rights abuses in Rakhine/Arakan State and Kachin State is at least in part the result of the untimely and rapid relaxing of sanctions by the Obama Administration. The superficial changes in Burma primarily affecting only the ruling Burman class were a clever way of luring the Obama Administration to lift all the sanctions. Each time a sanction is lifted without verifying genuine change in Burma, or requiring the Burmese government to meet a pre-condition, the leverage that the US government has maintained for so long is wasted.

### **United State's military-to-military relations with Burma**

I am not a military strategist who can provide a detailed analysis of proposed military-to-military relations between Burma and the United States. However, as a concerned citizen knowledgeable about the Burmese military establishment, I urge the US government to avoid military relations with governments guilty of some of the worst crimes of our time. Establishing military-to-military relations between the United States military and Burmese armed forces would be premature. This should not be on the table at this stage of Burma's development. The rapid move by the Obama Administration in relaxing sanctions is a perfect example of a counter-productive strategy that prioritized rushing to reward the Burmese government without actually holding the government accountable for its actions. The military institution in Burma has abused civilians for the past half a century through brutal crackdowns on democracy activists, democratically elected officials, and vulnerable ethnic minorities. Further, empowering the military despite its long and ongoing record of human rights abuses by allowing it to build relations with Western military institutions is an outright insult to the democratic values of respect for human rights and human dignity in Burma. The Burmese government has not proven that it has made tangible progress in showing respect for ethnic minorities and human dignity, and these should be very basic preconditions before military-to-military relations are allowed.

It is understandable that some officials maintain that we should be realistic about our expectations for the democratic reform process in Burma; however, what has been achieved in Burma is too little over a two and a half year time span and the government has failed to deliver on most of its rights-based promises while capacitating more offensive attacks against ethnic minorities despite purported "ceasefire agreements" and while escalating crackdowns on religious and ethnic minorities and activists across the country. The United States' military cooperation with the Burmese forces will not significantly help counter Burma's relations with China; it is rather another distraction from establishing basic rights for ethnic minorities, human rights for all citizens, and addressing lawlessness and impunity, violence against minorities, and

massive arrests in minority areas. Again, the abuses against the Rohingya and Kachin are good examples of human rights violations by the military and government forces in regions that it says it governs lawfully.

In Kachin State, the Burmese military has reneged on its agreement with the Kachin concerning a peaceful settlement of the war. In Rohingya areas in Rakhine/Arakan State, the Burmese government could have prevented the violence against Rohingya through its security apparatus with massive military force as it did during the handling of the uprising of monks in central Burma. The Burmese government did not have the willpower to protect the Rohingya from violence by Rakhine mobs backed by Burmese/Rakhine police forces. The US State Department's 2013 report on human trafficking shows that the Burmese military is keeping Rohingya women as sex slaves on bases in Arakan State. Given ongoing violations and systemic impunity, military-to-military relations should not yet be part of the policy equation. Military-to-military relations should be paused until the Burmese government gives basic rights to ethnic minorities *in both legislation and practice*. The rhetoric of peace and stability coming out of President's Thein Sein's office in Nay Pyi Taw is not actual government policy or practice.

### **The growing conflicts between the Majority and the Minorities**

Conflicts between Buddhist and Muslim populations are overwhelmingly one-sided attacks on the small Muslim minority by the Buddhist majority that have been backed by Burmese security forces. The root of this problem is the systematic ethnic cleansing policies adopted by the first military junta in 1962. Then the Revolutionary Council of the military regime along with the Rakhine leadership had largely disregarded the fact that the Rohingya are an indigenous population of Rohang region of Rakhine/Arakan State, with their history pre-dating Burmese rule of the region. The ultra-nationalist vision of the Rakhine leadership centered on making the State emblematic of a single race and religion – a vision that the Burmese government has also long perpetuated.

The government has historically devised strategies to conduct systematic ethnic cleansing in Rohingya areas. Operation Nagamin (Dragon King) in the late 1970s and Operation Galong (a mythological bird symbolic of Burmese nationalism) were some of the government programs that aimed to drive Rohingya people off of their land by accusing them of being illegal Bengali migrants. These operations resulted in many deaths and widespread destruction of Rohingya property and forced many Rohingya into Bangladesh, where they were confined to camps or even pushed into areas with no infrastructure at all by the unwelcoming Bangladesh government. The Burmese government cleverly used this logic of “Bengali” or “Kala” by conflating the Rohingya with immigrants from the Indian subcontinent to Burma during the British colonial rule. The five-decade-long denial of basic rights and systematic discrimination against Rohingya by the Burmese government created fertile ground for nationalist Rakhine leadership and radical Buddhist monks to instigate fresh violence against Rohingya that has spilled into Burmese Muslim areas across Burma.

### **The Implications of the conflict on ending inter-ethnic conflict and national reconciliation**

The violence against Rohingya and Burmese Muslims is part of a pattern of ultra-Buddhist nationalism led by the 969 movement spearheaded by the radical Burmese monk Wirathu and his supporters. The ideology of hate and bigotry of the 969 extremist movement

aims to “purify” Burmese society. The movement has gained popularity across the country; however, it is unlikely that the great majority of its supporters actually know the real agenda of the movement. The average Burmese citizen is naturally not an initiator of any kind of violence at individual level, but as evidenced in Arakan State, Meiktila, Okkan, Lashio, and Sagaing Division, normal people can be mobilized by radical religious leaders who are revered highly by the average Buddhist Burman.

Goals of the 969 movement include not only violence but apartheid and segregation, an imposition of a ban on inter-faith marriages, boycotting Muslim owned business, reducing the Muslim population, and the eventual elimination of Muslims from Burma. The Burmese government has largely ignored the hate speech and instigation of violence by the 969 movement that has resulted in killings of Rohingya and Burmese Muslims and has instead bolstered the movement by praising its leader Wirathu.

The inter-ethnic conflicts in several ethnic regions in Burma have been a serious issue for Burma since independence in 1948, and there was never a meaningful peace between the government and many of the ethnic groups despite sporadic ceasefire agreements or peace talks. The “Burmanization” policy of the Burmese government has been the primary cause for warfare in ethnic areas for the past several decades. The “Burmanization” is primarily a government’s ideology of “purity” of race, language, and religion of people of Burma by imposing that of the Burman’s (Bamma’s) on ethnic minorities that do not have much in common with the ruling class, Burman (Bamma), in these attributes. True peace and stability in ethnic minority areas are unattainable unless the Burmese government recognizes equal social and political justices for all the ethnic groups.

Achieving national reconciliation with the ethnic groups is not as complex as the Burmese government has painted it to be. In the past, military hardliners envisioned national reconciliation to be powerful enough to pose some sort of threat to the military’s power. This is particularly true for Rakhine/Arakan State where unity between ethnic Rakhine and Rohingya has been deemed a threat to military rule; therefore, the government capacitated nationalist Rakhine leaders to mobilize the ethnic Rakhine population against the Rohingya. Actually today, ethnic reconciliation in Burma is within the reach and the Burmese government holds the key to this. Reconciliation between ethnic Rakhine and Rohingya can be achieved within a short period of time as the government has tremendous influence on nationalist Rakhine leadership. The Burmese Government must abandon its hostile policies against the Rohingya and position itself in the middle with neutrality. The government could choose to be the facilitator for dialogue between ethnic Rakhine and Rohingya for peace, stability, and communal harmony in Rakhine/Arakan State. But the Burmese government appears to have delegated this to minor parties on the ground while staying in the background and continuing to perpetuate anti-Muslim policies and even call for the deportation of the Rohingya, even while knowing that most Rakhine refuse even to talk to Rohingya. The Rakhine who are willing to talk with Rohingya are subject to harsh intimidation and threats from their own community. Dialogue with the potential to bring true and lasting peace, stability, and communal harmony in Burma must be tripartite (i.e. Rakhine, Rohingya, and Burmese government) facilitated by international mediators.

## **Recommendation to the Government of the United States for its response to the escalating human right abuses**

- 1) Sustain the momentum and step up the efforts by the State Department in developing comprehensive strategies to find a solution for Rohingya, Kachin, and other ethnic groups.
- 2) Stop relaxing or lifting sanctions until the Burmese government meets preconditions, and reverse the previous relaxing of sanctions as the government has refused to halt violence against minorities
- 3) At the United Nations, the U.S. should continue to press the European Union to include language in the UN General Assembly Burma resolution this fall that includes calls for the establishment of international independent investigation into allegations of ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya and anti-Muslim violence and discrimination and the system of impunity for these serious crimes.
- 4) The Administration should maintain Burma's "country of particular concern" or CPC designation for 2013 because there continue to be egregious and serious religious freedom restrictions that coincide with sectarian and societal violence targeting Muslims and ethnic minority Christians and military campaigns in ethnic minority areas.
- 5) Abolish or amend the military's 1982 citizenship law to be compatible with international norms and human rights standard.
- 6) Demonstration by the Burmese Government that rights for Rohingya, Kachin, and other ethnic minorities have been fully given before considering any military-to-military relations.
- 7) Mediating a national political dialogue between the government of Burma and ethnic nationality groups, including Rohingya, with the primary goal of building a successful federal system in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious Burma.
- 8) Burmese Government provides international relief groups and media unfettered access to all violence-affected areas in Rakhine/Arakan and Kachin states.
- 9) Establishing independent inquiries into the status of the Rohingya, to evaluate their historical claims to citizenship and assess the root causes of ethnic and sectarian violence in Rakhine (Arakan) State.
- 10) Burmese Government takes concrete actions against radical elements, including the monks preaching hate.
- 11) Burmese Government outlaws the radical Buddhist 969 network and its activities and hold those individuals accountable who incite violence, either in speeches or online, against Muslims or other ethnic groups.
- 12) Creating programs to counter anti-Rohingya and anti-Muslim sentiment in the Burmese population, specifically focusing on undermining fears of "religious extremism" and "exaggerated Muslim birthrates", which drive popular support for a Rohingya and Muslim exclusion campaign.
- 13) Placing those who instigate, carry out, or publicly support anti-Rohingya and anti-Muslim violence and discrimination on the U.S. Treasury Department's Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) list, including Buddhist monks, organizers of the "969" anti-Muslim exclusion campaign, and government or other officials.
- 14) President Thein Sein officially retracts his statement to UN officials that the Rohingya people are national security threat, and they should be transferred to a third country or kept in camps.
- 15) Expedited return of the displaced persons from IDP camps to their respective homes and properties with full protection provided to them by the Burmese Government.

- 16) Burmese forces immediately cease night-time raids of Rohingya households, the massive arrests of Rohingya men, and sentencing them to life or long jail terms.
- 17) President Thein Sein nulls and voids the unjust and unlawful sentencing of Rohingya to life or long jail terms.
- 18) Burmese Government re-classify the Rohingya prisoners (over a thousand) scattered in jails throughout Rakhine/Arakan state as political prisoners.
- 19) Burmese Government returns all the residency and nationality documents confiscated from Rohingya by the Burmese authorities overtime since 1962.
- 20) Burmese Government removes arbitrary regional regulations on Rohingya restricting travels locally or nationally, requiring permission to marry, deprivation of education and freedom of worship, confiscation of lands, rejection in employment in government, and others.
- 21) Burmese Government officially renounces the two-child policy adopted for Rohingya only.
- 22) Burmese Government allows international monitors, specially US and UN, for the 2015 national election.