

“The Military Plan to Wipe Out All Muslims in Myanmar”

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“This village is a Muslim-free zone,” reads a sign hanging at the entrance to a village in an area of Myanmar outside Rakhine state. The orders are directed at the country’s Rohingya population, an ethnic group of around 1.3 million that live mainly in Rakhine and who have been described as the “world’s most persecuted minority”.

It’s not difficult to see why. Since 1992 the Burmese government has imposed heavy restrictions on the Rohingyas. If they want to travel from one town to the other they have to pass immigration checkpoints and to do so the administration must grant them permission.

Because requests are regularly turned down the Rohingyas have become isolated within their own country:

“They’ve kept us in an open air prison for more than 25 years. Since 1978 they are propagating and they are brain washing the public that these people are invading the country, that they are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh,” says Nay San Lwin, an activist and blogger who has adopted the prefix “Ro” on social media to identify himself as Rohingya.

“This is our own native land,” he continues. “We gave them an open channel to debate with us but nobody dares to debate with us because they know they are lying.”

“We entered the Rakhine land before the seventh century, then the Rakhine Buddhists invaded us in the eleventh century. Those living in the southern part were driven out from the southern side to the northern side. [Then they said] these people are invading our country from the northern side. It’s similar to Israel and Palestine’s history, as we know Palestinians became like the immigrants.”

As Muslims the Rohingya already live in a majority Buddhist country but the military, says San Lwin, want Myanmar to be “pure Buddhist”. To achieve this they stoke tension between the Buddhists and Muslims and try and force the Rohingya to flee:

“Rakhine has two or three insurgency groups fighting for the land. The Burmese government always creates communal problems and keeps them busy so they are always fighting with the Muslims and they have no time to fight with the Burmese government.”

In addition to this Rohingyas are barred from entering certain professions; they are discriminated against in the education system, in health services and when they are practicing their religion.

When Myanmar won its independence from the United Kingdom in 1948 the Rohingya were recognised as an official ethnic group and enjoyed full citizenship rights. But in 1974 the government launched operation Jasmine and took away their citizenship and national registration cards.



A Rohingya Muslim woman fled from ongoing military operations in Myanmar's Rakhine state and is seen holding her children at a refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh on 20 September 2017 [Safvan Allahverdi / Anadolu Agency]

After it had effectively rendered them stateless some 270,000 Rohingyas fled the country. Under the 1982 citizenship law the government asked everybody to apply for a new citizenship card, many of which were refused on the basis that Myanmar did not recognise them as one of its 135 ethnic groups.

In 2001 San Lwin left Myanmar legally to work in Saudi Arabia because back then his parents were officials of the state and had citizenship. But eventually the embassy stopped renewing his passport, he became stateless, and he migrated to Europe.

A particularly vicious wave of violence against the Rohingya began in August this year when the military launched an "anti-terror" operation, beating, raping, shooting and torturing Rohingyas and burning down their villages.

If you count the Rohingyas who have previously fled the country, there are now roughly 800,000 who are seeking refuge in neighbouring Bangladesh. Videos posted on social media capture hundreds of Rohingyas walking through mud and water barefoot, their possessions gathered in bundles on their back.

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Much of the anger has been directed at Myanmar's de facto leader and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, who has failed to condemn the army's abuses and has instead labelled the Rohingya terrorists, argued that the military are victims of a misinformation campaign and even accused women of reporting fake rapes.

Suu Kyi seems to be indifferent to her long fall from grace. [Over 400,000 people have signed](#) an online petition to strip her of her peace prize, led by those who campaigned for her release in the late eighties when she was held under house arrest for her efforts to bring democracy to a country living under a military dictatorship and was consequently revered as a symbol of peace.

"She was my hero too in the past," San Lwin tells me. "We supported her, all Rohingya supported her; our expectation was that the Rohingya's situation would change if she got into power. But sadly the opposite is happening. We did many campaigns when she was under house arrest – demonstrations in UK and France, online petitions, we celebrated her birthday."

When Suu Kyi founded the National League for Democracy (NLD) party in 1988 many Rohingyas joined her party in northern Rakhine state, San Lwin tells me. In the 1990 election four candidates from northern Rakhine stood but they didn't win mainly because the Rohingyas had their own political party.

"All the Rohingya members got their identity cards from the party and on those cards the Rohingya name was clearly mentioned. Now all those party members are denied their existence," he says.

Between 1948 and 2015 Rohingyas enjoyed their full voting rights and were elected into parliament. Whilst Suu Kyi was under house arrest one of the founders of the NLD branch in Buthidaung Township, U Kyaw Maung, was arrested repeatedly by military intelligence and tortured to death for refusing to resign from the party.

San Lwin doesn't think there are any Rohingya left who still support Suu Kyi:

"She never took the side of the Rohingya people or the other ethnic minorities. She doesn't want to lose her position because she struggled for many, many years to get this position, that's the reason she's not condemning [the violence]. On the other hand she's taken the side of the military, which means she's against us. Also she's denying our existence."

On the whole, news coverage in the West of the latest atrocities have been pretty accurate, reckons San Lwin. However India – where Islamophobia is rising and hate crimes against Muslims are increasing – is pumping out a lot of fake news whilst China is simply a propaganda machine for the [Myanmar] government, says San Lwin.

Officially, the Myanmar government is not allowing any reporters – or unofficially any aid – into Rakhine state but earlier this week the Chinese media visited the area.

“One of the reasons they are burning all the houses and clearing the land is they have an agreement with China,” says San Lwin.

The \$10 billion Kyauk Pyu Special Economic Zone Project agreed between China and Myanmar will see oil and gas pipes built in Rakhine state and has been criticised by activists who question whose land will be appropriated for construction to begin, and where the people living there will go.

San Lwin believes that the main reason behind all this violence is not necessarily this project. Neither is it the physical appearance of the Rohingya, nor their ethnic group or the language they speak. The problem, says San Lwin, is their religion.

Ethnic groups such as the Dainet or the Marmagyi share the Rohingyas physical appearance, language, tradition and culture yet are not Muslims, so they are recognised as official ethnic groups and have been granted full citizenship rights. Other Muslims in the country, says San Lwin, are also suffering:

“[The military] have a plan to wipe out all the Muslims in the country. This is the long-term plan. In 20 years, after they have cleared all the Rohingya population, there will be other ethnic cleansing of the other Muslim minorities in the country.”

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