
The Scramble for Rakhine

Introduction

Conflict in Myanmar today holds the track record of the longest civil war of our times. It is also one of the most complex, most protracted ones, involving some 20 armed groups struggling for autonomy, a history of failed attempts at building a nation from a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual population and a military accused of the most heinous of war crimes committed in the name of national unity.

Hopes to find a peaceful settlement to the conflict were high when the military government initiated far-reaching reforms starting in 2011 which included the lifting of censorship and creation of space to political opposition. Finally, the democratic election of a quasi-civilian government under the leadership of Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, known worldwide for her vocal opposition to the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw), consolidated the optimism within the population. The socio-political reforms led to considerable improvements in Myanmar's bilateral relations; International sanctions were lifted, and thanks to Myanmar's largely untapped wealth in natural resources and its geostrategic position connecting South and Southeast Asia, the country quickly became a focus of policy-makers in Asia and beyond. Soon enough, the phenomenon came to be dubbed the '*gold rush*' to Myanmar.

Yet, Myanmar's democratic transformation has failed to achieve peace. Four years into the new democratic government's term in office, many ethnic groups suspect that Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) are lacking a genuine will to address their communities' grievances. As a result, new waves of violence swept the country soon after the NLD's election. Thereby, violence has geographically concentrated in Rakhine State which – perhaps not coincidentally – is Myanmar's strategically most critical region. Two of Myanmar's giant rival neighbors in particular, India and China, have cast their eyes on Rakhine, and are struggling to pursue their respective ambitions in an environment torn by insurgency and terrorism.

The goal of this article is twofold. On one hand, it aims at drawing attention to the ongoing conflict in Rakhine State. Having received significant publicity in the past years with reference to the Rohingya crisis, Rakhine has largely vanished from international headlines. Little has been reported about the emergence of a new armed actor, the Arakan Army (AA), although this group has become the most formidable opponent of the Myanmar government and a major nuisance for other regional powers. This leads to the second objective; With Myanmar opening up and allowing processes of globalization and capitalism to take hold in the country, conflict dynamics cannot be explained by a reference to endemic processes alone. Therefore, the second part of the article will locate the Rakhine conflict within the broader geographical region and explore how international interests impinge and are impinged on by the conflict.

Civil war in Rakhine

Today, Myanmar is home to some 135 officially recognized ethnic nationalities. Although areas dominated by ethnic minority groups have been incorporated into various empires – first by Burmese royal families such as the Toungoo and Kongabung dynasties, and from 1885 by the British colonial powers – their location in Myanmar’s mountainous periphery rendered them difficult to access for rulers in the heartland. Consequently, Burma’s successive rulers in the country’s center allowed ethnic communities to largely retain their own traditional systems of governance as a matter of pragmatism. When the Burmese political elites set off to mold Myanmar into a highly centralized State system after the country’s independence in 1948, the first Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) were formed so as to defend their communities’ autonomy, initiating decades of insurgency against the State. The ensuing brutal suppression of secessionist groups and attempts at forcibly “*Burmanising*” Myanmar’s periphery by the successive military governments did not succeed in subduing armed actors.

Rakhine State is one of Myanmar’s ethnic areas, with 60% of its population being ethnic Arakanese (sometimes called ‘Rakhine’). The Arakanese are Buddhists like the Burmese, however, they invoke their unique history, language and traditions in order to set themselves apart from the Burmese majority. In recent years, Rakhine has drawn attention mainly with regard to the atrocities committed by the State military against the Rohingya. The Rohingya are another minority group inhabiting Rakhine but are not recognized as such; Classified as ‘*foreign immigrants*’ by the State, they have been subject to a plethora of alleged human rights violations including – as Myanmar stands currently accused – genocide.

In line with the narrative, the Arakanese have received international coverage predominantly in their role as aggressors against the Rohingya. At times, the Rohingya-crisis is even misleadingly characterized as being “*Buddhist Rakhine*” versus “*Muslim Rohingya*”. Communal violence and hate preaching by Arakanese extremists against Muslim communities in Rakhine have certainly fueled anti-Rohingya sentiments but nonetheless, in order to understand current conflict dynamics, it has to be acknowledged that the Arakanese too view themselves as victims of systematic marginalization by the State. Apart from accusing the latter of arbitrary land acquisitions, suppression of their local language and culture, and human rights abuses, the Arakanese also blame their government of exploiting their land and resources. Indeed Rakhine, said to once have been Myanmar’s most economically and culturally vibrant region, is today impoverished despite its immense wealth in natural resources.

The Arakan Army

Grievances among the Arakanese stemming from allegations of marginalization and exploitation have provided fertile ground for nationalistic (armed) movements such as the Arakan National Party (ANP) and the Arakan Army. Tellingly, Rakhine was one of the only two states in which Suu Kyi’s NLD did not win a majority in the elections of 2015 and the ANP managed to win most seats in the regional parliament through its advocacy of decidedly nationalistic goals, defended with fiery anti-Islam and anti-government rhetoric.

Instead of taking the election results as a warning signal and incentive to re-engage the region politically and economically, the government continued ignoring Rakhine aspirations. In a fashion uncomfortably remindful of Myanmar's military era, it attempted to resolve ethnic nationalism by forcing it to its knees. Accordingly, the traditional festivities mourning the fall of the mythical Rakhine kingdom of Mrauk-U were cancelled, the flying of Rakhine flags was prohibited, and a popular ANP politician and vocal opponent of the government, Dr. Aye Maung, was arrested after he had given a public speech condemning Burmese oppression of Rakhine. Finally, in early 2018, a protest in Rakhine's capital escalated and was crushed violently, resulting in the death of 7 civilians.

Needless to say, such measures did little besides adding fuel to public resentment. It is therefore hardly surprising that the resort to armed insurgency received broad approval among the Arakanese population. Consequently, the Arakan Army – founded in 2009 in neighboring Kachin State - found it easy to take foothold in Rakhine State. Under the catchphrase '*Arakan Dream 2020*', the AA – and in particular its young, highly charismatic leader, Commander-in-Chief Twan Myat Naing – managed to channel the discontent of their compatriots into a common vision; A sovereign Rakhine, where freedom from Burmese exploitation and subjugation will entail the restoration of peace and wealth for the Arakanese (Irrawaddy, 2019).

Crush the Terrorists

Between 2015 and 2019, a number of skirmishes were reported between the AA and the Tatmadaw, but it was only in early 2019 that the AA staged its first major attack. On 4 January, a group of AA fighters attacked four border police posts, killing 13 policemen and wounding another 9.

The Tatmadaw's response was immediate and heavy. According to a military general, *de facto* head of State, Suu Kyi herself gave orders to "*crush the terrorists*" (Reuters, 2019). The months following the attack witnessed an increasing militarization of Rakhine. Mortar shelling, landmines and other explosives became a daily reality for Rakhine civilians who were often caught between the conflicting parties. Within one year, hundreds were killed and wounded while a hundred thousand people fled their homes.

As time progressed and it became increasingly obvious that the AA was a force to be taken seriously, the Tatmadaw resorted to a tactic it had used in the fight against other insurgent groups in the past. The so-called '*4 cuts*' strategy aims at targeting food, funds, intelligence and recruitment of armed groups, hence weakening insurgents and forcing them into submission. A side effect of this strategy is that it takes a massive toll on the security and well-being of civilians. The government-imposed internet blackout in crisis regions in Rakhine, for example, is meant to forestall '*illegal activities*', but at the same time it prevents citizens in affected regions from attaining information, especially in recent times, about spread and preventive measures regarding the COVID-19 crisis (Wion News, 2020). Furthermore, it has

been reported that military actors have used arbitrary force against civilians in Rakhine, including extrajudicial killings, torture and arrests of those accused of collaboration with the AA as a means of deterrence. Finally, the government declared the AA a terrorist organization in March 2020, hence categorically excluding it from the negotiation fora. In addition, the designation meant that anyone suspected of being affiliated in any way with the AA could be arrested. Since then, hundreds of locals in Rakhine have been sued under the Counter-terrorism law, among them various journalists who have attempted to report on the situation in Rakhine (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

An Unprecedented Force

The government's increasingly heavy-handed attempts at getting the AA under its control have not proven successful as of yet. Despite the numerical superiority of the Tatmadaw, whose troops reach up to 500,000 - as compared to the AA's estimated cadre strength of 7,000 - 10,000 - the latter has been able not only to retain an offensive posture, but also to extend the geographic range of its military operations on account of its highly innovative military tactics. An established institution, the Tatmadaw, has not been able to formulate an effective response to this new type of warfare.

Most of Myanmar's insurgent groups' struggles are in essence about political and economic self-determination for the respective ethnic community they claim to represent. So is that of the AA – however, as opposed to other Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), it does not have permanent military bases and does, at least for the moment, not openly strive to control territory. According to Bertil Lintner, a Burma-based journalist, the AA pursues a *“different kind of warfare, it is not trying to hold territory so far, it hits the Tatmadaw hard and then just vanishes. The Burmese troops have no answer to this highly mobile warfare”* (Burma News International, 2020). Using guerilla tactics such as ambushes against government and police convoys, kidnappings and landmine attacks, the AA manages not only to evade conventional confrontations with the Tatmadaw but also demoralizes the troops and weakens the State's credibility as a security provider (Choudhury, 2019). The efficiency of psychological warfare is underpinned by the group's savvy use of digital platforms utilized to mobilize and recruit (CrisisGroup, 2019). And the strategy seems to work; Although the AA's own claim that *‘the entire population of Arakan supports us’* (E-International Relations, 2020) may be somewhat of an exaggeration, it is true that the group enjoys a high degree of legitimacy among the Arakanese. The high toll that the Tatmadaw's counter-insurgency strategy takes on the general population, thereby plays into the hands of the AA.

Apart from the success of its mobile warfare and its broad support basis in Rakhine, the AA also benefits from stable supply lines, which provide it with funding and equipment. The group not only draws incomes from donations by the Arakanese business elites and diaspora, but also from illegal trade in drugs and timber across the border with Bangladesh, China and India, although the AA denies this (Irrawaddy, 2020). Its weapons are said to be purchased from other EAO's in Myanmar; in particular from its partners in the 'Northern Alliance', a network of four EAOs including the AA, and the United Wa States Army (UWSA) (Asia Times,

2020). However, the high degree of sophistication of the equipment used by the AA has raised eyebrows – and, as this paper will explore below, led to suspicions that the group benefits from ties to a much more powerful sponsor.

Although the short-term goal of AA may be to win the minds and hearts of the Arakanese people and to gather strength, the groups' own promotional material makes it clear that on the long term, it aims at establishing some type of sovereign realm on the territory of Rakhine. In a speech from April 2020, AA Commander-in-Chief Twan Myat Naing commented that *"The struggle for national liberation and the restoration of the Arakan's sovereignty to the people of Arakan is our legitimate resistance in accordance with our natural and historic right. We are not asking the consent of the enemy; we are practically implementing our collective determination to throw off the shackles of Burmese racism and colonialism in Arakan. This is our morale and faith in our own strength that we are going to attain the independence of Arakan whether the Burmese war criminal grant us or not; nothing can stop us"* (Arakan Army, 2020).

The 'Arakan Dream 2020' and the Rohingya

Despite the fact that the war between the AA and Tatmadaw bears no direct relation to the Rohingya crisis, the geographical proximity of the two conflicts calls for some clarification on the manner in which their interests intersect.

The relationship between the Rohingya and the Arakanese is characterized by competition over land and resources, mutual mistrust and fear, which has in the past decades time and again materialized in outbursts of sectarian violence. Yet both the AA and the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) – the much weaker, much less organized Rohingya counterpart to the AA - define the Tatmadaw as their main opponent. Rumors even have it that the two groups have collaborated in order to challenge the common enemy (New York Times, 2019). Whether this is true or not, they have to date not engaged in warfare against each other.

The AA's official website states that the *"main objective of the Arakan Army is to defend the Fatherland of Arakan and to protect all peoples of Arakan. The presence of the Arakan Army in Arakan is to give peace, stability, security, freedom, justice and development to all peoples of Arakan irrespective of sex, race, religion and political belief"* (Arakan Army, 2019), and Commander-in-Chief Twan Myat Naing has stated his intention to *"support the Rohingya and help to punish the perpetrators who committed mass atrocities against the Muslims in Rakhine state"* (Cowley, 2020). It is, however, questionable whether the suggestion of including the Rohingya into the 'Arakan Dream 2020' is genuine, or a stunt designed to garner international approval. After all, most references in the AA's promotional material frame the envisioned independent Rakhine in terms of a *'Rakhine for the Arakanese'*. Furthermore, given the radical nature of Rakhine nationalism and the historically strained relationship between the two ethnic nationalities, it seems unlikely that the Rohingya have a place in the 'Arakan Dream'. What is certain is that the deterioration of the security situation in Rakhine

affects, both the Rohingya who have remained in Rakhine State, and those who have sought refuge in Bangladesh, pushing the possibility of their repatriation into ambiguity.

The 'scramble for Rakhine' – curse or opportunity?

In an increasingly interconnected, globalized world, almost any conflict has international ramifications, ranging from internal conflict spill-over to interference of external actors and proxy war. The international dimensions of the Rakhine conflict are not – yet – as obvious as for example, the Syrian or Somalian civil wars; So far, no third party has directly engaged in confrontations with either the AA or the Tatmadaw. Nevertheless, the fact that two ambitious giants in Myanmar's immediate neighborhood have increasingly high stakes in the Rakhine state raises questions as to the strategies by which China and India secure their investments in Rakhine, and the consequences of their involvement in the conflict.

The international importance of Rakhine is a consequence of its geostrategic location and its wealth in natural resources. For China, the vast oil and gas reserves at Rakhine's coast constitute an opportunity to satisfy the countries' growing demand for energy, and its access to the Andaman Sea provides it with a supply route for its energy imports from the Middle East. Furthermore, Myanmar's location between South and Southeast Asia makes it a strategically critical component in China's Belt and Road Initiative, since it may act as a gateway for China's ambition to extend its influence into Southeast Asia. Accordingly, China has invested heavily in a pipeline transporting gas from Rakhine's Kyaukpyu port directly into China's Yunnan Province, and is currently building a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) including a deep water port, railway lines, airports, logistics, highways and other industrial clusters and infrastructures.

From the Indian perspective, China's growing presence in its own backyard has become a major reason for concern. India has therefore launched its own mega-project in Rakhine. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Project, designed to connect Calcutta with the seaport of Sittwe in Rakhine, is part of India's 'Act East' policy and may be viewed as an attempt to counterbalance China's regional influence by improving its own connectivity with ASEAN and beyond.

What, then, are the consequences of China's and India's struggle for influence in Rakhine for the conflict itself? On one hand, both investing countries and the Myanmar government maintain the narrative of a 'win-win situation', claiming that investments will facilitate economic growth which, in turn, will reduce incentives to engage in armed conflict. In general terms, such narratives are based on statistical evidence of the connection between violent conflict and poverty, from which the applicability of investment as a means to reduce violence is deduced.

However, this reasoning constitutes a gross oversimplification of the complex realities of civil war. Poverty and underdevelopment without doubt increase the likelihood of violent conflict, yet, it is rarely its singular driver. The Rakhine conflict is an *ethnic* conflict, which is about historical grievances, political self-determination and the preservation of ethnic culture just

as much as about economic development. As suggested by a growing body of academic literature, conflict resolution strategies focusing on economic growth alone are unlikely to succeed in reducing violence (Piazza, 2006).

Secondly, and more importantly, even if we accept the credo that economic development contributes to the reduction of violent conflict, it can only do so if it is ascertained that the benefits of investments trickle down to the masses. In Myanmar's case, the opposite is true; A mix of weak investment regulations, a lack of good governance, weak enforcement of the rule of law as well as widespread corruption precipitate a misallocation of profits to the benefit of Burma's military, business and political elites, while little to nothing reaches the public. In an interview with the Transnational Institute, a Rakhine citizen describes his discontent with this situation: *"I am concerned about the sale of natural gas offshore in the Bay of Bengal of Rakhine State. The natural resources belong to us, the Rakhine people, and at least the Rakhine people should have a stake in it. But the proceeds do not go to us, they only go to the central government"* (Buchanan, Kramer and Woods, 2013).

In addition, investments in Myanmar are almost exclusively concentrated on extractive industries. Investment projects in sectors such as mining, hydropower dams and logging are particularly prone to incentivize land 'grabs' and ecological degradation as a result of their sheer scale. Activists claim that for the construction of the China-Myanmar gas pipeline alone, more than 20,000 indigenous people lost their livelihoods through confiscation of arable lands along the route (Asia Sentinel, 2017). In short, local populations do not reap the benefits but suffer the externalities of investment. This condition doubtlessly fuels, rather than dampens, insurgency.

Another factor by which China's engagement in Rakhine in particular has potential to exacerbate the conflict requires mention. Officially, China categorically rejects allegations of collaborating with insurgent groups in Myanmar (Licas News, 2020) and has vowed to assist the State in its fight against separatism and terrorism (Joy, 2018) through generous funding, weapons and training to the Tatmadaw. However, a number of factors – such as the AA's use of highly sophisticated Chinese weapons, and the fact that the AA regularly attacks Indian targets in Rakhine but spares Chinese ones – have raised suspicions that China is playing a double game. Indeed, collaboration in some way or another with insurgent groups in Myanmar, and especially of the AA, doubtlessly benefits Chinese advances in Myanmar by allowing China to pursue its infrastructural ambitions uninterrupted. However, if accusations regarding China's sponsorship of the AA hold true, this may add an extra layer of complexity to the conflict. As explained by Gurr (2014), conflicts in which both sides to a conflict receive political support and military assistance from foreign sponsors are among the deadliest and most protracted of all civil wars in the contemporary world.

Conclusion

The Arakan Army, with its innovative tactic of mobile warfare, apt use of social media and considerable regional public support, has become the most formidable obstacle to the peace process in Myanmar. Not only does the State redirect valuable resources into the fight against

the AA that otherwise could be used for genuine development purposes, but the government's brutal suppression of the insurgency also erodes the trust of other EAOs in the sincerity of the former to address the grievances of ethnic groups.

The escalation of the security situation in Myanmar, however, is not merely a national issue. The past years have witnessed an increasingly bold Chinese government with seemingly few scruples when it comes to the pursuit of its global ambitions. This has prompted growing concerns among its neighbors of a Chinese economic, military and political superpower stretching its arms further and further. India's attempts to counterbalance this has led to competition between the two, not only in Myanmar's Rakhine State, but also in other counties across South Asia such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Many of those regions where competitions between China and its challengers play out are notorious for their political instability – and therefore, understanding the implications of the involvement of those foreign powers for commercial and strategic purposes is critical.

The above analysis suggests that, contrary to the narrative of foreign investment as a tool of conflict resolution, the 'scramble for Rakhine' acts as a driver of conflict. Firstly, the arming of both conflict parties with up-to-date technology as a means to secure allegiances enables the continuous escalation of violence. Secondly, and arguably more importantly, the massive infrastructural projects that are currently being implemented in Rakhine have the potential to aggravate the grievances of the Rakhine population, who feel that their lands are sold out.

This is not to say that foreign investment necessarily acts as a driver of conflict. Myanmar's Rakhine is chronically underdeveloped, and in light of the State's lack of funds and technology to monetarize its resources, foreign investment may provide a path out of poverty for Rakhine. However, it is the task of both the State and external powers to ensure incomes from investments are used in a people-centric way. For the Myanmar government, this would mean to either re-invest into local structures such as schools, roads and healthcare or to allocate gains to Rakhine's regional government. For investors, it means to ascertain that social corporate responsibility norms are followed. More specifically, any investment project should engage local communities in every step of the investment process from its planning to its implementation and take their concerns regarding environmental and social consequences seriously. Furthermore, by making use of the local workforce instead of importing their own nationals, companies can contribute to economic growth in the region they invest in.

Nonetheless, on the long run the only way to resolve conflict in Rakhine is through a long-term political solution between insurgent groups and the Myanmar government. The core demand of all ethnic groups, including the AA, is a rearrangement of the State which allows ethnic communities to exert a higher degree of self-governance. Unfortunately, neither the government nor the Tatmadaw demonstrate a willingness to enter into negotiations with the AA. In the light of a lacking will to peace, investing States add a layer of complexity to the Rakhine crisis.

Peace in Rakhine still has a long way to go.

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