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Fighting Fear with Fire: Analyzing the Causes of the Rohingya Conflict in Myanmar

Submitted by:

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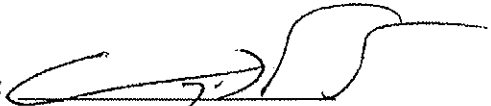
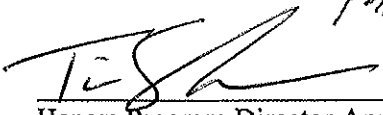
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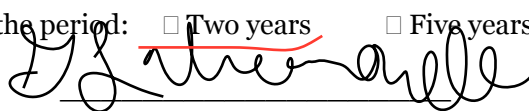
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*Fighting Fear with Fire: Analyzing the Causes of the Rohingya Conflict in Myanmar*

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## **Introduction**

After the end of the cold war, conflicts throughout the world shifted from a pattern of primarily interstate in nature to increasingly intrastate. Even more shocking is that most of these conflicts in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been related to tensions among ethnic groups (Estaban 2012). Not only have ethnic conflicts dominated the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century warfare, but they have proven to be some of the most brutal forms of conflict, often producing intense violence. The level and intensity of violence may range across nations, but there is an undeniable truth that ethnic conflicts produce some of the most intense forms of violence (Posen 1993, 27). Due to the high intensity and extreme complexity of ethnic wars, conflicts such as these are some of the most difficult to mediate and solve. In order to address this issue, the study of ethnic conflict has aimed understand why ethnic conflicts occur and how they might be solved. Although there have been great advances in the sphere of ethnic conflict studies, given the status and outcome of many modern day conflicts, it is evident that the solution for preventing and mediating ethnic conflict is far from reach. Policy makers have utilized a range of techniques for preventing ethnic wars such as international intervention, military force, and change in public policy to prevent and mediate ethnic conflict. Often, such efforts have been flawed and ineffective.

The misunderstanding and inability to mediate ethnic conflict can be clearly seen in the current Rohingya conflict in Myanmar. Since August 25, 2017, almost 582 thousand Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh to seek safety (United Nations News Centre 2017). Thousands more have have been displaced in recent years as a result of the ethnic war. In addition to their displacement, Rohingya Muslims have been subjected to brutal acts of violence which are alarming, highly gruesome and often a violation of human rights. Furthermore, assertions have been made suggesting that acts of genocide are occurring within Myanmar. Although it is clear that the

conflict is brutal, intense, and violent, it is unclear as to the source of the conflict. In order to effectively address the issue and propose possible policy solutions, it is necessary that a deeper understanding of the conflict be found.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to analyze the possible causes of the Rohingya conflict in Myanmar by applying different theories of ethnic conflict to the Rohingya case in order to investigate the most likely explanation. Its thesis is that the Rohingya conflict is occurring due to insecurities among ethnic group identities which are manifested in an ethnic security dilemma. Consequently, this ethnic security dilemma provokes fear and violence. This will be demonstrated in the following order. First, the analysis of current literature and theories of ethnic conflict will be examined. Within this section different theories of ethnic conflict will be discussed such as primordialism, instrumentalism, institutionalism, and identity-based theories. Next, a historical background of the Rohingya conflict will be presented in order to serve as a foundation for further analysis. Following, a methods section including hypothesis and expected results will be provided. Herein, the most likely cause of the Rohingya conflict will be formulated based on the previously explained theories. After formulating a hypothesis, it will be tested through case-study analysis to see if the case of the Rohingya conflict supports or negates the hypothesis. Finally, possible solutions for conflict management and prevention will be extrapolated.

### **Common Explanations for a Complex Problem**

Primordialism argues that the source of ethnic conflict is rooted in deep ancient hatreds between ethnic groups (Varshney 2009, 280). These ancient hatreds are a result of “the propensity to favor kin over nonkin” (Vanhanen 1999, 57). Additionally, primordialism suggests that ethnic group ties are “a stronger bond and a more powerful motivator of human conduct than the pull of civic ties being forged by new states” (Geertz 1963, 1994). Because of this, social and political

constructs such as state nationalism are easily discounted as sources of conflict. As Connor points out, at man's core, shared ancestry will always exceed any sort of rationality due to the ideas of "shared blood" or "shared ancestry" (Varshney 2009, 280). Furthermore, Berghe explains that behavior is not limited simply by the presence of differing ethnicities but is extended to any organisms that may relate to their biological roots (1981, 32). Consequently, tangible connections may be related to the conflict that are directly linked to the identity and definition of that specific ethnic group (Vanhanen 1999, 56). For example, a certain group may engage in conflict over territory that has been passed down from generation to generation (Moore 2016, 94). These ancient tensions are "old and, therefore, deeply historically rooted" which make them exceptionally hard to subdue (Varshney 1999, 56). As Vanhanen argues, humans "have evolved to favor our relatives in the struggle for existence because it has been an adaptive behavior pattern" (Nagel, 28).

Additionally, it is important to point out that the term ethnicity in primordialism is seen as a biological set of traits passed from one generation to the next and therefore ethnicity is a rigid construct (Francis 2013, 57). So although primordialism is heavily dependent on ethnic group identity as a causal factor of violence, it suggests that these identities are unchanging and are ancient. Identities are not affected heavily by the present political and social influences but rather are stable and unchanging throughout time. Despite the undeniable biological traits that often are seen across varying ethnicities, many scholars argue that ethnicity is much more fluid and constructive than primordialists suggest.

Arguments against primordialism point out a variety of flaws. First, primordialism suggests that identities among ethnic groups are stable and unchanging. As Brubaker points out, "ethnic boundaries are fluid categories that change over time, which may matter in different ways" (Weidmann and Nils, 1179). He argues that primordialism does not account for social and

political factors that may heavily shape conflict or group identity (2016). Varshney argues that primordialism does not explain why ethnic wars occur because there is a disconnect between timing of which they often occur (1999, 281). For example, Varshney explains that Yugoslavia experienced both peace and war throughout different periods of history and similarly their political makeup has changed drastically between those periods. He argues that it then seems more apparent that political institutions may play a greater role than the ancient hatreds that exist within Yugoslavia (1999, 281). Lastly, primordialism fails to explain the origins of ethnic conflict because new ethnic groups and migrant ethnic groups are often the actors engaged in conflict (Varshney 1999, 281). Hence, ancient hatreds may not explain the entirety of why ethnic conflicts occur. Now that primordialism has been explained, instrumentalism will be addressed.

In contrast to primordialism, instrumentalism attributes the cause of ethnic conflict to factors outside of biological traits and ethnicity. Ethnicity assumes an entirely different meaning in instrumentalism. As Varshney explains, instrumentalism argues that “ethnicity is neither inherent in human nature nor intrinsically valuable” but that “ethnicity masks a deeper core of interests which are either economic or political” (1999, 282). In this case, ethnicity itself is not relevant but instead it is used as a tool for self-interest. Distinguishing between ethnic groups, biological traits, and shared ancestry is not a factor understanding conflict according to instrumentalists. As Che clearly explains, conflict arises when “ethnic identities are politicized or manipulated to generate political and socio-economic advantages for an ethnic group” at the cost of another (2016). In other words, variables outside of ethnicity provoke power and economic disadvantages which therefore translate into violence. In this regard, the role of ethnicity simply exists as an instrument for gaining power, resources, or economic advantages (Varshney 1999, 284). As cited in Nathan’s analysis on Collier and Hoeffler, Nathan explores the concept that

economic gain explains why conflict occurs because of ‘grievance and greed’ (2008, 263). Furthermore, Nathan explains the ideas of Collier and Hoeffler which argue that rebellions “are motivated by greed which is presumably sufficiently common that profitable opportunities for rebellion will not be passed up” (Nathan 2008, 263). By this standard their argument suggests that the dominant factor provoking conflict is linked to economic disadvantages. Additionally, Nathan points out that Hoeffler and Collier find that grievances were hardly linked to a greater likelihood of conflict which suggests that rebellion is not necessarily linked to grievances of one ethnic group to another (2008, 263). Based on this ideas, instrumentalism may examine data such as terrain, population size, mobilization capacity and Gross Domestic Product as possible measurements in predicting the likelihood of conflict (Min and Wimmer 2010, 113). Rather than focusing on historical grievances, ancient hatreds and past conflicts, instrumentalism focuses more on the tangible variables that are in play. Often, power and economics are the main instruments that are said to play a role in provoking violence. As Sasse points out, ethnicity may be used to link and leverage certain power advantages (2016, 315). While there may be truth to some aspects of instrumentalism, the theory is not without flaws.

A number of faults exist within the theory of instrumentalism but its main fault is that instrumentalism fails to explain the non-rational factors that may contribute to provoking conflict. A number of factors such as “emotions, historical memories, and myths can exacerbate the violent implications” between group interactions (Lake and Rothchild 1996, 44). The idea that power and economics hold the greatest influence in predicting conflict simplifies the scenario far too much. Despite the influence that economic gain or power may hold, there is often an irrational component involved in ethnic conflicts. Lake and Rothchild explain that emotions may cause individuals to



act entirely irrational (Lake and Rothchild 1996, 44). Now that instrumentalism has been explained, institutionalism will be discussed.

Neither ethnicity nor power instruments play a role in explaining ethnic conflict according to institutionalists. Institutionalism suggests that “political institutions explain why some multiethnic societies have violence and, and others, peace” (Varshney 1999, 289). Van Evera argues that a few different structural factors can predict or measure the likelihood that a conflict will occur. To demonstrate, he argues that likelihood of conflict will increase if a group has greater plausibility to gain greater autonomy (1994, 8). For example, if an ethnic group feels that they will be supported by an outside force or if they have a strong mobilization they may feel that freedom is more attainable. Additionally, an ethnic group may feel freedom is more attainable if the central government is already unstable. In both cases, the groups may be more likely to rebel because they feel autonomy is more easily attainable. In addition to a group’s plausibility of freedom, the amount of intermingled nationalities within a border can further predict if conflict is more likely to occur. Lastly, Van Evera argues that the legitimacy of political and communal borders will predict the likelihood of a violent conflict to occur (1994, 8). In all of these cases, the structure of the state is dictating the outcome.

Additionally, institutions of a state may be prone to creating economic disadvantages for one group over another which can ultimately cause conflict. More important to note is that the origins of the economic disadvantage can be attributed to the state structure. As Mishali-Ram explains in the case of Pakistan, there are a great deal of “discriminative policies expressed by economic and political inequality among the main ethnic groups” which ultimately contributes to ethnic tensions (2015, 320). The fact of the matter is not the inequalities at hand, but the system that encourages and enforces these inequities. Furthermore, Norwich explains that ethnic conflict

and mobilization for violence emerges directly from “initial conditions within a given state” and is linked to the political context in which it occurs (2015, 355). Norwich hypothesizes that institutionalized ethnic movements will typically be stronger and more cohesive in both their unity and collective ideology (2015, 355). Similar to previously explained theories, institutionalism also falls short to explain the entirety of ethnic conflict.

Despite the influence that institutionalism has in explaining ethnic conflict, it falls short in a variety of ways. First, institutionalism tends to overemphasize the role that institutions play and ultimately overlooks other key actors that may be involved (Norwich 2015, 365). To demonstrate, Norwich points out that “structural accounts often tend to be ‘state centric’ discounting the range of actors and interactions that combine to shape movement” (2015, 356). Additionally, institutionalism cannot explain why governments with similar structures are able to produce a diverse range of conflicts (Norwich 2015, 357). Various political and social structures may produce extremely different outcomes of peace and conflict. Institutionalism cannot explain why regional variations occur within the same country (Varshney 1999, 289). One region within a state may experience conflict while another may experience peace. Since institutionalism suggests the overall composition of the state influences conflict, then it cannot explain why conflict may vary within the borders of a state. Now that institutionalism has been explained, theory of identity will be explained.

Theorists of identity suggest that structural, primordial, or instrumental factors do not play the dominant role in causing ethnic conflict. While such factors may be in play, identity theorists argue that identity is the most important factor for inspiring and agitating conflict. First, it is important to point out that identity theorists often have a different understanding of the concept of ethnicity. On the contrary to primordialists, identity theorists suggest that ethnicity is not rigid but

is rather a fluid concept. Rather than being fixed, “ethnic boundaries are fluid categories that change over time, which may matter in different ways” (Weidmann and Nils, 1179). Ethnicity holds a different meaning within the theory of identity instead of basing ethnicity on biological characteristics. As Albert most clearly explains, “ethnicity is an ordering principle and nothing more” (Albert 32, 2012). This understanding of ethnicity suggests that ethnicity alone does not indicate any sort of group cohesion, rather it allows for distinction between individuals. Ethnicity therefore, is not strictly dependent on a specific set of characteristics or common perception but should be seen as a category or label (Albert 74, 2012). Ethnic group identity is understood as the feeling or attachment of one’s ethnic group membership (Albert 73, 2012). Because of this, ethnic group identity is the main factor in predicting conflict.

Albert most clearly states the role of identity in predicting ethnic group conflict. He explains that “identity adds fuel for both the causes of ethnic conflict and the intensity of violence in battle” (Albert 2013, 2). In other words, ethnic group identity gives power to a movement because it brings cohesion to one group of individuals and creates division from another group of individuals. Group identity may provoke and fuel a movement especially when a groups’ identity is threatened because identity significantly impacts how groups behave and react (Albert 2013, 2). The relationship between identity threats and action best understood by the argument that an ethnic group identity relates directly to one’s existence (Albert 2015, 2). Upon facing threats to group identity, a group may encounter an ethnic security dilemma which will now be explained.

The concept of an ethnic security dilemma exists because groups may act based upon the threats of one another. Group identity may be strengthened simply by the presence of another group as well as by shared perceptions of other present groups (Posen 30, 1993). The ethnic security dilemma states that when a group is confronted by another ethnic group this will provoke

an imperative for one group to provide for their own security (Kaufman 1996, 110). As the group seeks its own security, it will make a defensive action. One ethnic group may view a defensive action as an offensive action from another group, thus causing them to strengthen their own existence (Posen 1993, 328). Consequently, group identity will become more cohesive, more aggressive, and more salient as one group is confronted with another. Furthermore, stronger group cohesion can translate into better mobility and power (Posen 1993, 30).

While factors such as power, resources and institutions may seem relevant in determining collective action, identity is always the underlying cause because it shapes how groups will behave and respond to situations. Because a group's identity is directly related to its existence, there can be no separation between ethnic group identity and conflict. When identity is threatened, the entire existence of the group is threatened. This phenomenon can clearly be demonstrated in the case of the Rwandan genocide because conflict resulted from "emplacing and displacing particular group categories" (Moore 2015, 103). Due to the emplacing and displacing, group identities were threatened and therefore, conflict resulted. It can be seen that these "categories" are simple constructs and perceptions meaning is given to (Moore 2015, 103). So although Moore explains the Rwandan genocide through the lens of an ethno-territorial theoretical explanation, it is clear that group perceptions and identity lie at the core. The only true reason conflict occurred was because of the meanings the groups gave themselves. Additionally, Shayo and Sambanis argue that "processes of ethnic identification may magnify the importance of political institutions" which in turn can effect perceived differences across ethnic groups (Sambini and Shayo 2013, 294). The underlying idea here is that perceptions frame actions (Sambini and Shayo 2013, 294). Now that the theory of identity has been explained, the ethnic security dilemma will be further explained as it relates to fear.

## **The Ethnic Security Dilemma and Fear of the Future**

Identity theory best explains the nature of ethnic group conflict. More specifically, the ethnic security dilemma holds the greatest explanatory power of why ethnic group conflict occurs. The security dilemma which is typically used within the context of International Relations Theory can be applied within the context of ethnic conflict. As Posen most clearly states, “what one does to enhance one’s own security causes reactions that, in the end, can make one less secure” (Posen 1993, 104). Essentially, as states seek to obtain their own security, they appear to be an offensive threat which will prompt an opposing state to increase its own security in response (Posen 1999). This cycle will continue to occur as states view one another’s defensive actions as offensive ones which will eventually prompt a preemptive action of one group (Posen 1999). In the same way, the ethnic security dilemma occurs as ethnic groups interact with one another. Ethnic groups seek security in their identity because their security is directly related to their existence. As Roe points out, “societal insecurities—threats to significant ethnic, national, and religious identities—have become ever more prominent in relation to more traditional, military centric security concerns” (Roe 2005, 4). In the same way, ethnic groups seek to solidify and maintain their strong identity which may generate a hostility with another group.

Furthermore, fear plays a role in this ethnic security dilemma because groups will act upon a fear of the future. Fear is a shared subjective feeling that the entire ethnic group holds so it therefore becomes part of the group identity (Lake and Rothchild 55, 1996). Additionally, “in psychological terms, fear functions as a powerful motivation for escaping threat” (Lira 2001, 111). This concept is perfectly demonstrated within the security dilemma. As Roe explains, the ethnic security dilemma occurs because groups are often uncertain about the true intentions of another group (Roe 2005, 9). What is even more unfortunate is that “each party is unaware that they are

creating insecurity in the other” (Roe 2005, 9). Conflict does not originate as a consequence of ancient hatreds, biological differences, or the structure of the system but rather occurs due to the security dilemma and fear of the future (Lake and Rothchild 1996, 55). As Lake and Rothchild point out, many analysts suggest there is a “deep psychological—perhaps even physiological—need for humans to belong to a group” which when threatened will produce conflict (1996, 56). In order to achieve peace, it is necessary to “reassure minority groups of their physical and cultural safety” (Lake and Rothchild 1996, 56). A certain level of security must be present to ensure that identities are not threatened in the future. Securing ethnic group identity may be obtained through changes in policy, better communication among groups, or by ensuring the group identity will not be oppressed or destroyed by the other. What is most essential is that group identity is secured and that the group does not find itself engaged in an ethnic security dilemma. Now that each perspective has been examined, it is necessary to argue that the best theory to explain ethnic conflict is identity theory. While each hold some degree of explanatory power, theory related to identity possesses the greatest degree of explanatory power because it encompasses all aspects of group action. Economics, power and institutions all play an important role in ethnic conflicts however each of these elements is directly influenced by identity. Therefore, it is possible to argue that at root, identity can explain how and why ethnic conflicts occur. Now that identity has been explained, a historical background of the Rohingya conflict will be examined.

### **A Long History of Violence**

Myanmar has experienced an immense number of changes and transitions that have shaped its history, political composition, culture, and identity today. Colonization of Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, was one of the most influential aspects in shaping the country. In 1886, the

British took control of Burma seeking to implement both direct and indirect rule of the people. (Walton 208, 893). British colonization brought various cultural and social influences but the greatest impact of colonization was the territorial and political makeup of the country because it “significantly affected the relationships” of the people inhabiting these places (Walton 2008, 983). During annexation, an area composed of ethnic minorities, known as the Frontier Areas, was added under jurisdiction of British rule. Prior to British rule, the Frontier Areas were not part of Burma but instead they were ruled by their own chiefs or princes (Kipgen 2016, 10). The British rulers imposed both indirect and direct rule throughout the country which heavily divided the nation (Walton 2008, 893). The less developed Frontier Areas were highly independent and continued to be self-governing while Burma Proper was more strictly regulated by the British (Kipgen 2016, 10). Because British ruling was so nominal in the Frontier Areas, ethnic groups were able to maintain their own traditions, political institutions, and cultural identities (Kipgen 2016, 11). It is clear that ethnic identities were able to thrive under this system of leadership despite the country becoming unified under British leadership.

Consequences of British rule became apparent even before Burma gained its independence in 1947. Tensions within the already ethnically diverse country were “no doubt exacerbated by not only territorial divisions but by colonial military recruitment policies as well” (Walton 2008, 893). Deadly riots occurred during the pre-independence of Burma because “Burmese nationalists looked to assert the dominance of ethnic Burmans” (Burke 2016, 262). The presence of racial categories which were applied during colonialism by the British were highlighted and manipulated during this pre-independence and early independence period (Burke 2016, 262). There has been little to no altering of these established ethnic categories since (Burke 2016, 262).

Burmans began to oppose British rule and turned to Japan for help to push out the British forces (Walton 2008, 894). A Burmese individual named Aung San petitioned for Japanese involvement in the independence movement but this plan backfired when it appeared as though Japan had become simply another occupying foreign force (Walton 2008, 894). During this time, tensions between ethnic minority groups rose as animosity between different military alliances were introduced. Furthermore, tensions between the majority Burmans and other ethnic minorities increased as “some Burman leaders also considered themselves superior to ethnic minorities” (Kipgen 2016, 9). Despite the conflict of interest, the Japanese were ultimately ousted from the country through the help of the British military. Although independence was gained, it was gained by “networks of armed guerillas and soldiers fighting *against* the same enemy but fighting *for* very different visions of the future (Walton 2008, 895).

Although Burma had defeated the Japanese, Burmese war leaders were still eager to gain complete independence (Walton 2008, 894). British officials began to work out the details of Burma’s independence but one of the biggest questions regarded whether the Frontier areas would be considered under Burmese jurisdiction or not (Walton 2008, 895). The Frontier people were included under British rule but they were “apprehensive that the majority Burmans would not listen to their interests after the country’s independence from the British” (Kipgen 2016, 9). In a meeting among representatives from Frontier areas as well as Burma Proper, Burman leaders emphasizes the idea that a under a unified Burma, Frontier areas would be allowed to have local autonomy and full authority to continue their own cultural and religious practices (Kipgen 2016, 14). This plea was not received by ethnic minority leaders as they argued against being under Burmese jurisdiction entirely. Despite opposition to this plan, the Panglong agreement was eventually signed by British Prime Minister and independence leader Aung San thus unifying Burma Proper



and the Frontier Areas. During the signing of the agreement, no representatives from any Frontier Areas were present (Kipgen 2016, 15). While the Panglong agreement was not aimed to take away autonomy from these minorities groups, the lack of initial representation and failure of implementation “increased mistrust and misunderstanding between the majority ethnic Burman-led central government and other ethnic nationalities” (Kipgen 2016, 17).

In 1948, Burma was under a parliamentary rule until the military carried out a coup in 1962. The failed parliamentary democracy was heavily caused by “fear and anxiety among the minorities that Burmanization would eventually lead to the loss of their culture and identity” (Kipgen 2016, 19). The 1962 Military coup led to the nationalization of all businesses along with the demonetization of currency which prompted violent demonstrations against the government (Kipgen 2016, 20). The 1980s were a time filled with much unrest and upheaval because of many failed socialist policies. In 1990, Aung San Suu Kyi won the first fair and free election but it was ignored by the military (BBC News 2017). The year 2003 marked the first steps towards a new democracy but progress has been slow since. Currently, the military still holds a great deal of power despite the existence of parliamentary elections. Power is therefore not truly democratically shared among the peoples and various ethnic groups. At present 135 recognized ethnic minority groups reside in Myanmar. Now that a brief background about Myanmar has been provided, the Rohingya people will be discussed.

The Rohingya people are “one of the most persecuted and ignored minorities in the world” (Pertanika 2015, 3). The Rohingya are an ethnic group residing in northeast Myanmar in the region bordering Bangladesh called the Rakhine State. There are approximately 1 million Rohingya living in Myanmar and predominantly in the Rakhine State (Funk and Wagnalls 2016, 1). Whether or not the Rohingya are a native group to Myanmar is a topic that is heavily debated (Syed 2017). Funk

and Wagnalls argue that the “Rohingya have lived in Myanmar for generations” and that the “Muslim peoples have lived in Northern Burma for centuries” (2016, 1). Furthermore, in a report from Scottish physician Francis Buchanan dated in 1799, Buchanan documented that the state of Arakan was often referred to as “Rovingaw” by those who had long been natives of the Arakan state (Syed 2017). In contrast, there is an idea that during British colonialism migrants from Bengal were brought in to be workers in the unoccupied Arakan region (Syed 2017). Because of this, the Rohingya are not viewed as natives to the region. Regardless of their origins, the Rohingya people have never been officially recognized by the government of Myanmar despite their recognition by the United Nations, United States Congress, European Parliament, and a variety of other international organizations.

Aside from the disputed origins, it is documented that the Arakan region has experienced conflict since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Farzana traces conflict region to 1784 as a result of rebellion against oppression from the Burmese government (2015, 294). In response to oppression and violence, thousands of Buddhist and Muslim Rakhines fled the area and joined the British ruled Bengal colony (Farzana 2015, 295). Consequently, animosity towards the state of Arakan and the Burmese king was deepened (Farzana 2015, 295). British colonization also created much greater conditions for ethnic conflict to occur. The British enforced a system of ‘divide-and-rule’ which “was responsible for creating the idea of ethnic boundaries and enforcing territorial ownership” (Farzana 2015, 295). Ethnic boundaries were further solidified during British colonization as ethnic minorities were allowed to reach high levels of colonial services which allowed them to govern their own territories (Farzana 2015, 295). Lastly, the British colonizers further solidified ethnic identities through their recruitment process of armed forces by hiring minorities intentionally (Farzana 2015, 295). During this time the Burmese were excluded in military recruitment by

replacing them with minority groups and “thus created a sense of ethnic insecurity among the Burmese” (Farzana 2015, 295).

British colonization not only influenced the entire country of Myanmar but certainly defined and shaped how the Rohingya were to be viewed post-independence. The Rohingya’s geographical location on the borderland of present day Bangladesh played an “important role in constructing, reshaping, and complicating the Rohingya people’s identity who have been living the Burma-Bangladesh borderland for centuries” (Farzana 2015, 297). Things were more complicated as the Frontier areas became officially united with Burma Proper during independence. Not only did their presence on the borderland create a sense of animosity towards them, their difference in religion from the rest of Buddhist Burma created a sense of division. Farzana points out that “it was easy for government officials to view and represent them as ‘others’” (Farzana 2015, 297).

While the Rohingya were issued national registration cards upon independence in 1948, the military coup of 1962 began “the erosion of Rohingya civil and political rights” (Syed 2015). In a 1974 election, the Rakhine people were denied rights to elect representatives (Syed 2015). Furthermore, the Arakan state was renamed the Rakhine State which brought cohesion to the Rakhine people but simply disregarded the rights of the Rohingya (Syed 2015). Military operations in 1978 caused more than 200,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh as they attempted to “escape military operations to purge Burma of so-called illegal foreigners” (Syed 2015). In addition to this, the 1982 government imposed the Citizenship Law which required groups to prove an ancestry dating back 160 years thus classifying the Rohingya people as illegitimate citizens (Syed 2015). In 1991 and 1992 military operations prompted roughly 260,000 Rohingya to flee to neighboring Bangladesh (Syed 2015).

The 2008 military government implemented a new constitution in attempts to fix relations with the international community and political turmoil of the past decades. The new constitution made progress but tensions surrounding the Rohingya made little improvement. In June 2012, violence in the Rakhine State broke out between Rohingya and Rakhine individuals provoked by the rape and murder of a Buddhist woman by three Rohingya men (Syed 2015). In retaliation the hundreds of Rakhine individuals attacked a bus filled with Rohingya individuals, killing 10. This sparked a period of violence between Rohingya and Rakhine and was heightened by the fact that Myanmar military joined the Rakhine in killing and stealing from Rohingya (Syed 2015). Zarni and Cowley argue that genocide has been occurring for over 30 years against the Rohingya people and that it has unfortunately been renewed in recent times. A spokesperson for the Rakhine State Government refuted allegations of ethnic cleansing by stating “How can it be ethnic cleansing? They are not an ethnic group.” (Zarni Cowley 2014). Communal violence combined with oppressive policies have cultivated and reinforced violence within the country. Syed notes that 140,000 Rohingya fled to internally displaced camps where they have essentially become detention centers. Additionally, those Rohingya individuals who are refusing to identify as Bengali have been placed in temporary camps for “indefinite periods” (Syed 2015).

Since October 2016, violence towards the Rohingya has increased at an alarming rate. Rohingya militant groups have emerged in retaliation which has increased military violence even further (BBC News 2017). The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) is one of the most active groups that have responded in violence. ARSA claims their goal is to “defend, salvage and protect the Rohingya community” by fighting through defensive attacks (BBC News 2017). Furthermore, ARSA has stated that it has no affiliation with any terrorist group and does not commit any acts of terrorism “against any civilians regardless of their religion and ethnic origin”

(Al Jazeera 2017). Confusingly, this claim is disputed by contrary evidence of “intelligence reports linking the group to radical elements in the Muslim World” (Lintler 2017). The possibility that Islamic extremism is finding a foothold in this scenario creates an even messier situation. If radical jihadists take advantage of the political turmoil, the Myanmar Militia will have even more incentive to retaliate against the Rohingya population. One of the most recent attacks claimed by ARSA was on police and army posts which ultimately resulted in a deadly clash killing more than five hundred individuals (Albert 2017). Myanmar military officials argue that their actions are targeting Rohingya militants and terrorists rather than innocent civilians (Fisher 2017). Unfortunately, this statement cannot explain the massive amount of atrocities, internally displaced persons, and persecution that has taken place. Even more concerning is that Aung San Suu Kyi who is the de facto leader of Myanmar has ignored the problem and does not want to recognize or discuss this subject altogether (Albert 2017). Aung San Suu Kyi “has denied that ethnic cleansing is taking place and dismissed international criticism of her handling of the crisis” (Albert, 2017). Furthermore, access has often been limited and restricted to journalists attempting to go inside conflict zones (Head 2017). Because journalists and aid groups are unable to go inside conflict zones, assessing an accurate state of damage is difficult (Albert 2017). The international community has voiced its concern for the mass atrocities against this group by agreeing that it is the most persecuted minority in the world (Canal 2017).

### **Theoretical Application and Analysis: Rohingya Identity Crisis**

The Rohingya conflict in Myanmar is clearly an example of how ethnic group identities provoke conflict. In this case, an ethnic security dilemma is present which consequently stimulates

group fear and therefore creates conflict. Ethnic group identity of the Rohingya was reinforced throughout history and has impacted the salience of group identity today.

Historically, the Rohingya identity has been shaped and coalesced through a number of events. During colonization, the Rohingya identity was further established through the policies which helped define and implement ethnic categories (Burke 2016, 262). Both military recruitment tactics and leadership positions required the presence of ethnic group categories through British rule (Walton 2008, 893). Because of this, the Rohingya identity became further reinforced. Although a salient ethnic group identity itself is not a problem, conflict arises when identity is faced with a threat.

An ethnic security dilemma has been occurring with the Rohingya people for almost a century and has been exacerbated recently. Early beginnings of an ethnic security dilemma can be seen during the independence movement as the “Burmese nationalists looked to assert the dominance of ethnic Burmans” (Burke 2016, 262). Initially, the Burmese felt their identity was threatened by the ethnic minorities due to their lack of access to leadership during British rule. In response to this threat from ethnic minorities, they sought to impose their dominance. Consequently, ethnic minority groups such as the Rohingya saw this defensive move as an offensive action and therefore sought to protect their own group identity. It is clear that conflict could arise out of an ethnic security dilemma if changes were not made in the future. Unfortunately, in the post-colonization and independence era, efforts to create a stable environment for minorities failed again.

During the diplomatic discussions of independence, ethnic minorities were never given the security they sought after. Prior to signing independence agreements, minority leaders stressed the importance of having local governing systems so that “there would be no interference with their

customs or religions” (Kipgen 2016, 14). Minority groups such as the Rohingya were seeking to secure their identities but unfortunately the lack of representation in the final independence agreements increased the lack of trust towards the majority Burman population. As a result, there was an “increased mistrust and misunderstanding between the majority ethnic Burman-led central governments and other ethnic minorities” (Kipgen 2016, 17). Through independence, the Burman majority identity became further solidified and the ethnic minority group identities like the Rohingya, were also solidified. This scenario created an “us” verses “them” situation which further divided and separated the different ethnic groups within the country. Now that it is clear how identity has shaped the historical context of the Rohingya group, the current developments of this same security dilemma scenario will be examined.

There has been little to no improvement upon the ethnic security dilemma which began during the establishment of Myanmar’s independence. Rather than unifying the nation, the two groups have been further divided and this has therefore intensified the security dilemma. The resentment, persecution and discrimination towards the Rohingya citizens has occurred because the majority population views the Rohingya as a threat to their own existence. This is largely due to due to the fact that the Rohingya identity and cultural practices are extremely different than the majority population. For example, the Rohingya “differ from Myanmar’s dominant Buddhist groups ethnically, linguistically, and religiously” (Albert 2017). Newsweek suggests that the “reason for this hatred, according to human rights activists, is simple: nationalism-fueled racism” (Persio 2017). Additionally, the International Crisis Group has explained that a “country-wide anti-Muslim sentiment makes it politically difficult for the government to take steps seen as supportive of Muslim rights” (Albert 2017). The anti-Muslim sentiment throughout the country creates a tricky situation especially for political leaders who often appease majority preferences.

The anti-Muslim sentiment has rapidly fueled an identity war between the groups. All of this, combined with the fact that the Rohingya population numbers to almost 1.4 million individuals make them appear to be an even greater threat to the majority Burmese group identity. The Council on Foreign Relations also points out that the Rakhine State is the least developed state within Myanmar, having a poverty rate of 78 percent which has certainly intensified the situation (Albert 2017). The economic disparity between the groups creates a further divide between the two and reinforces identities further. Despite the complex historical backgrounds of this conflict, the simple theme is exceedingly clear—when identity is threatened an ethnic security dilemma arises and conflict will likely occur out of fear.

The actions of both the Rohingya and the Myanmar militia are examples of how fear translates to action as a consequence of an ethnic security dilemma. As the Burman majority in Myanmar seeks to maintain dominance and powerful identity, the Rohingya see this defensive act as offensive. In the same way, when the Rohingya take any action to increase their own security, it is often seen as a deliberate threat to the Myanmar majority. These actions are misconstrued by both parties because their intentions are not in line with how the other perceives them. During October 2016, around the period of a new wave of violence, a Rohingya militant group attacked the Myanmar military, killing nine soldiers because they felt threatened and oppressed by the Myanmar government. Regardless of any connection to extremist organizations, the initial cause of this attack was because of oppression towards their ethnic group. Individuals often engage in violent retaliation—extremist or not, because their identity is threatened or oppressed. Unfortunately, their action to attack the Myanmar militia only exacerbated the situation because it induced fear into the Burmese majority. Each act of violence increases the salience of each identity and therefore reinforces each ethnic group identity. As an unfortunate result, both parties are



threatened by the presence of the other. In this scenario, neither ethnic identity is secured and instead, each group is harming themselves further.

Additionally, in the case of both the Rohingya people and the Myanmar military, their willingness to act is not based upon fears of the past but fears of the future. Primordialist theory would suggest that past grievances provoked the violence that persists today which in some ways may be true. Past grievances have certainly shaped the way identities are perceived today but it is not valid to suggest that past grievances or ancient hatreds are the sole cause of the conflict. Though there is conflict rooted deep in history, the Rohingya are not fighting to justify their past problems. On the contrary, the Rohingya are fighting because they fear the stability of their future. The Rohingya fear that their identity will be taken from them and that their group will no longer exist. As it stands, their group is entitled to no rights and no political power. Dias and Solomon argue that “the reasons for the violence against the Rohingya have long been hard to sort out, with a mix of religious, ethnic and economic roots” (Dias and Solomon 2017, 45). However, this argument bypasses the fundamental truth that identity is rooted at the center of this conflict. The Rohingya Salvation Army militia has asserted that their goal is to “defend, salvage and protect” the Rohingya population rather than to take up arms to seek vengeance from the past (BBC News 2017). Because of this, it can be concluded that past grievances do not necessarily cause conflict but rather the fear of the future is the dominant cause of conflict.

Additionally, instrumentalism cannot truly explain the situation because the military does not gain much by carrying out mass atrocities against the Rohingya people. Forino points out, Myanmar has often confiscated land for “development” projects and has forcibly displaced thousands of people since the 1990s regardless of religion or ethnicity (2017). Furthermore, there may be possible geopolitical factors related to oil, strategic importance, and development that may

be influencing the military's actions (Forino and Meding 2017). Though geopolitics may be influencing action, it seems unlikely that the military would carry out such harsh targeted attacks for the gain of land. It does not seem rational for the military to carry out such atrocities against its own people if there is not something deeper causing the feud. While geopolitics also may be present in this issue, it seems more likely that an identity war is further rooted in the origin of conflict.

The theory of intuitionism, which attributes ethnic conflict to political structures within Myanmar, may hold some explanatory truth. The intense discriminatory policies within the government certainly exacerbates the scenario and in some ways has prompted conflict. However, suggesting that political structures are the main cause of the conflict would be far too simple of a claim. There is a much deeper tension than just overall structural issues in the country. Identities play a greater role in influencing actions than do the structures themselves. It would be much too simple to argue that the system is the only variable causing conflict. Furthermore, institutionalism does not really explain why the government is harshly attacking the entire ethnic group. The discriminatory policies in place give reason as to why the Rohingya retaliated but they do not explain why the government itself is harshly targeting the Rohingya people.

Instead, the Rohingya's willingness to fight the majority population is simply out of fear that their existence will be eradicated. As stated previously, one's ethnic group identity is connected to one's entire existence. It is also interesting to point out that the de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi has turned a blind eye to the conflict. Suu Kyi has not even recognized the Rohingya group and does not use the name Rohingya when referring to the conflict in the Rakhine state. Instead, Kyi "chooses to use the word in relation to a terrorist group, that means that is the only identity that Rohingya will be attached to" (Griffiths, 2017). The fact that Aung San Su Kyi refuses

to even recognize the identity of this group demonstrates how important identity truly is. The underlying cause behind the issue is certainly identity. Behind the institutions, the instruments and the ancient hatreds lies the fact that identity is attached to all of these things. Identity is at root of the conflict because identity establishes existence. Identity is what makes individuals who they are and thus drives actions. Without identity, there would be no power politics or geopolitical games being played. Identity plays into all of these factors and is an overarching concept. Now that the issue of identity has been explored, further conclusions and extrapolations will be put forth.

### **Conclusion**

Although it is evident that identity plays a huge role in influencing ethnic conflict, it does not provide an easy solution for future policy making. As Lake and Rothchild explain, the best way to solve conflict is to “reassure minority groups of their physical and cultural safety” (Lake and Rothchild 1996, 56). This assertion is not only true but very valuable to understanding how ethnic conflicts must be handled in the future. In order to prevent the security dilemma, there must be affirmation for all ethnic groups that their identities will be secured. Although this may seem like an easy fix, it is far from easy. Identities are complex, shifting, and influenced by the past and present. Furthermore, policy measures that may be taken to protect identities may have unwarranted impacts on various group dynamics. When dealing with ethnic conflict, it is so essential that policymakers tread lightly and think carefully. If actions are taken without considering the cultural and political surroundings of a case it is very possible that there may be extremely negative results.

In order to solve the identity crisis and ensure the security of all ethnic identities, it is essential that communication be the fulcrum of peacemaking. The first step to solving the ethnic conflict involves communication from one ethnic group to another. Although this seems like a

trivial and rather oversimplified solution, it is not. The fact of the matter is that both groups are stuck in a security dilemma of uncertainty of the other group's intentions. Both parties must be open to discuss and collaborate regardless of their ethnic differences. Furthermore, there needs to be some power sharing agreement involved in the future. The Rohingya must be given some sort of political power and certainly must attain proper citizenship in order to peacefully reside in Myanmar. Unfortunately, as the Council on Foreign Relations points out, "resolving this issue in a way that allows for their safe repatriation requires breaking down deep psychological and material barriers" (Albert, 2017). Even if the Rohingya are given the means to vote and become citizens, there will be much effort needed to reverse the stigma against them. This psychological damage and the nationwide stigma that is present could be solved through nationwide campaigns aiming to shift the perceptions of the Rohingya. Perhaps the government could also utilize nationalist campaigns to use as a platform for unification. What is certain though is that the Rohingya must have security.

One might point out that it would be helpful for the Rohingya to have their own autonomy as an ethnic group much like they had before the nation unified. This idea seems plausible but it would ultimately fail because separation of the ethnic groups would further reinstate identity cleavages. The "us" versus "them" mentality would just be intensified if groups were separated physically and politically. Lastly, it would not fix the nation-wide animosity that lingers against the Rohingya. There needs to be a much deeper reconciliation between the groups rather than a simple political fix. The reconciliation will likely take years and it will require the efforts of nationwide campaigns that are geared towards establishing a unified Myanmar.

Following these possible solutions, it is essential to point out that that identity is not always the only factor at hand. When analyzing any conflict, it is important to understand that no singular

paradigm will likely explain all aspects of a conflict. Although this thesis argues that identity is the causal factor for violence, there are certainly other relevant factors at play that have impacts on how the conflict plays out. For example, identity does not necessarily explain why other groups with similar stories of persecution have not erupted to the same extent as the Rohingya conflict. Despite the shortcomings that identity theory may hold, it is ultimately the best method for explaining why ethnic conflict is occurring in Myanmar.

Finally, it is crucial that scholars begin to take a closer look at conflicts such as this occurring throughout the world. Recently, news outlets have been more attentive to this conflict as it has blown to a greater proportion but sadly this conflict is not truly 'new' news. This conflict has been occurring for decades and yet there seems to be little being done to help this situation. Not only does this ethnic group face persecution but there are countless other ethnic groups throughout the world that face similar stories of persecution on a daily basis. The study of ethnic conflict must be expanded so that this conflict ridden mess will never occur in the future. Though Myanmar is geographically very distant from our American lives, the reality is that these people are experiencing hardships and difficulties that will require greater research to help solve.

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