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Myanmar in 2018

The Rohingya Crisis Continues

ABSTRACT

The Rohingya crisis cast a long shadow over Myanmar in 2018, and prospects for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh were bleak. The peace process with ethnic armed organizations remained stalled. Myanmar signed major investment agreements with China that could have a dramatic effect on the economy.

KEYWORDS: Rohingya, Rakhine State, Facebook, peace process, China

THE ROHINGYA CRISIS

A year after 700,000 Rohingya Muslims sought sanctuary in Bangladesh, the Myanmar military continued to deny it had committed widespread rights abuses against them. The military leadership, with the acquiescence of the civilian government, refused to allow independent investigations into its 2017 security operations. Nevertheless, two Burmese journalists working for Reuters managed to collect information on one massacre of Rohingya men. To prevent publication and send a strong signal to other journalists, the police, who operate under military command, charged the two journalists, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, with violating the colonial-era Official Secrets Act. They set them up by having two policemen invite them to dinner and hand them documents they had not asked for. Other policemen arrested them immediately afterward for possessing secret information. At the trial, a police captain broke rank and testified that the journalists had been framed. Unmoved, the judge in September 2018 sentenced the journalists to seven years in prison and the police captain to one year. Despite the international outcry, Aung San Suu Kyi, who runs the civilian government, defended the court proceedings. Reuters released the story, and the military

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later said it had punished the responsible soldiers but provided no further details.

Meanwhile, international rights groups conducted hundreds of interviews with Rohingya victims and witnesses in refugee camps in Bangladesh and used satellite photos and other forms of visual evidence to piece together what had happened. In August, the UN Human Rights Council's fact-finding mission accused the commander-in-chief, Min Aung Hlaing, and five other generals of having committed crimes against humanity and possibly genocide. The mission urged the Security Council to refer the generals to the International Criminal Court or an ad hoc international tribunal. The mission's report detailed horrific forms of torture and killing and contended that the security operations had been preplanned rather than simply a response to the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army's attack on 30 border posts.¹ The mission also blamed the civilian authorities for contributing to the crimes "through their acts and omissions," including spreading hate speech and denying that the military had done anything wrong.² The government denounced the report, but UN Security Council members, though divided, remained strongly engaged on the issue. In April, Security Council members had taken their own trip to meet with the Myanmar government and Rohingya refugees. They were shaken by the intensity of the refugees' suffering.

State Councilor Aung San Suu Kyi's defense of the military's actions diminished her international credibility. While the military-drafted 2008 constitution grants the military full autonomy in its operations, Aung San Suu Kyi could have given credence to Rohingya victims' testimonies. She was presumably reluctant to do so because she did not want to antagonize the military or lose the support of the electorate. Most non-Muslim citizens of Myanmar were said to have approved of the military's handling of the Rohingya crisis because they believed that Muslims, and the Rohingya in particular, were a threat. It was unclear what Aung San Suu Kyi really thought, but members of her government and the state media at times reinforced this narrative.

Facebook has had a tremendous influence on popular perceptions of Muslims in Myanmar. Ultranationalist Buddhist monks such as Wirathu

1. "Report of the Detailed Findings of the Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar," UN Human Rights Council, Doc. A/HRC/39/CRP.2, September 17, 2018, 362–63. The report also addresses the military's rights violations in other parts of the country.

2. *Ibid.*, 388–90.

used the platform to persuade people that Muslims are inhuman, violent, and determined to make Myanmar, which is over 87% Buddhist, a Muslim-majority nation. At the same time, the military ran a covert campaign on Facebook to generate antipathy toward the Rohingya and support for itself. Hundreds of individuals were reportedly working at secret military facilities pumping out misinformation and sham photos through real and fake online accounts.³ Some of the officers involved may have honed their abilities through training in Russia.⁴ The military disseminated similar propaganda offline in the past, but Facebook enabled them to intensify their impact. Facebook is widely used in Myanmar and is people's main source of online information.

Facebook executives were slow to react to the spread of hate speech on their platform, despite the repeated appeals of Myanmar civil society organizations. As international pressure on the company grew in 2018, Facebook removed the accounts of Wirathu, the military-run TV station, the commander-in-chief, and many others.⁵ The commander-in-chief was outraged that his account had been taken down. He accused Aung San Suu Kyi of telling Facebook to do so, although he had no evidence. He and other banned individuals migrated to the Russian social media platform VKontakte, but that platform also deleted their accounts after receiving complaints.

Meanwhile, much to the Bangladesh government's dismay, the Myanmar government only took small steps to create conducive conditions for Rohingya refugees to return. Officials signed an agreement with UN agencies to facilitate the process but did not consult the refugees or give UN agencies free access to northern Rakhine State. Most refugees do not want to go back unless they are confident they will be safe, able to move around freely, make a living, access basic services, and obtain citizenship, which they have been denied for decades. Yet, all this seems doubtful. Rohingya villagers still living in some parts of Rakhine State could not travel easily from rural areas to markets or hospitals, because they feared attacks by Rakhine Buddhist citizens. Some health centers refused to treat Rohingya patients. Only those Rohingya who can provide the extensive documentation required for

3. Paul Mosur, "A Genocide Incited on Facebook, with Posts from Myanmar's Military," *New York Times*, October 15, 2018, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/technology/myanmar-facebook-genocide.html>>.

4. Ibid.

5. "Facebook Removes More Pages, Accounts Linked to Tatmadaw," *Frontier Myanmar*, October 16, 2018, <<https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/facebook-removes-more-pages-accounts-linked-to-tatmadaw>>.

citizenship have any chance of obtaining it. But most lost what records they had in the 2017 violence or in past interactions with state officials.

The government, with assistance from India, China, and Japan, began constructing housing for future returnees at border reception centers and newly planned communities. However, most Rohingya want to go back to their former places of residence and recover their farmland. In many cases, though, nothing remains. In 2017, security forces and local supporters burned down over 350 Rohingya villages in whole or in part.⁶

In central Rakhine State, over 100,000 Rohingya remained in internally displaced people's camps established in 2012 following communal violence. While the government finally began preparations to close the camps, it appeared that most of the displaced would not be able to go home. The government was erecting improved housing for them in or near the camps. It is unclear how people living there will be able to support themselves or rebuild social trust with Rakhine Buddhists, since the two population groups will remain segregated.⁷

DOMESTIC POLITICS

Aung San Suu Kyi remained the de facto head of government but was unable to convince the commander-in-chief to endorse changing the constitution so she could assume the presidency. In March, Win Myint replaced Aung San Suu Kyi's trusted friend, Htin Kyaw, as president. Win Myint also became vice-chairman of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and Aung San Suu Kyi's presumed successor.⁸ A lawyer and the former speaker of the lower house of parliament, he seemed prepared to play a leading role in governance. Nevertheless, Aung San Suu Kyi continued to make most decisions.

The government-led peace process remained stalled, in part because the civilian government was not able to build sufficient trust, propose creative solutions, or broker compromises. The military continued to play an outsized

6. "Burma: 40 Rohingya Villages Burned since October," Human Rights Watch, December 17, 2017, <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/12/17/burma-40-rohingya-villages-burned-october>>.

7. Emanuel Stoakes and Ben Dunant, "As Camps Close in Rakhine, Humanitarians Fear Complicity in Permanent Segregation," *Frontier Myanmar*, October 13, 2018, <<https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/as-camps-close-in-rakhine-humanitarians-fear-complicity-in-permanent-segregation>>.

8. The pro-democracy NLD and the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party are the two largest parties in the country. There are also numerous ethnic-based political parties, as well as smaller pro-democracy and military-affiliated parties.

role, determining which ethnic armed organizations could participate and refusing to budge on key issues. The ethnic armed organizations want a decentralized federal system and a restructuring of the armed forces to institutionalize ethnic-minority representation at the highest levels. The commander-in-chief has not clarified how much autonomy he would tolerate in the ethnic states. He has adamantly opposed broad security-sector reforms. Ongoing military operations in northern Myanmar have also undermined ethnic minorities' confidence in the peace process. Almost 100,000 Kachin civilians were in internally displaced people's camps, but the military and civilian government mostly blocked international humanitarian organizations' access to these camps, resulting in shortages of food and other necessities. Fighting between the military and ethnic armed organizations as well as conflicts between different ethnic armed organizations resulted in the displacement of thousands of Shan civilians as well.

Rakhine anti-government and anti-military sentiment increased in 2018, despite most ethnic Rakhines' approval of the military's 2017 operations against the Rohingya. Ethnic Rakhine have long resented central-government control over Rakhine State, the woeful lack of investment in infrastructure and services, and military abuses against Rakhine villagers in remote areas. In January, Rakhine Buddhists were enraged when the police suddenly canceled a memorial event marking the fall of the Rakhine kingdom to Burman forces in 1785. When they protested, the police opened fire, killing at least seven people. They were further angered when the police charged two highly regarded Rakhine individuals with high treason for making negative comments about the government and intimating support for armed resistance. Both the military leadership and the civilian government have been sensitive to criticism and have routinely used criminal charges against journalists, activists, and others who have revealed unpleasant truths or made derogatory remarks about them.

THE ECONOMY

Myanmar's economic growth rate in 2018 was over 6%, but the impact on standards of living was uneven.⁹ The country relies heavily on imports, and the depreciation of the kyat relative to the US dollar led to higher prices,

9. International Crisis Group, "Myanmar's Stalled Transition," Briefing No. 151, August 28, 2018, <<https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/b151-myanmars-stalled-transition>>.

hurting the poor. The garment sector continued to grow, but foreign direct investment declined. This was due to the unsettled situation in Rakhine State and other residual problems, such as continued restrictions on financing and banking, the prolonged release of new import and export procedures, and poor infrastructure. Myanmar's ranking on the World Bank's ease of doing business scale remained 171, significantly below Laos and Cambodia. Positive steps included the appointments of Soe Win, the respected former director of Deloitte's Myanmar office, as planning and finance minister, and a stronger team to review investment proposals.

Notably, China persuaded Myanmar to accept the multi-billion-dollar China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, part of the larger Belt and Road Initiative. The centerpiece is a high-speed railway linking China's Yunnan Province to Rakhine State's Kyaukphyu port, which Chinese companies will also build. In addition, Chinese state and private firms will invest in roads and a range of other economic projects along the corridor. If the projects are designed to align with the government's sustainable development goals, and if Myanmar does not end up indebted to China, the impacts could be transformative.¹⁰ While China made great efforts to persuade the NLD government to resume the suspended Myitsone Dam hydropower project, the government stalled, saying that it was still considering the issue. Regardless, China may play a greater role in Myanmar's peace process in order to protect its investments.

There are other emerging economic opportunities. New discoveries of oil and gas hold the promise of increased investment in the sector in the coming years. Also, the Yangon region government, in partnership with the highly successful businessman Serge Pun, launched a project to build a sprawling new city near Yangon. However, critics raised concerns about government ownership of the project and the regional government's failure to run the proposal by the regional parliament, as required.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Several Western governments imposed sanctions on senior military generals and backed away from further engagement with the military. They provided humanitarian support to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, but wrestled with

10. Clare Hammond, "The Grand Plan for the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor," *Frontier Myanmar*, September 26, 2018, <<https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-grand-plan-for-the-china-myanmar-economic-corridor>>.

how to achieve military accountability without undermining the country's fragile partial democracy. As relations with Western governments became more complicated, Aung San Suu Kyi focused greater attention on Asian nations, in particular China and Japan. The Chinese government stated its willingness to help resolve the Rohingya crisis without passing judgment. It sought to allay fears about its intentions in Myanmar by hosting study tours designed to build trust and showcase its development expertise. Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzō urged Aung San Suu Kyi to allow a credible investigation into rights abuses in Rakhine State—but also offered to provide maximum financial assistance to the government.

END-OF-YEAR SETBACKS AND PROGRESS

The results of the November by-elections suggested that the NLD government's popularity had decreased somewhat, particularly in ethnic-minority-dominated areas. The NLD lost seven of the 13 seats it contested, including four it had previously held. Despite its promise to establish a federal system, the NLD has devolved few powers. In October, two large ethnic armed groups suspended participation in formal peace talks.¹¹ They were frustrated with the military's encroachment in their areas and intransigence on key issues. Nevertheless, in December, ethnic armed groups welcomed the military's announcement of a four-month unilateral ceasefire in parts of the country, though not Rakhine State, where the ethnic Rakhine Arakan Army was active.

The NLD government continued to grapple with how to raise standards of living for the impoverished majority, many of whom are landless. Foreign tourism has helped, but tourist numbers increased less than 1% in 2018, far below the 7% rise in 2017. Western tourists largely avoided Myanmar due to the instability in Rakhine State. To boost tourist arrivals, in November the government eased visa procedures for citizens of India and East Asia. To encourage more foreign investment, the government permitted foreign companies to establish retail stores, wholesale ventures, and private schools, as well as to hold shares in domestic companies. And foreign banks can now lend to domestic businesses. In late December, the government took a step

11. The two armed groups are the Karen National Union and the Restoration Council of Shan State.

toward demilitarizing governance by moving much of the civil service from the military-run Home Affairs Ministry to a new civilian-led ministry. Together, these changes may help further the country's development in 2019, although unresolved conflicts over land rights nationwide and lack of progress on the peace process and Rohingya refugee repatriation remain serious challenges.