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Identity and the Rohingya Question in Myanmar

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Abstract

United Nations has described the Muslim Rohingya ethnic group as one of the most persecuted minorities in the world. Over the years, the Rohingyas have clashed with the security forces of Myanmar, resulting in their deaths, internal displacements and migrations to other countries especially Bangladesh. Though they have a large population of 1.5million in Rakhine state, the Rohingyas are neither considered citizens of Myanmar nor Bangladesh-effectively rendering them stateless. The question that is relevant to ask is who are the Rohingyas? What is their identity? Where do they come from? What are their conditions and aspirations? What has been done and can be done about it? This paper explicates the identity question, and links that to the recurrent ethnic clashes in Rakhine state. The paper also identifies the bottlenecks that impede peace in Rakhine state, and offers recommendations for improving the security situation in Arakan and the whole of Rakhine state.

Keyword: Identity, Rohingya, Myanmar, Ethnic conflict.

Introduction

A 19-year old Rohingya refugee in Nayapara Camp in Bangladesh once said, “I was born in Burma, but the Burmese government says I don’t belong there. I grew up in Bangladesh, but the Bangladesh government says I cannot stay here. As a Rohingya, I feel I am caught between a crocodile and a snake” (Frontières-Holland, M. S, 2002:1). The question of the identity of the Rohingya remained topical and has provided the basis for many ethnocentric attacks in recent times. Even though there are close to two million Rohingyas living mostly in Rakhine State, they are not considered citizens of Myanmar or any other country. The president of Myanmar, Thein Sein, in October 2012 asked the UN to resettle the Rohingya in other countries, saying, “We will take care of our own ethnic nationalities, but Rohingya who came to Burma illegally are not of our ethnic nationalities, and we cannot accept them here.”¹ During the 2014 Myanmar census, the government banned the word “Rohingya” and asked for registration of the minority as “Bengalis”. In other words, the national identity of Myanmar has been constructed exclusively of the Rohingyas. It is important to note that Myanmar is not a homogeneous country. In fact, there are officially some 135 different ethnic groups in Myanmar. These ethnic groups differ in many ways including culture, language, and looks. Officially, the Rohingyas are not considered one of these. The fact is they are not considered citizens of any other country. The current stateless status of the Rohingya has effectively exposed them to various despicable human right abuses and conditions. According to the United Nations, the Rohingyas are the world’s most persecuted minority². Every year, there are reports of ethnic clashes between Muslim Rohingyas and the government forces or some Buddhists of Myanmar. According to Adam Simpson “the Rohingya, based predominantly in gas-rich Rakhine (Arakan) State, have not only been oppressed by the Bamar majority (Berlie 2008) but

¹ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/10/rohingya-151024202611276.html>

² See <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs19/HRC2013-23-NGO-10-red.pdf>

also by the Buddhist Rakhine and other ethnic minorities” (Adam Simpson, 2004:4). The questions that have often been asked is why are the Rohingyas being persecuted in Myanmar? Why is it difficult for the rest of Myanmar to identify with the Rohingyas as citizens? Is the identity crisis of the Rohingya the reason for the truculent attacks and recurrent ethnic conflicts? What are the factors fuelling these recurrent ethnic and violent clashes resulting in loss of numerous lives and property? These questions regarding the status, conditions, nationality, and abuses of the Rohingyas are collectively referred to in this paper as the Rohingya question. This paper considers the concept of identity and examines the identity crisis of the Rohingya people in Myanmar.

Identity

It is fair to say that the concept of identity is perhaps one of the most nebulous concepts in international politics in spite of the fact that it has enjoyed recurrent usage over the years. Like many other social science concepts, scholars have failed to attain a definitional consensus of the term. In many cases, lenses of religion, culture, ethnicity, common history and race are used in explicating, conceptualizing and clarifying specific identities. Thus, identities are usually constructed around states, regions of the world, cultures, and races among others. While these lenses offer a fair scope of conceptualizing identities, there are inherent practical inconsistencies and overlaps in classifying the constituent elements of specific identities. For example, the United States of America, Canada, France, Russia, China, Ghana and Australia may be described as religiously pluralistic. That is these states harbour and accept citizens with different religious affiliations and practices. It runs parallel therefore that in terms of religious classification, all the aforementioned states share the same identity. However, in practical terms, there are many other areas of divergence as far as the identities of these states are concerned. Some of these may include cultural, historical, social, political, economic and other intricate attributes. Consequently, constructing an identity based solely on religion will only blur our understanding of the distinctive identities of these states. The same applies to identity construction based on ethnicity, history, politics, and culture. According to Hall, S., & Du Gay, P. (1996), Identity in its traditional sense means “an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation”. It includes and arouses the feelings of ‘we-ness’ as opposed to ‘they-ness’. Ashmore, R. D. et al (2001) confirms that we can have different identities within one identity. Thus Identity may be constructed based on individual differences in a society, a group difference within the larger society or a state difference within the international community). These definitional complexities are at the root of the ethnic unrests and recurrent ethnic violence against the Rohingya ethnic minority in Myanmar. Even though Myanmar is ethnically, culturally and socially heterogeneous, they have constructed a national identity exclusive of the Rohingya people.

Literature review

The Rohingya and the ethnic identity of Myanmar

Myanmar is one of the ethnically heterogeneous countries in East Asia. Formerly known as Burma, the East Asian state is bordered to the northwest by India and Bangladesh, north, and northeast by Tibet Autonomous Region and Yunnan province of China and Laos and Thailand to the southeast. The country is one of the poorest in the region with a GDP of 66.5million (UN Nations Data, 2014) and a population of 54 million people (United Nations Data: 2016).³ Myanmar gained independence from the British in 1948 and was ruled a military regime for 49 years from 1962-2011. In 1989, the military junta changed the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar. The country is predominantly a Buddhist with other minor religions scattered around. In

³ <http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=myanmar#Summary>

fact, the country officially has 135 distinct ethnic groups. These groups are further divided into eight distinct ethnic groups as the Bamar (which is the largest ethnic group with about 68 percent of the population), the Chin, Kachin, Kayin, Kayah, Mon, Rakhine, and the Shan ethnic groups. The Bamar being the majority also control most state institutions and the military currently. It is instructive to note that country's ethnic classification does not include the Rohingyas. The Rohingya people are predominantly concentrated in the northern part of Rakhine State. They live in small towns and villages especially in Arakan, which shares a border with Bangladesh. They have a population of about 1.5 million in Rakhine state, which represents about 50 percent of the total population of Rakhine state. In Arakan, they are about 80-90 percent of the population. This is about 3 percent of the entire population of Myanmar, which is 54 million. Arakan is located between two worlds: South Asia and Southeast Asia, between Muslim-Hindu Asia and Buddhist Asia, and amidst the Indo-Aryan and Mongoloid races. Over the years, the Rohingyas have come under a series of problems bordering on their identity, safety, and self-determination. These questions are about who they are, where they come from, whether they are citizens of Myanmar or not, what challenges, problems, discrimination and abuses they face in Myanmar and as refugees in other countries. I refer to these questions collectively as the Rohingya question. It is undoubted that these questions are not easy to answer. The answers one get depends on whom he asks. Many Rohingyas believe they are citizens of Myanmar and have been citizens historically. The government of Myanmar and the Buddhist majority, on the other hand, does not. In fact, these two colliding schools of thought are the foundation on which the perennial ethnic clashes in Myanmar rests. For a better understanding of the Myanmar and the Rohingya question, it is important to know the history of the Rohingyas.

The Origin of Rohingya ethnic group

In an attempt to rationalize the origin and nationality of the Rohingyas, Ahmed (2009:2) identifies two established schools of thought. The first suggests that the Rohingyas are descendants of Moorish, Arab and Persian traders, including Moghul, Turk, Pathan and Bengali soldiers and migrants, who arrived between 9th and 15th centuries, married local women, and settled in the region. This school of thought believes that the Rohingyas are therefore a mixed group of people with many ethnic and racial connections. This position is mainly upheld by the political organizations of the Rohingyas, including scholars sympathetic to their cause. (Eric Hobsbaw, 1994). In line with this theory, Frontières-Holland, M. S. (2002:9), states, "The Arakanese had their first contact with Islam in the 9th century, when Arab merchants docked at an Arakan port on their way to China. The Rohingyas claim to be descendants of this first group, racially mixing over the centuries with Muslims from Afghanistan, Persia, Turkey, the Arab peninsula, and Bengal. The merging of these races arguably constituted an ethnically distinct group with its own dialect." According to Abdur Razzaq (1995:14) "in Chittagong dialect, Rakhine came to be pronounced as 'Rohong' or 'Rohang' and the people from this land, 'Rohingyas.'

Ahmed, I. (2009:3) states, "although for many long years the people of Arakan had been referred to as Rakhines, and for reason of local dialect some of them were later referred to as the Rohingyas. It did not take long for the two identities to be politicized, with the Arakanese Buddhists calling themselves 'Rakhines' and the Arakanese Muslims calling themselves 'Rohingyas.'"

The second school of thought, on the other hand, suggests that the Muslim population of the Rakhine State is mostly Bengali migrants from the erstwhile East Pakistan and now Bangladesh, with some Indians coming during the British period. This view is further premised on the fact that since most of them speak Bengali with a strong 'Chittagong dialect,' they cannot but be illegal immigrants from pre-1971 Bangladesh. The government of Myanmar, including the majority Burman-Buddhist population of the country, subscribes to this position. Ahmed, I. (2009:3). The Buddhist-majority Myanmar, calls the Rohingya as "Bengalis" which implies that they are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

What is more worrying is the fact that “none of the recognized ethnic groups in Myanmar have supported the cause of the stateless Rohingyas Ahmed, I. (2009:9).

For the proponents of the first theory, the current deterioration in the relations between the Rohingya and the rest of Myanmar can be explained historically. According to Frontières-Holland, M. S. (2002:10), “Shortly after Burma’s independence in 1948, some Muslims carried out an armed rebellion demanding an independent Muslim state within the Union of Burma. Though the rebellion was quashed in 1954, Muslim militancy nevertheless entrenched the distrust of the Burmese administration, and a backlash ensued that echoes today: Muslims were removed and barred from civil posts, restrictions on movement were imposed, and property and land were confiscated. Martin Smith (1991:41) further explain that at the time of Burma’s independence, the Rohingyas not only formed their own army but also approached the ‘Father of Pakistan,’ Muhammad Ali Jinnah, ‘asking him to incorporate Northern Arakan into East Pakistan. The Rohingyas continued with their demands even in the 1950s. The new State of Burma had no other choice but to consider them as non-Burmese and dissidents who were bent on wrecking the territorial integrity of the country” Ahmed, I. (2009:3).

In addition to the historical reason for the mistrust of the Rohingya, there is an increased militarization of the pro-Rohingya political fronts such as the Rohingya Solidarity Organization and the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front. The activities of these militarized groups have not only heightened tension among Myanmar’s ethnic groups but also between Myanmar and Bangladesh especially after reports of assault, robbery and other vices along the border. This militarization itself has brought about further uncertainty to the repatriation of the Rohingyas and correspondingly to the fate of the stateless Rohingyas within Bangladesh. (Ahmed, I., 2009:8).

Dimensions of the Rohingya identity discrimination

In a February 6, 2017, statement by the United Nations Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Adama Dieng reiterate OHCHR reports which claim that there were a number of human right violations that were taking place against the Rohingya people in Rakhine. Some of these violations include “mass gang-rape, extrajudicial killings – including of babies and young children - brutal beatings and disappearances” (United Nation, 2017)⁴ He also expressed concern over the contradicting reports that come from the government of Myanmar sponsored investigations into the alleged human right violations against the Rohingya people. He therefore called for an impartial international investigation to ascertain the facts on the ground. In spite of the difficulties in accessing factual evidence of violations, there is an agreement that violations of the Human Right are taking place on both sides with the Rohingya being the worse sufferers or victims. It is also true that there has since been extreme politicization, in some cases exaggeration, sentimentalism, and distortion of information across all sectors. The advisory Commission, (led by Kofi Annan) which investigated the situation in Myanmar, unfortunately, had a limited scope. The commission was to “analyse the present situation of all communities in Rakhine State, and seek to identify the factors that have resulted in violence, displacement, and underdevelopment.”⁵ It was not specifically meant to thoroughly investigate the alleged human right violations against the Rohingya people. In any case, the commission was set up by the government of Myanmar and was responsible to the same government. This is in spite of the fact that the government has been consistently accused of complicity or masterminding the ethnic violence against the Rohingya people.

⁴ See <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs19/HRC2013-23-NGO-10-red.pdf>

⁵ See Report of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, *Government of Myanmar*, August 2017 at <http://www.rakhinecommission.org/>

Generally, reports of violations and discrimination against the Rohingya are multidimensional. Legally, the rights and liberties of the Rohingyas regarding citizenship are curtailed. They are not considered citizens. In most cases, they are considered illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, because of which they are referred to as 'Bengalis'. It is refreshing, however, to note that one of the key recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State report was the revision of the 1982 Citizenship law, which denies many minorities the automatic citizenship rights. According to the Advisory Commission (2017:29), "the manner in which the law has been applied over the past decades has not done justice to the credible claims of communities who have been living in the country for generations. Of these, the Muslims in Rakhine state are the largest but certainly not the only group." The report notes, "The issue of citizenship rights remains a broad concern and a major impediment to peace and prosperity in Rakhine" (Advisory Commission, 2017:26).

There is no doubt that religious differences continue to fan the flames of the ethnic conflict in Myanmar. Over the years, the Buddhist majority feels threatened by the growing population of the Muslim Rohingyas. Even in Rakhine state, there are tensions. This is in spite of the fact that the Muslim Rohingyas are not the only group of Muslims in the country. Inflammatory statements from some of the leading figures of the various Buddhist and Muslims groups corroborates the religious undertones of the conflict. It is interesting, to note that even among the Buddhists, there are challenges caused by sectarianism. According to Ahmed, I. (2009:7), "The Burman-dominated military in the Rakhine State is at loggerheads not only with the Rohingyas but also with the Rakhine Buddhists" This is in spite of the fact that the military is predominantly Buddhist. The reason according to Ahmed is that "the majoritarian Burmans follow Theravada Buddhism while the Rakhine Buddhists are mainly followers of the Manayana sect." Ahmed, I. (2009:7)

The Rohingyas are one of the severely economically disempowered people on earth. Majority of the population is uneducated, malnourished, unemployed or underemployed. A huge majority lives below the poverty line. Common diseases are rife among the population. United States Department of State in 2015 reports that there were many human right violations in Myanmar including arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of life, disappearances, torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment in Myanmar. Department of State (2015:2-3)

International and Domestic Response to the Rohingya Question

Over the years, the Rohingya question has attracted a lot of interest both regionally and among the wider international community. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia have all spoken to condemn the regime in Yangon for not doing enough to ameliorate the plight of the Rohingya people. In September 2017, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) also condemned Myanmar for "systematic brutal acts" against its Muslim Rohingya minority and asked it to accept international monitors.⁶ The 57-member OIC, meeting in Astana, expressed "serious concern about recent systematic brutal acts committed by the armed forces against the Muslim community of Rohingya in Myanmar."⁷

The Malaysian government has referred to the situation as genocide just like the French president Emmanuel Macron.⁸ The president of the United States called on "the Security Council of the United States to take strong and swift action to bring this crisis to an end and bring hope and help to the Rohingya people in their hour of need."⁹ Former Nobel Peace Laurette Desmond Tutu laments about the seeming inaction of Aung San Suu Kyi in dealing with the Rohingya crisis. He states, "If the political price of your ascension to the highest office in Myanmar is your silence, the price is surely too steep,"¹⁰ The UN Secretary-

⁶ See <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/muslim-nations-condemn-myanmar-for-rakhine-violence-9203166>

⁷ See <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/muslim-nations-condemn-myanmar-for-rakhine-violence-9203166>

⁸ See <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/trump-urges-strong-swift-action-rohingya-170921013304717.html>

⁹ See <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/trump-urges-strong-swift-action-rohingya-170921013304717.html>

¹⁰ See <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/world/south-africa-s-tutu-slams-aung-san-suu-kyi-over-rohingya-crisis-9196014>

General Antonio Guterres also called on the Myanmar government to do more than its currently doing. Since the August 25 attacks, there have been a series of pro-Rohingya protests in major cities in Philippines, Malaysia, US, and other cities across the world.

The interesting irony is that “while their plight attracts deep compassion from Muslim communities worldwide, in Yangon, not so many Muslims seem to look at the situation along religious lines”¹¹ This deflates the argument of religious persecution of the Rohingyas. In spite of the huge international pressure and condemnation, the government of Suu Kyi continue to retain massive domestic support. According to Min Thant "Myanmar people think the criticism is not based on true information about the Rakhine crisis."¹² On the streets of Yangon, the consensus view appears to be that the world does not fully understand the situation and that international criticism of the Myanmar government is misplaced.¹³

Domestically, there were some steps taken by the Aung Sung Suu Kyi government to mitigate the clashes, especially in Rakhine. These include the establishment of a commission of inquiry into the allegations of human right abuses in Rakhine. The facilitation of emergency kits to the victims of the clashes among others. This, however, fell short of international expectations and demands, with some calling for either the resignation of the Nobel Prize winner and state counsellor. Some even demanded that her Nobel Prize title should be taken away from her because of her inability to deal with the Rohingyas' issues.

Discussion

Identity, which is constructed on religion, ethnicity, language, and culture, only serves as a catalyst to fuel the ethnic clashes, which is primarily underscored by economic determinants. The discussion about the cause of the ethnic conflict in Myanmar, therefore, ought to be specifically focused on the broader question of power and its distributional problems rather than the narrow framework of differences in identities. As corroborated by Gartzke, E., & Gleditsch, K. S. (2006), differences can divide, but divisions are only a necessary (not sufficient) condition for warfare or conflict. The fact that the Rohingyas are different from the rest of Myanmar (racially, religiously etc.) is not a sufficient condition to warrant an ethnic conflict. As Fearon and Laitin (1996) points out, history shows that different cultures clash; it also shows that they coexist peacefully. Indeed, people of differing identity normally live side by side amicably. Other Muslims in Yangon are not facing the problems that the Rohingya Muslims face.

Secondly, the failure to properly identify the causes and political context of the ethnic conflicts in Myanmar invariably leads to expectations of quick fixes. Since her election into office in 2015, State counsellor Aung Sung Suu Kyi has been categorically bashed for her ineffectiveness in dealing with the humanitarian problems of the Rohingyas in Rakhine. Even though this criticism is rooted in good spirit and humanitarianism, it fails to contextualize the political power that is available to the State Counsellor. To understand the role of political leaders and their effectiveness in dealing with the Rohingya question, one must also understand the political systems and structure, the contexts and constraints that are embedded in the systems and the structures. It may be unfair to blame Aung Sung Suu Kyi for all the problem of the Rohingya if one is not privy to the situational context and powers that are available to her. The military junta, which ruled the country from the 1960s to 2011 “still controls the security

¹¹ See <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/despise-global-criticism-myanmar-s-rakhine-strategy-retains-9236010>

¹² For more, see <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/despise-global-criticism-myanmar-s-rakhine-strategy-retains-9236010> Min Thant, a senior editor of local news publisher Eleven Media. He spoke to Channel News Asia.

¹³ <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/despise-global-criticism-myanmar-s-rakhine-strategy-retains-9236010>

forces, the police and key cabinet positions in the government. And there's nothing Suu Kyi can do about it."¹⁴ Myanmar considers its Rohingya population as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. In addition, the Rohingya militant groups have also visited some atrocities on some security forces including the August 25 2017 attacks, which killed 12 police officers¹⁵

The fact is that many Myanmar citizens see the military as protecting their interest when they clash with the Rohingyas. This leaves Ms. Suu Kyi in an understandable dilemma. Coupled with this, Ms. Suu Kyi has little authority over the army, which she does not regulate. For many people, why should she engage in a fight with the military when she has no prospect of winning? If gains are to be made, the international community should assist Myanmar in building the institutional and democratic structures upon which effective accountability and respect of human rights can flourish. This task is enormous and requires support for Suu Kyi and not just the chorus of condemnations. This is not however to exonerate the state counsellor from all blames. Aung Sung Suu Kyi should be seen to be upholding the human dignity and right of all people within the Myanmar irrespective of who they are. She should at least be able to speak and condemn the military when they visit untold atrocities on the Rohingyas just as she condemns the militant Rohingyas when they commit the same. Furthermore, she should instigate constitutional reforms towards a full democratization of Myanmar. The report by the former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, should not be shelved. The inherent inconsistencies, contradictions and imperfections in the constitution should be looked at thoroughly.

There is no doubt that there is a connection between identity and conflict. However, rather than being the cause of conflicts, identity mostly serves as the catalyst fanning conflicts. Perhaps the foremost scholar who attempts to comprehensively rationalize a nexus between identity and conflict in contemporary times is Samuel Huntington. In his work, Huntington loosely identifies nine civilizations whose fault lines he claims will define conflicts in the post-cold war era (Huntington, 1996). In spite of his great attempt to rationalize conflicts, his ideas have been severely criticized for lacking not only historical and factual basis but also logic and ideology. (Henderson & Tucker, 2001; Russett, Oneal, & Cox, 2000). In simple terms, he fails to recognize the different divisions within each civilizational identity. Myanmar is very diverse with many distinct ethnic groups. The historical evolution and complexities surrounding how these ethnic groups coexisted continue to play out in contemporary politics of the country. The current friction with the Rohingyas are mainly the results of historically shaped attitudes and behaviours, which continue to evolve today. As Laclau (1990) argues, the constitution of a social identity is an act of power. In other words, those with the resources and tools of power are in better position to define and redefine their identity and probably the identity of weaker people. In the context of Myanmar, it can be seen that the current relative power disadvantage of the Rohingyas is both a cause and consequence of their identity crises.

In light of this, addressing the Rohingya question would have to take into consideration the foundational issues of poverty alleviation, economic empowerment, and social integration/reintegration among others. The fundamental cause of ethnic conflict in Myanmar is mainly rooted in issues of power resources and its distributional inequities and fuelled by differentiation of identity. There cannot be any gainsaying that at the root of the ethnic violence against the Rohingyas are deeply rooted economic, political, and social disparities, which have been manipulated much to the detriment of the Rohingyas. If the Rohingyas and the rest of Myanmar are supported to rise economically, it will be easier to solve other symptomatic problems. Adam Simpson (2004:2) analyses the ethnic identity-related conflicts associated with the distribution and exploitation of natural resources in Myanmar and their relationship to emergent democratic governance, and finds that "the exploitation of natural resources in the

¹⁴ <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/09/21/asia/myanmar-military-the-real-power/index.html?sr=fbCNN092217myanmar-military-the-real-power0925AMVODtop>

¹⁵ http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia41300247?ocid=socialflow_facebook&ns_mchannel=social&ns_campaign=bbcnews&ns_source=facebook

South is often accompanied by increased insecurity for marginalized populations. In Myanmar, this insecurity has been exacerbated by decades of civil conflict between the Myanmar government and the ethnic minorities who populate its resource-rich mountainous borderlands, including the Shan, Kachin, Kayin (Karen), Karenni (Kaya) and Rakhine (Arakanese).” The link between natural resources and ethnic conflict is a common phenomenon across the world, especially in the developing world.

Mueller (2000:42) assesses the ethnic violence in Rwanda and former Yugoslavia in the 1990s and argues, “The whole concept of "ethnic warfare" may be severely misguided. Specifically, insofar as it is taken to imply a war of all against all and neighbour against neighbour—a condition in which pretty much everyone in one ethnic group becomes ardent, dedicated, and murderous enemy of everyone in another group. Ethnic war essentially does not exist.” Mueller continues, “Ethnic warfare more closely resembles non-ethnic warfare, because it is waged by small groups of combatants, groups that purport to fight and kill in the name of some larger entity.” The consequence of this generalization, according to him, is that it shatters the possibility of comprehending the nuances of the conflict, impedes effective policing and encourages armed thugs to act with impunity.

Recommendation and Conclusion

Conflicts have been part of human society from antiquity. When conflicts start, it is necessary to examine the fundamental causes and not just the symptomatic attributes. The search for a comprehensive framework to conceptualize its causation is unquestionably laudable. In order to address the Rohingya question, certain key steps must be taken with preconditions. This paper recommends the following key steps.

It is important to as a matter of urgency to disband all militant groups that are fighting in Myanmar including those that purport to be fighting for the cause of the Rohingya. This is because; the activities of these militant groups, such as the Rohingya Solidarity Organization and the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front have only exacerbated the ill-treatment of the Rohingyas in Myanmar. Similarly, there is the need for the government of Myanmar, the international community to assist in dealing with the militancy that has engulfed the whole of Myanmar. This should be done within the context of assurances brokered with the support of the international community that the Myanmar government will address the needs, aspirations and concerns of the Rohingya people.

All forms of illegal activities of the military, such as beatings, rapes, disappearances etc., should be reined in. The judiciary can also be reformed to be useful in dealing with matters that come before it judiciously. It is understandable that this would be difficult especially considering the limits of new Suu Kyi government powers, but this is worthy of pursuit. She should not keep quiet on exposing the ills of the military even if she cannot do anything about it. The loud silence from her only echoes the allegations of her complicity and ineptitude in dealing effectively with the ethnic problems that her country faces.

Legally, there is the need for a revision of the 1982 citizenship law. This law accepts many other groups in Myanmar but has over the years exposed the larger Rohingya population to risks of collateral damages, which includes ethnic attacks, forced disappearances among others. Similarly, there is the need for the government of Myanmar to be firm in legalizing the citizenship of the Rohingyas.

At the heart of the ethnic conflict is the huge economic disparities between the Rohingyas and the rest of Myanmar. Education, healthcare, and other economic disparities only exacerbate the already volatile situation in Myanmar. The government should ensure that these wide disparities are bridged as soon as possible. Economic and political exclusions, discriminations and other forms of societal imbalances that gives rise to some sort of identity within identities should be consciously worked at.

Finally, there is also the need for the Suu Kyi government to foster a new national identity that incorporates the Rohingyas and their interests. The formation of a common identity through civic nationalism is one such remedy.

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