

The Rohingya: Myanmar's outcasts

Wednesday, 01 February 2012

Al Jazeera.com/30 Jan 2012

Akbar Ahmed

Ambassador Akbar Ahmed is currently the Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at American University in Washington. Millions of residents of western Myanmar have been stripped of citizenship and basic human rights. Will Suu Kyi help?

This article is the first in a series by Ambassador Akbar Ahmed, a former Pakistani high commissioner to the UK, exploring how a litany of volatile centre/periphery conflicts with deep historical roots were interpreted after 9/11 in the new global paradigm of anti-terrorism - with profound and often violent consequences. Incorporating in-depth case studies from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, Ambassador Ahmed will ultimately argue that the inability for Muslim and non-Muslim states alike to either incorporate minority groups into a liberal and tolerant society or resolve the "centre vs periphery" conflict is emblematic of a systemic failure of the modern state - a breakdown which, more often than not, leads to widespread violence and destruction. The violence generated from these conflicts will become the focus, in the remainder of the 21st century, of all those dealing with issues of national integration, law and order, human rights and justice.

Washington, DC - The image of a smiling Daw Aung San Suu Kyi receiving flowers from her supporters is a powerful message of freedom and optimism in Myanmar, the symbol of democracy in a country which has known nothing but authoritarian oppression for decades. Yet few ask one of the most pressing questions facing Daw Suu Kyi. How will she deal with the Rohingya? "The Rohingya," you will ask. "Who are they?" The Rohingya, whom the BBC calls "one of the world's most persecuted minority groups", are the little-publicised and largely forgotten Muslim people of the coastal Rakhine state of western Myanmar. Their historic lineage in Rakhine dates back centuries, as fishermen and farmers. Over the past three decades, the Rohingya have been systematically driven out of their homeland by Myanmar's military junta and subjected to widespread violence and the total negation of their rights and citizenship within Myanmar. They are a stateless Muslim minority. The continued tragedy of the unrecognised Rohingya, both in Myanmar and as refugees abroad, casts a dark shadow over the bright hopes and prospects for democracy in a country plagued by violence and civil war. Suu Kyi is ideally placed to extend democratic reforms to all ethnic peoples, including the Rohingya, in a free Myanmar. Though the Rohingya may be small in number at less than two million, the real lesson of the Arab Spring is that no notion of democracy can succeed without the inclusion of all people within a country's borders. Every member of society, regardless of race and religion, must be given their due rights as citizens. While many ethnic minorities in Myanmar have been the victims of the central government's oppressive measures, the Rohingya stand apart in that their very existence is threatened. The Rohingya's plight abroad as refugees in places such as Bangladesh and Thailand has seen glimmers of the media spotlight, but less attention has been brought to the underlying cause of their flight: the violence and cultural oppression at home. These policies were enacted by Myanmar's government to force the Rohingya outside of Myanmar as a result of their being Muslim and ethnically non-Myanma. The government erroneously labelled them as "illegal Bengali immigrants" in their efforts to eradicate the Rohingya culture. Kings to refugees Yet, the long history of the Rohingya and the Rakhine state contradicts the government's claims. The medieval Kingdom of Arakan, encompassing the Muslim Rohingya, was once an enlightened centre of culture, knowledge and trade, displaying a harmonic blend of Buddhism and Islam in its administration and court life. The kingdom's cosmopolitan and international capital city, Mrauk U, was described in the 17th century as "a second Venice" by a Portuguese Jesuit priest and was often compared to Amsterdam and London by travellers and writers of the time. It was the 1784 military conquest by Bodawpaya, the king of Burma (now Myanmar), that transformed this once vibrant kingdom into an oppressed peripheral region. After this, many haunting tales began to circulate of Burmese soldiers rounding up the Rohingya in bamboo enclosures to burn them alive, and marching thousands to the city of Amarapura to work, effectively as slave labour, on infrastructure projects. With the rise to power of the military junta in 1962 under General Ne Win, a policy of "Myanmarisation" was implemented as an ultra-nationalist ideology based on the racial purity of the Myanma ethnicity and its Buddhist faith. The Rohingya, as both Muslims and non-Myanma, were stripped of their legitimacy and officially declared foreigners in their own native land. With the passage of the junta's 1982 Citizenship Law, they effectively ceased to exist legally. Stripped officially of their citizenship, the Rohingya found their lives in limbo: prohibited from the right to own land or property, barred from travelling outside their villages, repairing their decaying places of worship, receiving an education in any language or even marrying and having children without rarely granted government permission. The Rohingya have also been subjected to modern-day slavery, forced to work on infrastructure projects, such as constructing "model villages" to house the Myanmar settlers intended to displace them, reminiscent of their treatment at the hands of the Burmese kings of history. The denial of citizenship and rights was accompanied by a military strategy of physical and cultural war designed to drive the Rohingya out of Myanmar. The initial push of the military's ethnic cleansing campaign came in 1978 under Operation Naga Min, or Operation King Dragon. The purpose of this operation was to scrutinise each individual within the state as either a citizen or alleged "illegal immigrant". This resulted in widespread rape, arbitrary arrests, desecration of mosques, destruction of villages and confiscation of lands among the Rohingya people. In the wake of this violence, nearly a quarter of a million Rohingya fled to neighbouring Bangladesh, many of whom were later repatriated to Myanmar where they faced further torture, rape, jail and death. In 1991, a second push, known as Operation Pyi Thaya or Operation Clean and Beautiful Nation, was launched with the same purpose, resulting in further violence and another massive flow of 200,000 Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh. Non-governmental organisations from Europe and North America estimate that 300,000 Rohingya refugees remain in Bangladesh, with only 35,000 residing in registered refugee camps and receiving some sort of assistance from NGOs. Acknowledging the Rohingya Those remaining, more than 250,000, are in a desperate situation without food and

medical assistance, largely left to slowly starve to death. The December 2011 refugee repatriation agreement reached between Myanmar President Thein Sein and Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will exclude the Rohingya, due to their lack of Myanmar citizenship, one of the conditions for repatriation for the expected 2,500 returning refugees. The Rohingya predicament underlines a paradox for the world's great faiths, straddling the divide between Islamic Asia and Buddhist Asia. Each emphasises compassion and kindness and yet, we see little evidence of this in their dealings with the Rohingya people. As part of this current study on the relationship between centre and periphery in the Muslim world, we recently interviewed Dr Wakar Uddin, Chairman of The Burmese Rohingya Association of North America (BRANA). A gentle and learned man, he is an energetic ambassador for his Rohingya people with a firm grasp of regional history. All the Rohingya want is the reinstatement of their citizenship in their own land, as revoked by the former dictator General Ne Win, and the dignity, human rights and opportunities that come with it. Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy have a unique opportunity to reach out to the Rohingya people and include them in the new democratic process. The NLD should work with the central government to expand the role of all ethnic minorities as full Myanmar citizens. By acknowledging their rights, the government will bestow upon the Rohingya the dignity and the responsibilities of citizenship and present opportunities for mutual cultural understanding and the repatriation of the thousands of refugees existing in purgatory, separated from their homes and families. Great strides have recently been made by the Myanmar government towards the creation of an open and democratic political system and an end to ethnic violence, yet this is only the beginning. With the recognition of the Rohingya as Myanmar citizens, Suu Kyi will honour the memory of her father, Aung San, as he, before his untimely and tragic death, also reached out to ethnic minorities to participate in an independent Myanmar. Only then can a democratic and modern Myanmar be legitimate and successful in the eyes of its own people. But the first step is to acknowledge the Rohingya exist. This article is based on research being conducted by Professor Akbar Ahmed, Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at American University, Washington, DC, and Harrison Akins, a Research Fellow attached to the Chair, for the forthcoming study, *Journey into Tribal Islam: America and the Conflict between Center and Periphery in the Muslim World*, to be published by Brookings Press, exploring the conflict between Muslim tribal groups and central governments across the Muslim world in the context of the US-led 'war on terror'. Ambassador Ahmed is a former Pakistani High Commissioner to the UK and former administrator in Waziristan and Balochistan. He is the award-winning author of numerous books, including *Discovering Islam*, and *Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam* (Brookings Press, 2010). The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial policy.