

South Asia: Murderous majorities

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The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Genocide

by Azeem Ibrahim, with a foreword by Muhammad Yunus

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Islam and the State in Myanmar: Muslim-Buddhist Relations and the Politics of Belonging

edited by Melissa Crouch

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The Rohingya are a community of Muslims concentrated in the northern parts of Myanmar's western state of Rakhine. There have been Muslims in Rakhine for a thousand years, but their numbers were substantially increased by migration from British India, particularly Bengal, during colonial rule. Before the recent forced exodus to Bangladesh, the Rohingya population in Myanmar was estimated at a little over a million, but that figure is contested. The last census did not count them because the government did not wish to recognize Rohingya as a legitimate identity. Including Rohingya refugees in nearby Bangladesh who fled during "clearances" conducted by Myanmar's military rulers in 1978, the early 1990s, and 2012, their total number is likely larger.

There are other Muslim communities in Rakhine and Myanmar, but they are culturally and ethnically different from the Rohingya, who have been singled out for violent discrimination. Their distinct dialect and ethnic "otherness," combined with their concentration in northern Rakhine, have made them seem to Myanmar's rulers unassimilable and a threat to the integrity of this avowedly Buddhist state.

In late August 2017, Rohingya militants attacked police stations in northern Rakhine using knives and homemade bombs. Twelve members of the security forces were killed. The Myanmar military retaliated by burning Rohingya villages, killing and raping civilians, and forcing more than half a million Rohingyas to flee to Bangladesh.

The scale of this ethnic cleansing represents the most extreme triumph of majoritarian politics in South Asia. The persecution of the Rohingya has made Myanmar something of an inspiration to majoritarian parties in neighboring states. The Indian government, led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, announced in mid-August that the 40,000 Rohingyas in India (refugees from an earlier exodus) would be deported because they were illegal immigrants. Even in early September, after the ferocity of the Myanmar army's "clearances" was known and the extent of the exodus became apparent, no one in Narendra Modi's administration voiced even the pro forma expressions of concern by which governments often acknowledge widespread human suffering.

Majoritarianism—the claim that a nation's political destiny should be determined by its religious or ethnic majority—is as old as the nation-state in South Asia; it was decolonization's original sin. Postcolonial nations in South Asia began with varying degrees of commitment to the ideal of a pluralistic, broadly secular state, but after a decade or so of independence they were either taken over by military rulers or transformed into religious states by majoritarian politicians.

Pakistan was carved out of British India to create a Muslim-majority country, and although its founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, seemed at times to support the idea of a secular state, the genocidal violence of the 1947 Partition more or less purged the country of its non-Muslim minorities. In its short-lived constitution of 1956, Pakistan formally defined itself as an Islamic republic, and it has remained one for over sixty years.

Sri Lanka, then Ceylon, was founded in 1948 as a secular nation, but by 1956 its Sinhala Buddhist politicians were pushing to redefine it as a Buddhist republic with Sinhala, the language of the Buddhist majority, as the sole national language. This majoritarian push was aimed at marginalizing Tamil speakers, a substantial non-Buddhist minority concentrated in the north and east of the country. Bangladesh, which won independence from Pakistan in 1971, was established as a secular Bengali-speaking nation, but after a coup in 1975, a military regime turned it into an Islamic republic. (The Supreme Court restored secularism in 2010, but Islam remains Bangladesh's official religion.)

Major General Aung San, who brought about Myanmar's independence from Britain after World War II and was assassinated in 1947, envisioned it as a secular republic. The constitution of 1948, however, which established Myanmar as an independent nation, conferred full citizenship on most ethnic minorities but withheld it from the Rohingya. Throughout the 1950s, the government of U Nu, the country's first prime minister, accommodated the idea of a Rohingya community and held out the prospect of citizenship for Rohingyas. The census of 1961 even recognized "Rohingya" as a demographic category. The evolution of Myanmar into an explicitly Buddhist state began in 1962 when a military government seized power in a coup d'état and enforced a Buddhist nationalist ideology. This process culminated in the 1982 Citizenship Law, which officially denied Rohingyas the possibility of full citizenship.

Ironically, it was during the transition to civilian rule between 2012 and 2017 that the country became a purely majoritarian polity through ethnic cleansing and by formally excluding Rohingyas in particular and Muslims generally from every democratic process and institution. The violence of 2012 (which prefigured the ethnic cleansing of 2017) resulted in 120,000 Rohingyas being expelled from towns in northern Rakhine and confined to camps for internally displaced persons. The 2014 census was designed to exclude "alien" minorities; nearly a third of Rakhine's population went uncounted because the Rohingya refused to identify as Bengali Muslim, which would have lent credibility to the claim that they were foreigners, not citizens. The census was used to compile the new electoral rolls for the country's first democratic elections in 2015; it effectively disenfranchised the Rohingya and led to the total absence of Muslims from Myanmar's parliament for the first time since independence.

That year, the government confiscated the registration cards that had entitled Rohingyas to health and education services and, until recently, to the right to vote, which they had previously been granted at the whim of the regime. The cards were the only official documents of residence or identity that they possessed. These administrative actions successfully established Buddhist supremacy in Rakhine and in Myanmar as a whole.

The absence of an important minority from both the electoral process and parliament is the sort of total victory that majoritarians in South Asia have long dreamed of but never achieved. In 2014, a year before Myanmar's elections, Narendra Modi led the BJP to an absolute majority in the Indian general elections. His majority was historic because it did not include a single Muslim member of parliament from the BJP. But twenty-three Muslims of other parties were elected to the Lok Sabha, the Indian parliament's lower house; the absence of any Muslims from Myanmar's legislature was a more comprehensive victory for majoritarianism. It is no surprise that a right-wing Hindu nationalist party in India would keep its distance from Muslims, but in Myanmar it was the liberal opposition,

the National League for Democracy (NLD), the party of Aung San Suu Kyi, that didn't field a single Muslim candidate.

The NLD may have excluded Muslim candidates for strategic reasons—to ride out the anti-Rohingya sentiment stirred up by extremist clergy, to defer to the military's prejudices during the sensitive transition to democracy, to avoid antagonizing Rakhine's Buddhist majority—or because of the prejudices of its own members. The result was the political marginalization of an already threatened minority. Myanmar in 2017, with a parliament free of Muslims and 600,000 Rohingyas violently driven out, has proven that it is possible for a religious majority to achieve political domination.

The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Genocide by Azeem Ibrahim doesn't pretend to be an objective history of the tragedy unfolding in Rakhine. It is a partisan book, and its claim on the reader's attention is not its grasp of history but its urgency and prescience. Completed in 2015, immediately after the long-awaited elections, it warned that the transition to democracy had, tragically, left the Rohingya more excluded, more vulnerable, and more likely to be expelled than ever before, unless the NLD and military acted to stop their persecution. In his epilogue to the updated paperback edition, written after the violence of September 2017, Ibrahim reflects on the vindication of that prediction and argues that "we are now seeing an unstable situation escalate into the ethnic cleansing of an entire community." His prescience is reason enough to recommend his book, and particularly the sections that deal with the transition to democracy in 2015.

Majoritarianism insists on different tiers of citizenship. Members of the majority faith and culture are viewed as the nation's true citizens. The rest are courtesy citizens, guests of the majority, expected to behave well and deferentially. To be tolerated at the majority's discretion is no substitute for full citizenship in modern democracies. It is a state of limbo, a chronically unstable condition. A polity that denies full citizenship to its minorities will, sooner or later, politically disenfranchise them or expel them on the grounds that, despite being residents, they aren't citizens at all and actually belong elsewhere—in India or Pakistan or Tamil Nadu or, as with the Rohingya, in Bangladesh. Myanmar has three categories of citizenship: citizen, associate citizen, and naturalized citizen. The Rohingya are classed as foreigners.

The one South Asian state that had formally resisted the temptation of majoritarianism until the 1980s was India. Founded as a constitutional republic in 1950, it treated its substantial Muslim minority (it has the third-largest Muslim population in the world) as full and equal citizens. Despite its being 80 percent Hindu, there was no formal sense in which India's religious minorities were expected to assimilate into Hindu culture. The only parties that demanded this assimilation, such as the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, the political ancestor of Modi's BJP, were minor regional parties that had little power. For the first twenty-five years of the republic, under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru and then his daughter Indira Gandhi, India remained a constitutionally secular state.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the political balance shifted following the Emergency, Indira Gandhi's experiment with authoritarian rule between 1975 and 1977. But the new politics was also shaped by pogroms. In 1983, two thousand Muslims of Bengali ancestry were slaughtered in a matter of hours in the town of Nellie, in Assam. (Unofficial estimates place the number of deaths at more than ten thousand.) The indigenous Assamese who perpetrated the massacre thought the Muslims were illegal migrants from Bangladesh whose names had been included on the electoral rolls. Bangladesh, then a relatively new nation, was seen by unsympathetic neighbors as a net exporter of people, and since these immigrants tended to be Bengali-speaking Muslims, they looked and sounded conspicuously alien.

The 1983 massacre in Assam was a landmark in Indian politics. The student organization whose anti-Muslim activism culminated in the pogrom established a political party that handily won the next

provincial election. The incident demonstrated that illegal immigration was a serious problem, that Bengali Muslims were a political scapegoat, and, most significantly, that pogroms could be politically profitable.

In 1984, the assassination of Indira Gandhi by two of her Sikh bodyguards led to the systematic murder of Sikhs in Delhi and elsewhere. Her son, Rajiv Gandhi, won a large electoral victory after this pogrom, and the lesson of Nellie was reinforced, this time at the national level. Subsequent pogroms of Muslims in Bombay (1992-1993) and Gujarat (2002) were followed by electoral victories for parties like the Shiv Sena and the BJP that were complicit in the violence. There has been no formal disenfranchisement of minorities, but majoritarian parties in India have learned that encouraging violence against minorities pays off electorally.

Majoritarian violence had become a shortcut to power throughout South Asia. In Myanmar, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, insecure military rulers sought legitimacy by aligning the state with its religious majority, while in India and Sri Lanka, nativist parties won elections by promoting the idea that the nation was being subverted by predatory minorities. By the end of the twentieth century, majoritarian parties were either in power or the principal opposition in every South Asian nation.

In his essay for *Islam and the State in Myanmar*, a collection that addresses the relationship between Myanmar's Muslims and their government, Benjamin Schonthal demonstrates the extent to which Buddhist majoritarianism in Myanmar is akin to Sinhala nativism in Sri Lanka, noting recent meetings between the Sri Lankan Bodu Bala Sena (Army of Buddhist Power) and the explicitly anti-Muslim monk-led 969 movement in Myanmar. Ashin Wirathu, its most notoriously Islamophobic preacher, visited Colombo in late 2014 to sign a memorandum of understanding between the Bodu Bala Sena and 969. People in both countries, Schonthal suggests, "are beginning to see their own actions in a broader regional framework."

In another essay in the collection, Nyi Nyi Kyaw compares 969's campaigns to those of Hindu chauvinist organizations in India like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the BJP. The supposed fertility of Muslim men and their practice of polygamy are seen as threats to the future of Buddhists in Myanmar. The allegation is that Muslim men are waging a "Love Jihad"; as Kyaw notes, Ashin Wimalar Biwuntha, a 969 monk, has accused Muslim men of seducing Buddhist women "for their reproductive tactics. They produce a lot of children, they are snowballing."

The terms "Love Jihad" and "Romeo Jihad" are lifted straight from the lexicon of Hindu bigotry. The BJP and its affiliates are committed to fighting so-called predatory Muslims practicing "Love Jihad" with street vigilantes organized in "Anti-Romeo squads." The chief minister of India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, a Hindu monk called Yogi Adityanath, has for years led a private militia, the Hindu Yuva Vahini (Hindu Youth Force), in the battle against this phantom enemy. In fact, his principal credential for the chief minister's office in 2016 was his proven ability to mobilize the "Hindu street" against Muslims.

The imagined threat of demographic extinction at the hands of fast-breeding, evangelizing Muslims is central to majoritarian mobilization in India, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar. Several Indian provinces have passed laws that strictly regulate religious conversion. Their unstated goal is to prevent conversion to Islam or Christianity; conversion to Hinduism, on the other hand, is seen as reversion. It is referred to as *ghar wapsi*, or "homecoming." In the discourse of Hindu majoritarianism, all Muslims and Christians are ancestrally Hindu.

Myanmar remains at the vanguard of majoritarianism in South Asia, in its capacity to violently expel an ethnic minority, disenfranchise those who remain, and make the prejudices of Buddhist chauvinists into law. The Organization for the Protection of Race, Religion, and Belief, popularly

known as Ma-Ba-Tha (the abbreviation of its Burmese name), began in 2013 as a campaign to pass what were collectively known as the Race and Religion Protection Laws. In a little over two years these laws were approved by the legislature and signed into law by the president.

Of all the laws governing monogamy, birth control, religious conversion, and interfaith marriage that implicitly target Muslims, the most flagrantly discriminatory is the Myanmar Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Law. A Buddhist woman under twenty years of age needs parental consent to marry a non-Buddhist. Local registrars are empowered to post marriage applications. The couple can marry only if no one objects, but any citizen can contest the application, causing it to be challenged in court. In the event of a divorce, the woman automatically gets custody of the children. The purpose of the law is to make intermarriage between Buddhist women and non-Buddhist men as difficult as possible. Monks, priests, and majoritarians in every country in South Asia will have taken note that the government of Myanmar has been able to stand out as the defender of the faith by legally discriminating in favor of the country's majority on the basis of religion.

Majoritarianism in South Asia isn't necessarily about targeting Muslims. Nor is it provoked by the need to discipline recalcitrant minorities in general. Majoritarian politics results from the patiently constructed self-image of an aggrieved, besieged majority that believes itself to be long-suffering and refuses to suffer in silence anymore. The cultivation of this sense of injury is the necessary precondition for the lynchings, pogroms, and ethnic cleansing that invariably follow.

Majoritarianism promotes equal-opportunity bigotry. In Sri Lanka the rout of the Tamil Tigers and the final destruction of the goal of a Tamil homeland did little to assuage radical nativists. For the Sinhala Ravaya (the Roar of the Sinhala Nation), the Ravana Balaya (Ravana's Force, referring to a legendary king believed to have ruled over Sri Lanka), and the Bodu Bala Sena, Muslims have replaced the Tamils as the existential threat to Sri Lanka's integrity as a Sinhala Buddhist nation. The Muslim community was orphaned by the civil war: Muslims had long been distrusted by the Sri Lankan state since they speak Tamil, but they were also purged from Tiger strongholds because they were not Tamil enough. Now, Schonthal writes, the new Muslim threat is seen as demographic, financial (through their alleged control of trade and industry), and transnational, because local Muslims are viewed as part of a broader conspiracy to Islamicize the Buddhist world. But Sri Lankan majoritarians don't necessarily single out Muslims: a long-standing campaign by the Jathika Hela Urumaya (National Heritage Party) for a bill that would place strict limits on conversion to non-Buddhist faiths was spurred by a dislike of Christian missionaries.

Even Pakistan, whose population is almost entirely Muslim (97 percent), has targeted minority Muslim sects. Starting in 1974 it began a fifteen-year process of Islamicization, declaring members of the Ahmadi sect non-Muslims, passing blasphemy laws that were routinely used to persecute minorities, and patronizing fundamentalist Sunni organizations that were willing to commit acts of horrific violence against Shias. Bangladesh, another Muslim-majority nation, has seen a decline in its Hindu population. While the Bangladeshi state under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has become more secular, it remains a dangerous country for Hindus, tribal minorities, and atheists.

The recent expulsions of Rohingyas from Myanmar have provoked a storm of criticism, which has received defensive responses not just from State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and Myanmar's official spokespersons, but also from historians, policy experts, and foreign diplomats. If their arguments in defense of Myanmar's policies succeed in normalizing the largest forced exodus in peacetime since the mid-1990s, when two million Rwandans were forced to leave their country, minorities across South Asia will become even more vulnerable to persecution.

India's first response to the violence in Rakhine was an implicit endorsement of the carnage. According to a joint statement issued on September 6 during the Indian prime minister's state visit

to Myanmar, “India condemned the recent terrorist attacks in northern Rakhine State, wherein several members of the Myanmar security forces lost their lives. Both sides agreed that terrorism violates human rights and there should, therefore, be no glorification of terrorists as martyrs.” The joint statement made no mention of the exodus of Rohingya refugees. India’s foreign secretary, speaking at a conference in New Delhi, was careful not to criticize Myanmar:

The fact that there is an exodus of a large number of people from the Rakhine state is clearly a matter of concern. Our objective will be to see how they can go back to their place of origin. That is not easy. We feel this situation is better addressed through practical measures and constructive conversation rather than doing very strong condemnations.

The largely Western condemnation of Myanmar’s government and Aung San Suu Kyi has been criticized as excessive, simplistic, and ill-informed. The argument made by majoritarians is that the narrative of Rohingya victimhood obscures and silences the trauma of Rakhine Buddhists because the latter haven’t been as adept in lobbying human rights organizations in the West. This argument highlights efforts by militant Rohingyas to create an independent or autonomous Muslim zone in northern Rakhine since decolonization. It emphasizes the fact that the Muslim community in Rakhine greatly expanded after Britain annexed Burma in the early nineteenth century and allowed immigrants from Bengal to enter the region. It insists that the Rakhine Buddhist resentment of Bengali Muslim encroachment needs to be situated in this longer history if foreigners are to arrive at a more evenhanded treatment of two communities, both victims of rival ethnic nationalisms.

The trouble with this position is that evenhandedness by any historical reckoning is impossible. The only way the argument in favor of the brutal treatment of Muslims makes sense is if one accepts the Burmese Buddhist distinction between native and alien as the basis for citizenship and belonging. The reason the Rohingya demand recognition as an ethnic group is that full citizenship in Myanmar has always been contingent on membership in one of the “national races,” or taingyintha. The government’s policy of excluding the Muslims of Rakhine from the taingyintha and then denying them citizenship, despite generations of residence, on the basis of that exclusion is Kafkaesque in its circularity. As Nick Cheesman, an Australian academic, points out in an article on taingyintha, “ultimately Myanmar’s problem is not a ‘Rohingya problem’ but a national races problem...the idea of taingyintha itself is the problem.”

Once the news of this latest atrocity recedes, the Myanmar government will have reason to believe that its project of diminishing the presence of Rohingya in Rakhine is well underway. Sri Lankan nationalists who believe that the country’s Buddhists are bhumiputras (sons of the soil) and non-Buddhists are mlecchas (inferior aliens) will take heart. The BJP government in Assam, where illegal Bangladeshi immigration sparked violence in the past, will learn new lessons about the latitude given to perpetrators of ethnic cleansing, as long as it is conducted by “sons of the soil.”

The fact that the most vocal protests about the recent violence have come from European countries, foreign human rights groups, and United Nations organizations has encouraged the Myanmar government and its apologists to dismiss them as the handiwork of know-nothing outsiders and professional breast-beaters. But this murderous purge is not a quarrel between the West and the rest. The ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya is a particularly vicious chapter in a long history of majoritarian nationalism in South Asia. Unless that history is acknowledged and its legacy contested, more tragedies lie in store.

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P.S.

*<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2018/01/18/rohingya-murderous-majorities/>