

The Geostrategic Location of Myanmar and its Influence on the Rohingya Conflict

Hanne Van Regemortel

Institute of Social Research and Cultural Studies
National Chiao Tung University

The aim of this research article is to investigate the connection between the Rohingya conflict and economic developments within Arakan State in Myanmar. The Rohingya conflict is often framed as an exclusively ethnic and/or religious conflict while little attention has been paid to the capitalist aspect of the conflict. However, projects such as the Kaladan Gateway Project and the Swhe Gas Pipeline Project, recently constructed in Arakan State to develop Myanmar's natural resources endanger the livelihood of the local population – which consists mainly of Rohingya. I argue that these geostrategic interests have an impact on the hostile attitude of the Myanmar government towards the Rohingya and that it fuels their persecution and expulsion as well as protest and violence committed by Rohingya against the Buddhist majority.

Keywords: Rohingya, Myanmar, Capitalism, Geopolitics, Land Grabbing

Introduction

In this article, I would like to investigate the role of capitalism and globalization in the ethnic conflict in Myanmar. Usually, the ethnic persecution of Rohingya is exclusively being framed as a religious and ethnic conflict and the manifestation of Buddhist nationalism. However, another important factor that is often overlooked is the geopolitical importance of the Arakan State where most Rohingya live and its natural resources.

This paper will use two case studies, namely the Kaladan Gateway project and the Swhe Gas Pipeline project to illustrate how capitalism and globalization add another dimension to the Rohingya conflict, namely the issue of land grabbing by the Myanmar government. I would like to argue that the important geostrategic location of Arakan State and its natural resources play a role in the hostile attitude of the Myanmar government towards the Rohingya and that it fuels their persecution and expulsion. Since many Rohingya earn their livelihood by farming and fishing, they pose a possible threat to the development of the Kaladan Gateway project and the construction of the Swhe Gas pipeline because if those projects are being realized, most Rohingya will lose their only source of income. By refusing the Rohingya citizenship and therefore political and economic rights in combination with severe persecution the Myanmar government secures its capitalist development projects (Lanjouw, Mortimer, & Bamforth, 2000).

The Rohingya Conflict: An Overview

The Rohingya are an ethnic minority living in Myanmar. Around 90 percent of them live in the Western state of Rakhine (Arakan) and are Muslim. The government of Myanmar does not recognize them as citizens of the state (Zarni & Cowley, 2014). Although there is proof that Rohingya have been living within the borders of contemporary Myanmar prior to 1824, the first British colonization of Myanmar, the government refuses to recognize them as an indigenous minority even though according to their own constitution every minority that can prove they were living within the borders of Myanmar before the British colonization can claim status as indigenous (Holliday, 2014).

Holliday (2014) remarks that after the independence of Myanmar in 1948 the government did recognize the Rohingya as citizens of the state. Some of them even became elected to parliament. The situation changed however after the 1962 coup d'état which placed Myanmar under military rule until 2011 (di Gaetano, 2013). During this long period, General Ne Win starting a Burmanization campaign targeting all ethnic minorities in Myanmar (Walton, 2013). This resulted in the notorious Citizenship Act of 1982 which denied the Rohingya citizenship. The government of Myanmar refuses to use the term Rohingya and insist upon calling them illegal Bengali immigrants from neighboring Bangladesh (Kipgen, 2014). As a result, most Rohingya are stateless since they have no paper proof that their community was established in Myanmar before the British colonization (Holliday, 2014).



"Bangladesh - International Women's Day in the Rohingya Refugee Camps" by UN Women Gallery is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Rohingya have faced mass expulsions before in 1977 and 1992 which were always followed by forced returns to Myanmar (Abdelkader, 2013). After the end of the military junta in 2010 and the following democratic elections which brought Aung San Suu Kyi in parliament and made her State Counsellor in 2015, hopes rose high for an end to the persecution of ethnic and religious minorities in Myanmar (Jones, 2014). However, since 2012 persecution of Rohingya by Buddhist has become more violent. Leading to the – mostly internal- displacement of tens of thousands of Rohingya and the killing of thousands (Kipgen, 2014). In 2016 the conflict became even more violent turning in one of the worst humanitarian crises the world has seen. Some Rohingya militants belonging to the radical group Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) sparked the conflict by attacking a military outpost from the army of Myanmar. The response of the army was disproportionate and hundreds of thousands of Rohingya were forced to flee to neighboring Bangladesh and thousands were killed in the most brutal way (Ramzy, 2017).

The disproportionate response by the Burmese army led to the UN and several other human rights organizations like Human Rights Watch to condemn the government of Myanmar of being guilty of ethnic cleansing and even genocide (Barry, 2017). However, an important aspect of the conflict remains underexposed. Compared to the religious and/or ethnic aspect of the conflict, little attention is being paid to the geostrategic location of Rakhine State and its influence on the Rohingya conflict.

Introduction of Capitalism and Globalization in Myanmar

The conflict in Myanmar is often portrayed as an ethnic or religious conflict while the capitalist aspect of this conflict is often overlooked or ignored. Since 1989 the country became less isolationist and opened itself up to a certain extent to international markets and foreign investments (Cook, 2011). This only increased with the policy shift which took place in 2011 (Tahilramani, 2018). According to Khan (2016) Rakhine State, where the majority of Rohingya live, is being developed to extract its natural resources like oil and gas. The main players are China and India. China improved its international relations with Myanmar in 1989 (Shee, 1997) while bilateral contacts with India were restored in the late 1990s (Lall, 2006). China even has offshore oil and gas fields in Rakhine State (Al-Adawy, 2013). Hilton (2013) stresses the importance of the geostrategic location of Myanmar for China. Through Myanmar, the Chinese provinces of Yunan and Sichuan could connect to the Indian ocean which is not only important for trade but also to enhance China's influence in the Indian Ocean. Myanmar could also provide much needed natural resources to these provinces of China. Of course, these projects have a far-reaching impact on the local population; in Rakhine State, we see forceful displacement and confinement of freedom of movement (Al-Adawy, 2013). Many Rohingya are being persecuted and forced to flee to neighboring Bangladesh.

In this paper, I will use two such projects as an example to underline the geostrategic importance of Arakan State and the significance of the presence of natural resources like gas. The first project is the Kaladan Gateway project which is an Indian project to connect Kolkata with Sittwe, the capital of Arakan State through land and sea to increase trade between both countries. The latter is the Shwe Gas Pipeline Project to create a pipeline from Arakan State to China to extract its natural gas resources. Both projects will be explained in more detail in the next section of this paper. Of course, there is a local protest against these projects because they endanger the livelihood of local farmers and fishermen in Arakan State, of whom most are Rohingya (Al-Adawy, 2013). The forceful displacement of people is not a new strategy used by the Myanmar government and they also used

it this time to get rid of people protesting against these projects or people who might impede the ongoing developments (Lanjouw et al., 2000).

Kaladan Gateway Project

The Kaladan Gateway project intends to construct a connection from Mizoram State in Northeast India to Sittwe, the capital of Arakan State in Myanmar. This connection will be a combination of a waterway on the Kaladan river and a highway (Thang, Oo, & Scott, 2015). The goal is to make Mizoram State more easily accessible and to connect it to the Indian Ocean. This project leads to land confiscation, forced displacement and the loss of livelihoods for the local people living in Arakan State (Thang et al., 2015). The dredging of the Kaladan river will seriously affect the farmers and fishermen living in the area, robbing them of their only source of income (Al-Adawy, 2013).



"Village Life along Kaladan River - Boat from Mrauk U to Sittwe - Myanmar (Burma)" by Adam Jones, Ph.D. - Global Photo Archive is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

Swhe Oil and Gas Pipeline Project

In 2004 the South Korean company Daewoo International discovered the Swhe gas field off the coast in Arakan State (Kolås & Tønnesson, 2006). The Swhe gas pipeline project is a project to import gas from the Indian Ocean to the southwest of China. Construction works started in 2010 and

the gas pipeline was finished in 2013 (Al-Adawy, 2013) while a parallel pipeline for oil was put into operation in 2017 (Tahilramani, 2018). The pipeline runs from Kyaukpyu island in Rakhine State more than 2000km through Myanmar and China to the capital of Yunnan province (Uddin, 2018). Besides the transportation of gas, crude oil exported from Africa and the Middle-East will also be transported from Kyaukpyu to Yunnan over land (Lee, Chan, & Chan, 2009). For China, this project offers the possibility to rely less on the Malacca Strait for its import of natural resources because this strait is vulnerable in case of an attack or embargo and there is also the threat of piracy (Kolås & Tønnesson, 2006). Besides the construction of the pipeline, other infrastructure works like railways, highways, chemical plants, and other forms of infrastructure are necessary (Hilton, 2013).

This, of course, impacts the lives of thousands of people living in Rakhine State. Most of them are Rohingya who makes their living through farming or fishing, professions endangered by the pipeline project. The Myanmar government also forcefully evicted people from their land and used forced labor in order to construct the project. Compensation given by the Chinese government has reportedly been used in other parts of the country and thus not for the people affected by the project (Al-Adawy, 2013).

The Impact of Capitalism and Globalisation on Land Ownership

It is thus very clear that the introduction of capitalism and globalization have a big impact on the local (mainly rural) population. Both projects have a devastating impact on the lives and livelihoods of the people living in the affected region as described above. However, it is remarkable that very few literature exists on the connection between these projects and the upraise of violence in Arakan State. As Al-Adawy (2013) notes, the conflict flared up again in late 2012 which is exactly the same moment as both projects were being fully developed. Since the local people did not have any say in these projects while it impacts their lives and makes their future insecure, it is plausible that the violence initiated by Rohingya partly stems forth from their discontent of these projects and the endangerment of their livelihoods instead of being solely related to their ethnic and religious persecution. Furthermore, it is also possible that there is a (partial) shift in the Myanmar government's attitude towards the Rohingya and that their ethnic and religious status is being misused as an excuse to secure the government's economic interests. Further research is necessary to explore this issue.

Conclusion

This paper investigates the connection between Myanmar's economic development and the persecution of its Rohingya population. The Rohingya conflict is often described as an ethnic and/or religious conflict, while the geopolitical and capitalist aspect of this conflict remains largely underexposed. By using the Kaladan Gateway project and the Shwe Gas Pipeline project, which both are situated in Arakan State as an example, I tried to argue that the Rohingya conflict partially has been influenced by the global economic developments of Myanmar. By persecuting and expelling the Rohingya from Arakan State, the Myanmar government secures its economic interests while changing the Rohingya in illegal squatters without any political or economic rights. However, further research is necessary to explore the relation between capitalist interests and Rohingya persecution.

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