

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24297/jssr.v14i0.8407>

A Conflict Profile: The Rohingya Conflict in Myanmar

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1. Abstract

'Rohingya' - world's most persecuted minority group came to the attention of the international media again in the mid of 2017 due to the brutality they were experiencing in their homeland by the state authority of Myanmar. Now they are being labeled as the 'perpetual other' of Myanmar and as the 'Bengali intruders' by the society regardless of being the inhabitants in the Rakhine state for centuries (The Diplomat 2017). This paper will focus on the causes of the present crisis which started to unveil since 2017 and how these are linked with the interest of the different stakeholders like: the Military junta of Myanmar, Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), ASEAN, Bangladesh, the Indian government, China, the UN, etc. To understand the causes and the effects of the conflict this paper will use the 'conflict tree' and the 'conflict onion' as tools to understand the positions, needs, and interests of different actors.

Keywords: Rohingya Refugee, Rohingya Conflict, Conflict Analysis, Bangladesh, Myanmar

2. Introduction

'Rohingya' - world's most persecuted minority group came to the attention of the international media again in the mid of 2017 due to the brutality they were experiencing in their homeland by the state authority of Myanmar. Now they are being labeled as the 'perpetual other' of Myanmar and as the 'Bengali intruders' by the society regardless of being the inhabitants in the Rakhine state for centuries (The Diplomat 2017). As a result of this Bangladesh experienced the largest surge of displaced people into its border after its independence. They are 'culturally discriminated, economically exploited and politically sidelined' and are being discerned by the Arakan people as a threat to their national identity and an additional competitor for the natural resources (Wolf 2015). It is widely believed that the reason for the violent crackdown of the military against the 'Rohingya' community in the Arakan state is either religiously or ethnically motivated. But this is only a splinter part of the entire truth. These violent atrocities against the Rohingya community are more politically and economically motivated than religiously and ethnically. This paper will focus on the causes of the present crisis which started to unveil since 2017 and how these are linked with the interest of the different stakeholders like: the Military junta of Myanmar, Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), ASEAN, Bangladesh, the Indian government, China, the UN, etc. To understand the causes and the effects of the conflict this paper will use the tool of 'conflict tree' and the 'conflict onion' will be used as a tool to understand the positions, needs, and interests of different actors.

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3. The context of the conflict

The persecution against the Rohingya community has its long roots which started to grow in the 1970s and

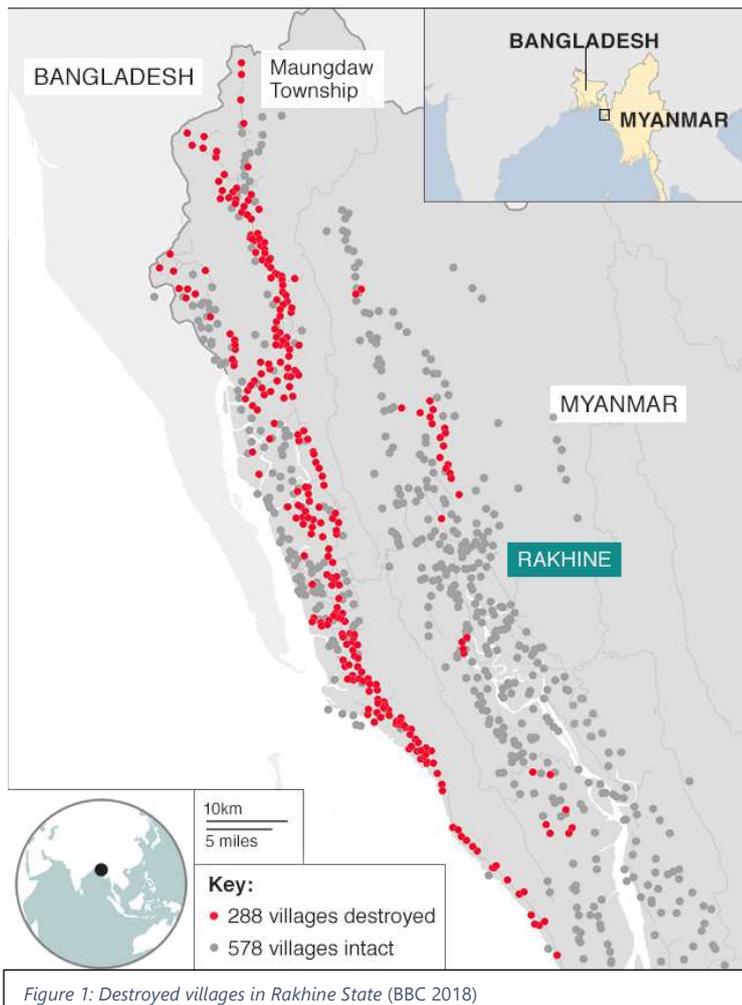


Figure 1: Destroyed villages in Rakhine State (BBC 2018)

since then due to the discriminatory policies of the government of Myanmar, they were forced to leave from their homeland to Bangladesh. A crisis started to unfold again in 2017 which resulted in the displacement of 700,000 Rohingyas in Bangladesh (BBC 2018) and in total, the number is 1.3 million. It is widely considered that they were persecuted based on their religious and ethnic identity (Forino, von Meding, and Johnson 2017) but this is far away from the fact of economic and political reasons which is always sidelined in the mainstream media and scholarly works. During this recent crisis, according to the BBC (2018), at least 6700 Rohingyas were killed among whom there were 730 were children who were under the age of five. It is also reported that Rohingya women and girls were raped and abused by the Myanmar military (HRW 2018). Based on this reports the Myanmar military responded by stating that they are fighting against the militants, not the civilians (Aung and Naing 2019). The Secretary General of the UN António Guterres has accused the Myanmar military of mass killings and gang rapes with the 'genocidal intent' (The Guardian 2018).

Economic and political factors should be taken into consideration to understand the root causes of this persecution, forced displacement, and vulnerability against the Rohingya people. The poor state of Arakan is blessed with natural resources which is enough to understand why the authority of the state is so much interested in this part of Myanmar. Land grabbing in the name of development projects like: the expansion of the military base, the exploitation of the natural resources, agricultural projects, infrastructure, and tourism (Conversation 2017) is quite common in Myanmar which in turn is responsible for the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas. The strategic importance of the position of Myanmar in the world map also helped to intensify the violence against the Rohingya people. China is exploiting the timber, rivers, and minerals in the northern state of Shan since the 1990s (Mirante 2016). China has also built a transnational pipeline which connects the Sittwe (the capital of Rakhine) to Kunming (China) to transport its oil and gas to Guangzhou, China (Dhaka Tribune 2017).

India is constructing the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project through the Rakhine state of Myanmar which will connect the northeast of India through the Bay of Bengal (The Hindu 2018). According to Jason von Meding, "Myanmar had designated 3 million acres in Rakhine state for the development of the area's rich mineral resources" (Dhaka Tribune 2017). It is very evident if we see the role and the interest of India and China in this part of the world which can't deny the fact that besides religion and ethnicity the political and economic interest of Myanmar and other stakeholders are also responsible for the displacement of the Rohingya people.

4. Analysis: Stakeholders with the power of influencing the conflict

'Stakeholders' in this paper is defined as groups/actors who have vested interests in the issue, the power to influence and a role to play (GSDRC 2017). Given the complexity of the issue, there are multiple stakeholders involved especially regional and international stakeholders.

a. Military Junta of Myanmar

- It is the primary political and economic force in the society. Constitutional laws and authority still undermine the authority of the state and keeps the military in power.
- since the 1990s onwards the juntas have been taking away land from small landholders without giving any compensation from different ethnic and religious groups
- The land which has been claimed to be acquired in the name of 'development' has been the work of military juntas which includes expansion of military bases, natural resource exploitation projects, agricultural projects and to foster infrastructure alongside tourism.
- Though these can be termed as 'development' in the most practical sense of the term, the question to be pondered upon here is the power of the military, the stake of the military and how it has manifested its power and domination in the form of juntas without receiving any hindrance from the government in power. This only manifests the power of the Juntas and the military within the country.

b. Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA)

- The ARSA operates in the Rakhine state of Myanmar where the Rohingyas have faced mass persecution.
- In August 2017 ARSA killed 12 security personnel in an attack (BBC 2017) and as a result of this the counter-insurgency operation was initiated by the security forces of Myanmar (**trigger**)
- The aim and goal of ARSA is in line with the self-defense of their people and protecting and the Rohingya people against state oppression (BBC 2017)
- The government of Myanmar claims that ARSA is a militant group within the country operating in the northern parts who have been trained abroad.
- The International Crisis Group also published a report in 2016 that the group was lead from people belonging to the same ethnicity in Saudi Arabia and the ARSA leader was born in Pakistan and raised in Saudi Arabia (ICG 2016).
- The kind of weapons that the ARSA possess, according to BBC News (2017), are knives and home-made bombs.
- The weapons used can be classified under sticks and small arms and weapons which were home-made which manifests the fact that the ARSA doesn't get that much of foreign assistance (ICG 2016) and such weapons prove that some help was received from the outside for creation and use of these weapons manifest their small capacity.
- ARSA's training has been started since 2013, but the first attack on nine people only happened in 2016. This can also be a testament of the fact that the attack required time to be planned and

despite the years in between, the weapons used were not advanced enough hence nullifying links from abroad.

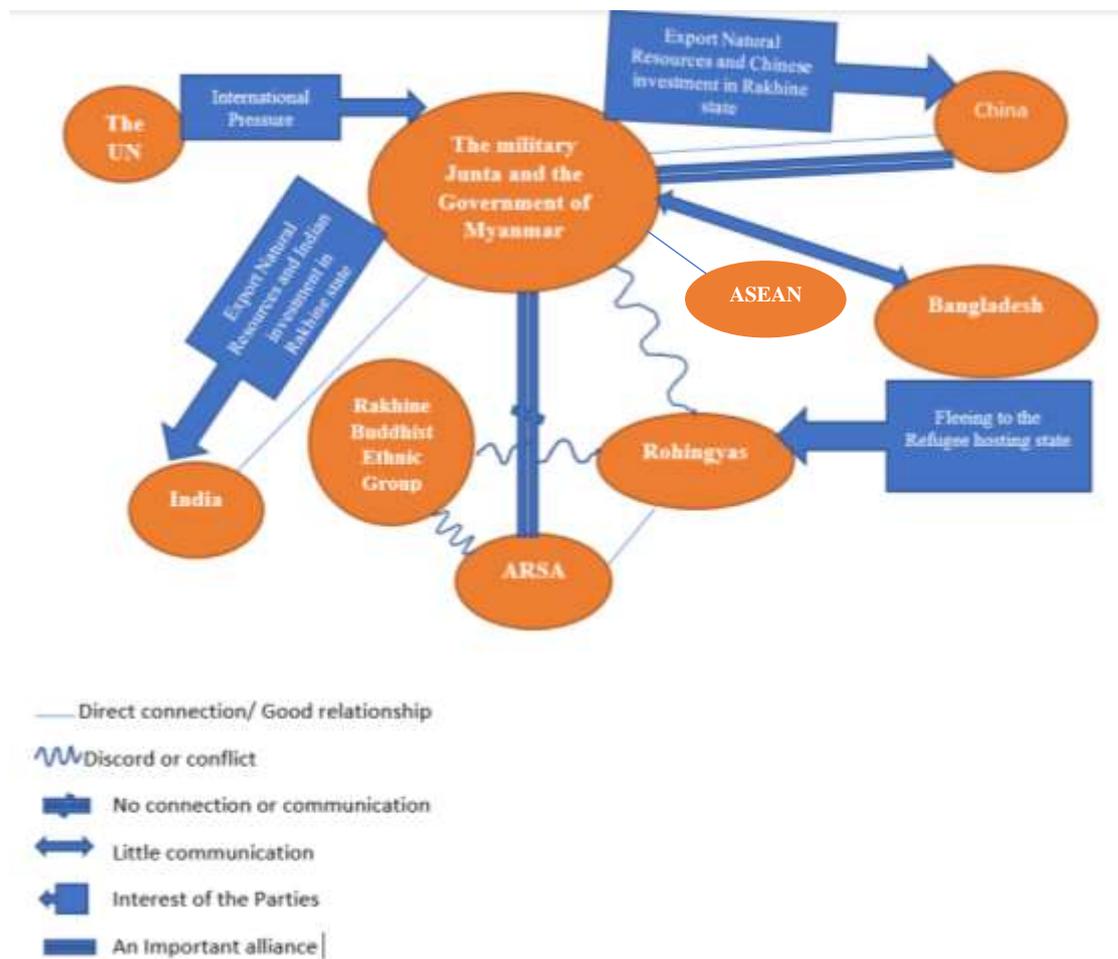


Figure 2: Myanmar Conflict Map

c. The role of ASEAN

- ASEAN countries lack a coordinated effort and an established legal framework to deal with the refugee crisis.
- The ASEAN Report failed to mention the military atrocities against the Rohingya Muslims which forced them to migrate from Myanmar to different countries. The report blamed Bangladesh for the delayed repatriation of the Rohingyas and praised the efforts of Myanmar taken for 'smooth and orderly' returns (The Straits Times 2019).
- ASEAN's report refrained itself from using the term 'Rohingya' and referred these people as "victims and affected communities of the conflict" (Lee 2018). As Myanmar thinks that the use of the term 'Rohingya' means taking the side against the state of Myanmar.
- Different ASEAN members like Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Myanmar are yet to ratify the refugee convention of the UN or its protocol (Albert and Chatzky 2018).
- Both Malaysia and Indonesia claimed that the plight of the Rohingya Muslims is a matter of regional concern, but they followed different rules to engage themselves to tackle the situation.

- Indonesia was eager to pursue its 'constructive engagement' (non-intervention principle) and refrained from putting direct pressure on Myanmar (Shivakoti 2017).
- Malaysia, on the other hand, was very vocal to put pressure on Myanmar. An emergency ministerial meeting in Malaysia was held by the OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation) on Malaysia's request (Shivakoti 2017). Malaysia wanted ASEAN to take coordinated humanitarian action and investigate the atrocities of Myanmar against the Rohingya Muslims (The Guardian 2016). These actions of Malaysia directly contradict against the ASEAN principle of non-interference in the intra-ASEAN matter.

d. The government of Bangladesh

- Accepted 700000 of Rohingyas despite knowing the fact that they are going to outnumber the local population
- Bangladesh is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention. There is no legal framework specified for the protection of refugees at the national level and this enables Bangladesh to treat the Rohingyas without any ethical, legal or moral obligations
- The policies of Bangladesh right now consist of transitory relief and push-back policies. The deals are taking place in a bilateral manner where Bangladesh and Myanmar governmental have signed an agreement in 2017 December (Holmes 2017).

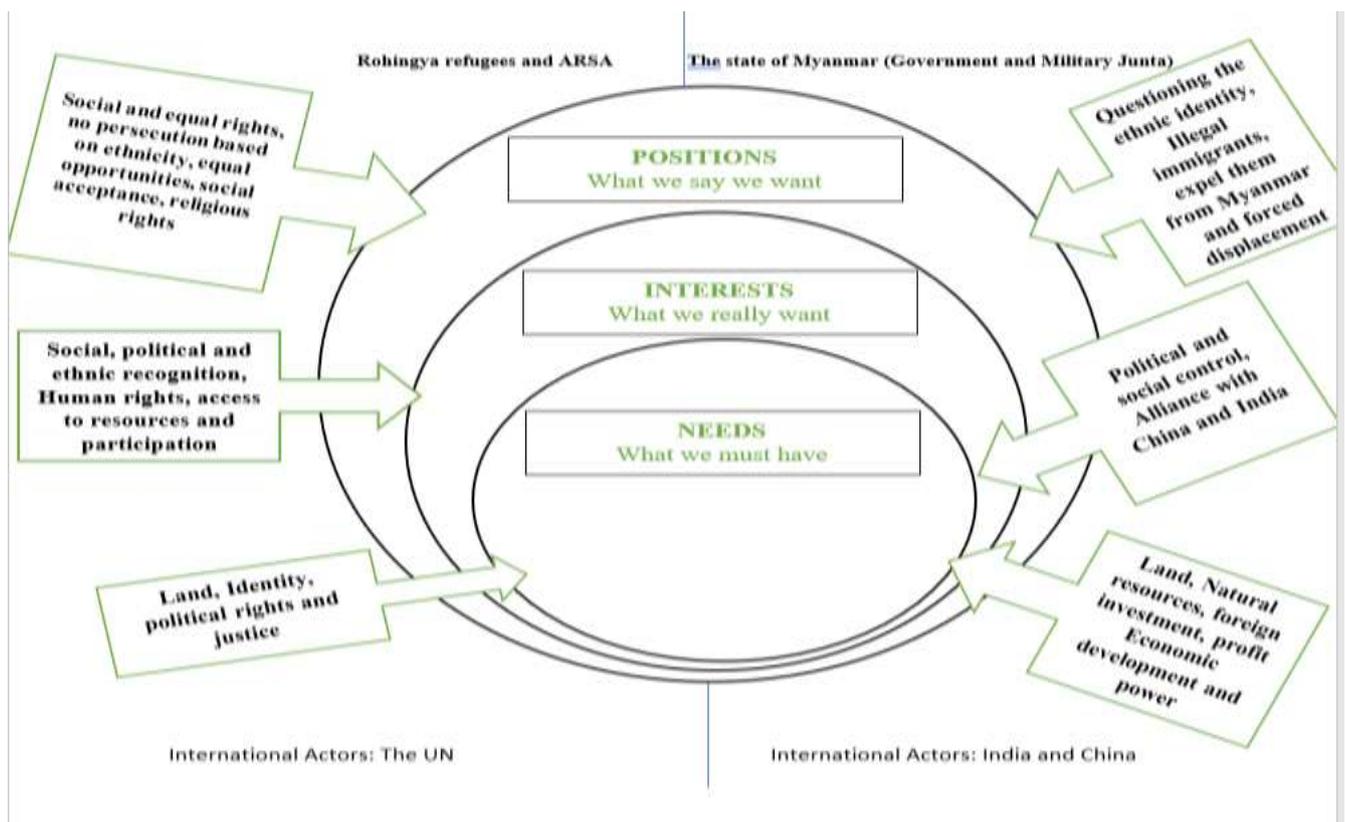


Figure 3: Onion actor analysis- Actors' positions, Interests, and needs

- "Rohingya refugees have been blamed for the increase in the domestic drug trade and other crimes, as well as for damage to the local environment. The Rohingya have thus been seen as a threat to national security and domestic law and order" (Reliefweb 2018).

e. The government of India

- At the beginning of the crisis Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia did not allow boats carrying Rohingya refugees and as these people were hindered in high seas, Delhi was called for help, but India turned its back during this point of time.
- Delhi took the side of the government of Myanmar because at that point of time it was having close connections with China and developing newer ties and it did not want to interfere in the process.
- India also has economic interests with its companies holding stakes in Shwe Gas field off the coast of Rakhine State.
- Along with energy interests and plans to build cross-border pipelines, India also has a connectivity interest to link its landlocked north-eastern region with the Bay of Bengal through Rakhine State under a joint project with Myanmar that includes development of port at Sittwe, inland waterway in the Kaladan River, and road construction to connect it with India's Northeast (Yhome 2018).
- The Indian government announced that they will deport the Rohingyas who have settled in different parts of India (Yhome 2018)

f. The government of China

- China claimed that the root causes of the conflict are under development and as a result of this China has endorsed a significant amount of infrastructural investment (a deep-sea port, and oil and gas pipelines) in the Rakhine state through which they are trying to find a resolution to the conflict (Joy 2018).
- Invested US\$2.45 billion to construct the pipeline from Rakhine to China's Yunan province to import crude oil from the Middle Eastern countries to China (AFP 2017).
- Might block any ambition to internationalize the Rohingya refugee crisis as they have already invested \$7.3 billion on the deep-sea project in the Rakhine state (Dasgupta 2017).
- Their interest is purely economic which is based on two significant projects: the Kyaukpyu Special Economic Zone and gas and oil pipelines that cross from Rakhine to China's Yunnan province (Joy 2018).
- These two projects reflect Chinese ambition to have access to the Indian Ocean and these two projects are linked with the Belt and Road Initiative announced in 2013 (Joy 2018)
- The profits the Chinese generate is being divided between Naypyidaw and foreign companies (mostly Chinese) made the local people upset and helped them to term the government as being exploitative
- China blocked the UN effort to pass a strong resolution aimed to condemn Myanmar's excessive military action against the Rohingya community (DW 2017)

g. The United Nations

- Termed the treatment of the Rohingya people by the state of Myanmar as the 'textbook example of ethnic cleansing'
- Advised the Security Council to pressurize Myanmar to end the sufferings of the refugees

- "The United Nations Human Rights Council stepped up pressure to punish Myanmar's military commanders for a brutal campaign against Rohingya Muslims" (Bruce 2017).

5. Causes of the conflict:

a. The structural causes of the conflict

The structural causes of the conflict are mainly religious and ethnic differences. The Rohingya crisis first came to the forefront in 1977-1978 which was the beginning of the forced displacement against this ethnic community (Doctors without Borders 2017). Since then the crackdown on the community has taken place at regular intervals; early 1990s to the recent mass exodus from August 25th, 2017. But why has the community been targeted time and time again? What is the cause behind the Rohingya crisis?

The UN has called the crisis a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing". This is a targeted crackdown on an ethnic and religious minority group. After Myanmar won independence from British rule in 1948 the Muslim population began a rebellion in the Rakhine State to seek equal rights and autonomy of the region. This was strongly pushed back by the government and is believed to have further cemented the point of contention between the two major religious groups within the region.

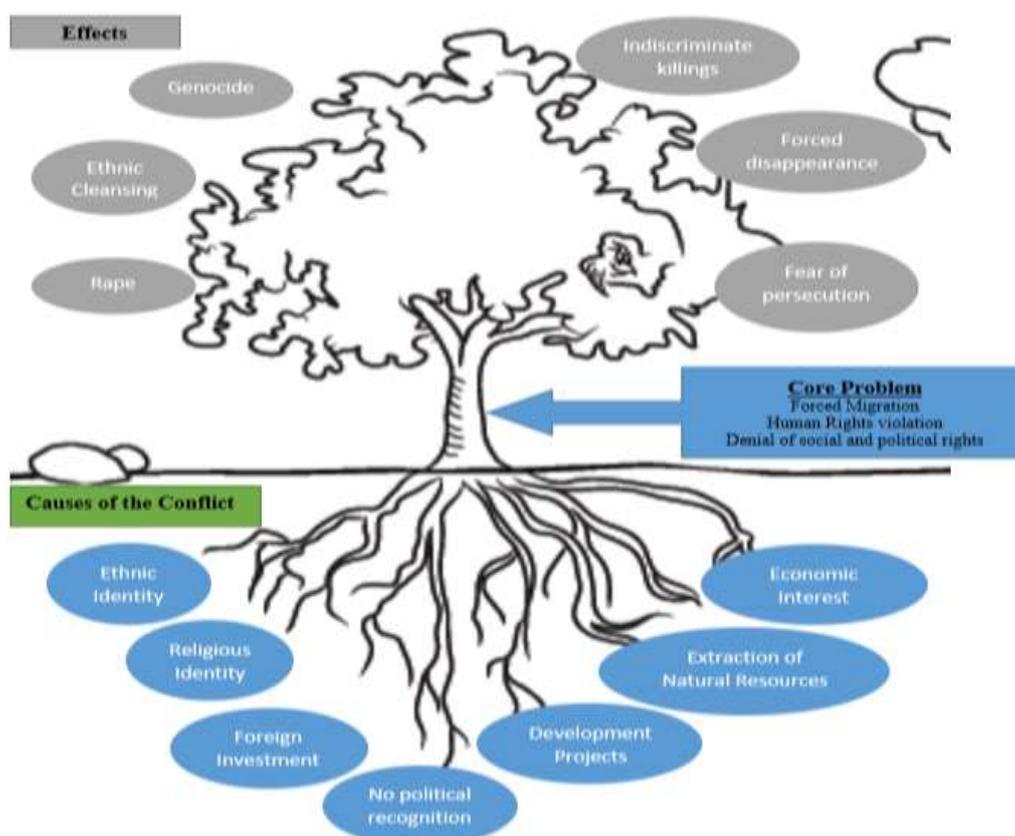


Figure 4: Conflict tree to visualize the reasons of the conflict

Rising Islamophobia also gave the Buddhist fundamentalists a reason to further the agenda of how the Rohingyas were a threat to the predominantly Buddhist culture of the country. The fact that neighboring countries such as Bangladesh and Malaysia are also predominantly Muslim helped to further their point of how they had to protect their own culture from the Muslims. Attacks by the ARSA (Arakan Rohingya

Salvation Army) is also being used to prove how dangerous Rohingyas are to Myanmar. The last crackdown on Rohingyas on August 25th was also started after an ARSA attack on 30 security posts of Myanmar.

Based on the religion and ethnicity of the Rohingyas the Myanmar government is continuing to discriminate and target them to kill them or scare them into leaving the country. Human Rights Watch's Thapa agrees, arguing that what makes this new wave of anti-Rohingya attacks worse than in previous years is how coordinated they are. "It feels like a program designed to drive out everyone finally," she said (Persio 2017).

b. Proximal Reasons for conflict

So, it is safe to say that religion and ethnicity of Rohingyas are the reason that the Myanmar government has been targeting them. However, is that the only reason? Myanmar has a total of 135 officially recognized ethnic groups. The Rohingyas were taken out of this group only in 1989.

A deeper look into the matter unveils an even more complicated reason behind the recent attacks on Rohingyas. A fight for resources and development of Myanmar seems to also be making matters worse for the Rohingyas. Rakhine state is one of the poorest (the second poorest) of Myanmar's states despite being natural resources rich.

When the new government came to power, Myanmar's zeal for economic development also came in the forefront. It is stuck between two very competitive rising economic powers, China and India who are both in need of natural resources to expand their economies. Land is one of the major factors of production and since 1990s Myanmar has been acquiring vast stretches of land from smallholders using threat and no compensation. At the time of the 2012 attacks, the land allocated to large projects had increased by 170% between 2010 and 2013. Interestingly, the allotment of lands in the Rakhine region has gone up to a 1,268,077 hectares (3,100,000 acres) in the Rohingya's area for corporate rural development compared to the first such formal allocation which was in 2012, for just 7,000 hectares (17,000 acres) (Sassen 2017). This is a trend as we see in other examples from Myanmar such as in the Shan, Chin, and Kachin provinces

Seen from this angle, persecution of the Rohingya at least during the recent years has at least two functions. The first is, expelling them from their land is a way of freeing up the region's land and water. By burning their homes this process is made irreversible. Secondly, a focus on religious difference mobilizes passions around religion, rather than aiming, let's say, at creating pressure on the government to stop evictions of all smallholders, no matter their religion (Sassen 2017).

6. Dynamics of the conflict:

The military Junta of Myanmar stopped their atrocities in the name of the state against the Rohingya community but at the same time reluctant to repatriate those who have migrated into the land of Bangladesh. Recently, Myanmar has shown a sign of their changed stance by signing an agreement with Bangladesh to repatriate all the Rohingya refugees (Paul 2018). But the UN expressed concerns on the agreement signed by both Bangladesh and Myanmar as the UN thinks that the conditions in the Rakhine state are not conducive for the refugees to return (Petersen and Rahman 2018).

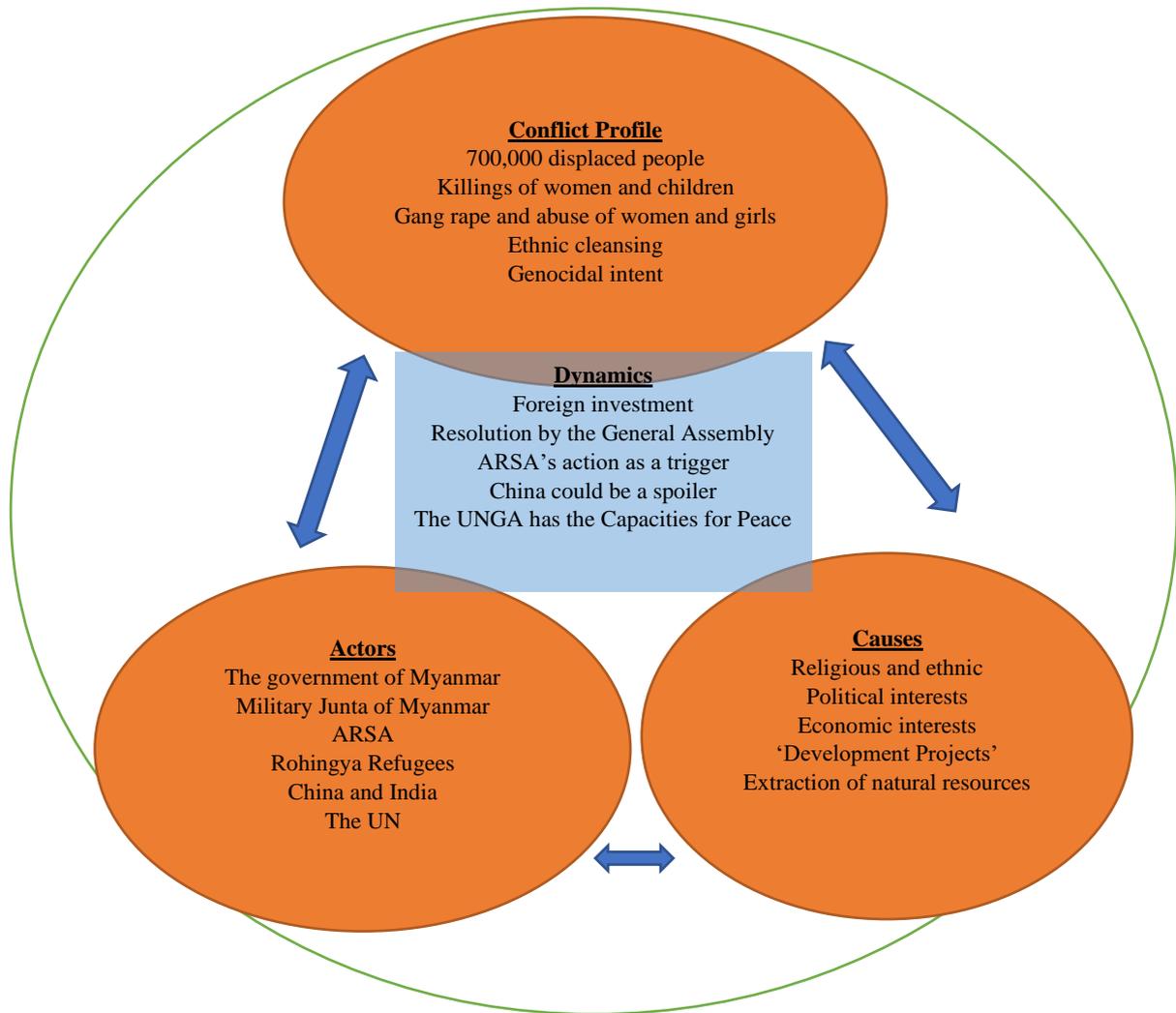


Figure 5: The Dynamics of the Conflict (how the Actors, Causes and Profile Interact)

In this conflict, the interest of the foreign stakeholders (China and India) might change the present status quo situation and might deny the other reasons and causes of the conflict. If the interest of the state of Myanmar matches the interests of both India and China then there is a chance of escalation of violence against the Rohingya people. Due to the interest of China, it might play the role of a **potential spoiler** (it has already played this role).

The violence against the Rohingya community started with the action taken by the ARSA against the security forces of Myanmar and that event worked as a **trigger**. Any action taken by ARSA against the state of Myanmar might trigger the event again.

In this situation, it is tough to say that what kind of scenarios can be developed to improve the situation and the lives of the Rohingya. Pressure from the international community on Myanmar should be continued and actions should be taken by the General Assembly instead of the Security Council to deny the veto power of China and to pass a resolution against Myanmar. This will enable the UN to establish peace (**'capacities for peace'**) through which they might be able to restore the rights of the Rohingya people. In the worst-case scenario, ARSA might attack the security forces again to take revenge which might lead the Myanmar government to be more ferocious against the remaining Rohingya people in Myanmar.

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