

**Multicultural society in Burma:
How it failed to accommodate the Rohingya identity**

**สังคมพหุวัฒนธรรมในพม่า :
ความล้มเหลวในการยอมรับอัตลักษณ์ชาวโรฮิงจา**

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Abstract

The Rohingya ethnic and religious minority residing in Rakhine State became victimized due to their cultural differences in multi ethnic Burma. Moreover, they have experienced difficulties in obtaining citizenship since the enactment of the 1982 Citizenship Law. From the British colonial time, their separate identity was recognized and they had strong involvement in government before and after Burmese independence. In Burma, not only Rohingyas, but other ethnic minorities also have similar problems with the ethnic majority Burman-dominated Yangon-based central government. The Rohingya issue is more complicated. In the name of indigenous ethnic identity, Rohingyas became stateless in their ancestors' land.

This paper will present evidence of the Rohingyas' presence in their ancestors' land of Arakan from pre-colonial times to the present day nation state of Burma/Myanmar. However, it is not enough to claim indigenous ethnic identity under the 1982 law. In this context, this paper will explore the discussion on the basis of multiculturalism and how the multi-ethnic country of Burma failed to accommodate ethnic minorities in their national framework. The theoretical discussion of multiculturalism is helpful for understanding how the Rohingyas were victimized in Burma due to their ethnic and religious identity. Moreover, the paper will present documentary evidence to prove that the government enacted various laws simply to deny the Rohingyas a place in the multi-ethnic country Burma/ Myanmar.

Keywords: Multiculture, Burma, Rohingya

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บทคัดย่อ

ชาวโรฮีนจาอาศัยอยู่ในรัฐยะไข่ ประเทศพม่า ซึ่งเป็นประเทศที่มีความหลากหลายทางชาติพันธุ์ เป็นชนกลุ่มน้อยทางด้านชาติพันธุ์และศาสนาที่ตกเป็นเหยื่อเพราะความแตกต่างทางด้านวัฒนธรรม ทั้งยังประสบความยากลำบากในการได้รับฐานะพลเมือง นับตั้งแต่การประกาศใช้พระราชบัญญัติพลเมืองปี ค.ศ.1982 ชาวโรฮีนจาตั้งแต่ยุคอาณานิคมอังกฤษมีอัตลักษณ์เป็นที่ยอมรับและได้เข้ามามีส่วนร่วมในรัฐบาล ทั้งในช่วงเวลาก่อนและภายหลังการได้รับเอกราชของพม่า ในพม่าไม่เพียงแต่ชาวโรฮีนจาเท่านั้น แต่ยังมีชนชาติพันธุ์อื่นๆ ที่ประสบปัญหาเช่นเดียวกันจากรัฐบาลกลางที่ผู้ครองอำนาจเป็นชนกลุ่มใหญ่ และมีฐานอำนาจอยู่ที่ย่างกุ้ง ประเด็นโรฮีนจาซับซ้อนมากกว่าอย่างอื่น ในนามอัตลักษณ์คนท้องถิ่น ชาวโรฮีนจาจากหลากหลายเป็นคนที่รัฐในแผ่นดินบรรพบุรุษของเขาเอง

ข้อเขียนนี้นำเสนอหลักฐานความมีอยู่ของชาวโรฮีนจาในแผ่นดินบรรพบุรุษของพวกเขา คือ อรากัน นับตั้งแต่ยุคก่อนล่าอาณานิคมตราบจนสมัยรัฐประชาชาติพม่าหรือเมียนมาในปัจจุบัน อย่างไรก็ตาม การอ้างอัตลักษณ์ทางชาติพันธุ์ของคนท้องถิ่นภายใต้พระราชบัญญัติ 1982 นั้นนับว่าไม่เพียงพอ ในบริบทดังกล่าว ข้อเขียนนี้จะสำรวจข้อถกเถียงบนพื้นฐานแนวคิดพหุวัฒนธรรมนิยมและลักษณะที่พม่าซึ่งเป็นประเทศหลากหลายวัฒนธรรม ประสบความล้มเหลวในการยอมรับชนกลุ่มน้อยชาติพันธุ์ต่างๆ ในข่ายรัฐประชาชาติของประเทศ การอภิปรายในเชิงทฤษฎีแนวคิดพหุวัฒนธรรมนิยม มีประโยชน์แก่ความเข้าใจถึงการที่ชาวโรฮีนจาได้ตกเป็นเหยื่อในพม่า เนื่องจากอัตลักษณ์ทางชาติพันธุ์และศาสนาของพวกเขา ยิ่งกว่านั้น งานเขียนนี้จะเสนอเอกสารหลักฐานเพื่อพิสูจน์ว่า รัฐบาลพม่าได้ตราพระราชบัญญัติต่างๆขึ้น เพียงเพื่อที่จะปฏิเสธพื้นที่ของชาวโรฮีนจาในพม่าหรือเมียนมา ซึ่งเป็นประเทศหลากหลายชาติพันธุ์

คำสำคัญ : พหุวัฒนธรรม, พม่า, โรฮีนจา

1. Introduction

The Rohingya is a religious and linguistic minority from the western part of Burma.¹ The United Nations describes them as one of the most persecuted minorities in the world (BBC, 2014). The Rohingyas have been denied Burmese nationality by the 1982 Citizenship Law. That law was created in the name of indigenous ethnicity to deny the Rohingya nationality. This article explores key areas of the Rohingyas' ancestry in present Rakhine State (Arakan State) and as a multi-ethnic country how Burma failed to accommodate Rohingyas in their national framework. Firstly, this paper will elaborate the ideas of multiculturalism and how it works in the Burma context. Secondly, it will present various documentary evidence of a Rohingya presence in Burma since the independent Arakan kingdom. This evidence clearly indicates that Rohingyas are one of the indigenous groups of people in Arakan as well as of the current nation-state of Burma. Despite pressure from the international community, the Myanmar government repeatedly denies the Rohingyas' identity. The Rohingya crisis started from the late eighteenth century. It has changed its shape and nature since then, but has mostly focused on Rohingya ethnicity and religion. This article argues that after Burmese colonization in Arakan the Rohingya became a minority group in terms of religion and ethnicity. Lastly, this paper explores the various causes of Rohingyas victimization in contemporary Burma's history. This discussion also connects with the ideas of multiculturalism. It is helpful to understand how the multiculturalism approach failed in the Burma context, especially in the case of Rohingyas.

2. Methodology

This research article mainly focuses on how Burma as a multi-ethnic country failed to accommodate the ethnic-religious minority Rohingya in their national framework. The nature of this research demanded theoretical discussion on the multicultural citizenship and the relevant documents of the Rohingyas' involvement in present nation state Burma. For that reason, in the first phase, relevant literature from a multicultural approach was reviewed to understand the theoretical framework of multicultural citizenship. The theoretical framework for this research is based on the ideas of Kymlicka and other scholars' discussions on the importance of multiculturalism and how multi-ethnic countries accommodate their minority people.

In the next phase, this study elaborates the Rohingyas' presence in present Burma's history and how the Rohingyas became victimized in their ancestors' land due to their ethnic and religious identity. In this phase, data was collected from the field, especially in Yangon. This study was conducted during three rounds of field work in July 2012, June 2013 and March 2014, to collect historical evidence of Rohingya presence in the now nation-state of Burma. All these findings are based on various reports, ethnographic interviews with Rohingya and civil society leaders, and then checked with previous documents.

3. Theoretical Framework

Multicultural Citizenship in Burma and the Rohingya

In the liberal political discourse of the contemporary world, multi-ethnic and racial diversity accommodations are the major challenges of the nation-building process. Multiculturalism arises within contemporary liberal egalitarianism, but it is at the same time in tension with and a critique of some classical liberal ideas. The multicultural citizenship become popular because this concept incorporates ethnic and national minorities' recognition and support their cultural identity. Modood (2002) argues that multiculturalism emphasized the equal dignity and equal respect for all. Though, in most multi-ethnic countries, minorities are often deprived of their rights and dignities.

The minorities' separate cultural identity is also neglected by the ruling elites. In Burma, most of the ethnic minorities have been struggling to establish their rights since decolonization. The case of the ethnic and religious minority Rohingya is a more complex issue. All their rights are confiscated by the Burmese elites. As a result, the Rohingyas are now treated as unwanted people in their ancestors' land. Multicultural citizenship is one of the best approaches to accommodate ethnic-national minorities in the mainstream society. The main purpose of this article to elaborate how the multi-ethnic country Burma failed to accommodate ethnic-religious minority Rohingyas in their national framework.

Many ethno-culturally diverse countries such as Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Burma, became violent conflict-zones because of lack of integration with multiculturalism. Earlier multicultural approaches included women, minorities and non-Western cultures in recognition of the increasingly diverse character of life in modern

Western societies (Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism). One of the major thinkers of multiculturalism, Kymlicka, extended this approach and included all of these ethno-cultural groups such as immigrants, ethnic groups, national minorities, nations and peoples.

Kymlicka argues that, “the term ‘multicultural’ covers many different forms of cultural pluralism, each of which raises its own challenges” (1995, p.10). According to Tariq Modood (2007) the term multiculturalism is the political accommodation of minorities, immigrants in the western countries. Modood mostly emphasized the multiculturalism in Western world context.

Regarding this research, accommodation of multiculturalism is a major challenge in any heterogeneous nation like Burma. However, Burma failed to accommodate ethnic minorities in the nation building process since independence. Specifically, the Rohingya ethnic-religious identity were not only rejected, but also persecuted by the state and non-state actors in Burma. The state makes law and new policies to expel the Rohingyas from their ancestors’ land. As a result, the Rohingya has now become the most unwanted people in Burma, and multiculturalism has not succeeded in practice.

In that context, Kymlicka (1995) tried to establish acceptance of cultural pluralism in the state framework. He tried to identify two broad patterns of cultural diversity. In first case, cultural diversity can arise from the incorporation of previously self-governing, territorially concentrated cultures into a larger state. In this context, Kymlicka stated that national minorities wish to maintain themselves as distinct groups along with the mainstream community and demand various forms of autonomy such as self-governance over their land. In second case, cultural diversity can arise from individual and familial immigration.² Kymlicka thinks that some ethnic groups have wished to integrate into the larger society and to be accepted as full member of it. As a result, they seek greater integration and recognition of their identity. So that is why they pressure the government to reform the laws and institutions which can give them guarantee of their cultural differences and accommodate them in mainstream societies. Regarding Burma, most of the time it was ruled by the military junta that did not want different opinions to flourish and were reluctant to incorporate ethnic minorities.

In Burma, the ethnic minorities dominated one-third of the country and were mostly living in areas high in mineral resources and border areas. Over the last six decades, they were forcibly displaced from their homes many times by the military and the military-backed government. Apart from the Rohingyas, members of other ethnic minority groups such as the Shan, Karen and Kachin communities have left the country and sought refuge in neighboring countries and many of them still live in IDP camps. A number of interviewees of this study think that the Rangoon-based central government failed to accommodate national minorities in mainstream politics (interview, March 2014, Yangon).³ It started when the government breached the agreement with national minorities. The historic Panglong agreement states “citizens of the Frontier Areas shall enjoy rights and privileges which are regarded as fundamental in democratic countries,” thus ensuring ethnic minorities equal treatment as ethnic majority Burmans and granted “full autonomy in internal administration for the Frontier areas”. It was never implemented until today’s quasi-democratic regime in Burma. So that is why the leaders of ethnic minorities often said that fighting will never end unless another Panglong Agreement is signed and implemented (interview, March 2014, Yangon).⁴ Even the present constitution (adopted in 2008) did not mention any real protection for ethnic minorities in Burma.

Many Western democratic countries developed as multination’s over the decades, though earlier they forcibly incorporated indigenous people or formed less voluntary federation of two/three major dominant cultures. Kymlicka (1995) emphasized that accommodating cultural differences is the major challenge of multinational states. There is one example Kymlicka where stated that some nation groups define themselves in terms of blood. In Germany, membership of the German nation is based on descent not culture. For that reason, German people who lived their whole life in the USSR or today’s Russia are entitled to German citizenship. But ethnic Turkish living in Germany more than half a century and simultaneously having adopted German culture, are not qualified for citizenship. In the case of Israel, any one Jewish can demand his or her citizenship because of their religious identity. In South Africa, the government discouraged mixed-marriages to protect their descent-based identity during the apartheid regime. Immigration and the incorporation of national minorities are the two most common sources of cultural diversity in modern states. In liberal democracies, one of the

major challenges is accommodating cultural differences and the protection of civil and political rights of individuals.

Kymlicka offered some approaches for strengthening the multicultural societies. One such approach is federalism, which is a good among many minority groups in Burma. stated:

One mechanism for recognizing claims to self-government is federalism, which divides powers between the central government and regional subunits (provinces/states/cantons). Where national minorities are regionally concentrated, the boundaries of federal subunits can be drawn so that the national minority forms a majority in one of the subunits. Under these circumstances, federalism can provide extensive self-government for a national minority, guaranteeing its ability to make decisions in certain areas without being outvoted by the larger society (1995, pp.27-28).

Kymlicka also argues that “national membership should be open in principle to anyone, regardless of race or colour, who is willing to learn the language and history of the society and participate in its social and political institutions” (1995.p.23). In Burma, except for the officially recognized 135 ethnic groups, other minority people have been disqualified for full citizenship. It is true that the State has supreme power to determine who will be its citizens or nationals. But, when a country consists of a many ethnicities, then the government should consider all, irrespective of ethnicity.

Officially Burma is a Union form of government. From the early days of independence, all powers were concentrated in Rangoon and dominated by the majority Burmese. It is noted that, in absence of Aung San, the rest of the leaderships, including Premier U Nu, could not rightly handle the ethnic minorities’ issues. So that is why the Burmanization is one of the major causes of conflict between ethnic minorities including Rohingya Muslims and majority Burmese in the present nation-state. In addition, militarization stopped the democratic environment for all people in Burma since the early 1960s. In Arakan, Burmanization and militarization merged and were used against the Rohingyas’ existence. According to Kymlicka, Tariq Modood and other scholars’ opinion on multiculturalism are missing the link in the case of Rohingya Muslims in Burma. It will be discussed more in the next section.

4. Overview of the Rohingya and Arakan State (Rakhine State)

Burma is one of the most ethnically diverse and biggest countries of Southeast Asia. After sixty-six years of decolonization, the nation-building process is still problematic and tension remains between the majority Burman and ethnic minorities. Official nationalist historiography indicates that modern Burma was made by the British colonial ruler. It is noted that after first Anglo-Burma war, “the territories of Rakhine and Taninthary were absorbed into the administrative structures in the British India Company through its agents in Bengal” (Taylor, 2007, p.73). Burma was treated as a province of British India through the third Anglo-Burma war in 1824. After 1937, it was separated from India and called British Burma.

Arakan found itself at the crossroads of two worlds: South and Southeast Asia, between Muslim-Hindu Asia and Buddhist Asia, and amidst Indo-Aryan and Mongoloid races. Throughout history Arakan had close relationship with Muslim Bengal in the fields of culture, economy, and politics. Historically, it had more interaction with its western neighbor, which is now Bangladesh. It is clear that Arakan, western Frontier State of today’s Burma, was not part of the Burmese kingdom. From ancient times, it was closer with the Bengal. The geographical position of Arakan explains the separate historical development of its Muslim population until the Burmese king Bodayapaya conquered it on 28 December 1784. While the British expanded their territory and after independence in 1948, Arakan was transferred in to Burma without any plebiscite or any kind of mass consultation (Rohingya National Union, 2013). Both the Rakhine and Rohingya ethnic leaders say that Arakan was colonized by the Burmans from end of the 1784.

Geographically, Arakan is at the juncture of South and Southeast Asia. The whole of Arakan consists of two major ethnic groups: Rakhine Buddhist and Rohingya Muslim. The majority is Rakhine or “Magh”⁵ are of Mongoloid decent whose ancestors might have migrated from the present Magadha region of India (Rohingya National Union, 2013). They are followers of Theravada Buddhism and considered ethnically close with the Burman. Wantanasombt (2013) examined how Arakanese Buddhist identities merge with the majority Burman in today’s Burma. In his work argues that, Arakan or Rakhine state was annexed as a part of Burma in 1785. During the transformation, local people of Arakan tried to resist. Unfortunately, it was not

successful. After same time, the Arakanese Buddhists merged and mixed with the Burmese until they became considered one and the same. It was possible due their shared faith of Theravada Buddhism.

Another major ethnic group, Rohingyas, are predominantly Muslim and live in the Northern part of Arakan. The Muslims of Arakan - Rohingya trace their ancestry to ancient Indian people of the Chandra dynasty of Arakan, Arabs, Turks, Persians, Bengalis and some of Indo-Mongoloid people. Thus, ethnic Rohingya developed from different ethnical backgrounds over the centuries. It is easy to differentiate between Arakanese Muslims and other people of the Burma. According to Berlie (2008), there are four major groups of Muslims in Burma. Rohingya or Muslims of Arakan's separate identity in Burma is quite different from Muslims of South Asian or Indian origin. Culturally and religiously, they are related to the people in South-eastern Bangladesh. By simply looking at them it is impossible to trace who originated from the area and who immigrated from somewhere else. Most people look at the Rohingya and think that they are foreigners that have illegally immigrated. So that is why Christie stated "in the course of the untidy evolution of modern history, many communities in these regions have found themselves 'trapped' on the 'wrong' side of the nation-state frontiers that have been created" (1996, p.161). That is because The military regime of Burma branded the Muslims as resident foreigners and effectively reduced them to the status of Stateless (Ahmed, 2010).

There is substantial evidence that Rohingya Muslims are an integral part of the present Rakhine State. There are many historical documents which indicate that Rohingyas are indigenous people of today's Rakhine State. Francis Buchanan's (1799 and reprint 2003) article on "*A Comparative Vocabulary of Some of the Languages Spoken in the Burma Empire*" recorded that there were three dialects spoken in Burma, which are derived from the Hindu language. "The first is that spoken by the Mohammedana, who have long settled in Arakan and who call themselves Rooinga or natives of Arakan" (Buchanan, 2003, p.55). This argument was also cited in Michael W Charney's article.

In terms of language, Rohingya and Rakhine reflect two completely different trends. Even the original names of Rohingya and Rakhine indicate that they were derived from Arabic and Pali languages respectively (Charney, 2005). Henry G. Bell in his *An*

Account of the Burman Empire (1852) provided details about the language with which race, culture and religion were discussed in the early days of Burma. Bell mentioned that:

“The native of Arracan proper call their country Yekein; the Hindoos of Bengal, Rossaun. The latter, who have settled in great numbers in Arracan are dominated by the original inhabitants KulawYekein or unnaturalised Arracaners. The Moguls know this country by the name of Rakhang and the Mahomedans who have been long settled in the country, call themselves them Rooinga or native of Arracan” (1852, p.66).

This evidence suggests that, Rohingya or Rooinga, Indo-Aryan descendents, have been settled in present day Arakan State for many centuries. Their language, appearance and religious customs are completely different from the other aboriginal race, the Buddhist Rakhine. According to the section 149 of the 1871 census report for British Burma (taken in August 1872), printed by the government press in Rangoon in 1875

“There is one more race which has been so long in the country that it may be called indigenous, and that is the Arakanese Mussulman. These are descendants, partly of voluntarily immigrant at different periods from the neighboring province of Chittagong, and partly of captives carried off in the wars between the Burmese and their neighbors. There are some 64,000 of them in Arakan, differing from the Arakanese but little, except in their religion and social customs which their religion directs” (1875, p.30).

This British colonial census report on Burma clearly identified the people now known as the Rohingya as an indigenous race living in Arakan. The Census report refers to them as “Arakanese Mussulman”. The Muslim identity in Bengal and Arakan mostly uses the colloquial word “Mussulman”. Still today, the Muslim community in Bangladesh, India or Burma is called “Mussulman”. In that sense, there is no confusion about the Arakanese Muslims’ identity. Lieut Phayre, who was Senior Assistant Commissioner of Arakan discussed the geographical, ethnic, religious and other descriptions of Arakan. As a member of the colonial civil service, Phayre stated that,

I shall only refer to its ancient history so far as necessary to give a general idea of its condition previous to the British conquest, and to shew what race the present inhabitants belong to. In the Plains: 1. Ra-khoing-tha, 2. Ko-là, 3. Dom. In the Hills: 1. Khyoung-tha, 2. Kúmé, Khyeng, 3. Doing-núk, Mroong and other tribe (1902, p.680).

According to Phayre's article, there were two major groups of people living in the plains land of Arakan. The *Ra-khoing-tha* and *Khyoung-tha* both have the same ethnicity. Although the *Khyoung-tha* lived in the mountain areas, they received cultivation support from the *Ra-khoing-tha*. Their lifestyles were quite similar and both of these peoples were Buddhist, and racially, belong to the Mongoloid family. Phayre also stated that apart from the *Rakhoing-tha* "the Kolas or Moosulmans, are of an entirely different race to the preceding , they being of Bengalee descent" (1902, p.681). Jacques Leider (2002) had done research on Arakan and stated that, hill tribes like the Mro, the Daingnak, the Kami and the Cak are Tibeto-Burman as well and likely settled before the arrival of the Rakhine-tha. According to Phayre's statement, during that time, the king of Arakan had possessions all along the coast as far as Chittagong and Dhaka. Phayre's findings have shown that two separate groups of people existed in Arakan: the Moosulmans of Arakan who were completely different from the other major race, the Rakhoing-tha. But Leider (2002) argues that hill tribes settled earlier than Rakhine and Muslims.

This study also incorporated Rakhine and Burmese scholars' opinions about Rohingya presence in Arakan. Rakhine scholar Aye Chan provided details in his article "The Development of a Muslim Enclave in Arakan (Rakhine) State of Burma (Myanmar)" published in *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* in 2005. In the first sentence he asked "who are the Rohingyas"? Then he answered that "the people who call themselves Rohingyas are the Muslims of Mayu Frontier area, present-day Buthidaung and Maungdaw Townships of Arakan (Rakhine) State, is isolated province in the western part of country across Naaf River as boundary from Bangladesh" (Chan, 2005, p.396).

According to Chan, Bengali intellectuals invented this term in the 1950s and it was first used pronounced by Abdul Gaffar, an MP from Buthidaung, in his article on “The Sudeten Muslims” published in the *Guardian Daily* on 20 August in 1951. Chan argued that the people in this community, “were indeed the direct descendants of immigrants from the Chittagong District of East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh), who had migrated into Arakan after the province was ceded to British India under the terms of the Treaty of Yandabo, an event that concluded the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826)” (2005, p.397). The Rohingya and other Muslim scholars inside and outside Burma rejected his arguments. Chan not only rejected the Rohingya scholars’ claim but also stated that there is no academic evidence of their ethnic presence in the present nation-state Burma. He claimed that the stories and news articles on the ethnic group’s existence were not credible and were stories were published in Burma and the international media made up to stir up trouble surrounding this issue in recent days. Chan did not mention detail or develop any counter argument against the Rohingya’s pre colonial presence.

Chan is not the only naysayer. Before Aye Chan, Jacques Leider (2002), also argued that British annexed Arakan after the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826). During that time, there was a heavy influx of Muslim Indian labour, mainly from Chittagong. It created imbalance especially in border areas. This situation led to communal and political problems that have not been solved up to now.

It is common allegation against the Rohingya that Muslim population of Arakan migrated from Chittagong and are thus an alien race. In the Census Report of India in 1911, Burma part 1, volume 9, which supervised by C. Morgan Webb. Webb was a British superintendent who discussed the movement of population. It was not easy to estimate the exact number of the population of Burma prior to the census era. Earlier, reports depended on travelers’ views and descriptions of particular areas. Webb’s report does not concur with the Burmese and Rakhine argument today regarding the Muslim people in Arakan. Webb also mentions the religious context in Arakan in the same report:

“the coast line of Burma, especially in the Akiyab and Mergui districts are to be found indigenious Mahomedans scarcely differentiated from the neighboring Arakanese or Burmese in

dress and speech and customs, the descendants of immigrants to the province many generations ago, yet who maintain their Mahomedan religion unaffected by the strength of their Buddhist surrounding” (1912, p.98).

It is clear from this statement, that the ethno-religious and cultural characteristics of the Muslim population of some districts were quite different from those of their neighbors. The report also referred to them as “indigenous Mahomedans”. It is common practice in many countries for Muslim people to be referred to ‘Mahomedan’.

This colonial and other historical evidence suggests that the Rohingya Muslims are not new settlers or migrants from other parts of the South Asian countries, specifically not Bangladesh. Former Israeli diplomat and researcher of the Truman Institute of Jerusalem, Moshe Yegar mentioned that “according to the 1931 census, there were 130,524 Muslims in the regions of Maungdaw and Buthidaung” (1972, p.95). Christie (1996) stated that during the colonial time, there was no restriction in Bengal or Arakan and rest of the Burma. Cross-border contacts between Chittagong and Arakan were very common. It was very possible that the Chittagongian settlement in border areas merged with the local Rohingyas. Christie also argues that “in addition, although on the whole the Arakan the Rohingya were distinguished from the Bengali-speaking Chittagongs, this distinction tended to be blurred in Northern Arakan by the constant interaction across the border” (1996, p.164). However, the Burmese government consistently claims that these minority Muslims migrated during the colonial time, not before. Historical evidence shows that Indo-Aryan Rohingyas presence were found long back in the period of pre-colonial Arakan, as another ethnic group apart from the Mongoloid races.

The colonial census reports, British government documents, civil servants’ writings clearly depict Arakanese Muslims as one of the indigenous groups in pre-colonial Burma. Consequently, the government documents are evidence that the Rohingyas were fully integrated into Burmese society from the beginning of independence. During the field work for this research in Burma, substantial evidence of a Rohingya presence was found in government documents. It is important to understand that the Rohingya were victimized by the Ne Win military government after 1962. Before that, The Rohingya were strongly involved in parliamentary government (1948-62)

and their ethnic minority culture was nurtured by the Rangoon-based central government. Even lately, the Rohingya have been recognized in various government and public, documents.

The Myanmar Encyclopedia (1964) discusses in detail that the Rohingya populated May Yu frontier area on pages 89 and 90 in Volume 9. The encyclopedia covers the history from the first human settlements in present Burma. Also historically, Burmese Radio broadcasted minority language program on short wave from 5.30 to 9 pm every day. Rohingya language was relayed three times a week as part of the indigenous language programme from the Burma Broadcasting Service in Rangoon, from 15 May 1961 to 30 October 1965 (Nyein, 1976). On 1 November 1965, Rohingya, Mon, Paoh and Lahu language programs were stopped without any reason. This evidence shows that Rohingya language broadcasts stopped after the military coup in the 1960s.

The text book “Geography”, produced by the Yangon University distance education program and published by the Ministry of Education in 2008, discussed the “*Rohinggas*” presence in western frontier region of Burma. This book was particularly intended for students of history and Burmese studies and referred to minority groups in border areas. “In northern Rakhine State close to the border with Bangladesh at Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships are where the Rohinggas and Chittagarians live. These minority ethnic groups had settled in the border region since early days” (2008, p.61). It is one of the latest government documents which clearly mention the Rohingya located in the northern part of Rakhine State. It also acknowledges the Rohingya’s long presence in border areas. The Rohingya Students Association in Rangoon University was one of the registered student associations in the 1959-60 academic year. The Office of the Dean certified it on 3 December, 1959.

On the basis of Burmese government documents identified, Rohingyas have had a long presence in the northern part of Rakhine State. Their religious identity and culture were recognized by Burmese regimes at different periods. A recently published textbook also refers to their indivisible identity in Burma. Despite all of this evidence, the Rohingya are currently treated as illegal Bengali immigrants. The Burmese government has operated a coercive policy against the Rohingya and tried to take advantage by confusing their ethnicity and religion, in an effort to ignore and deny their history and

force them out. However, government documents prove their historical presence in modern Burma for generations.

5. What Factors contributed to the Failure the Accommodate Ethnic-religious Minority Rohingya in Burma

Minorities in different countries are frequently confronted and harassed about their identity and their cultural differences. This often involves two major trends. Either the majority group tries to accommodate the in minorities the nation building process, or the majority group tries to apply a policy of exclusion against minority groups. Minorities are protected only where democratic institutions can run smoothly but this situation does not prevail in most Asian countries.

From the early days of independence, Burma was a fragile country in terms of the nation building process. Burma did not follow the federal concept of multi-party democracy nor establish one party to dominate the so-called people's democracy. The post-independent leaderships tried to establish Burman dominated, Rangoon based central authority. John Furnival (1956) had suggested that in Burma, "a promise of national unity was foreshadowed from before the dawn of history because that major racial elements are akin, peoples fundamentally the same racial and cultural kind" (cited in Silverstein :1980.p.6). But, at the beginning of decolonization, evident that the whole society was not ready to identify themselves as members of the Union of Burma. Rather the masses thought themselves as members of their own ethnic group. Regarding this research, the ethnic Rohingya Muslim minority have been confronted by the ethnic Burmese and Rakhine religious majority since before independence. It is well known that Burma is an ethnically diverse country. However, the ethnic-religious minorities face discrimination regarding their identity. In this section, the article will elaborate the major causes of Rohingyas' victimization in the Burma context.

5.1 Burmanization against the Rohingya in Arakan

Scholars argue that the Burmanization of the nation's culture contributed to the perpetuation of national disunity. It could be said, as many Burman educational and political officials did, the nation could ill afford unequal development of all the languages and cultures of Burma. The Panglong spirit reflected on the 1947 Constitution and it insured that ethnic minorities' language, and culture could coexist with Burma and

it was not necessary to Burmanize. Everyone was guaranteed of his or her freedom of religion. Ethnic and linguistic minorities were not barred from a state educational institution or forced to accept religious institutions against their will. However, in the absence of U Aung San, post-independence leaderships of Burma faced serious difficulties from the ethnic minorities' as well as they could not materialized the achievement from first constitution. From the early days of independence, the Rangoon based central government pursued policies of assimilation, Burmanization, Buddhization, persecution and exclusion against non-Burman peoples of the country (interview, Rohingya political leader, June 2012 and July 2013 in Yangon).⁶

The Burman ethnic domination is the major challenges of the post-independence nation building process in Burma. The majority Burman comprise two-thirds of the total population. They are the only politically significant group whose total number resides within the present borders of Burma. As a result, the ethnically diverse nation-state of Burma became the major ethnic Burman-dominated Union of Myanmar. A federal state conception has not worked out here at all. Robert Taylor stated that "Ethnic politics is the obverse of the politics of national unity" was the very starting point of one study on Burma's complex ethnic problems. Since the independence, perception of race has remained as extremely sensitive issue" (2007, p.37). Today's Burma has one of the most extreme citizenship laws in the world. Full citizenship is, in theory, confined to those who can prove they had ancestors resident in Burma before the first British annexation in 1824.

Burmanization involves Burmese domination with Buddhization. With every regime that has ruled Burma, from the kings to the military dictators and the brief democratic period in between, Buddhism has been synonymous with Burmese nationalism. The Rohingya political leaders have claimed that the Burmese military regime is shaped by a fascist mentality guided by a belief in Burmese as "*Amyo, Batha, Thatana*" meaning "one race, one language, one religion" (interview, July 2013, Yangon).⁷ Successive Burmese regimes have pursued a policy of Burmanization in the name of national integrity. After independence, the Rangoon based central government tried to suppress ethnic and religious minorities' rights. One Rohingya leader argues that this policy did not start after decolonization but was, rather, a legacy inherited from past Burmese kings who actively and forcibly practiced a policy of assimilation and

subjugation of non-Burmese people by the use of force (interview, Nurul Islam, email, 21 December 2013).⁸

Burmanization was inflicted on Arakan mainly in two ways: race-religion, and national security. Burmanization was first introduced when Burmese King Bodawphaya occupied it on 28 December, 1784. Most Rohingya organizations called it “Black Day”.⁹ After independence in 1948, Burmanization started in a new form and established a cordial relationship with local Rakhine in the name of Buddhism. Within short time, the Burmese ruler created a situation in which Arakan Muslim identity was inconsistent with mainstream politics in Burma. In Arakan, it was not difficult to introduce Burmanization because the whole society was sharply divided on grounds of ethnicity and religion before independence. Therefore, Burmese politicians took advantage of this situation without any difficulty. The first stage of Burmanization in Arakan and Burma was supported by the Rakhine against the Rohingya. Tin Soe alias Taher, who is an editor of Kaladan News Network, stated that “in Arakan, successive Burmese regimes used Burmanization systematically to divide the two peacefully co-existing sister communities of Rohingya and Rakhine on cultural and religious grounds” (interview, September 2013 in Bangkok).¹⁰ This research argues that Rohingya-Rakhine relations changed, when Arakan was formed by the Burmese King. From 1786 to 1824, Burmanization developed in the name of Buddhist unity. So, after the first Anglo-Burma war in 1824, a Hemptiny to protect themselves the Rohingya tried to win political favor from the ruling British colonial authorities and establish a warm relationship with them against the newly defeated Burmese kingdom. Due to the fragile relationship between the two indigenous communities, (name the two communities again) no strong Arakan nationalist movement had yet been formed.

Another form of Burmanization has been successful in Arakan in the name of national security. From the early days of independence, the Rohingyas have been treated as separatists. For that reason, they are perceived as a security threat to the whole nation. The Myanmar government identified that Rohingya disjunction is necessary if it is to successfully implement its future agenda. From the early 1990s, the military regime adopted the “model village” program especially in ethnic minority dominated area such as, Rakhine, Karen, Shan, and Kachin States. The recent former State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) government had a policy of relocating non-Arakan people

to the region in new ‘model villages’ which are often populated by the *NaSaKa*¹¹ (border security force) and their families, former insurgents, and non-Rohingya from the other states. The Myanmar government confiscated Rohingya land in the name of army cantonment and military’s commercial project. In Arakan, the Rohingya have been subjected to expulsion and arbitrary confiscation of land and property (interview, Debbie Stothard, November 2012, Bangkok).¹² Rakhine villagers are not affected like ethnic religious minority Rohingya Muslims. Hundreds of acres of land were confiscated for army purposes. Rohingya Solidarity Organization President, Mohammad Yunus, claimed that “Rohingya people did not get the compensation from the authorities. Moreover, confiscated lands were distributed to junta sponsored settlers” (email conversation, November 2013.).¹³ As a result of this encroachment policy, thousands of Rohingya fled Arakan.

Burmanization did not end here. After the 2012 communal riot, Rakhine state has been depopulated of Rohingya by the Rakhine and other Buddhists from different parts of the Burma. About 14,000 Rohingya Muslims have been living for almost two years in IDP camps. Rohingya leaders claim that Union and State government tried to rehabilitate Non-Muslim people in Rohingya villages (interview, March 2014 in Yangon).¹⁴ This process of Burmanization is now being applied against the Rohingya in Arakan State collaboration with Rakhine Buddhist, though, a few Rakhine organizations are still fighting against the Burmese occupation in Arakan or Rakhine State.

5.2 Rohingya Population Growths

It is another common belief that Muslim populations grow rapidly, especially in places where they are in the minority. In this regard, the ethnic Rohingya Muslim minority in Burma is no exception. Most of Burma’s population firmly believes that the western frontiers were occupied by Bengali settlers from the colonial period. Rakhine and Burmese civic groups argue that the high growth rate of the Bengali (Rohingya) population has contributed to feelings of fear and insecurity in the local Rakhine community. These are not only relating to high birth rates but also to the steady increase of illegal immigrants from neighboring Bangladesh. They try to justify this attitude in terms of population density (Rakhine Commission Report, 2013). Burmese central and Rakhine state government officials often accuse the Rohingya community of practicing polygamy. Government reports and other official documents associate Rohingya

population growth with their polygamous practices. It is not uncommon especially among uneducated Muslims societies (Zuehlke, 2009). In Arakan, Rohingya marriage is not easily compared with other communities in the country. Many international and regional human rights organizations are highly critical of Burmese government policy against the Rohingya's right to marriage.

There are many policies that make marriage difficult for the Rohingya. Without local administrative approval, it is not possible for Rohingya to marry. Rohingya leaders reject the allegation about polygamy. Moreover, they claim that Rohingya youth cannot marry in due proportion because of lengthy administrative procedures. Even after permission is granted Rohingya are harassed by the security forces. During the field discussions with young Rohingya in Yangon, all of them were waiting for government permission to marry (interview, July 2013, Yangon).¹⁵ It is not an atmosphere conducive for Rohingya to live dignified lifestyles. However, most Rakhines consistently campaign against Rohingya population growth on grounds of polygamy and mixed marriage.

Rohingya leaders argue that half of the Rohingya population have been exterminated or have had fled to Bangladesh and other countries in search of shelter or protection due to systematic and large-scale persecution. Many Rohingya areas have been systematically depopulated by settlers. As a result, some parts of Arakan have been turned into non-Rohingya territories. After the last communal riot in 2012, many Rohingya tried to leave the country. These circumstances, Rohingyas cannot live a normal life such as that enjoyed by other citizens of the country. It is well known that livelihood opportunity and freedom of movement is restricted for the Rohingya. This life and death situation for Rohingya does not encourage them to have more children. This field study finds that, such claims of exponential growth in reproduction it is well-organized propaganda against the Rohingya community and there is no sign that Rohingya population growth is a threat for Burma.

5.3 Racial attitude against the Rohingya

Racial uniformity and purity are terms used as tools against a particular community to deprive and discriminate against them in a nation-state. Most are politically motivated and serve to justify the injustice and exploitation perpetrated by majority groups on minorities. The Rohingya became isolated from other ethnic groups because of their different ethnic identity. This is deeply rooted in Burmese society as a

cultural problem. According to the *Rakhine Commission Report* “the public generally view the Bengalis as being merciless, selfish and unsavory” (2013, p.18). A whole societal perception developed against the Rohingya because of racism. The words, ‘merciless’, ‘selfish’, and ‘unsavory’ indicate the intensity of racism in Arakan. From the early days the Rohingya were treated differently from other groups in Burma. The ruling USDP MP from Buthdaung, U Shwe Maung, stated that “there is no official word ‘Rohingya’ in Burma except according to government stand there is no ‘Rohingya’ in Burma” (interview, March 2014, Yangon).¹⁶

After the 1982 Citizenship Law, the Myanmar government tried to establish that the “so-called Rohingya” were illegal settlers on the western border during British colonization. The whole state machinery instigated a discriminatory policy against the Rohingya presence. Even the media and civic groups were against them. These groups all tried to justify their stance in the name of racial purity needed in the Burmese national framework. This argument became more popular after the 2012 communal violence. As a heterogeneous nation, Burmese politicians and government could not properly handle this issue. One should note that in Burma “Kalar” is a derogatory and racist term widely used to refer to persons of Muslim or South Asian descent. In official and unofficial communications, authorities still commonly refer to Rohingya as Bengali, so-called Rohingya, or the derogatory “Kalar” (cited in Fortify Rights, 2014, p.16).

Due to climatic influences, the human complexion varies from place to place. Burma is a multi-ethnic country, but ruling elites perceived that the Rohingya were not genuinely people of Burma due to their darker complexion. According to the statement of a Burmese diplomat, it is clear that the brown color of the Rohingya is treated in Burma as ugly and not fair looking (cited in ALTSEAN Burma, 2009).¹⁷ It is persistent in Burmese society that “Rohingya do not look like us, and there is no place for Rohingya in Burma” (interview, anonymous Burmese civil society member, March 2014, Yangon).¹⁸ Both state and non-state actors called the Rohingya “Kala” or “Kaula”¹⁹ due to their South Asian appearance and brown skin.

In Burma, most people strongly believe that the brown complexion of the Rohingya is not consistent with their state-ethnic identity. It is a common perception that “Kala” as a race group cannot be eligible for full or associate citizenship in Burma. After extensive criticism from various international sources, the GoM retracted the racist word

“Kala” on 6 June 2012 (interview, Tin Maung Than, Secretary General, Islamic Religious Affairs Council, Myanmar, July 2013, Yangon).²⁰ However, its initial use in mainstream media served to sanction a racist discourse. The different ethnic and religious identity of the Rohingya makes them non-native in the present nation-state Burma.

Rakhine scholars and politicians often claim that there is no Rohingya ethnic group in Burma and the term “Rohingya” is a Bengali word. The underlying cause of these allegations against the Rohingya is their different ethnicity and religion. Rohingya leader, Habibur Rahman, stated that systematic propaganda and vilification have been carried out against the Rohingya and other Muslims with the slogan *Arakan is for Rakhine; Rakhine and Buddhism are synonymous, and Muslim Kalas have nothing to do in Arakan and they are to be kicked out of Arakan*” (email conversation October 2013).²¹ This argument also supported by the Fortify Rights report which found that “many Rakhine have been intent on forcing Rohingya out of what they regard as their exclusive ancestral homeland” (2014, p.9).

Moreover, in Burma today, Rohingya and Islamic identity is taken as the same thing. Islam and Islamic culture is always projected in distorted forms through the media. Cultural issues like personal law, status of women in Muslim society, Muslim way of worship, and Islamic missionary activities are presented to project a different picture of Muslims and Islam from what it actually is. Either in the electronic or print media, Islam has to be presented in humiliating and distorted forms. Despite their long glorious history in Arakan, the Rohingya are not tolerated in Burma for their religion and ethnicity.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature review and field work data suggests that the ethnic minority Rohingya Muslims have had a long presence in Arakan from their independent kingdom period. Before militarization, Rohingyas had a strong presence in government. Geographically, Arakan neighbors Bangladesh, but this fact does not mean that all the Rohingya migrated from Bangladesh and settled after British colonization. Due to militarization and absence of democratic culture, Burma as a multi-ethnic country failed to accommodate this ethnic-religious minority. Most of the ethnic minorities also face this problem with the Rangoon-based central government. However the Rohingya is

exceptional case because in the name of indigenous ethnicity they became *de jure* stateless in their ancestors. In addition, this article tried to prove, through the discussion, how the Rohingya became the unwanted people of Burma. It is the major failure of Burma as a multicultural country. This article argues that the Rohingya are simply one of many and various ethnic groups in Burma, but due to the political situation in Arakan, the Burmese and Rakhine are afraid to recognize them by the term 'Rohingya'. Moreover they are trying to establish that the Rohingya Muslims are a current threat to the national integrity of Burma. As a result, the most diverse country of Burma failed miserably to accommodate ethnic religious minority Rohingya in their nation building process.

End notes

- ¹ Burma is now officially called the Myanmar. It was renamed by the then SLORC military government in 1989. Many of the opposition groups including the Rohingya community and Western countries continue to use the term Burma. They argue that "Burma" should still be used since it was an undemocratic (military) government which changed the name without the consent of the people. This article uses Burma except for direct quotation and government referral documents which use the term Myanmar.
- ² The immigrants' assimilation is strong phenomenon in contemporary world. Many Western countries accept it, although not in same magnitude as the United States or Canada. After the Second World War, Britain and France gradually accepted immigrants from their former colonies from Africa and Asia. In some places, these immigrants play important roles in the national development, and immigrants enjoy citizenship rights and participate in the government.
- ³ Interview with Rohingya leader U Tahay-President, Union National Development Party July 2013 and March 2014 in Yangon.
- ⁴ Interview with Karen and Kaman ethnic minority leaders, March 2014 in Yangon.
- ⁵ The word "Magh" is applied to the Buddhists of Arakan and those residing in the eastern parts of Bangladesh. According to A. Phayre, the name Magh originated from the ruling race of Magadha (Bihar) and relied on a Burmese oral tradition. He says that they were originally a Kshartiya tribe of north India and migrated from Magadha to

- Burma through eastern Bengal. Subsequently they spread over Arakan from Burma. In Arakan and Bangladesh societies, many people derogatively the Bhudists “Magh”, meaning sea pirate.
- ⁶ Interview with Rohingya political leader, Wali Ullah- General Secretary National Democratic Party for Development, June 2012 and July 2013 in Yangon.
- ⁷ Interview with U Tahay, President, Union National Development Party, July 2013 in Yangon.
- ⁸ Interview with Nurul Islam, President, Arakan Rohingya National Organization, email, December 2013.
- ⁹ On 28 December, 1784, Arakan was first colonized by the Burmese kingdom. So that is why, most of the Rohingya organizations observe 28 December as “Black Day”.
- ¹⁰ Interview with Tin Soe alias Taher , Editor in Kaladan News Network, September 2013 in Bangkok.
- ¹¹ The *NaSaKa* are the security forces most frequently cited by the Rohingya as committing human rights violations against them. *NaSaKa* is the Bama acronym for “Nay-Sat Kut-kwey Ye”. It is a border task force, consisting of the police, Military Intelligence (MI), the Lon Htein (internal security or riot police), customs officials, and the Immigration and Manpower Department (IMPD). The *NaSaKa* was established in 1992, initially only in Northern Rakhine with its headquarters in Sittwe, the capital city of Rakhine State.
- ¹² Interview with Debbie Stothard, Coordinator, ALTSEAN Burma, November 2012 in Bangkok.
- ¹³ Email conversation with Rohingya Solidarity Organization President, Mohammad Yunus, November 2013.
- ¹⁴ Interview with Shwe Maung alias Abdul Razak, current Minister of Parliament (MP) from Rakhine State and Kyaw Min alias Shamsol Anwar former MP from Rakhine State, March 2014 in Yangon.
- ¹⁵ Group discussion with Rohingya youth community in Yangon, July 2013.
- ¹⁶ Interview with Shwe Maung alias Abdul Razak, current MP from Rakhine State, March 2014 in Yangon.
- ¹⁷ During the boat people crisis in early 2009, the Burmese Consul General in Hong Kong, Ye Myint Aung, wrote to heads of foreign missions and local newspapers

insisting the Muslim Rohingyas should not be described as being from Burma. Ye Myint Aung described the Rohingya boat people as “ugly as ogres”. The SPDC diplomat was quoted as saying: “In reality, Rohingya are neither Myanmar people nor Myanmar’s ethnic group.” The envoy contrasted the “dark brown” Rohingya complexion with the “fair and soft” skin of people from Burma (cited in ALTSEAN Burma: 2009).

¹⁸ Interview with anonymous Burmese civil society member, March 2014 in Yangon.

¹⁹ “Kala” is widely used in Burmese society to refer to people of South Asian origin and Muslims. It is a racist term because South Asian peoples’ complexion is relatively dark compared with Tibet-Mongoloid ethnic groups.

²⁰ Interview with Tin Maung Than, Secretary General, Islamic Religious Affairs Council, Myanmar, July 2013 in Yangon.

²¹ Email conversation with Habibur Rahman, Vice President, Arakan Rohingya National Organization, October 2013.

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