



## **The Development of a Muslim Enclave in Arakan (Rakhine) State of Burma (Myanmar)<sup>1</sup>**

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Who are the Rohingyas? Burma gained independence from Great Britain in 1948 and this issue is a problem that Burma has had to grapple with since that time. The people who call themselves Rohingyas are the Muslims of Mayu Frontier area, present-day Buthidaung and Maungdaw Townships of Arakan (Rakhine) State, an isolated province in the western part of the country across Naaf River as boundary from Bangladesh. Arakan had been an independent kingdom before it was conquered by the Burmese in 1784. Rohingya historians have written many treatises in which they claim for themselves an indigenous status that is traceable within Arakan State for more than a thousand years. Although it is not accepted as a fact in academia, a few volumes purporting to be history but mainly composed of fictitious stories, myths and legends have been published formerly in Burma and later in the

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<sup>1</sup> The present paper was written for distribution and discussion at a seminar in Japan. During the seminar, there was a debate between the author and Professor Kei Nemoto concerning the existence of the Rohingya people in Rakhine (Arakan). Nemoto, in a paper written in Japanese, agreed with the Rohingya historians that the Rohingyas have lived in Rakhine since the eighth century A. D. The author contests the validity of these claims. The present paper was also read at the 70th Conference of Southeast Asian historians of Japan, held at the University of Kobe, on 4 to 5 February 2003.

United States, Japan and Bangladesh. These, in turn, have filtered into the international media through international organizations, including reports to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Ba Tha 1960: 33-36; Razzaq and Haque 1995: 15).<sup>2</sup>

In light of this, it is important to reexamine the ethnicity of the 'Rohingyas' and to trace their history back to the earliest presence of their ancestors in Arakan. And history tells us that we do not have to go back very far. In the early 1950s that a few Bengali Muslim intellectuals of the northwestern part of Arakan began to use the term "Rohingya" to call themselves. They 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). Most of these migrants settled down in the Mayu Frontier Area, near what is now Burma's border with modern Bangladesh. Actually, they were called "Chittagonians" in the British colonial records.

The Muslims in the Arakan State can be divided into four different groups, namely the Chittagonian Bengalis in the Mayu Frontier; the descendents of the Muslim Community of Arakan in the Mrauk-U period (1430-1784), presently living in the Mrauk-U and Kyauktaw townships; the descendents of Muslim mercenaries in Ramree Island known to the Arakanese as Kaman; and the Muslims from the Myedu area of Central Burma, left behind by the Burmese invaders in Sandoway District after the conquest of Arakan in 1784.

### **Mass Migration in the Colonial Period (1826-1948)**

As stated above, the term "Rohingya" came into use in the 1950s by the educated Bengali residents from the Mayu Frontier Area and cannot be found in any historical source in any language before then. The creators of that term might have been from the second or third generations of the Bengali immigrants from the Chittagong District in modern Bangladesh; however, this does not mean that there was no Muslim community in Arakan before the state was absorbed into British India.

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/burma/burm> for the report to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

When King Min Saw Mon, the founder of Mrauk-U Dynasty (1430-1784) regained the throne with the military assistance of the Sultan of Bengal, after twenty-four years of exile in Bengal, his Bengali retainers were allowed to settle down in the outskirts of Mrauk-U, where they built the well-known Santikan mosque. These were the earliest Muslim settlers and their community in Arakan did not seem to be large in number. In the middle of the seventeenth century the Muslim community grew because of the assignment of Bengali slaves in variety of the workforces in the country. The Portuguese and Arakanese raids of Benga (Bengal) for captives and loot became a conventional practice of the kingdom since the early sixteenth century. The Moghal historian Shiahabuddin Talish noted that only the Portuguese pirates sold their captives and that the Arakanese employed all of their prisoners in agriculture and other kinds of services (Talish 1907: 422). Furthermore there seem to have been a small group of Muslim gentry at the court. Some of them might have served the king as Bengali, Persian and Arabic scribes. Because the Mrauk-U kings, though of being Buddhist, adopted some Islamic fashions such as the maintaining of silver coins that bore their Muslim titles in Persian and occasionally appearing in Muslim costumes in the style of the Sultan of Bengal. Accordingly there were Muslim servants at the court helping the king perform these Islamic conventions (Charney 1999: 146). Arthur Phayre, the first deputy commissioner of Arakan, after the British annexation, reported about the indigenous races of Akyab District and the Muslim descendents from the Arakanese days as:

The inhabitants are, In the Plains – 1. Ro-khoing-tha (Arakanese)-2. Ko-la (Indian) – 3. Dôm(Low Caste Hindu). In the Hills – 1. Khyoung-tha – 2. Kumé or Kwémwé – 3. Khyang – 4. Doing-nuk, Mroong, and other tribes... While the Arakanese held these possessions in Bengal, they appear to have sent numbers of the inhabitants into Arakan as slaves, whence arose the present Ko-la population of the country (Phayre 1836: 680 – 681).

During the four decades of Burmese rule (1784-1824), because of ruthless oppression, many Arakanese fled to British Bengal. According to a record of British East India Company, there

were about thirty-five thousand Arakanese who had fled to Chittagong District in British India to seek protection in 1799 (*Asiatic Annual Register* 1799: 61; Charney 1999: 265). The following report by Francis Buchanan provides a vivid picture of the atrocities committed by the Burmese invaders in Arakan:

Puran says that, in one day soon after the conquest of Arakan the Burmans put 40,000 men to Death: that wherever they found a pretty Woman, they took her after killing the husband; and the young Girls they took without any consideration of their parents, and thus deprived these poor people of the property, by which in Eastern India the aged most commonly support their infirmities. Puran seems to be terribly afraid, that the Government of Bengal will be forced to give up to the Burmans all the refugees from Arakan (Buchanan 1992: 82).<sup>3</sup>

A considerable portion of Arakanese population was deported by Burmese conquerors to Central Burma. When the British occupied Arakan, the country was a scarcely populated area. Formerly high-yield paddy fields of the fertile Kaladan and Lemro River Valleys germinated nothing but wild plants for many years (Charney 1999: 279). Thus, the British policy was to encourage the Bengali inhabitants from the adjacent areas to migrate into fertile valleys in Arakan as agriculturalists. As the British East India Company extended the administration of Bengal to Arakan, there was no international boundary between the two countries and no restriction was imposed on the emigration. A superintendent, later an assistant commissioner, directly responsible to the Commissioner of Bengal, was sent in 1828 for the administration of Arakan Division, which was divided into three districts respectively: Akyab, Kyaukpyu, and Sandoway with an assistant commissioner in each district (Furnivall 1957:29).

The migrations were mostly motivated by the search of professional opportunity. During the Burmese occupation there was a breakdown of the indigenous labor force both in size and structure. Arthur Phayre reported that in the 1830s the wages in

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<sup>3</sup> Puran Bisungri was an officer of the Police Station of Ramoo what is called Panwah by the Arakanese. He was a Hindu, born in Arakan and fled the country after Burmese invasion of 1784 (Buchanan 1992: 79).

Arakan compared with those of Bengal were very high. Therefore many hundreds, indeed thousands of coolies came from the Chittagong District by land and by sea, to seek labor and high wages (Phayre 1836:696). R.B. Smart, the deputy assistant commissioner of Akyab, wrote about the 'flood' of immigrants from Chittagong District as follows:

Since 1879, immigration has taken place on a much larger scale, and the descendants of the slaves are resident for the most part in the Kyauktaw and Myohaung (Mrauk-U) townships. Maungdaw Township has been overrun by Chittagonian immigrants. Buthidaung is not far behind and new arrivals will be found in almost every part of the district (Smart 1957: 89).

At first most of them came to Arakan as seasonal agricultural laborers and went home after the harvest was done. R. B. Smart estimated the number at about twenty-five thousand during the crop-reaping season alone. He added that about the same number came to assist in plowing operations, to work at the mills and in the carrying trades. A total of fifty thousand immigrants coming annually were probably not far from the mark (Smart 1957: 99).

Moreover, hunger for land was the prime motive for the migration of most of the Chittagonians. The British judicial records tell us of an increase in the first decade of the twentieth century in lawsuits of litigation for the possession of land. The Akyab District Magistrate reported in 1913 that in Buthidaung Subdivision, the Chittagonian immigrants stand to native Arakanese in the proportion of two to one, but six sevenths of the litigation for land in the court was initiated by the Chittagonians (Smart 1957: 163). Another colonial record delivers about a striking account of the settlements of the Bengali immigrants from Chittagong District as: "Though we are in Arakan, we passed many villages occupied by Muslim settlers or descendents of the settlers, and many of them Chittagonians" (Walker 1891(I): 15).

The colonial administration of India regarded the Bengalis as amenable subjects while finding the indigenous Arakanese too defiant, rising in rebellion twice in 1830s. The British policy was also favorable for the settlement of Bengali agricultural communities in Arakan. A colonial record says:

Bengalis are a frugal race, who can pay without difficulty a tax that would press very heavily on the Arakanese....(They are) not addicted like the Arakanese to gambling, and opium smoking, and their competition is gradually ousting the Arakanese ( Report of the Settlement Operation in the Akyab District 1887-1888: 21).

The flow of Chittagonian labor provided the main impetus to the economic development in Arakan within a few decades along with the opening of regular commercial shipping lines between Chittagong and Akyab. The arable land expanded to four and a half times between 1830 and 1852 and Akyab became one of the major rice exporting cities in the world.

Indeed, during a century of colonial rule, the Chittagonian immigrants became the numerically dominant ethnic group in the Mayu Frontier. The following census assessment shows the increase of population of the various ethnic/religious groups inhabiting Akyab District according to the census reports of 1871, 1901 and 1911. There was an increase of 155 percent in the population in the district. According to the reports, even in an interior township Kyauktaw, the Chittagonian population increased from 13,987 in 1891 to 19,360 in 1911, or about seventy-seven percent in twenty years. At the same time the increase of the Arakanese population including the absorption of the hill tribes and the returning refugees from Bengal was only 22.03 percent.

#### The Assessment of the Census Reports for 1871, 1901, and 1911

Races	1871	1901	1911
Mahomedan	58,255	154,887	178,647
Burmese	4,632	35,751	92,185
Arakanese	171,612	230,649	209,432
Shan	334	80	59
Hill Tribes	38,577	35,489	34,020
Others	606	1,355	1,146
Total	276,671	481,666	529,943

It should be noted that all the Chittagonians and all the Muslims are categorized as Mohamedan in the census reports. There was an increase of 206.67 percent in Mahomedan population in the Akyab District and it was clear that only a few numbers of the transient agricultural laborers went home after the plowing and harvesting seasons and most of them remained in Arakan, making their homes (Smart 1957:83).<sup>4</sup> The heyday of the migration was in the second half of the nineteenth century after opening of the Suez Canal, for the British colonialists needed more labor to produce rice which was in growing demand in the international market. In the 1921 Census, many Muslims in Arakan were listed as Indians (Bennison 1931: 213).

### **Communal Violence**

Moshe Yegar suggests that during the colonial period the anti-Indian riots broke out in Burma because of the resentment against unhindered Indian settlements particularly in Arakan, Tenasserim and Lower Burma (Yegar 1992:29-31). But those riots that took place in Rangoon and other major cities in 1926 and 1938 never had had any effects on the peoples of Arakan. A peaceful coexistence was possible for the two different religious/ethnic groups in the Mayu Frontier till the beginning of the World War II. At the beginning of colonial era the establishment of bureaucratic administration by the British repealed the traditional patron-client relationship in the Arakanese villages. The elected village headman had little influence on the elected village council. As John F. Cady wrote, the government policy of forbidding the village headman to take part in the activities related to the nationalist movements weakened the position of the headman as the leader of village community, and as well as his connection with the Buddhist monastery because most of the Buddhist monks were vigorously active in the movements (Cady 1958: 172-273). On the other hand British administration to a certain extent gave the Muslim village communities religious and cultural autonomy. Maung Nyo, a *kyun-ok* (headman of the village tract) of Maungdaw Township recorded

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix I. According to the 1872 Census Muslims had already formed 26.1 per cent of the population of Akyab, the capital city of Arakan Division. Also see Appendix II. According to the 1881 Census 68,809 people of the population of Arakan Division that numbered 276,877 were born in Bengal.

how the new comers from the Chittagong District set up their village communities in the frontier area. They occupied the villages deserted by the Arakanese during the Burmese rule and established purely Muslim village communities. The village committee authorized by the Village Amendment Act of 1924 paved the way for the Imam (moulovi) and the trusteeship committee members of the village mosque to be elected to the village council. They were also allowed to act as the village magistrates and *shariah* was somewhat in effect in the Muslim villages (Charter 1938:34-38). At least the Islamic court of village had the jurisdiction over familial problems such as marriage, inheritance and divorce. There was no internal sense of unrighteousness and presence of nonbelievers in their community, and accordingly they believe no internecine struggle was for the time being necessary.

However, the ethnic violence between Arakanese Buddhists and those Muslim Chittagonians brought a great deal of bloodshed to Arakan during the World War II and after 1948, in the opening decade of independent Burma. Some people of the Mayu Frontier in their early seventies and eighties have still not forgotten the atrocities they suffered in 1942 and 1943 during the short period of anarchy between the British evacuation and the Japanese occupation of the area. In this vacuum there was an outburst of the tension of ethnic and religious cleavage that had been simmering for a century. One of the underlying causes of the communal violence was the Zamindary System brought by the British from Bengal. By this system the British administrators granted the Bengali landowners thousands of acres of arable land on ninety-year-leases. The Arakanese peasants who fled the Burmese rule and came home after British annexation were deprived of the land that they formerly owned through inheritance. Nor did the Bengali zamindars (landowners) want the Arakanese as tenants on their land. Thousands of Bengali peasants from Chittagong District were brought to cultivate the soil (Report of the Settlement Operations in the Akyab District 1887-1888: 2, 21).

Most of the Bengali immigrants were influenced by the Fara-i-di movement in Bengal that propagated the ideology of the Wahhabis of Arabia, which advocated settling ikhwan or brethren in agricultural communities near to the places of water resources. The peasants, according to the teaching, besides cultivating the land should be ready for waging a holy war upon the call by their



lords (Rahman 1979: 200-204). In the Maungdaw Township alone, there were, in the 1910s, fifteen Bengali Zamindars who brought thousands of Chittagonian tenants and established Agricultural Muslim communities, building mosques with Islamic schools affiliated to them. However, all these villages occupied by the Bengalis continued to be called by Arakanese names in the British records (Grantham and Lat 1956: 41-43, 48-51). For the convenience of Chittagonians seasonal laborers the Arakan Flotilla Company constructed a railway between Buthidaung and Maungdaw in 1914. Their plan was to connect Chittagong by railway with Buthidaung, from where the Arakan Flotilla steamers were ferrying to Akyab and other towns in central and southern Arakan.

In the period of the independence movement in Burma in 1920s and 1930s the Muslims from the Mayu Frontier were more concerned with the progress of Muslim League in India, although some prominent Burmese Muslims such as M.A. Rashid and U Razak played an important role in the leadership of the Burmese nationalist movement. In 1931, the Simon Commission was appointed by the British Parliament to enquire the opinion of Burmese people for the constitutional reforms and on the matter of whether Burma should be separated from Indian Empire. The spokesman of the Muslim League advocated for fair share of government jobs, ten percent representation in all public bodies, and especially in Arakan the equal treatment for Muslims seeking agricultural and business loans (Cady 1958: 294).

In education, the Chittagonians were left behind the Arakanese throughout the colonial period. According to the census of 1901 only 4.5 percent of the Bengali Muslims were found to be literate while the percentage for the Arakanese was 25.5. Smart reported that it was due to the ignorance of the advantages of the education among the Chittagonian agriculturists. Especially Buthidaung and Maungdaw were reported to be most backward townships because the large Muslim population in that area mostly agriculturalists showed little interest in education. In 1894 there were nine Urdu schools with 375 students in the whole district. The British provincial administration appointed a deputy inspector for Muslim schools and in 1902 the number of schools rose to seventy-two and the students increased to 1,474 (Smart 1957: 207-209). Consequently, more Arakanese and Hindu Indians

were involved in the ancillary services of the colonial administration. Towards the middle of twentieth century a new educated and politically conscious younger generation had superseded the older, inactive ones. Before the beginning of the Second World War a political party, Jami-a-tul Ulema-e Islam was founded under the guidance of the Islamic scholars. Islam became the ideological basis of the party (Khin Gyi Pyaw 1960: 99).

Regarding the beginning of the ethnic violence in Arakan, Moshe Yegar wrote that when the British administration was withdrawn to India in 1942 the Arakanese hoodlums began to attack the Muslim villages in southern Arakan and the Muslims fled to the north where they took vengeance on the Arakanese in Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships (Yegar 1972:67). However, an Arakanese record says:

When the British administration collapsed by the Japanese occupation, the village headman of Rak-chaung village in Myebon Township and his two younger brothers were killed by the kula (Muslim) villagers. Although the headman was an Arakanese, some of the villagers were kulas. The two Arakanese young men, Thein Gyaw Aung and Kyaw Ya, organized a group and attacked the kula villages and some inhabitants were killed (Rakhine State People's Council 1986: 36).

It is certain that hundreds of Muslim inhabitants of Southern Arakan fled northward, and that there were some cases of robbing the Indian refugees on the Padaung-Taungup pass over the Arakan Yoma mountain ranges after the retreat of the British from the Pegu Division and southern Arakan. But the news of killing, robbery and rape was exaggerated when it reached Burma India border (Ba Maw 1968: 78). The British left all these areas to the mercy of both Burmese and Arakanese dacoits. However, N.R. Chakravati, an Indian scholar, gives a brief account of the flights of Indian refugees from the war zone in the Irrawady valley across the Arakan Yoma.

Most of the estimated 900,000 Indians living in Burma attempted to walk over to India...100,000 died at the time... Practically all Indians except those who were not physically fit

or were utterly helpless, began to move from place to place in search of safety and protection until they could reach India (Chakravarti 1971: 170).

The estimated number of Chakravarti includes all the Indian refugees from the whole Burma proper excluding Arakan. The number of Chittagonian refugees put by Yegar was close to twenty-two thousand (Yegar 1972: 98). However, the leaders of ANC (Arakan National Congress), formed in 1939 and that later becoming the Arakan branch of Anti-Fascist Organization (AFO) formed a de-facto government, before the Japanese troops and Burma Independence Army (BIA) reached there. The ANC announced that anybody or any organization looting or killing the refugees would be brought before the justice and would be severely punished (*New Burma Daily* 1942: May 28). The Japanese air force attacked Akyab on 23 March 1942 and the British moved their administrative headquarter to India on March 30. The administration by martial law began in Akyab District on 13 April 1942 and with this racial tension burst to the surface, giving way to the public disorder (Owen 1946: 26).

For all the bloody communal violence experienced by the Arakanese Buddhists in the Western frontier, I feel strongly that it is reasonable to blame the British colonial administration for arming the Chittagonians in the Mayu Frontier as the Volunteer Force. The V Force, as it is called by the British Army, was formed in 1942 soon after the Japanese operations threatened the British position in India. Its principal role was to undertake guerrilla operations against Japanese, to collect information of the enemy's movements and to act as interpreters. But the British Army Liaison Officer, Anthony Irwin wrote that the participation of the local V Forces in the skirmishes with the Japanese in Arakan was discredited by the British commanders (Irwin 1946: 7-8, 16).

The volunteers, instead of fighting the Japanese, destroyed Buddhist monasteries and Pagodas and burnt down the houses in the Arakanese villages. They first killed U Kyaw Khine, the deputy commissioner of Akyab District, left behind by the British government to maintain law and order in the frontier area; they then massacred thousands of Arakanese civilians in the towns and villages. A record of the Secretary of British governor of Burma in exile dated 4 February 1943 reads:

I have been told harrowing tales of cruelty and suffering inflicted on the Arakanese villages in the Ratheedaung area. Most of the villages on the West bank of the Mayu River have been burnt and destroyed by the Chittagonian V forces.... The enemy never came to these villages. They had the misfortune of being in the way of our advancing patrols. Hundreds of villagers are said to be hiding in the hills... It will be the Arakanese who will be ousted from their ancestral land and if they cannot be won over in time, then there can be no hope of their salvation (British Library, London, India Office Records R/8/9GS. 4243).

After the Japanese occupation of Akyab (Sittwe), Bo Yan Aung, the member of the Thirty Comrades and commander of a BIA column, set up the administrative body in Akyab District and attempted to cease the violence in the frontier area. Bo Yan Aung discussed the matter with both Arakanese and Muslim leaders. He sent his two lieutenants, Bo Yan Naung and Bo Myo Nyunt to Maungdaw to negotiate with the radical Muslim leaders. They tried to persuade the Muslims to join in anti-imperialist and nationalist movement. But both of them were killed in Maungdaw and Bo Yan Aung was called back to Rangoon by the BIA headquarters (Rakhine State People's Council 1986: 40-42).

For most of the Chittagonians it was a religious issue that would necessarily lead to the creation of a Dah-rul-Islam, or at least to being united with their brethren in the west. It also aimed at the extirpation of the Arakanese or being forced them to migrate to the south where there were overwhelming majority of Arakanese Buddhists. The events during the war contributed the Chittagonians' fervent sense of alienation from the heterogeneous community of the Arakan. Anthony Irwin called the whole area a "No Man's Land" during the three years of Japanese occupation (Irwin 1946:27). Irwin explained how the ethnic violence divided the Arakan State between Arakanese and Chittagonians:

As the area then occupied by us was almost entirely Mussulman Country ... (from) that we drew most of our "Scouts" and Agents. The Arakan before the war had been occupied over its entire length by both Mussulman and Maugh (Arakanese). Then in 1941 the two sects set to and

fought. The result of this war was roughly that the Maugh took over the southern half of the country and the Mussulman the North. Whilst it lasted it was a pretty bloody affairs...My present gun boy a Mussulman who lived near to Buthidaung, claims to have killed two hundred Maughs (Arakanese) (Irwin 1946: 21).

In the words of the historian, Clive J. Christie, the “ethnic cleansing in British controlled areas, particularly around the town of Maungdaw,” was occurring till the arrival of Japanese troops to the eastern bank of Naaf River (Christie 1996: 165). The British forces began to take offensive in the warfare against the Japanese in northern Arakan in December 1944. The Arakanese troops of AFO maintained law and order in the areas from which Japanese forces withdrew. Of course there were some prominent Arakanese guerrilla leaders who cooperated with the Japanese during the war. British Battalion 65 occupied Akyab, the capital city of Arakan on 12 December 1944. As soon as Akyab was captured the British Army began arresting the Arakanese guerrilla leaders. U Ni, a leader of AFO in Akyab was accused of one hundred and fifty-two criminal offenses and sentenced to forty-two years in prison. Another leader, U Inga was condemned to death by hanging five times, as well as forty-two-year imprisonment. Consequently many guerrilla fighters escaped into hideouts in the forests (*Myanmaralin Daily* 25 September 1945). On the contrary, Anthony Irwin praised the Chittagonian V Forces as follows:

It is these minorities that have most helped us in throughout the three years of constant fighting and occupation and it is these minorities who are most likely to be forgotten in the rush of Government. They must not be. It is the duty of all of us, for whom they fought, to see this (Irwin 1946: 86).

During the early post-war years both Arakanese and Bengali Muslims in the Mayu Frontier looked at each other with distrust. As the British Labor Government promised independence for Burma, some Muslims were haunted by the specter of their future living under the infidel rule in the place where the baneful Arakanese are also living. In 1946 a delegation was sent by the Jami-atul Ulema-e Islam to Karachi to discuss with the leaders of

the Muslim League the possibility of incorporation of Buthidaung, Maungdaw and Ratheedaung townships into Pakistan, but the British ignored their proposal to detach the frontier area to award it to Pakistan. The failure of their attempts ended in an armed revolt, with some Muslims, declaring a holy war on the new republic. The rebels called themselves "Mujahid." A guerrilla army of 2700 fighters was organized (Khin Gyi Pyaw 1960: 99; *The Nation Daily* 1953: April 16).

In fact the Arakanese were well on their way to rebellion. Under the leadership of two prominent and politically active Buddhist monks, U Pinnyathiha and U Seinda, a guerrilla force of four hundred to five hundred men was raised and assisted the Japanese in occupying the northern Arakan. U Pinnyathiha even announced that the Japanese government had agreed to his proposal for a separate Arakanese unit of Burma Independence Army. Later his force was known as the Arakan Defense Force, under the command of Kra Hla Aung, the protégé of U Pinnyathiha. Later two monks became leaders of Arakan Branch of AFO (Anti-Fascist Organization), turning their guns on the Japanese. At the middle of 1944 they were supported by the British with certain amount of arms to fight the Japanese. Brigadier Richard Gordon Prescott, Deputy Director of Civil Affairs reported to the governor:

As result of arming certain members of AFO under the leadership of U Pinnyathiha and Kra Hla Aung, the AFO (in Arakan) are endeavoring to set up a parallel government to that of the British Administration and in fact repeating their modus operandi at the time of Japanese invasion of Arakan (British Library, London, India Office Record M/2500).

In the meantime the AFO changed its name to AFPFL (Anti-Fascist and People's Freedom League) with U Aung San, the ultimate hero of the Burmese independence movement, as its leader. When the AFPFL accepted the proposal of the governor of Burma to join the Executive Council, U Pinnyathiha remained as the AFPFL leader in Arakan while U Seinda was actively preparing a revolt. U Sein Da's group was acting as a local government, controlling a number of villages in the Myebon township of Kyaukpyu District and Minbya township of Akyab District. The fact of the matter was that U Seinda was persuaded by the radical communists of Thakhin Soe's

faction of the Communist Party of Burma to choose the way to independence by violence (British Library, London, India Office Records M/4/2500).

When the Aung San-Attlee Agreement was signed, U Seinda denounced it publicly. An All Arakan Conference was held in Myebon on 1 April 1947 and about ten thousand people from all parties in Arakan attended. U Aung San was openly assailed to his face as an opportunist by some people attending the conference, using rebellious slogans (British Library, London, India Office Records M/4/PRO: WO 203/5262). U Seinda with the communists behind him moved forward to the rebellion. Actually, Thakhin Soe's Red Flag Communists took advantage of the misunderstanding between U Seinda and AFPFL. It was in fact an ideological struggle in the AFPFL, the national united front of Burma that was under the leadership of the charismatic leader U Aung San. On the other side some Arakanese intellectuals led by U Hla Tun Pru, a Barrister-at-Law, held a meeting in Rangoon and demanded the formation of "Arakanistan" for the Arakanese people (British Library, London, India Office Records, M/4/2503). All these movements of the Arakanese might have alarmed Muslims from the Mayu Frontier. In the wake of independence most of the educated Muslims felt an overwhelming sense of collective identity based on Islam as their religion and the cultural and ethnic difference of their community from the Burmese and Arakanese Buddhists. At the same time the Arakanese became more and more concerned with their racial security and ethnic survival in view of the increasingly predominant Muslim population in their frontier.

The ethnic conflict in the rural areas of the Mayu frontier revived soon after Burma celebrated independence on 4 January 1948. Rising in the guise of Jihad, many Muslim clerics (Moulovis) playing a leading role, in the countryside and remote areas gave way to banditry, arson and rapes. Moshe Yeagar wrote that one of the major reasons of Mujahid rebellion was that the Muslims who fled Japanese occupation were not allowed to resettle in their villages (Yeagar 1972:98). In fact, there were more than two hundred Arakanese villages in Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships before the war began. In the post-war years only sixty villages were favorable for the Arakanese resettlement. Out of these sixty, forty-four villages were raided by the Mujahids in the first

couple of years of independence. Thousands of Arakanese villagers sought refuge in the towns and many of their villages were occupied by the Chittagonian Bengalis (Rakhine State People's Council 1986:58-60).

The Mujahid uprising began two years before the independence was declared. In March 1946 the Muslim Liberation Organization (MLO) was formed with Zaffar Kawal, a native of Chittagong District, as the leader. A conference was held in May 1948 in Garabyin Village north to Maungdaw and the name of the organization was changed to "Mujahid Party." Some Chittagonian Bengalis from nearby villages brought the weapons they had collected during the wartime to the mosques in Fakir Bazaar Village and Shahbi Bazaar Village (Department of Defense Service Archives, Rangoon, DR 491 (56)). Jaffar Kawal became the commander in chief and his lieutenant was Abdul Husein, formerly a corporal from the Akyab District police force (Department of Defense Service Archives, Rangoon, DR 1016). The Mujahid Party sent a letter written in Urdu and dated 9 June 1948 to the government of Union of Burma through the sub-divisional officer of Maungdaw Township. Their demands are as follows (Department of Defence Service Archives, Rangoon: CD 1016/10/11):

- (1) The area between the west bank of Kaladan River and the east bank of Naaf River must be recognized as the National Home of the Muslims in Burma.
- (2) The Muslims in Arakan must be accepted as the nationalities of Burma.
- (3) The Mujahid Party must be granted a legal status as a political organization.
- (4) The Urdu Language must be acknowledged as the national language of the Muslims in Arakan and be taught in the schools in the Muslim areas.
- (5) The refugees from the Kyauktaw and Myohaung (Mrauk-U) Townships must be resettled in their villages at the expense of the state.
- (6) The Muslims under detention by the Emergency Security Act must be unconditionally released.
- (7) A general amnesty must be granted for the members of the Mujahid Party.



Calling themselves “the Muslims of Arakan” and “the Urdur” as their national language indicated their inclination towards the sense of collective identity that the Muslims of Indian sub-continent showed before the partition of India into two independent states. When the demands were ignored the Mujahids destroyed all the Arakanese villages in the northern part of Maungdaw Township. On 19 July 1948 they attacked Ngapru-chaung and near by Villages in Maungdaw Township and some villagers and Buddhist monks were kidnapped for ransoms (Department of Defense Service Archives, Rangoon: CD 1016/10/11). On 15 and 16 June 1951 All Arakan Muslim Conference was held in Alethangyaw Village, and “The Charter of the Constitutional Demands of the Arakani Muslims” was published. It calls for “the balance of power between the Muslims and the Maghs (Arakanese), two major races of Arakan.” The demand of the charter reads:

North Arakan should be immediately formed a free Muslim State as equal constituent Member of the Union of Burma like the Shan State, the Karenni State, the Chin Hills, and the Kachin Zone with its own Militia, Police and Security Forces under the General Command of the Union (Department of the Defense Service Archives, Rangoon: DR 1016/10/13).

Here it is again noticeable that in the charter these peoples are mentioned as the Muslims of Arakan. The word “Rohingya” was first pronounced by the Mr Abdul Gaffar, an MP from Buthidaung, in his article “The Sudeten Muslims,” published in the *Guardian Daily* on 20 August 1951.

However, the new democracy in the independent Burma induced some Muslim leaders to remain loyal to the state. The free and fair elections were held and four Muslims were elected to the legislature from Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships. Meanwhile the Mujahid insurgency threw the frontier area into turmoil for a decade. During his campaign for the 1960 elections, Burmese Prime Minister U Nu who succeeded U Aung San after the independence hero was assassinated, promised the statehood for Arakanese and Mon peoples. When he came to the office after a landslide victory the plans for the formation of the Arakan and Mon states were affected. Naturally the Muslim members of

parliament from Buthidaung and Maungdaw Townships denounced the plan and called for the establishment of a Rohingya State.

General Ne Win took power in a coup d'état in 1962, and almost all the Rohingya movement went underground. The first step of Ne Win's Burmese Way to Socialism was the nationalization of the private enterprises in 1964. The plan was clearly aimed at the transfer of private assets owned by the Indian and Chinese entrepreneurs into state ownership in the form of the public corporations. Most of the Indian and Pakistani businesspeople, living in the major cities of Burma, left Burma. In the two years following the decision to nationalize the retail trade, some 100,000 Indians and some twelve thousand Pakistanis left Burma for their homeland. The flow of Indians returning to India as a result of these policies began in 1964 (Donison 1970: 199-200). But the Muslim agriculturists from Northern Arakan, most of them, holding the national registration cards issued by the Department of National Registration in the post-war decade, were not concerned with the event and remained in the frontier areas till the Citizenship Law of 1982 was enforced in 1987.

In 1973, Ne Win's Revolutionary Council sought public opinion for drafting anew constitution. The Muslims from the Mayu Frontier submitted a proposal to the Constitution Commission for the creation of separate Muslim state or at least a division for them (Kyaw Zan Tha 1995:6). Their proposal was again turned down. When elections were held under the 1974 Constitution the Bengali Muslims from the Mayu Frontier Area were denied the right to elect their representatives to the "Pyithu Hlut-taw" (People's Congress). After the end of the Independence War in Bangladesh some arms and ammunitions flowed into the hands of the young Muslim leaders from Mayu Frontier. On 15 July 1972 a congress of all Rohingya parties was held at the Bangladeshi border to call for the "Rohingya National Liberation" (Mya Win 1992: 3).

Burma's successive military regimes persisted in the same policy of denying Burmese citizenship to most Bengalis, especially in the frontier area. They stubbornly grasped the 1982 Citizenship Law that allowed only the ethnic groups who had lived in Burma before the First Anglo-Burmese War began in 1824 as the citizens of the country. By this law those Muslims had been treated as

aliens in the land they have inhabited for more than a century. According to the 1983 census report all Muslims in Arakan constituted 24.3 percent and they all were categorized as Bangladeshi, while the Arakanese Buddhists formed 67.8 percent of the population of the Arakan (Rakhine) State (Immigration and Manpower Department 1987:I-14).

In the abortive 1988 Democracy Uprising, those Muslims again became active, hoisting the Rohingya banner. Subsequently when the military junta allowed the registration of the political parties they asked for their parties to be recognized under the name "Rohingya." Their demand was turned down and some of them changed tactics and formed a party, the National Democratic Party for Human rights (NDPHR) that won in four constituencies in 1990 elections as eleven candidates of the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD) were elected to the legislature. However, the Elections Commission abolished both the ALD and the NDPHR in 1991. Some of the party members went underground and into exile.

Recently, the main objectives of the movement of some groups have been to gain the recognition of their ethnic entity in the Union of Burma and to obtain the equal status enjoyed by other ethnic groups. But some elements have adopted the radical idea of founding a separate Muslim state. The following are the Rohingya organizations currently active on the Burma-Bangladesh border (Mya Win 1992: 3):

1. RSO (Rohingya Solidarity Organization)
2. ARIF (Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front)
3. RPF (Rohingya Patriotic Front)
4. RLO (Rohingya Liberation Organization)
5. IMA (Itihadul Mozahadin of Arakan)

## **Conclusion**

After Burma gained independence, a concentration of nearly ninety percent of the area's population, the distinguishing characteristics of their own culture and the Islamic faith formed an ethnic and religious minority group in the western fringe of the republic. For successive generations their ethnicity and Islam have been practically not distinguishable. At the beginning they adopted the

policy of irredentism in favor of joining East Pakistan with the slogan, "Pakistan Jindabad," (Victory to Pakistan). This policy faded away when they could not gain support from the government of Pakistan. Later they began to call for the establishment of an autonomous region instead. Pakistan's attitude toward the Muslims in Arakan was different from the Islamabad's policy toward Kashmiris. During the Independence War in Bangladesh most of the Muslims in Arakan supported West Pakistan. After Bangladesh gained independence Dhaka followed the policy of disowning those Chittagonians. Consequently they had to insist firmly on their identity as Rohingyas. Their leaders began to complain that the term "Chittagonian Bengali" had arbitrarily been applied to them. But the majority of the ethnic group, being illiterate agriculturalists in the rural areas, still prefers their identity as Bengali Muslims.

Although they have showed the collective political interest for more than five decades since Burma gained independence, their political and cultural rights have not so far been recognized and guaranteed. On the contrary the demand for the recognition of their rights sounds a direct challenge to the right of autonomy and the myth of survival for the Arakanese majority in their homeland. A symbiotic coexistence has so far been inconceivable because of the political climate of mistrust and fear between the two races and the policy of the military junta. The Muslims from the other parts of Arakan kept themselves aloof from the Rohingya cause as well. Thus the cause of Rohingyas finds a little support outside their own community, and their claims of an earlier historical tie to Burma are insupportable.

## Appendix I

*British Burma Census of 1872 (Akyab Town)*

Group	Male	Female	Total
Hindu	1,884	28	1,911
Mohomendan	3,516	1,502	5,018
Buddhist	5,892	5,627	11,519
Christian	216	109	325
Others	387	70	457
Grand Total	11,895	7,335	19,230

(Department of Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce 1875, 42)

## Appendix II

The Statement Showing the Distribution of People According to their Birth Places British Burma Census of 1881 (Arakan Division)

Birth Place	Male	Female	Total
Akyab Dist.	144,746	132,131	276,877
Bassein	721	518	1,239
Hanthawaddy	178	157	335
Henzada	230	232	471
Kyauk Pyu	79,487	79,180	158,667
Mergui	3	2	5
Moulmein town	24	23	47
North Arakan	7,138	6,853	13,991
Prome	805	628	1,433
Rangoon Town	112	75	187
Sadoway	27,410	27,363	54,773
Shway Gyin	1	4	5
Tavoy	17	1	18
Tharawaddy	4	9	13
Thayetmyo	704	599	1,303
Thone Gwa	6	5	11
Toungoo	9	3	12
Assam	8		8
Bengal	49,374	19,435	68,809
Bombay	5	3	8
Central	2	1	3
Diu	27		27
Goa	5		5
Madras	1,823	31	1,854
Nepal	49	10	59
N-Western Provinces	246	14	260
Oudh	2		2
Punjab	63	6	69
Afganistan	4		4
Arabia	3		3

(Government of British Burma, British Burma Census, 1881: Appendix LXXVIII)

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