# MYANMAR AND THE ROHINGYA: THE LEGIMITZATION OF VIOLENCE

FLEUR HOOGENDOORN

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# Abstract

This thesis gives insight into the strategies used by Myanmar to legitimize its treatment of the Rohingya population on both an international and regional level between 2012 and 2017. Amidst international condemnation of its actions, Myanmar sought to legitimize its policies mainly through the employment of permanent security. This case is examined by means of political discourse analysis with a special focus on political discourse frames. By using a paranoid threat perception, Myanmar tried to frame the Rohingya nationally, regionally and internationally as a terrorist, extremist threat requiring a strong security response. This research will show that a different audience meant a different legitimization strategy. Internationally, Myanmar maintained that the Rohingya issue should be handled internally and it attempted to shift the focus from its treatment of the Rohingya to its democratic transition. Regionally, Myanmar sought acceptance of its terrorist threat narrative from its neighbors Bangladesh, China, and India, by using strategic alliances and exploiting Bangladesh's weaker geopolitical position. This thesis aims to provide a comprehensive analysis and comparison of Myanmar's legitimization attempts of its treatment of the Rohingya internationally at the United Nations and regionally towards its neighbors and the measure of success for these legitimization efforts.

Keywords: permanent security, legitimization, islamophobia, anti-Muslim racism, human rights, repatriation agreements

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**list of abbreviations**

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| ARSA | Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army |
| ASEAN | Association for Southeast Asian Nations |
| EIA | Emergency Immigration Act |
| EU | European Union |
| GNLM | Global New Light of Myanmar |
| GoB | Government of Bangladesh |
| GoM | Government of Myanmar |
| IIFFMM | Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar |
| MoU | Memorandum of Understanding |
| NLD | National League for Democracy |
| R2P | Responsibility to Protect |
| RSO | Rohingya Solidarity Organization |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |
| UNGA | United Nations General Assembly |
| UNHCR | United Nations Refugee Agency |
| UNSC | United Nations Security Council |

**Introduction and research rationale:**

The Rohingya, a Muslim minority in Myanmar, have been discriminated against since the country's first origins. The Buddhist Arakan, who form the majority of the population in Rakhine State (formerly Arakan State), regard the Rohingya as migrants who are native to Bangladesh. Over the years, repression of the Rohingya has intensified; the government has taken their identity cards, prohibited them from having more than two children, and restricted their freedom of movement.[1] This intensification of repression was partly caused by the introduction of a more liberalized "democratic" Myanmar and resulted in violent clashes between Arakanese and Rohingya in 2012. Through social media, Burmese citizens were indoctrinated by the Government of Myanmar (GoM) and army that Rohingya were all terrorists intent on carrying out the Jihad and taking over the country.[2] After several years these increasing tensions between Rohingya and Burmese communities came to a head when in 2017 the army named the Tatmadaw alongside Burmese citizens attacked and murdered the Rohingya and burned their villages to the ground in so-called "clearance operations," making global headlines.[3] Today the Rohingya are in displacement camps in the surrounding countries such as Bangladesh where their living conditions are terrible.

Within the field of genocide studies, recent debate revolves around the matter of responsibility for the violence and the potential for reconciliation and justice. While most authors agree that the GoM carries most of the blame and discuss how legal proceedings in the International Court of Justice will play out, some argue that United Nations (UN) agencies and the international community bear some responsibility as well.[4] However, studies rarely focus on the manner in which the GoM has attempted to justify their actions against the Rohingya. The studies that do focus on legitimization either gravitate towards Myanmar's legitimization efforts internationally or regionally. My research aims to fill in this gap by comparing the legitimization efforts of the GoM internationally and regionally through the lens of permanent security. Since the audience differs greatly, so will the results of legitimization. This however, does not mean that condone or agree with Myanmar's legitimization of atrocities in any way, shape or form. My argument is that the GoM used a different set of tools internationally than they did regionally, which translated in a more successful legitimization effort regionally than

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[1] Muhammad Abdul Bari, *The Rohingya Crisis: A People Facing Extinction* (Leicestershire: Kube Publishing, 2018), 31.
Stephen C. Druce, "Chapter 2: Myanmar's Unwanted Ethnic Minority: A History and Analysis of the Rohingya Crisis," in *Managing Conflicts in a Globalizing ASEAN: Incompatibility Management Through Good Governance*, ed. Mikio Oishi (Singapore: Springer, 2020), 30.
[2] Andrew Seth, "Burma's muslims and the war on terror, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 27 no. 2 (2010), 119.
[3] "'Hundreds of Rohingyas' killed in Myanmar crackdown," *Aljazeera* (3 February, 2017). Retrieved from: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/2/3/hundreds-of-rohingyas-killed-in-myanmar-crackdown.
Poppy McPherson, "6,700 Rohingya Muslims killed in one month in Myanmar, MSF says," The Guardian (14 December 2017). Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/14/6700-rohingya-muslims-killed-in-attacks-in-myanmar-says-medecins-sans-frontieres.
[4] Meagan Free, "How a People's Cries of Pain and Suffering Fell on Deaf Ears Around the World: the Rohingya Genocide," *Student Works* 1138, (2021). Retrieved from: https://scholarship.shu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2135&context=student_scholarship.
Sara Perria, "The Unmaking of Myanmar" (21 September 2017), *OpenCanada.Org.* Retrieved from: https://opencanada.org/unmaking-myanmar/.

internationally. The value of this comparison lies in the understanding (by NGO's, governments and human rights activists) of the various ways in which governments attempt to legitimize atrocities depending on their audience. If we know why certain legitimization efforts were more successful than others, we can anticipate how to counter these efforts; both on a diplomatic level between countries as well as online among the public.

**Research questions and preliminary chapters**

The intensification of Rohingya persecution commenced after the violence of 2012 and came to a head in 2017. Since it was during this period that the Rohingya were given the most international attention, Myanmar sought to legitimize the actions it took during this period as well, which is why the time frame will be from 2012 to 2017. This thesis adopts a comparative approach to investigate Myanmar's legitimization efforts both internationally and internationally with the concept of permanent security in mind. Therefore, the main research question that will be answered is: **How has the Myanmar government used the concept of permanent security to legitimize their actions against the Rohingya between 2012-2017 towards the UN and towards its neighbors?** Legitimization will be defined in this thesis as the act of making something legal or acceptable to an audience while government encompasses the head of state and their closest colleagues.

This research is divided into three chapters. The first chapter will establish an historical overview of Myanmar's gradual adoption of permanent security as a legitimization tool and answer the subquestion: What kind of discriminatory security measures has Myanmar's government implemented nationally to portray the Rohingya as a threat? This will be followed by chapter two which analyzes Myanmar's legitimization efforts internationally in the form of the UN to answer the subquestion: In what ways has the Myanmar government employed permanent security in their legitimization attempts towards the UN of their treatment of the Rohingya between 2012-2017? The third chapter covers Myanmar's legitimization efforts regionally by looking at neighboring Bangladesh, China, and India, to answer the subquestion: In what ways has the Myanmar government employed permanent security in their legitimization attempts regionally of their treatment of the Rohingya between 2012-2017?

Last but not least, the conclusion will compare Myanmar's legitimization efforts internationally and regionally, highlighting differences between the regional and the international response to the justification of Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingya illuminates that these vastly different perspectives come with different priorities. Whereas the UN has to uphold the global human rights standards and international law, prompting a large-scale investigation of Myanmar's security measures and treatment of the Rohingya, Myanmar's neighbors have to consider the regional implications of diplomatic interventions since they cannot compromise regional security by risking the alienation of Myanmar and losing billion dollar investments in Rakhine. However, by failing to present a united front, the UN allowed Myanmar to take advantage of its division by using regional alliances with China and India to avoid UN resolutions.

## Historiography and academic debate

Few studies focus on Myanmar's legitimization efforts internationally or regionally, and seldom on both. The ones that do tend to focus on the response of the international community in the form of organizations like the UN and the European Union (EU) and regionally in the form of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).[5] The EU has been criticized for attempting a weak political dialogue with Myanmar and even for sending aid, while the UN was reluctant to raise the issue with the GoM and much-needed action by the UN Security Council (UNSC) was blocked by China and Russia.[6] More regionally, researchers have harshly criticized China's repression of its own Muslim minority while Bangladesh has lacked a comprehensive long-term strategy on the Rohingya issue and India has remained absent from the negation table.[7]

## Myanmar's legitimization and the international community

In a 2019 report wherein the UN investigated its own conduct in Myanmar's Rohingya crisis, Rosenthal concludes that the UN involvement in Myanmar could best be described as a systemic failure.[8] A lack of leadership from all levels, including the country level, individual member states and even the "very highest levels of management of the Organization," combined with "the absence of a clear and unifying strategy" led to an ineffective response of the UN.[9] The inherent conflict between engaging in diplomacy and enacting the pressure on Myanmar to "uphold their international commitments" resulted in miscommunication and a dysfunctional approach which was exploited by the GoM.[10] For instance, various human rights organizations such as Amnesty International wrote an open letter in 2017 to the UN with the strong call for a UN human rights council.[11] These organizations called attention to the fact that the state of Myanmar initiated various commissions to investigate human rights abuses, yet none of these commissions have been impartial, independent or addressed the root causes of the violence.

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[5] Iqther Uddin Md Zahed, "Responsibility to Protect? The international community's failure to protect the Rohingya," *Asian Affairs* 52, no. 4 (2021), 934-957, DOI: https://doi-org.proxy.library.uu.nl/10.1080/03068374.2021.1999689.

"Myanmar: No justice, no freedom for Rohingya 5 years on," *Human Rights Watch* (2022). Retrieved from: https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/24/myanmar-no-justice-no-freedom-rohingya-5-years.

Shuva Das, "The ineffective international response to the Rohingya Crisis – a paradox," the Oxford University Politics Blog (2020). Retrieved from: https://blog.politics.ox.ac.uk/the-ineffective-international-response-to-the-rohingya-crisis-%E2%94%80-a-paradox/.

[6] Iqther Uddin Md Zahed, "Responsibility to Protect? The international community's failure to protect the Rohingya," *Asian Affairs* 52, no. 4 (2021), 942-944.

Jonah Fisher, "UN failures on Rohingya revealed," BBC News (2017). Retrieved from: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41420973.

[7] Jeasoo Park, "Myanmar's Foreign Strategy Towards China since Rohingya Crisis: Changes, Outlook and implications," *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs* 6, no. 1 (2020): 11. Retrieved from: https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/67601.

Mohammed Nuruzzaman, "Bangladesh and the Rohingya Crisis: The Need for a Long-Term Strategy," *The Washington Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2023): 65. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2023.2260595.

[8] Gert Rosenthal, "A brief and independent inquiry into the involvement of the United Nations in Myanmar from 2010 to 2018," (29 May 2019), 3. United Nations Digital Archive. Retrieved from: https://www.un.org/sg/sites/www.un.org.sg/files/atoms/files/Myanmar%20Report%20-%20May%202019.pdf.

[9] Ibid, 18-19.

[10] Ibid, 11, 14.

[11] "Open letter calling for a UN-mandated international commission of inquiry or similar international mechanism to investigate serious rights violations in Rakhine State, Myanmar," ASA 16/5814/2017. (3 March 2017). Retrieved from: https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/58b9652b4.pdf.

Moreover, these commissions have been used by Myanmar to deny human rights violations and abuses, to deflect responsibility.[12] However, while the UN failed to take meaningful action in practice, NGO and UN reports both reject to accept arguments like security concerns and stress that there have been serious human rights violations which the state needs to be held accountable for.[13] Unfortunately, combined with the failed response of the UN, it has taken years until any meaningful international action took place in the form of Gambia's genocide case (2019) against Myanmar in the International Court of Justice. Within the UN, there is a huge discrepancy between condemning the actions of Myanmar and taking actions against the state.

## Myanmar's legitimization regionally

On a regional level, neighboring countries have been criticized for their inaction and acceptance of Myanmar's narrative. Bangladesh, China and India have all adopted Myanmar's terrorist threat perception to various degrees.[14] To loud international and academic criticism, India and China have staunchly backed Myanmar at the UN on multiple occasions but right after the 2017 clearance operations in particular.[15] With billion dollar infrastructure projects in Rakhine, China and India considered the Rohingya issue an internal matter that Bangladesh and Myanmar had to solve on a bilateral basis.[16] However, while Myanmar has made multiple promises of closer cooperation and repatriation agreements with Bangladesh, when slightly pressured most of these agreements either fell through or were heavily skewed towards Myanmar, showcasing its significant regional influence compared to Bangladesh, which has had to bear the responsibility for most of the refugees.[17]

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[12] Ibid, "Myanmar's investigative commissions: a history of shielding abusers," *Human Rights Watch*, September 2018. Retrieved from:
https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/supporting_resources/201809myanmar_commissions.pdf.
[13] Ibid, "Report of the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar," A/HRC/39/64, Human Rights Council (12 September 2018). Retrieved from:
https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/FFM-Myanmar/A_HRC_39_64.pdf.
[14] Hossain Ahmed Taufiq, "China, India, and Myanmar: Playing Rohingya Roulette?" in *South Asia in Global Power Rivalry*, ed. Imtiaz Hussain (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 89.
[15] Shahidul Haque and Sufiur Rahman, "Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations and Resolution of Rohingya Crisis: A Foreign Policy Perspective," in *The Displaced Rohingyas: A Tale of a Vulnerable Community* ed. Sk Tawfique M. Haque, Bulbul Siddiqi, and Mahmudur Rahman Bhuiyan (London: Routledge, 2024), 247.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Kudret Bülbül, Nazmul Islam, and Sajid Khan, *Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Myanmar; Ethnic Conflict and Resolution* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022). 159-160, 183

**Permanent security as a vehicle to legitimation**

The various ways in which media and technology have shaped public perceptions of the Rohingya, both inside Myanmar and in neighboring countries, has been extensively studied, with a strong focus on newspaper coverage.[18] This is relevant since in their legitimation efforts, the GoM has been involved in propaganda campaigns against the Rohingya on social media as well as in their state funded newspaper called the global New Light of Myanmar.[19] More recently, authors like Nickey Diamond and Ken Maclean have linked the Rohingya crisis to securitization theory, which they recognize, only partially explains the problem as securitization theorists are uncertain of where to place religion and only provide vague answers to the question of de-securitization.[20] As an addition to securitization theory, permanent security offers a solution to the question of de-securitization, while a comparison between international and regional legitimization efforts offers insight into regional dynamics and Myanmar's diplomatic strategies which differ depending on the audience, therefore highlighting the complexities of a country responding to a humanitarian crisis they themselves created. Moreover, analyzing Myanmar's legitimization efforts and the past responses of neighboring countries and the international community could help human rights advocates and organizations in devising more effective strategies and to counter misinformation and misleading narratives. However, permanent security does not explain all of Myanmar's legitimization strategies which is permanent security is the leading concept but other concepts such as islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism and their surrounding contexts will come to the fore as well.

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[18] Bimbisar Irom, Porismita Borah, Anastasia Vishnevskaya & Stephanie Gibbons, "News Framing of the Rohingya Crisis: Content Analysis of Newspaper Coverage from Four Countries," *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 20 no. 1 (2022), 109-124, DOI: 10.1080/15562948.2021.1906472.
Khadimul Islam, "How Newspapers In China, India And Bangladesh Framed The Rohingya Crisis Of 2017," *Thesis University of Mississippi* (2018). Retrieved from: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1647&context=etd.
Christopher L. Atkinson, "Public Information and Ultranationalism in Myanmar: A Thematic Analysis of Public and Private Newspaper Coverage," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 40, no. 4 (2020), 597-613. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2020.1847780.
[19] Kristina Kironska and Ni-Ni Peng, "How state-run media shape perceptions: an analysis of the projection of the Rohingya in the Global New Light of Myanmar," South East Asia Research 20 no. 1 (2021). Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1080/0967828X.2020.1850178.
[20] Nickey Diamond and Ken MacLean, "Dangerous speech cloaked in saffron robes; race, religion and anti-Muslim violence in Myanmar," in *The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Mass Atrocity, and Genocide*, ed. Sara E. Brown, Stephen D. Smith (London: Routledge, 2021), 214.

## Analytical concepts

### Genocide

Genocide is here defined as the systematic and deliberate extermination of a particular racial, ethnic, religious, or national group. It is a grave crime under international law and is recognized as one of the most heinous and dehumanizing acts that can be committed against a group of people. This includes the rather narrow definition of the United Nations Genocide Convention of 1948, where genocide is defined as:

- Killing members of the group;
- Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.[21]

### Islamophobia and anti-Muslimism racism

Islamophobia is the fear and hatred of Islam and Muslims, and it manifests itself in various forms of discrimination, prejudice, and violence against Muslims. Anti-Muslim racism refers to the discrimination and prejudice directed at Muslims on the basis of their race, as well as the belief that Muslims are inferior to other racial or ethnic groups. Both Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism are forms of discrimination and intolerance that have serious consequences for the well-being and human rights of Muslims around the world. Bakali notes that while much of the current discourse surrounding the war on terror and islamophobia centers around the global North, increasingly the focus is also shifting to the global South of which Myanmar is a prominent example. [22]

### Permanent security

In The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression, A. Dirk Moses adopts the term *permanent security*; to eliminate all threats, both immediate as well as in the future. This anticipatory and paranoid threat perception attempts to "close the gap between perceived insecurity and permanent security;" a utopic point of view which is impossible to reach because a state can never be completely secure as new threats will always emerge.[23] Moses critiques this security paradigm which still persists as states obsess over finding ways to eliminate all threats.

Moses identifies three main elements of permanent security, namely accusations of collective guilt, preemption and paranoia.

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[21] Convention of the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, United Nations, (9 December 1948), Retrieved from: https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf.

[22] Naved Bakali, "Islamophobia in Myanmar: the Rohingya genocide and the 'war on terror,'" *Race & Class* 62 no. 4 (2016): 53.

[23] A. Dirk Moses, *The problems of Genocide: permanent security and the language of transgression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 34-35.

Under the element of accusations of collective guilt, minorities and social classes are regarded as "internally homogeneous historical actors with collective agency and interchangeable parts" meaning that the entire group is held responsible for crimes which may have been committed by a few of its members. There is no distinction made between crimes which were committed in the past or in a different region as all members of a group are held responsible.[24]

Under the element of preemption, groups are held responsible for the potential crimes they may commit in the future, forming the basis of strategic logic; "rounding up all members of a group because some of them collaborated with the enemy is routine in wartime emergencies." Yet, aiming to murder or cripple groups to potentially prevent them from ever becoming a threat again is what Moses considers a crime of permanent security as members of these groups do not always present an objective threat.[25]

The element of paranoia is the foundation behind permanent security which is built on fearful, paranoid threat evaluations instead of a grounded and realistic assessment of threats. This paranoia arises from a history of "traumatic and humiliating experience of loss and occupation," a mindset which is especially prevalent among nationalist groups who constantly fear the repetition of past events, leading states to never again let a disloyal national minority to undermine its survival. These perceived disloyal groups are then blamed collectively and subjected to collective expulsion or eradication in advance to prevent the reoccurrence of traumatic events.[26]

## Operationalization:

The rationale of my research is to use the aforementioned elements of permanent security to trace how the situation in Myanmar escalated from discriminatory practices to the persecution of the Rohingya and, in turn, how the government and the military have tried to justify these long-lasting and increasingly repressive security measures internationally and regionally under the guise of protecting the national security, thus showcasing that their reasoning is underpinned by the notion of permanent security.

I will illustrate that the first stage of this permanent security consisted of weaponizing existing tensions between majority Buddhists and minority Muslims by encouraging anti-Muslim sentiments to securitize the Rohingya as a people. This consisted, for example, of painting the Rohingya as the other, the Bengali immigrant to be feared as a threat to national security, especially since the Rohingya sided with the British during their colonial rule and were in turn promised their own state.[27] For the past few decades, the Rohingya have been collectively held responsible for these past transgressions and since the paranoid fear of the Rohingya conquering a part of Myanmar to create a state of their own persists within national and elite circles, a repetition of past events must be avoided at all costs.

Therefore, the state took part in the second stage; the process of structural violence, meaning that through the means of laws, institutions and ideological mechanisms, a single or multiple

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[24] Ibid, 272.

[25] Ibid, 273.

[26] Ibid, 274.

[27] Azeem Ibrahim, "Introduction," in *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's hidden genocide* (London: Hurst & Company, 2016), 10-11.

groups of people suffer through structural inequalities in life.[28] For the Rohingya, this meant a severe limiting of their civil, social, economic and human rights.

Moreover, the aftermath of 9/11 only fueled islamophobia as the threat of a "Muslim takeover" in the name of "Jihad" by "terrorists" became the dominant justification of the third stage: strict security measures. Even more so when insurgent organizations such as the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) were founded in response to this repression.[29] It did not matter whether the Rohingya were or were not associated with the RSO; the Rohingya as a people were all potential terrorists who had to be eradicated, resulting in the last stage where the army murdered Rohingya, burned their villages and thus led to mass displacement and uncertainty.

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[28] Iqther Uddin Md Zahed, "The State against the Rohingya: Root Causes of the Expulsion of Rohingya from Myanmar," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 22, no. 3-4 (2021), 439-440. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2021.1995716.

[29] Tahmina Akter, "Securitization of 'Rohingyas' in Myanmar: An Analysis" (Thesis, University of Dhaka, 2021), 76.

**Methodology**


My methodology will primarily consist of poststructuralist approach to document analysis, more specifically political discourse analysis, to uncover which particular frames the GoM has employed in order to justify their repressive measures toward the international community. Since my research aims to uncover the interaction between the state of Myanmar and the international and regional community, in particular the UN, NGO's and international investigative journalists, I will be using a form of discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is the "production of meaning through talk and texts" and analyzes the social context or the "social situation or forum in which the text or talk occurs."[30] My focus will be on the manner in which the state of Myanmar has attempted to justify and legitimize their actions against the Rohingya toward the international community and regional community. To do this effectively, I intent to analyze the language such as terms, phrases and words used in UN speeches made by representatives of the GoM, public statements, government reports, newspaper articles etc. to shed a light on the government's reasoning in favor of anti-Rohingya measures and how this reasoning or reality is presented. Therefore, I will be using frame analysis; "the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights the connections among them to promote a particular interpretation."[31] Frame analysis will not only reveal which frames and inherent biases the GoM has used to justify their anti-Rohingya measures, it will also reveal that these frames were aimed at multiple audiences at once including the majority Buddhist population as well as the international community. Moreover, frame analysis will also reveal which perspectives, voices and facts have been left out of the way the Myanmar government has presented reality, thereby often showing the true intentions behind anti-Rohingya measures and the violence that followed. For instance, the elements of permanent security can be found in the manner in which Myanmar frames the Rohingya as a security threat through propaganda and the legal and political frames upon which repressive laws and policies rest.

An accumulation of other primary sources such as reports by NGO's such as Human Rights Watch, Fortify Rights and Amnesty International, since these organizations have conducted valuable field research complemented by a review of the relevant media reports, policy papers or documents from regional intergovernmental bodies, thus ensuring the most complete overview of the developing repression of the Rohingya since its early stages. These reports will contain interviews conducted at key moments such as the violence in 2012 in Rakhine State which could be considered as a primary source and its investitive journalism is a valuable addition to the interaction and reaction between the GoM and the international community. In addition, I will be using government reports, speeches and laws as well as articles from the government funded Global Light of Myanmar because this newspaper is owned by Myanmar and portrays a nationalist point of view. These documents will be most valuable in establishing language patterns in the establishing of new laws and security measures concerning the Rohingya to eventually arrive at the types of frames this language brings forth. Examples

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[30] Ibid, 2-3.

[31] Margaret Linström and Willemien Marais, "Qualtiative News Frame Analysis: a Methodology," *Communitas* 17 (2012), 24. Retrieved from:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351884528_QUALITATIVE_NEWS_FRAME_ANALYSIS_A_METHODO LOGY_Communitas.

include the Final Report of Inquiry Commission on Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State which is a state-organized commission focused on finding the origin of the violence in Rakhine State in 2012.[32] Another example are laws that have been gradually introduced over the years such as the two-child policy aimed at Rohingya or the Nationwide census of 2014 which excluded Rohingya. The two-child policy or Regional Order 1/2005 has been covered extensively by Fortify Rights and is based on leaked government documents and public records, thus being representative of the government in the way the policy is being framed.[33] However, not all government documents have been dated so this must be taken into account when reviewing them.

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[32] "Final Report of Inquiry Commission on Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State," Rakhine Inquiry Commission (8 July 2013), Foreword. Retrieved from: https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs15/Rakhine_Commission_Report-en-red.pdf.

[33] "Policies of Persecution: Ending Abusive State Policies Against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, *Fortify Rights* (February 2014). Retrieved from:
https://www.fortifyrights.org/downloads/Policies_of_Persecution_Feb_25_Fortify_Rights.pdf.

Figure 1: map of Myanmar



In late October 2012, Arakanese mobs waged coordinated attacks against Muslim villages in nine townships throughout the state, committing killings, burning down entire Muslim neighborhoods, and displacing tens of thousands more Muslims.

[34] *Human Rights Watch.*

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[34] "All You Can Do is Pray; Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Burma's Arakan State," *Human Rights Watch* (22 April 2013), I. Retrieved from:

## Chapter 1: the legitimization of violence against the Rohingya: an historical overview of the gradual adoption of permanent security as a legitimization tool

The first chapter of my thesis will answer the question: What kind of discriminatory security measures has Myanmar's government implemented nationally to portray the Rohingya as a threat? This sets the stage for the rest of the thesis because it provides a historical overview of the security measures and policies Myanmar has adopted and the social and political climate in which they were produced. An understanding of the "emerging Rohingya threat" and the measures implemented to counter this threat are vital since it is these security measures and policies that the GoM would have to legitimize towards the international and regional community.

In this chapter, I argue that Myanmar has led a decades-old persecution campaign against the Rohingya, which has escalated in recent years through intensified discrimination and violence. This has fueled resentment and anger within the Rohingya community, leading to the creation of several terrorist organizations aimed at obtaining political and civil rights for the Rohingya. While these organizations have proved to be a minor threat, I maintain that successive governments of Myanmar had already planned persecution campaigns and have twisted the history to suit their narrative in which all Rohingya were a security threat, with the end goal of banishing all Rohingya to Bangladesh and rounding the remaining Rohingya up in displacement camps under the guise of security concerns. Therefore, the emerging "Rohingya threat" served Myanmar's narrative in later legitimization efforts. To illustrate the intensification of the persecution in 2012 and the government's stance after the violence in Rakhine in 2012, I will first discuss these events, before delving into the historical background and the systematic Rohingya persecution before 2012. Then, the aftermath of the violence in 2012 in the form of intensified persecution, exacerbated by a state-sponsored (social media) propaganda campaign will be discussed, showing that the government twisted the historical context of persecution to suit its narrative.

### Violence in June and October 2012

In June 2012, complete and utter chaos broke out in Myanmar's Rakhine State.
Arakan and Rohingya mobs plundered and ignited businesses, homes and places of worship, whilst villagers inside were beaten with crude weapons.[35] In the months that followed, unrest spread across the state and came to a head in October in almost simultaneous attacks against the Rohingya in nine townships.[36] As a result, thousands of buildings (mostly in Rohingya

https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/04/22/all-you-can-do-pray/crimes-against-humanity-and-ethnic-cleansing-rohingya-muslims.

[35] "The Government Could Have Stopped This; Sectarian Violence and Ensuing Abuses in Burma's Arakan State," *Human Rights Watch* (31 July 2012), 18. Retrieved from: https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/08/01/government-could-have-stopped/sectarian-violence-and-ensuing-abuses-burmas-arakan.

[36] "All You Can Do is Pray; Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Burma's Arakan State," *Human Rights Watch* (22 April 2013), 47. Retrieved from: https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/04/22/all-you-can-do-pray/crimes-against-humanity-and-ethnic-cleansing-rohingya-muslims.

neighborhoods) were destroyed, roughly 100,000 Rohingya were displaced and over 200 people were killed.[37] The direct cause of the inter-communal violence in 2012 was the rape and murder of an Arakanese woman on May 28 by three Muslim men in the Township of Ramree and the subsequent revenge killings of ten Muslim men who were dragged off a bus and beaten to death by Arakanese villagers in Toungop.[38] Before this attack, three Muslim men were already in custody for the events of the 28th of May and were later found guilty, whilst no one has been convicted for the murders of the ten Muslims, despite hundreds of witnesses including security forces who did not intervene.[39] What's more, security forces and police in Rakhine were actively involved in killing Rohingya in June as they opened fire on those trying to extinguish the flames that engulfed their houses.[40] From June to October, local authorities destroyed Rohingya homes and mosques, colluded with the Arakanese to forcibly displace Rohingya communities, and were responsible for mass arbitrary arrests, detention, and torture.[41]

Violence of this magnitude was not, as President Thein Sein's office tried to claim, unexpected, nor was it as simple as "a conflict between two communities within a State of Myanmar following a criminal act," as Myanmar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated.[42] Instead, this violence was the result of a decades-old hate campaign of persecution by Myanmar's government that targeted the Rohingya. By downplaying the severity of the violence, the government tried to eliminate the historical context in which this violence was rooted. Since this trend of trivializing violence continued in later years, it is pertinent to discuss the historical background of persecution before 2012, especially because it shows how Myanmar's military governments have created the "Rohingya threat."

**The persecution of Rohingya before the violence of 2012**

In line with historical records, the Rohingya consider themselves to be indigenous to the region of today's Rakhine State, dating back to the Arakan kingdom of the ninth century which Myanmar's government contradicts as they consider Rohingya to be illegal immigrants brought to Myanmar by the British Empire during the period of colonial rule (1824-1948).[43] The presence of the British exacerbated tensions between Rohingya and Buddhist Burmese as the latter were exercising authority over the Rohingya who, in turn, were resented by the Burmese for wanting their own state as promised by the British.[44] When Rohingya supported the British

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[37] "Caged without a Roof; apartheid in Myanmar's Rakhine State," *Amnesty International* (21 November 2017), 22.Retrieved from: https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/11/myanmar-apartheid-in-rakhine-state/.
[38] Ibid, 1.
[39] "The Government Could Have Stopped This; Sectarian Violence and Ensuing Abuses in Burma's Arakan State," *Human Rights Watch* (31 July 2012), 18.
[40] Ibid, 26.
[41] Ibid, 36-37, 40, 43.
[42] "Press Release Regarding the Recent Incidents in Rakhine State of Myanmar," The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar Ministry of Foreign Affairs (21 August 2012). Retrieved from: https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/press-release-regarding-recent-incidents-rakhine-state-myanmar.
"President Office issues statement with regard to conflict in Rakhine State," Government of Myanmar (25 October 2012). Retrieved from: https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/president-office-issues-statement-regard-conflict-rakhine-state.
[43] Azeem Ibrahim, "Introduction," in *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's hidden genocide* (London: Hurst & Company, 2016), 15-17.
[44] Jobair Alam, "The Current Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar in Historical

after the Japanese invasion of Burma in the Second World War (instead of the Japanese like Buddhist nationalists) these ethno-religious tensions cemented.[45] While Rohingya were allowed to vote and recognized as citizens of Burma a year before gaining independence in 1948, independence meant that the autonomy Rohingya had been able to exercise under the rule of the British fell away, fueling disloyalty to Burma and an insurgency which was defeated in 1954.[46] This colonial legacy and the subsequent insurgency have left deep scars on Rohingya's relationship with the government. I believe that the government has never forgiven the Rohingya for betraying the country, not once but twice. In their eyes, Rohingya did not only support the British oppressors but also turned against the country when they fought for their own, separate state. As a result, the government undertook various extreme security measures to prevent new insurgencies.

**Citizenship denial, armed operations, and terrorism**

The first of these measures was the Union Citizenship Law of 1948, which never recognized the Rohingya as one of the indigenous races who were granted full nationality, and Rohingya could gain citizenship if their family had lived in the country for two generations. Rohingya unable to provide this evidence were only given Foreigners Registration Certificates.[47] The military coup d'état by General Ne Win in 1962 stripped the Rohingya of their political and civil rights and increased exclusion from state institutions; from discrimination in education and employment to the confiscation of property up to the Emergency Immigration Act (EIA) of 1974, intended to curb illegal immigration by forcing citizens to carry Identification Cards but Rohingya were excluded and thus considered non-nationals.[48]

In response, resistance organizations were founded, including the Rohingya Patriotic Front (1974-1986), the RSO (1982-late 1990s), and the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA, 2013-present). Although most Rohingya were against using armed warfare and the ARSA clarified that they do not adhere to jihadist ideology but wanted to defend Rohingya rights, the GoM declared them terrorist organizations.[49] In the 1970s, the military organized a series of armed campaigns like "Operation King Dragon (1978)," "Operation Clean (1991)" and "Beautiful Nation (1991)," during which they raped and murdered Rohingya under the pretense of checking whether they were illegal immigrants. As a result, 450,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh between 1978 and 1992 where they were also seen as unwelcome foreigners and

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Perspective," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 39, no. 1 (2019): 6. Retrieved from: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13602004.2019.1575560.

[45] Muhammad Abdul Bari, *The Rohingya Crisis: A People Facing Extinction* (Leicestershire: Kube Publishing, 2018), 65.

[46] Ibid, 30.

Jobair Alam, "The Current Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar in Historical Perspective," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 39, no. 1 (2019): 7. Retrieved from: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13602004.2019.1575560.

[47] Ibid, 8.

[48] Muhammad Abdul Bari, *The Rohingya Crisis: A People Facing Extinction* (Leicestershire: Kube Publishing, 2018), 31.

Stephen C. Druce, "Myanmar's Unwanted Ethnic Minority: A History and Analysis of the Rohingya Crisis," in *Managing Conflicts in a Globalizing ASEAN: Incompatibility Management Through Good Governance*, ed. Mikio Oishi (Singapore: Springer, 2020), 30.

[49] Naved Bakali, "Islamophobia in Myanmar: the Rohingya genocide and the 'war on terror,'" *Race & Class* 62, no. 4 (2016), 59-61. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396820977753.

most were sent back to Myanmar.[50] Furthermore, the Citizenship Law of 1982 was implemented, limiting citizenship accessibility and thereby essentially rendering the Rohingya stateless and vulnerable to further repression.[51] In retaliation, the RSO attacked military and police outposts in Rakhine in the 1980s and the 1990s.[52] Their most successful attack took place in April 1994, when bombs planted in Maungdaw town injured civilians and damaged several buildings.[53]

While the RSO has been inactive since the 1990s, for the military GoM, the events of 9/11 provided an opportunity to declare their support for the war on terror and to establish links between Al Qaeda and the RSO, no matter how shaky the evidence.[54] The RSO continued to deny these connections and most of the reports that claimed these ties were provided by Myanmar's military and therefore unverifiable.[55]  Since 2001, the government framed the Rohingya problem as one of illegal immigrants and terrorists, making no distinction between the Rohingya as a community and actual terrorists.[56] Notably, even *if* one were to accept the government's perspective that Rohingya were immigrants around the time of independence, it would still not explain nor justify why Rohingya decades after independence have remained stateless, in contravention of international human rights standards. By framing the Rohingya as a threat, the government has dehumanized Rohingya, making it easier to implement discriminatory policies to "tackle this threat" and serving as a distraction from the root causes of the conflict such as statelessness.

**Official policies of persecution (1990s-2012)**

This dehumanization of an entire ethnic minority was evident in various discriminatory policies that were implemented and exclusively applied to Rohingya. Fortify Rights was able to access internally leaked orders spanning from 1993 to 2008 which were still in place at the time of the 2017 attacks.[57]

A regional order from 1993 claimed an extreme increase in population in the predominantly Rohingya Maungdaw Township. Fear of food shortage would turn "stray kids" into "bad youth" who will "create problems" and therefore Muslims should register their marriages and divorces."[58] This was followed by Regional Order 1/2005, which stated that: "those who have

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[50] Ibid, 59-60.

[51] Muhammad Abdul Bari, *The Rohingya Crisis: A People Facing Extinction* (Leicestershire: Kube Publishing, 2018), 32.

[52] Ibid, 59.

[53] "Myanmar: A new Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State," *International Crisis Group*, Asia Report n. 283 (15 December 2016), 4. Retrieved from: https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/283-myanmar-new-muslim-insurgency-rakhine-state.

[54] Andrew Selth, "Burma and International Terrorism," *Australian Quarterly* 75, no. 6 (2003): 26-27. Retrieved from: https://www.jstor.org/stable/20638218.

Elliot Brennan and Christopher O'Hara, "The Rohingya and Islamic Extremism: a Convenient Myth," *Institute of Security & Development Policy* no. 181 (2015), 1. Retrieved from: https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/191758/2015-brennan-ohara-the-rohingya-and-islamic-extremism-a-convenient-myth.pdf.

[55] Ibid, 1-2.

[56] Andrew Seth, "Burma's Muslims and the war on terror," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27, no. 2 (2010): 119. Retrieved from: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10576100490275094.

[57] "Policies of Persecution: Ending Abusive State Policies Against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar," *Fortify Rights* (February 2014), 13. Retrieved from: https://www.fortifyrights.org/mya-inv-rep-2014-02-25/.

[58] Ibid, Appendix II: Regional Order 1993, 64.

permission to marry must limit the number of children, to control the birth rate."[59] Authorities enforced this as a strict two-child policy that, if violated, could lead to imprisonment, fines, or both, leading many to unsafe abortions out of fear of government persecution.[60]

Undated addendums called "Population Control Activities" and "Requirements for Bengalis who apply for Permission to Marry" further limited the freedom of Rohingyas. The first banned polyamory and spoke of "making people use pills, injections, and condoms for birth control," while the latter required parental permission to marry.[61] Addendum's in 2008 called for "spot-checking;" whereby law enforcement officials raid the homes of Rohingya unannounced to check home occupancy against official home registries."[62] Furthermore, a government document from 2005, severely limited Rohingyas' freedom of movement by forcing married couples to get permission from the authorities if they wanted to move within the same territory, move to a different territory or move out, all of which required multiple documents such as a marriage certificate.[63]

The emphasis these measures placed on population control was a clear indication that the government feared that the high birth rate of Rohingya would lead to overpopulation. However, Harvard University's Ash Center found that the birth rate in Rakhine was lower "compared to all of Myanmar for the 1955-2010 period" and that the Muslim share of the national population had slightly decreased.[64] The fabrication of a high Rohingya birth rate has instilled fear into the hearts of Buddhist Burmese and allowed the government to implement invasive policies with the intent to control Rohingya. These policies were based on a paranoid threat perception of a Muslim threat to Buddhism and were therefore the early stages of permanent security. Since the violence in 2012, the situation in Rakhine has deteriorated as the government became determined that more measures were necessary in the name of security, to the detriment of the Rohingyas' basic human rights.

**The aftermath of the 2012 violence: Intensification of the Rohingya persecution (2012-2017)**

In 2017 Amnesty International reported "continuous curfews, checkpoints, extortion, and physical violence by security forces" in 2012 and Rohingya were often unable to leave their villages/displacement camps or risk long jail sentences.[65] In addition, Rohingya were segregated from the rest of the Rakhine population and denied access to healthcare, job opportunities and education. For instance, medical emergencies after curfew had to wait till the next day and Rohingya who managed to obtain travel permits were at risk of extortion and

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[59] Ibid, Appendix III: Regional Order 1/2005, 67.
[60] "Burma: Revoke 'Two-Child Policy' For Rohingya," Human Rights Watch, 28 May 2013. Retrieved from: https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/05/28/burma-revoke-two-child-policy-rohingya.
[61] "Policies of Persecution: Ending Abusive State Policies Against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar," *Fortify Rights* (February 2014), 68, 70. Retrieved from: https://www.fortifyrights.org/mya-inv-rep-2014-02-25/.
[62] "All You Can Do is Pray; Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Burma's Arakan State," *Human Rights Watch* (22 April 2013): 81. https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/04/22/all-you-can-do-pray/crimes-against-humanity-and-ethnic-cleansing-rohingya-muslims.
[63] "Policies of Persecution: Ending Abusive State Policies Against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar," *Fortify Rights* (February 2014), 68, 70. Retrieved from: https://www.fortifyrights.org/mya-inv-rep-2014-02-25/. Ibid, 33.
[64] Ibid, 20.
[65] "Caged without a roof; apartheid in Myanmar's Rakhine State," *Amnesty International* (2017), 44-45, 51, 53. Retrieved from: https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa16/7484/2017/en/.

ended up in segregated hospital wards.[66] Furthermore, Rohingya children were no longer allowed to attend Rakhine-Rohingya mixed government schools and had to stay at home, while their parents could no longer access vital markets and town centers to trade.[67]

As the years went by, the persecution worsened; Rohingya were excluded in 2014 from the first national census in 30 years, and in 2015 their temporary identification cards (for the few that held them) were confiscated so that they were forced to obtain new cards that identified them incorrectly as immigrants from Bangladesh.[68] 2015 also saw the implementation of *four race and religion protection laws* which were applicable nationwide and could therefore be seen as a more public set of persecution policies compared to the more secret regional orders. One of these laws prohibited polyamory and living with an unmarried partner, while another required government authorization for the conversion to a different religion. [69] The Interfaith Marriage Law sought to limit the number of Buddhist women marrying non-Buddhist men by requiring parental consent below the age of 20.[70] Lastly, the Population Control Law required women to space the birth of their children 36 months apart.[71]

These race and religion protection laws were inherently racist in nature; they were intended to protect the Burman race and the Buddhist religion from Islamic influences. Preventing interfaith marriage and limiting the freedom of religion with the knowledge that Muslims were from a different ethnic group such as the Rohingya, has led me to the conclusion that this is another form of segregation to protect the purity of the Buddhist Burmans. This belief was strengthened by the more noticeable segregation of entire displacement camps and Rohingya villages that have been cut off from the rest of Rakhine and even medical emergencies were not enough to get permission to leave. Depriving Rohingya of essential resources, (job) opportunities, and protections, has made them more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, which, in turn, has given the government and its security forces almost total control over the Rohingya population. However, the more extensive the measures, the more attention it would generate from both inside and outside the country. Hence the government's attempt to win over the Burmese by controlling the narrative during a brief period of democratization.

**Democratization without regulation**

Between 2012 and 2017, a time of extreme and increasingly violent persecution of Rohingya, the Burmese population supported the government and eventually even approved of military intervention in Rakhine.[72] The reason for this widespread government support for anti-Rohingya measures, could best be explained in the words of Mohamad Ayas, a Rohingya schoolteacher, who recalled:

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[66] Ibid, 59-60.

[67] Ibid, 67,74.

[68] "Burma's Path to Genocide; Timeline," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Retrieved from: https://exhibitions.ushmm.org/burmas-path-to-genocide/timeline.

[69] "Burma: Four "Race and Religion Protection Laws" Adopted," Library of Congress (14 September 2015). Retrieved from: https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2015-09-14/burma-four-race-and-religion-protection-laws-adopted/.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Victoire Rio, "The Role of Social Media in Fomenting Violence: Myanmar," *Toda Peace Institute*, Policy Brief No. 78 (June 2020), 11. Retrieved from: https://toda.org/policy-briefs-and-resources/policy-briefs/the-role-of-social-media-in-fomenting-violence-myanmar.html.

*"We used to live together peacefully alongside the other ethnic groups in Myanmar. Their intentions were good to the Rohingya, but the government was against us. The public used to follow their religious leaders, so when the religious leaders and government started spreading hate speech on Facebook, the minds of the people changed."*[73]

Until the political reforms (2011-2015), Myanmar was a military dictatorship with draconian censorship and low internet access. When the telecommunications sector became liberalized and SIM card costs dropped sharply in 2014, millions of people in Myanmar suddenly had access to affordable internet yet without the critical digital and media literacy skills necessary to safely traverse it.[74] Facebook, pre-installed on smartphones, effectively became the internet, serving as a hub for entertainment, news, and communication. By 2017, Facebook had 18 million users out of a total population of 53 million, though the actual number was far higher due to the active sharing of accounts and information among friends and family.[75]

**MaBaTha, the military, and anti-Rohingya hate speech**

These liberalization policies granted the people of Myanmar more freedom of speech without any regulations to accompany this newly acquired freedom. Therefore, this democratization period provided the social climate fundamental for the rise in extreme Buddhist nationalism in the form of MaBaTha or the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion. The organization grew out of the 969 movement in 2013, when the latter was banned after boycotting Muslim-owned businesses and spreading the word about a Muslim threat to Buddhism in the form of "an internal threat linked to inter-religious marriage and high birth rates, and an external threat linked to immigration and terrorism."[76] About 88 percent of Myanmar's population is Buddhist and this source of national pride was exploited by religious leaders, regarded by Buddhists as trustworthy due to their perceived understanding of the world.[77] MaBaTha's leader U Wirathu is a prominent example, as he posted anti-Rohingya and Islamophobic messages on Facebook since 2014, calling Rohingya "mad dogs," posting graphic images of dead bodies by pretending these were Buddhists murdered by Rohingya and claiming that peace required Muslims and Buddhists to live segregated.[78] He amassed 400,000 followers by creating multiple accounts, exploiting Facebook's delay in addressing hate speech until 2019 when local staff were hired.[79] Facebooks' incompetent message review facilitated MaBaTha's

[73] "The Social Atrocity; meta and the Right to Remedy for the Rohingya," *Amnesty International* (29 September 2022), 27. Retrieved from: https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa16/5933/2022/en/.

[74] Victoire Rio, "The Role of Social Media in Fomenting Violence: Myanmar," *Toda Peace Institute*, Policy Brief No. 78 (June 2020), 3, 6.

[75] Ibid, 7

[76] Ibid, 3.

[77] Ibid, 2.

Christina Fink, "Dangerous Speech, Anti-Muslim Violence, and Facebook in Myanmar," *Journal of International Affairs Editorial Board* 71, no. 1.5 (2018): 45. Retrieved from: https://www.jstor.org/stable/26508117.

[78] Ali Siddiquee, "The portrayal of the Rohingya genocide and refugee crisis in the age of post-truth politics," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 5, no.2 (2019): 96. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/2057891119864454.

[79] Victoire Rio, "The Role of Social Media in Fomenting Violence: Myanmar," *Toda Peace Institute*, Policy Brief No. 78 (June 2020), 8, 14.

efforts to divide communities and promote hatred; in 2015, this led to advocacy for race and religion protection laws.[80]

Unfortunately, the government's involvement has proliferated hate speech more extensively and rapidly; the New York Times uncovered in 2018 that roughly 700 members of the military had taken part in a systematic propaganda campaign since at least 2013.[81] Using various fake accounts, often posing as national heroes or pop star fans, the military would post misinformation and anti-Rohingya propaganda on multiple entertainment, informational and beauty pages they had created. Hateful messages were found among beauty tips and tricks, making the operation more covert. Leaders of the military were also openly inciting fear and uncertainty; Commander-in-Chief of Myanmar's military, Senior General Aung Hlaing, posted photos on Facebook claiming they were evidence of conflict in Rakhine during the independence struggle of Myanmar, yet in fact they depicted Bangladesh's independence war in 1971.[82] What's more, over 2,7 million followers read Min Aung Hlaing's continuous praising of military attacks on Rohingya in 2017.[83] A Reuters investigation into Facebook's reactive stance found in 2018 that more than 1,000 examples of "posts, comments, images and videos attacking the Rohingya or other Myanmar Muslims" were still on Facebook months after the company had promised improvements, with some posts dating back to 2012.[84] Facebook pages such as the "Kalar* Beheading Gang (created in 2012)," and "We will genocide all of the Muslims and feed them to the dogs (created in 2014)" were only removed after activists reported these pages.[85] Together, MaBaTha and the government created an echo chamber of islamophobia, centered around the spread of misinformation and hate speech, which was so powerful that it convinced the majority of Burmans. It is undeniable that hate speech contributed to the violence during the clearance operations.

**The amplification of persecution through hate speech on social media**

**Clearance operations**

For decades the Rohingya endured various forms of persecution and the apex of suffering transpired during the years of 2016 and 2017 in the form of clearance operations. The trigger for these operations were attacks by ARSA on three police outposts in Rakhine on 9 October 2016, allegedly killing nine police officers.[86] On the same day, Myanmar's army executed

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[80] Alan Davis, "Hate Speech in Burma," in *Media and Mass Atrocity: the Rwanda Genocide and Beyond,* ed. Allan Thompson (Waterloo, ON, Canada: CIGI Press, 2019), 312.

[81] Paul Mozur, "A Genocide Incited on Facebook, With Posts From Myanmar's Military," *The New York Times*, 15 October 2018. Retrieved from: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/technology/myanmar-facebook-genocide.html.

[82] Alexandra Stevenson, "Facebook Admits it Was Used to Incite Violence in Myanmar," *The New York Times*, 6 November 2018. Retrieved from: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/06/technology/myanmar-facebook.html.

[83] Victoire Rio, "The Role of Social Media in Fomenting Violence: Myanmar," *Toda Peace Institute*, Policy Brief No. 78 (June 2020), 8.

[84] Steve Stecklow, "Hatebook; Why Facebook is losing the war on hate speech in Myanmar," *Reuters Investigates* (15 August 2018). Retrieved from: https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/myanmar-facebook-hate/#article-hatebook.

\* Pejorative used to describe the Rohingya

[85] Steve Stecklow, "Hatebook; Why Facebook is losing the war on hate speech in Myanmar," *Reuters Investigates*, 15 August 2018. Retrieved from: https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/myanmar-facebook-hate/#article-hatebook.

[86] "They gave them long swords," *Fortify Rights* (July 2018), 31. Retrieved from: https://www.fortifyrights.org/mly-inv-rep-2018-07-19/.

civilians, destroyed numerous villages in Maungdaw township and "systematically raped and gang-raped Rohingya women and girls, slit throats, burned victims alive, and arbitrarily arrested hundreds of men and boys."[87] Between October 2016 and February 2017, clearance operations caused an unknown death toll and the displacement of approximately 94,000 Rohingya while 74,000 to 87,000 fled to Bangladesh.[88] Strikingly, the months preceding August 2017 were characterized by government preparations like: "systematically collecting sharp or blunt objects from Rohingya," train[ing] and arm[ing] local non-Rohingya … in Rakhine, depriv[ing] Rohingya … of food and other aid, … and build[ing] up state security forces in northern Rakhine to unnecessary levels."[89] Consequently, when ARSA targeted 30 security posts on 25 August 2017 in Rakhine, reportedly killing 12 officials, the government responded immediately and disproportionally; hundreds of Rohingya villages were looted and destroyed with the help of non-Rohingya civilians and atrocities like unlawful killings, rape and other sexual violence were committed.[90] Consequently, over 700,000 Rohingya were deported into Bangladesh and more than 10,000 were murdered.[91] After 2017's clearance operations, the total number of Rohingya who have fled to Bangladesh numbers more than 960,000, a number which has remained the same until the time of writing.[92]

**Conclusion**

A historical background of the Rohingya persecution by the government through the years has unearthed that these clearance operations were not a new phenomenon but the culmination of various systematic forms of oppression. The 1982 Citizenship Law was the first in a series of structural discrimination laws intent on disenfranchising Rohingya. By restricting (interfaith)marriage and divorce, limiting the number of children Rohingya were allowed to have to two, and carrying out spot checks, the government effectively controlled many aspects of life that should have remained private under the guise of "population control." Rohingya were regarded as lesser beings wanting to spread the Islam and take up all available resources in Rakhine due to their "explosive birth rate." In reality, these laws were designed to expunge Rohingya from the country; without a form of identification and/or a marriage certificate, it was impossible to move, obtain government subsidies and to get a job. Combined with the government's attempts to divide communities in Rakhine by spreading hate speech on social media, it is evident that the government tried to divert attention from root causes of violence like statelessness.

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[87] Ibid, 39.
"Situation in the People's Republic of Bangladesh/Republic of the Union of Myanmar," International Criminal Court No. ICC-01/19 (4 July 2019),32-33. Retrieved from: https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/CourtRecords/CR2019_03510.PDF.
[88] "They gave them long swords," *Fortify Rights* (July 2018), 39.
"Caged without a roof; apartheid in Myanmar's Rakhine State," *Amnesty International* (2017), 23.
[89] "They gave them long swords," *Fortify Rights* (July 2018), 41.
[90] "Caged without a roof; apartheid in Myanmar's Rakhine State," *Amnesty International* (2017), 24.
"Situation in the People's Republic of Bangladesh/Republic of the Union of Myanmar," International Criminal Court No. ICC-01/19 (4 July 2019), 36.
[91] Ibid.
[92] "Rohingya refugee crisis explained," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Retrieved from: https://www.unrefugees.org/news/rohingya-refugee-crisis-explained/.

Other measures for the sake of security such as limiting Rohingya's freedom of movement, job opportunities, and access to healthcare and education have confirmed this. The denial of these freedom's has left the Rohingya marginalized to the point that many fled to Bangladesh even before latest clearance operations. However, what really indicated the government's planning was the fact that these clearance operations were not a new concept at all; they occurred in 1978, 1991, 2012, 2016, and 2017, resulting in massive displacement and killings every single time. Attacking the Rohingya on the same day of the 2016 and 2017 terrorist attacks, along with building op security forces in Rakhine, and arming and training locals right before these events, are all evidence of a systematic planning that just needed an excuse. Since the first clearance operation in 1978 predated terrorist activities and the actual terrorist threat has been minimal, it stands to reason that the war on terror proved to be this perfect excuse to round up Rohingya in displacement camps and expunge the rest to Bangladesh. In the government's paranoid threat perception, never would the Rohingya try to take over Myanmar, their country, again. The only thing left to do now was to convince the rest of the world of their reasoning, a matter easier said than done, especially at the UN as will be the point of discussion for the next chapter.

## Chapter 2: Myanmar's legitimization efforts internationally; a story of denial and misinformation

**Introduction**

The second chapter will seek the answer to the question: in what ways has the Myanmar government employed permanent security in their legitimization attempts towards the UN of their treatment of the Rohingya between 2012 and 2017? The first part will concentrate on the legitimization efforts of the government after questions by the UN in 2012 while the second part will focus on the justification of the clearance operations in 2016 and 2017. This chapter aims to expose the reasoning of GoM by focusing on their interaction with various departments of the UN. I argue that both President Tein Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi have attempted to deny the extent of the Rohingya persecution in favor of highlighting the steps the government has taken towards democratization. This strategy failed after increased scrutiny following the clearance operations which broke Aung San Suu Kyi's silence and led her to adopt the Tatmadaw's stance of emphasizing the terrorist threat that Rohingya posed along with downplaying the Tatmadaw's human rights violations.

**2012 violence: intercommunal clashes or the beginning of a humanitarian crisis?**

The June 2012 violence prompted a swift response from the UN Human Rights department; its High Commissioner Navi Pillay raised the alarm on 27 July, saying that "ongoing human rights violations" like the "instigation of and involvement in clashes" of security forces "highlighted the long-standing and systemic discrimination against the Rohingya."[93] Pillay welcomed "the Government's decision to allow the Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Myanmar access to Rakhine" but stressed that this would not be a substitution for a much-needed independent investigation.[94] The Special Rapporteur in question, Tomás Quintana, visited Rakhine on 31 July and 1 August, noted on 4 August that "excessive use of force by security and police personnel, arbitrary arrest and detention, killings, denial of due process guarantees and the use of torture in places of detention," required an independent investigation to hold those responsible accountable.[95] Both this statement and Quintana's report of 25 September to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) voiced concerns about Rohingya's statelessness and the living conditions in displacement camps.[96]

As the situation in Rakhine received more and more unwanted international attention, Myanmar's President Sein scrambled to salvage the situation by establishing the Inquiry Commission on Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State on 17 August. The President was under the impression that he could deflect attention from this issue by redirecting it toward Myanmar's

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[93] "Myanmar: Pillay concerned about human rights situation in Rakhine state," United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (27 July 2012). Retrieved from https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2012/07/myanmar-pillay-concerned-about-human-rights-situation-rakhine-state.

[94] Ibid.

[95] "Statement of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar," United Nations Human Rights office of the High Commissioner (4 August 2012). Retrieved from: https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2012/08/statement-special-rapporteur-situation-human-rights-myanmar.

[96] Ibid.

Thomás Ojea Quintana, "Situation of human rights in Myanmar: note by the Secretary-General," United Nations Digital Library No. A/67/383 (25 September 2012), 15. Retrieved from: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/736603?v=pdf#files.

democratic transition. Insinuating that Rohingya lacked a moral compass and were uneducated, President Sein promised that the government would civilize them by providing (segregated) modern education.[97] The President wanted to avoid an international investigation of this issue and stressed in his address to the UNGA in September that Myanmar's democratic transition would need the continued support from the UN, the country was looking into the issue and that "Myanmar has done the right thing to secure our borders and safeguard our sovereignty."[98] Myanmar's attempt at an independent investigation was generally viewed by the UN as a positive development apart from the fact that the Commission did not include Rohingya representatives.[99]

**The 2013 report of the Inquiry Commission**

The Commission's final report was published on 8 July 2013. Its foreword immediately dashed the hopes of the UN Human Rights Department as it underlined that the commission had no "intention of casting blame on any group or organization" and that its purpose was "to promote peace and development in the region."[100] Nevertheless, when closely examined, the report appears to insinuate that the Rohingya were responsible through its choice in language and framing of events. A case in point was the historic root cause of the violence identified by the report: intercommunal violence during the Second World War. "In the 1942 events, Bengalis killed a great number of Rakhine."[101] The little verifiable evidence that exists on these events seemed to indicate that the Burma Independence Army first instigated violence against the Rohingya and after multiple attacks and counterattacks, there were thousands of deaths on both sides.[102]

This misrepresentation of history paints Rakhine as the victims and Rohingya as the aggressors, a trend that sustains the rest of the report. Rohingya were referred to as "extremist Bengalis," who "practice an extreme form of religion" and were "ready to respond to any problem with violence." [103] Moreover, demanding to be called Rohingya would be "fanning the flames of sectarian violence," as in the past "armed rebel groups … waged an insurgency against the Union of Myanmar" and Rakhine people feared that an official recognition of this name would

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[97] Michael Lipin, "Burma's President Tells VOA He Will Open Schools for Rohingya," *Voice of America*, 14 August 2012. Retrieved from: https://www.voanews.com/a/burma-president-thein-sein-to-open-schools-for-muslims/1485901.html.
[98] Ibid.
"General Assembly Sixty-seventh session 12th plenary meeting," United Nations General Assembly No. A/67/PV.12 (27 September 2012), 13. Retrieved from: https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n12/523/37/pdf/n1252337.pdf?token=8YbQ2VB99PW2R2KaJs&fe=true.
[99] Thomás Ojea Quintana, "Situation of human rights in Myanmar: note/ by the Secretary-General," United Nations Digital Library No. A/67/383 (25 September 2012), 16. Retrieved from: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/736603?v=pdf#files.
[100] "Final Report of Inquiry Commission on Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State," Rakhine Inquiry Commission (8 July 2013), Foreword. Retrieved from: https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs15/Rakhine_Commission_Report-en-red.pdf.
[101] Ibid, 17-18.
[102] Jacques P. Leider, "Conflict and Mass Violence in Arakan (Rakhine State): The 1942 Events and Political Identity Formation," in *Citizenship in Myanmar: Ways of Being in and from Burma*, ed. Ashley South and Marie Lall (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2017), 198, 208-210.
[103] "Final Report of Inquiry Commission on Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State," Rakhine Inquiry Commission (8 July 2013),13, 18, 62. Retrieved from: https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs15/Rakhine_Commission_Report-en-red.pdf.

have led to Rohingya demanding their own state.[104] The report also falsely claimed that Rohingya were taking over (farm)land from the Rakhine whilst at the same time admitting that the government had segregated Rakhine and Rohingya communities by confining Rohingya to displacement camps.[105] Together with other falsehoods such as the "extremely rapid growth rate of the Bengali population in Rakhine," a pattern clearly emerges.[106] This report echoed the anti-Rohingya sentiments of the GoM and illuminated the deep-seated fear that extremist Rohingya would become a threat again, taking over the country by spreading "extremist teachings" of the Islam and "overpopulating" already poor Rakhine to steal precious resources. If the Commission and government were to acknowledge the name Rohingya, this would mean accepting that Rohingya are a distinct ethnic minority with human rights, which would disrupt the existing power structure by threatening the dominance of Buddhist-Nationalism.

Disturbingly, the report also foreshadowed further persecution since it discussed the "return or relocation" of displaced Rohingya "where local Rakhine populations do not want them to stay or return to their places of origin" and that the government should determine "where the Bengalis will live in the future."[107] The implication that Rohingya would be unable to return based on the wishes of the Burmese majority and the government showcased arbitrary rules which could be easily exploited. The anti-Rohingya language, accusations of instigating the violence, and the early stages of segregation all substantiate my belief that the Commission was just an extension of the government and therefore the investigation itself was not independent in the slightest.

**Redirection and deflection: from the Rohingya persecution to a democratic Myanmar**

President Sein's assurances of implementing the Commission's recommendations and launching democratic reforms would have been more believable had he not proposed in July 2012 that the solution to illegal Rohingya "threatening the country's stability" was to expulse them from the country into UN-managed refugee camps when talking to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.[108] While this proposal was immediately rejected, a strong response from the UN did not occur. After decades of military rule, a democratic transition was regarded by Western member states as a golden opportunity; Japan forgave Myanmar almost 4 billion dollars in debt, the United States among others lifted sanctions, and foreign investment skyrocketed.[109] As a result, the risks associated with the fragile early stages of democratization were vastly underestimated by the UN. Suppressed issues in the form of extreme Buddhist nationalism encouraged by the Tatmadaw, rising Islamophobia, and an escalation of discrimination against the Rohingya, were all glossed over in favor of praising democratic reforms such as greater press freedom.[110] The development department of the UN preferred constructive engagement with Myanmar and strongly supported this democratization

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[104] Ibid, 16-17, 56.
[105] Ibid, 13, 29.
[106] Ibid, 5.
[107] Ibid, iv, 40.
[108] Rachel Vandenbrink, "Call to Put Rohingya in Refugee Camps," *Radio Free Asia*, 12 July 2012. Retrieved from: https://www.rfa.org/english/news/rohingya-07122012185242.html.
[109] Enze Han, "Overconfidence, missteps, and tragedy: dynamics of Myanmar's international relations and the genocide of the Rohingya," *The Pacific Review* 36, no. 3 (2023): 589-590. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2021.1996451.
[110] Ivan Šimonović, "Why 'Never Again' and R2P did not work in Myanmar," *Global Responsibility to Protect* 13, no. 2-3 (2021): 388. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1163/1875-984X-13020010.

process.[111] This strategy of quiet diplomacy should have complimented the "robust advocacy role" of the UN Human Rights department but instead they start to undermine one another at this stage.[112] For instance, between June 2012 and January 2014, Quintana alerted the UN 14 times on the deteriorating situation in Myanmar while various other UN officials did so 15 times.[113] Although the UN Human Rights Department only used strong words and undertook no strong action, the frequency of these reports, statements and discussions on the deterioration of human rights in Myanmar do indicate that it was seen as an emerging problem.

With hindsight, President Sein's words in July 2012 warranted more than mere words by the UN; he declared all Rohingya, a whole ethnic minority, a threat to Myanmar without providing any evidence, and perilously, provided a first version of a final solution that would see the Rohingya permanently expulsed from Myanmar. Statements like these only served to spread a paranoid threat perception which helped fuel ethnic tensions and anti-Rohingya violence in Rakhine. Moreover, by centering on the positive aspects of democratization, it seemed as if the development department of the UN had forgotten who initiated this transition in the first place. The military may have opened the door towards democracy but it also installed a door chain lock; President Sein and his cabinet were former military generals, military-era repressive legislation remained unchanged, and the 2010 elections were not fair.[114] Not to mention, the Tatmadaw ensured that it would remain in power by adopting a constitution that ensured 25% of parliamentary seats would go to the military, the constitution could only be amended with the military's approval, and vital ministries were still controlled by the military, including Border Affairs, Home Affairs and Defense.[115] It was this lack of civilian oversight that allowed an environment in which nine NGO workers and five UN employees were jailed in 2012 on flimsy charges of "fomenting ethnic hatred."[116] This intimidation, along with the attitude by the government and military that if the UN was not with the country then it was against the country, illustrated that Myanmar was willing to go through great lengths to control the narrative. It worked. During this transitional period (2012-2015), the UN development department at the country level succumbed to their will and undermined the effectiveness of the UN human rights department, thereby making the UN "reluctant to raise concerns about violence against the Rohingya."[117]

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[111] Gert Rosenthal, "A brief and independent inquiry into the involvement of the United Nations in Myanmar from 2010 to 2018," United Nations Digital Archive (29 May 2019): 13, 22. Retrieved from: https://www.un.org/sg/sites/www.un.org.sg/files/atoms/files/Myanmar%20Report%20-%20May%202019.pdf.
[112] Ibid.
[113] David J. Simon, "Rwanda and the Rohingya: Learning the Wrong Lessons?" *Journal of International Peacekeeping* 22, no.1-4 (2020): 207. Retrieved from: http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/18754112-0220104013.
[114] Nehginpao Kipgen, "Myanmar's perspective on the Rohingya Crisis," *International Journal on World Peace* 37, no. 1 (2020): 53. Retrieved from: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26906542.
Erin Bijl and Chris van der Borgh, "Securitization of Muslims in Myanmar's Early Transition (2010-15)," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 28, no. 2 (2021): 109. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2021.2003624.
[115] Michał Lubina, "The Role of Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar's Transition (2011-2021)," in *Demystifying Myanmar's Transition and Political Crisis*, ed. Chosein Yamahata and Bobby Anderson (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 27-28.
[116] David J. Simon, "Rwanda and the Rohingya: Learning the Wrong Lessons?" *Journal of International Peacekeeping* 22, no.1-4 (2020): 207-208. Retrieved from: http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/18754112-0220104013.
[117] Ibid, 208.

**Instability in times of democratic transition: Aung San Suu Kyi, the Tatmadaw and the Rohingya**

As the daughter of an independence hero and a diplomat, Aung San Suu Kyi became known as an icon of Myanmar's struggle for democracy and human rights. She co-founded the National League for Democracy (NLD) in 1988 when mediating between protesters and the army turned out to be fruitless due to the army's unwillingness to cooperate.[118] Suu Kyi's non-violent protests against the military junta and her advocacy for imposing foreign sanctions on Myanmar increased her political standing but also put a target on her back: from 1989 to 2010, the military placed her under house arrest.[119]Her non-violent approach during this time earned her the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991.[120] With the Tatmadaw ruling from the shadows and the installment of a quasi-civilian government in the early 2010s, Suu Kyi realized that she had to change the system from within as opposed to overthrowing the system completely.[121] This meant that Suu Kyi needed to appease the Tatmadaw by backing them on sensitive issues such as the Rohingya. With the knowledge that publicly defending the Rohingya would alienate her political base, the first step was to remove all Rohingya names from the candidate list of the 2015 elections to rally popular support.[122] It worked. The NLD won by a landslide and Suu Kyi became the de-facto ruler of the country under the title of State Counsellor on 6 April 2016. The civilian government had no oversight of the Tatmadaw whatsoever so there was no easy way in which the 2016 and 2017 clearance operations could have been prevented. The Tatmadaw had politically trapped Suu Kyi; as the spokesperson for Myanmar she had to defend and justify the actions of the Tatmadaw before the UN with the understanding that this would lead to harsh international criticism, while the clearance operations were widely supported and the Tatmadaw reveled in their role as defender of the country.[123] Thus, Suu Kyi had a difficult choice to make: either remain a champion of human rights and democracy by standing up for the Rohingya and risk destabilizing the country by antagonizing the Tatmadaw into a potential coup or stand by the Tatmadaw and lose her international credibility. She chose the latter.

[118] Idhamsyah Eke Putra, Hema Preya Selvanathan, Ali Mashuri and Cristina J. Montiel, "Aung San Suu Kyi's Defensive Denial of the Rohingya Massacre: A Rhetorical Analysis of Denial and Positive-Image Construction," *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 9, no. 2 (2021): 356. Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354162522_Aung_San_Suu_Kyi's_defensive_denial_of_the_Rohingya_massacre_A_rhetorical_analysis_of_denial_and_positive-image_construction.
Iqthyer Uddin Zahed and Bert Jenkins, "Aung San Suu Kyi and ethnic cleansing: the dark side of 'Myanmar way' democracy," *South East Asia Research* 30, no. 2 (2022): 208. Retrieved from: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0967828X.2022.2086062.
[119] Ibid.
Idhamsyah Eke Putra, etc, "Aung San Suu Kyi's Defensive Denial of the Rohingya Massacre," *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 9, no. 2 (2021): 357. Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354162522_Aung_San_Suu_Kyi's_defensive_denial_of_the_Rohingya_massacre_A_rhetorical_analysis_of_denial_and_positive-image_construction.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Michał Lubina, "The Role of Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar's Transition (2011-2021)," in *Demystifying Myanmar's Transition and Political Crisis*, ed. Chosein Yamahata and Bobby Anderson (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 32.
[122] Iqthyer Uddin Zahed and Bert Jenkins, "Aung San Suu Kyi and ethnic cleansing: the dark side of 'Myanmar way' democracy," *South East Asia Research* 30, no. 2 (2022): 210. Retrieved from: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0967828X.2022.2086062.
[123] Anna Grzywacz and Michał Lubina, "Competing Stories: Narratives of the Rohingya Crisis in the Making," *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 29, no. 5 (2022): 922. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1163/15718115-bja10078.

**Aung San Suu Kyi stays silent**

After the ARSA attacks in October 2016 and the disproportionate response by the Tatmadaw, Suu Kyi remained silent on the topic for as long as possible. Perhaps she, like the Tatmadaw, mistakenly believed that the international repercussions for these initial clearance operations would be minor considering the lack of UN pressure and action following the violence in 2012.[124] In her stead, the state-sponsored newspaper The Global New Light of Myanmar (GNLM) declared that the international community was guilty of making false accusations of human rights violations in Myanmar. Representatives from the UN Development Pillar were shown around Rakhine and were allowed to speak to Rohingya in an attempt to prove that there were no "offenses of arresting Muslims without evidence, rape cases and burning homes… committed by the forces."[125] Since this UN department downplayed human rights violations in reports and even bowed to the GoM by not using the term Rohingya, this visit did not assure human rights organizations in the slightest.[126] On the other hand, other UN departments did not obey Myanmar's will and accused the country of ethnic cleansing.[127] Along with interviews from Rohingya refugees, satellite evidence from December 2016 of systematically burned Rohingya villages were evidence that not Rohingya terrorists, like the government claimed, but the Tatmadaw were responsible.[128] Regrettably, the government stuck with their story: there was no evidence of ethnic cleansing and the international media was misreporting the realities on the ground.[129] So were accusations of rape "fake" since Rohingya were "too dirty" to rape.[130]

**A former peace icon justifies Myanmar's atrocities**

With mounting international pressure after new clearance operations following ARSA attacks in August 2017, Suu Kyi could no longer remain silent. Speaking in English, Suu Kyi addressed the international community from Myanmar's capital Naypidaw in September 2017. The timing was no coincidence considering that the UN Human Rights Council had established the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar (IIFFMM) in March 2017 and had been requested and denied access to Myanmar from the beginning of September 2017.[131] In her speech, Suu Kyi insisted that Myanmar did not "fear international scrutiny" as the

[124] Enze Han, "Overconfidence, missteps, and tragedy: dynamics of Myanmar's international relations and the genocide of the Rohingya," *The Pacific Review* 36, no. 3 (2023): 596. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2021.1996451.

[125] "False accusations on violating human rights exposed to the world," *The Global New Light of Myanmar*, 3 November 2016. Retrieved from: https://www.burmalibrary.org/sites/burmalibrary.org/files/obl/docs23/GNLM2016-11-03-red.pdf.

[126] David J. Simon, "Rwanda and the Rohingya: Learning the Wrong Lessons?" *Journal of International Peacekeeping* 22, no.1-4 (2020): 209.

[127] "Myanmar wants ethnic cleansing of Rohingya – UN official," *BBC News*, 24 November 2016. Retrieved from: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-38091816.
"UN condemns Myanmar over plight of Rohingya," *BBC News*, 16 December 2016. Retrieved from: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-38345006.

[128] "Burma: Military Burned Villages in Rakhine State: Witnesses and Satellite Imagery Reveal Pattern of Burnings," *Human Rights Watch*, 13 December 2016. Retrieved from: https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/14/burma-military-burned-villages-rakhine-state.

[129] "Myanmar wants ethnic cleansing of Rohingya – UN official," BBC News, 24 November 2016. Retrieved from: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-38091816.

[130] "Report of the detailed findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar," *Human Rights Council* no. A/HRC/39/CRP.2 (17 September 2018): 333, 403. Retrieved from: https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/myanmar-ffm/reportofthe-myanmar-ffm.

[131] Ibid, 6.

government was committed to the "restoration of peace, stability and rule of law."[132] Even though the government and the Tatmadaw repeatedly blamed ARSA and Rohingya terrorists for the situation in Rakhine, Suu Kyi maintained that the government would not blame a particular group.[133] Moreover, Suu Kyi falsely stated that there were "several months of seemingly quiet and peace" between October 2016 and August 2017, completely disregarding the clearance operations of the Tatmadaw in this period.[134]

Suu Kyi sought to circumvent the international community by twisting the truth. Independent journalists, human rights organizations and the UN were barred from Myanmar, clearance operations continued after 5 September 2017 and Rohingya did not have access to "education and healthcare services without discrimination" for years up to this point, yet Suu Kyi declared that the opposite was true.[135] As someone with a vast knowledge of human rights and Myanmar's political climate, it was shocking that Suu Kyi dared to claim to be surprised at the Rohingya exodus to Bangladesh.[136] This speech was the first stage of Suu Kyi's defense based on the War on Terror Logic that Myanmar was merely fighting terrorists and that the clearance operations were intended as a counter-insurgency measure. The intensity of the government's fear of the exaggerated Rohingya threat emerged in January of 2018 when the GNLM published a list of 1,300 names and photographs of "ARSA terrorists," which was then shared by President Htin Kyaw's office.[137] The list provided no evidence whatsoever that these individuals were involved in terrorist activities and worse yet, it included children.[138] The implication that the government believed that children could be potential terrorists highlighted the paranoid threat perception that underpinned its reasoning; since children would follow extremist Islamic teachings and grow up, all Rohingya were potential terrorists and should be treated as such. As Suu Kyi stated: "The danger of terrorist activities, which was the initial cause of events leading to the humanitarian crisis in Rakhine remains real and present today."[139] It was not the decades of Rohingya persecution that led to desperate acts of terrorism like the UN wrongly claimed, but that the unprompted terrorist attacks were a legitimate security threat. Rohingya were no victims but the instigators who brought the massive force of the Tatmadaw upon themselves.

[132] "Speech delivered by Her Excellency Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, State Counsellor of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar on Government's efforts with regard to National Reconciliation and Peace," Online Burma/Myanmar Library (19 September 2017). Retrieved from: https://www.burmalibrary.org/en/aung-san-suu-kyis-public-speech-19-september-2017-video-and-text.

[133] Ibid.

[134] Oliver Holmes, "Fact check: Aung San Suu Kyi's speech on the Rohingya crisis," *The Guardian*, 20 September 2017. Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/20/fact-check-aung-san-suu-kyi-rohingya-crisis-speech-myanmar.

[135] Ibid.

"Speech delivered by Her Excellency Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, State Counsellor of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar on Government's efforts with regard to National Reconciliation and Peace," Online Burma/Myanmar Library (19 September 2017). Retrieved from: https://www.burmalibrary.org/en/aung-san-suu-kyis-public-speech-19-september-2017-video-and-text.

[136] Iqthyer Uddin Zahed and Bert Jenkins, "Aung San Suu Kyi and ethnic cleansing: the dark side of 'Myanmar way' democracy," *South East Asia Research* 30, no. 2 (2022): 211. Retrieved from: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0967828X.2022.2086062.

[137] "Report of the detailed findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar," *Human Rights Council* no. A/HRC/39/CRP.2 (17 September 2018): 336. Retrieved from: https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/myanmar-ffm/reportofthe-myanmar-ffm.

[138] Ibid.

[139] Naved Bakali, "Islamophobia in Myanmar: the Rohingya genocide and the 'war on terror,'" *Race & Class* 62, no. 4 (2016): 66. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396820977753.

Accordingly, when the IIFFMM published its report in September 2018, Myanmar rejected its findings. The Tatmadaw were not guilty of perpetrating ethnic cleansing with genocidal intent because these were "legitimate counter-terrorist actions" and the mission based their conclusions on "unverified circumstantial evidence" without access to Rakhine.[140] The report was also "politically motivated" to cast the government in a bad light instead of the victim of "unprovoked and premeditated attacks.[141]" Ironically, whilst the government kept insisting that it faced a legitimate security threat, the hundreds of thousands of Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh did not constitute a threat to "international peace and security."[142] In my opinion, claiming that you are fighting a real threat on the border with Bangladesh whilst insisting that this has no consequences for international security whatsoever made for a flimsy case.

## Defending the indefensible: Suu Kyi at the International Court of Justice

A year later, the UN Human Rights Council reported that the living conditions for internally displaced Rohingya were still abysmal and that the Tatmadaw kept acting with impunity.[143] A case filed by The Gambia against Myanmar for breaching the Genocide Convention of 1948 was therefore regarded as a positive development by the international community. In a move that shocked the international press except close observers, Suu Kyi decided to defend Myanmar before the court. It made sense that in the light of her already tarnished international reputation, domestic support would be her priority for the next elections of 2020.[144] In her speech before the court, Suu Kyi tried to justify the Tatmadaw's actions by vastly exaggerating the terrorist threat that the Rohingya presented. She called ARSA an organized armed group trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan that consisted of several thousand fighters in August 2017, when they launched their coordinated attacks.[145] The final report of the IIFFMM painted a different picture wherein ARSA at most consisted of a few hundred "minimally-trained members" with arms but that most members were "untrained villagers wield[ing] sticks and knives."[146] Moreover, links to other groups such as al-Qaeda or the Islamic State could not be established by the IIFFMM.[147] Essentially, ARSA never presented a severe threat to Myanmar's sovereignty or security as the Tatmadaw vastly outnumbered ARSA in troops and resources. Again, Suu Kyi circled back to the crux of the government's issue with the Rohingya; the colonial legacy and the subsequent Rohingya insurgence.[148] In her own words, the clearance

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[140] "Head of Human Rights Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar Urges Security Council to Ensure Accountability for Serious Violations against Rohingya," *UN Security Council* Meetings no. SC/13552 (24 October 2018). Retrieved from: https://press.un.org/en/2018/sc13552.doc.htm.

[141] Ibid.

[142] Ibid.

[143] Aungshuman Choudhury and Felix Heiduk, "Aung San Suu Kyi at the International Court of Justice: the Gambia's genocide case against Myanmar and its domestic ramifications," Deutsches Insitut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit no. 51 (2019): 2. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.18449/2019C51.

[144] Ibid.

[145] "Public sitting in the case concerning Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (The Gambia v. Myanmar)," *International Court of Justice* no. CR.2019/19 (2019): 13,14. Retrieved from: https://www.icj-cij.org/files/case-related/178/178-20191211-ORA-01-00-BI.pdf.

[146] "Report of the detailed findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar," *Human Rights Council* no. A/HRC/39/CRP.2 (17 September 2018): 117-118, 244. Retrieved from: https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/myanmar-ffm/reportofthe-myanmar-ffm.

[147] Ibid, 245.

[148] "Public sitting in the case concerning Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (The Gambia v. Myanmar)," *International Court of Justice* no. CR.2019/19 (2019): 14. Retrieved from: https://www.icj-cij.org/files/case-related/178/178-20191211-ORA-01-00-BI.pdf.

operations simply meant "to clear an area of insurgents or terrorists," thereby again implying that all Rohingya were removed from the picture in a preemptive measure to avoid a future uprising. While admitting that perhaps "disproportionate force was used" by the Tatmadaw, there was no planning involved to justify genocide and all crimes would be investigated to ensure "military justice" and "accountability."[149] Since this meant that the Tatmadaw would investigate its own wrongdoing again, the term justice could not be farther removed from Myanmar's rule of law.

**Conclusion**

With the complete and utter lack of a common strategy tying various UN departments together, President Sein could easily manipulate the UN development pillar. Human rights violations were ignored or downplayed in favor of maintaining a relationship with a country "transitioning towards democracy." As the years went by, attempting to break through these patterns of complacency proved to be difficult; UN departments concerned with human rights could only deliver harsh criticism but meaningful action was never undertaken. In the end, while Suu Kyi never fully convinced the UN that Myanmar was facing a terrorist threat, their final problem had been solved. Only after the clearance operations when Rohingya had either fled to Bangladesh or were rounded up in displacement camps, did the UN become more actively involved, eventually leading to the case being brought before the International Court of Justice. Ironically, secret government documents dating back to 2018 discussed how the government would handle foreign intervention in the form of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) mechanism.[150] This doctrine would allow the UN Security Council to intervene in countries where atrocities were being committed. The documents stated that there was only a small chance that R2P would be triggered and they were right; with both Russia and China as allies, Myanmar did not have to fear foreign intervention. Moreover, the coup of 2021 has confirmed that the Tatmadaw would have never allowed Suu Kyi to steer a more democratic course involving the amendment of the 2008 constitution. As Myanmar has since deteriorated into a terrible civil war, it is questionable that any ruling of the highest court could be implemented in the foreseeable future. Unfortunately, Myanmar's neighbors won't be of much help as most have staunchly supported Myanmar amid growing international criticism, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

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[149] Ibid, 17, 18.

[150] Poppy McPherson and Wa Lone, "Planned Purge," *Reuters,* 4 August 2022. Retrieved from: https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/myanmar-rohingya-warcrimes-investigation/.

## Chapter 3: Myanmar's legitimization efforts regionally; security concerns, diplomatic maneuvering and the humanitarian crisis narrative

**Introduction:**

While the last chapter delved into the various ways Myanmar used the concept of permanent security when legitimizing its treatment of the Rohingya toward the UN, this chapter will have a more regional focus. Since the government had a different approach toward legitimization depending on the audience, an analysis of regional legitimization attempts will be a great point of departure to answer the sub question; in what ways has the Myanmar government employed permanent security in their legitimization attempts regionally of their treatment of the Rohingya between 2012-2017? In this case, regionally will be taken to mean several of Myanmar's neighbors, namely Bangladesh, China and India. Bangladesh has taken in most of the Rohingya refugees, India has been a major regional influence, and China has significant regional and international influence due to its seat on the UNSC. In sum, when it comes to legitimization, these were the significant actors that Myanmar had to convince.

This chapter will argue that on a regional level, Myanmar has mainly focused on bilateral relations to exercise and exploit its geopolitical influence through strategic alliances with China and India. Regionally, Myanmar emphasized that the Rohingya threat had resulted in a humanitarian crisis that would impact regional security and therefore required a solution based on regional cooperation and solidarity while respecting Myanmar's sovereignty. The paranoia of a looming terrorist threat of a Muslim minority resonated with the Chinese due to their own issues with the Muslim minority of the Uyghurs while India has had to deal with an influx of unwanted Rohingya refugees like Bangladesh. Combined with China's and India's economic investments in Myanmar, particularly in the conflict ridden Rakhine, both countries have almost indiscriminately taken over Myanmar's line of reasoning and continuously defended Myanmar against international criticism to the detriment of Bangladesh's bargaining power. Since Bangladesh has had to bear the brunt of the refugee crisis and Chinese and Indian involvement became only prominent in 2017, this chapter will primarily focus on Myanmar's legitimization efforts towards Bangladesh during the historical development of this crisis and the events of 2012 and 2016-2017, before analyzing the more recent legitimization efforts towards China and India.

**The historical context of the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh**

Due to its close proximity to Myanmar's Rakhine State, Bangladesh has been the largest destination for Rohingya refugees for decades. As described in the first chapter, the state-sponsored violence of 2012 and the "clearance operations" of 1978, 1991-1992, and 2016-2017 all led to mass exoduses of desperate Rohingya looking for safety in Bangladesh. The first "clearance operation" in 1978 was launched under the guise of "registering citizens and screen[ing] out foreigners."[151] When this led to the forced expulsion of 200,000 Rohingya, the Myanmar government claimed that since the Rohingya were fleeing it was further evidence of their illegal status.[152] At the time, there was no strong response from Bangladesh; the country had only gained independence seven years earlier and was more concerned with resolving

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[151] "Burmese refugees in Bangladesh: Still no Durable Solution," Human rights Watch 12, no 3 (2000): 7. Retrieved from: https://www.hrw.org/reports/pdfs/b/burma/burm005.pdf.
[152] Ibid.

issues related to this independence struggle with India and Pakistan while domestically the focus was on nation-building and development.[153] Bangladesh never pressed Myanmar to address the root causes of this Rohingya exodus but instead treated it as a humanitarian crisis and temporary camps were set up with help from international organizations like the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).[154] Nevertheless, Bangladesh firmly stated that Rohingya refugees would not be locally integrated but repatriated to Myanmar to relieve the social and economic strain on the local community.[155] Through bilateral meetings and with the added pressure of the UN, Bangladesh soon managed to get Myanmar to sign the 1978 Repatriation Agreement.[156] Within a year all Rohingya were repatriated, sometimes by force.[157]

With the erasure of Rohingya citizenship in the early 1990s, another 250,000 Rohingya crossed the border in 1991 and despite a 1992 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), repatriation this time was more complicated due to increased scrutiny of the UN.[158] When the UN realized that Bangladesh was forcibly returning Rohingya, it shortly withdrew, stalling repatriation and frustrating Bangladesh. The UN reengaged in 1993 and interviewed Rohingya who rightfully stated that they were unwilling to return to Myanmar.[159] However, as demonstrated in chapter one, Rohingya militant organizations emerged in the 1990s and combined with Myanmar's exaggeration of the Rohingya threat there was a shift in the way Rohingya were perceived. Where the GoB insisted on referring to Rohingya as "lawful residents of Burma" in the 1978 agreement, the 1992 agreement only mentioned "Myanmar refugees" and "Myanmar residents," indicating that repatriation was a higher priority for the GoB than ensuring the rights of citizenship for the Rohingya.[160] By 1997, 20,000 Rohingya remained in two camps in Cox's Bazar while the rest were involuntarily repatriated.[161]

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[153] Shahidul Haque and Sufiur Rahman, "Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations and Resolution of Rohingya Crisis: A Foreign Policy Perspective," in *The Displaced Rohingyas: A Tale of a Vulnerable Community* ed. Sk Tawfique M. Haque, Bulbul Siddiqi, and Mahmudur Rahman Bhuiyan (London: Routledge, 2024), 241.

[154] Reza Habib, "The "stateless" Rohingya in Bangladesh: Crisis management and policy responses," *Asian Politics & Policy* 13, no. 4 (2021): 582. Retrieved from: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/aspp.12611.

[155] "Burmese refugees in Bangladesh: Still no Durable Solution," Human rights Watch 12, no 3 (2000): 7. Retrieved from: https://www.hrw.org/reports/pdfs/b/burma/burm005.pdf.

[156] Ibid.

[157] Reza Habib, "The 'stateless' Rohingya in Bangladesh: Crisis management and policy responses," *Asian Politics & Policy* 13, no. 4 (2021): 582. Retrieved from: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/aspp.12611.

[158] Sohel Rana and Ali Riaz, "Securitization of the Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 58, no. 7 (2023): 1279. Retrieved from: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00219096221082265.

[159] Ibid.

[160] "1978 Repatriation Agreement," Government of Bangladesh, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (9 July 1978): 1. Retrieved from: https://dataspace.princeton.edu/handle/88435/dsp01th83kz538.
"Joint statement by the Foreign Ministers of Bangladesh and Myanmar issued at the conclusion of the official visit of the Myanmar Foreign ministers to Bangladesh from 23-28 April 1992," Government of Bangladesh, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (28 April 1992): 1, 6. Retrieved from: https://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/1992-Bangladesh-Myanmar-MOU.pdf.

[161] Sohel Rana and Ali Riaz, "Securitization of the Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 58, no. 7 (2023): 1279. Retrieved from: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00219096221082265.

**Myanmar-Bangladesh relations in the context of the 2012 violence**

The GoB's strong focus on bilateral reconciliation and a non-confrontational approach during Myanmar's clearance operations in the past had set the tone for future Rohingya crises. While Bangladesh kept making attempts at being the friendly understanding neighbor such as remaining silent on the Rohingya issue at the UN in the early 2000s and even in 2012 and 2013, it was met with a tepid response at best. The beginning of President Sein's tenure was fraught with false promises of repatriation and closer cooperation on border issues while at the same time accusing Bangladesh of allowing the "illegal Bangli immigrants" to cross over into Myanmar.[162] For instance, in January 2012, Myanmar's foreign minister U Maung Myint was willing to accept 9,000 out of the 28,000 registered Rohingya, and in March 2012 Myanmar and Bangladesh resolved the maritime boundary dispute which gave Bangladesh access to the resource-rich Bay of Bengal.[163] Misplaced optimism that Myanmar's democratic transition would lead to closer collaboration, and trust in a repatriation that never materialized, motivated Bangladesh's proactive approach.[164] However, when in June of 2012 the violence in Rakhine broke out, Bangladesh shifted from a humanitarian to a national security approach. Insisting that Bangladesh had already fulfilled its humanitarian obligations in 1978 and the early 1990s, an official of the foreign ministry stated that "we won't accept any more refugees in Bangladesh" and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina added that the Rohingya are citizens of Myanmar and that the situation "is not our responsibility, it is their [Myanmar's] responsibility." [165]

Therefore, while Myanmar has never been able to convince Bangladesh that the Rohingya were Bangladeshi descendants, the GoM was relatively successful in conveying the message that the Rohingya posed a significant security threat. In September 2012 several Buddhist temples and homes in Ramu village (Cox's Bazar district) were attacked by roughly 25,000 Muslims.[166] The perpetrators were referred to by reliable sources as "local" or "unidentified" "miscreants" and Rohingya involvement was either alleged or the number of Rohingya participants was "much

[162] Shahidul Haque and Sufiur Rahman, "Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations and Resolution of Rohingya Crisis: A Foreign Policy Perspective," in *The Displaced Rohingyas: A Tale of a Vulnerable Community* ed. Sk Tawfique M. Haque, Bulbul Siddiqi, and Mahmudur Rahman Bhuiyan (London: Routledge, 2024), 241-242.
"Report of the detailed findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar," *Human Rights Council* no. A/HRC/39/CRP.2 (17 September 2018): 166. Retrieved from: https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/myanmar-ffm/reportofthe-myanmar-ffm.
[163] Syeda Naushin Parnini, Mohammad Redzuan Othman and Amer Saifude Ghazali, "The Rohingya Refugee Crisis and Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations," *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 22, no. 1 (2013): 141. Retrieved from: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/011719681302200107.
[164] Shahidul Haque and Sufiur Rahman, "Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations and Resolution of Rohingya Crisis: A Foreign Policy Perspective," in *The Displaced Rohingyas: A Tale of a Vulnerable Community* ed. Sk Tawfique M. Haque, Bulbul Siddiqi, and Mahmudur Rahman Bhuiyan (London: Routledge, 2024), 241-242.
[165] "No more refugees," *The Daily Star* (13 June 2012). Retrieved from: https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-238074.
Kasun Ubayasiri, "Framing statelessness and 'belonging,'" *Pacific Journalism Review* 25 no. 1-2 (2019): 269. Retrieved from:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334808582_Framing_statelessness_and_'belonging'_Rohingya_refugees_in_Bangladesh's_The_Daily_Star_newspaper.
"PM says Bangladesh cannot help Rohingya," *Aljazeera* (28 July 2012). Retrieved from:
https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2012/7/28/pm-says-bangladesh-cannot-help-rohingya.
[166] Wahid Soruar, "Changes in Social and Religious Practices of Disputing Communities After Riot: A Case Study on Communal Violence in Ramu," *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion* 51, no. 1 (2021): 16. Retrieved from: https://iiste.org/Journals/index.php/JPCR/article/view/55442/57257.

less than that of our native people."[167] While the GoB claimed that Rohingya "radical Islamists" carried out a "premeditated and deliberate attempt to disrupt communal harmony," research into the attacks has revealed that instead local political leaders instigated the attacks and exploited Rohingya to help create religious conflict with the Buddhist minority for political gain.[168] Instead of opening an investigation into the attacks, most of the blame was placed upon the Rohingya. Rohingya were no longer refugees but infiltrators, intruders and radical Islamists.[169] As a result of adopting Myanmar's image of a massive Rohingya terrorist threat, Bangladesh strengthened its border security, briefly closed its borders after the violence erupted in June, and prohibited international aid agencies to stop assisting unregistered Rohingya refugees.[170] Since Rohingya refugees have not been registered since 1992, only 30,000 out of an estimated 200,000 were granted refugee status.[171] Conditions inside camps and makeshift camps were deplorable; overcrowding, child malnourishment, diseases due to a lack of clean water and sanitation, and severe restrictions on freedom of movement were so serious that aid workers described them as "among the worst they have seen anywhere in the world."[172] By denying Rohingya education, basic aid, freedom of movement, and integration with the Bangladeshi population, the GoB has created a climate of disenfranchisement and isolation.

**Repatriation stagnation and the 2016-2017 clearance operations**

With a rather passive Bangladesh, Myanmar had no reason to switch tactics and continued to exaggerate the "Bengali threat" infiltrating Myanmar from an "unstable" border with Bangladesh on an international level, while bilaterally taking an aloof approach which meant that all initiatives to resolve the Rohingya crisis had to come from Dhaka. In September 2014, the GoB announced that it had successfully negotiated a "breakthrough" with the GoM to repatriate 2,415 Rohingyas, yet Myanmar had a vastly different interpretation.[173] Myanmar's Deputy Minister for Foreign affairs framed Bangladesh as uncooperative and the reason for

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[167] Kazal Barua, "Communal Harmony and Buddhism: Perspective Bangladesh," National Vietnam Buddhist Sangha's Executive Council, 11th United Nations Day Buddhist Contribution To Global Peace-Building (2014): 179. Retrieved from: https://undv2014vietnam.com/en/hoi-thao/dien-dan-4-phat-giao-xay-dung-hoa-binh-the-gioi/.
Niloy Ranjan Biswas, "Identity, Intersectionality and Refugees in Cox's Bazaar: Remaking Rohingyas?" in *Rohingya Camp Narratives*, ed. Imtiaz A. Hussain (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan Singapore, 2022): 156.
Iftekharul Bashar, "New Challenges for Bangladesh," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 4, no. 11 (2012): 11. Retrieved from: https://www.jstor.org/stable/26351100?seq=1.
[168] Anis Ahmed, "Bangladesh blames Muslim Rohingyas for temple attacks," *Reuters* (1 October 2012). Retrieved from: https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSBRE8900D1/.
Kazal Barua, "Communal Harmony and Buddhism: Perspective Bangladesh," National Vietnam Buddhist Sangha's Executive Council, 11th United Nations Day Buddhist Contribution To Global Peace-Building (2014): 179. Retrieved from: https://undv2014vietnam.com/en/hoi-thao/dien-dan-4-phat-giao-xay-dung-hoa-binh-the-gioi/.
[169] Kasun Ubayasiri, "Framing statelessness and 'belonging,'" *Pacific Journalism Review* 25 no. 1-2 (2019): 270. Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334808582_Framing_statelessness_and_'belonging'_Rohingya_refugees_in_Bangladesh's_The_Daily_Star_newspaper.
[170] 80.
[171] "Bangladesh: Assist, Protect Rohingya Refugees," *Human Rights Watch* (22 August 2012). Retrieved from: https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/08/22/bangladesh-assist-protect-rohingya-refugees.
[172] Ibid.
[173] Kyle Knight, "Concern over Bangladesh move to repatriate Rohingyas to Myanmar," *The New Humanitarian,* 4 September 2014. Retrieved from: https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2014/09/04/concern-over-bangladesh-move-repatriate-rohingyas-myanmar.

repatriation delays by insisting that Myanmar would only accept repatriation on the basis of verification and that Dhaka had "not yet given any response to us in this regard."[174] That the aforementioned Rohingya were already verified by Myanmar authorities in 2005 was apparently of little consequence.[175] Moreover, for a country concerned about "illegal terrorists infiltrating the border," it was rather strange that the GoM rejected multiple Bangladeshi proposals to enhance border security. In the months preceding the violence in 2015, Bangladeshi proposals to create Border Outposts and Border Liaison Offices, and to establish a MoU on security cooperation were all turned down by the GoM.[176] Border security fell entirely on the shoulders of Bangladesh and despite few border incidents between 2012-216 and several counter-terrorism operations where insurgents were deported to Myanmar, the GoM never changed its tune of blaming Bangladesh for a situation that Myanmar had created.[177]

When Suu Kyi became State Counsellor in 2016, Prime Minister Hasina congratulated her and was optimistic that working with this new Myanmar leadership would lead to a lasting solution to the Rohingya issue.[178] However, again this optimism was misplaced as Suu Kyi remained silent on the suffering of the Rohingya. In fact, Suu Kyi went so far as to visit all neighboring countries when she gained power yet there was no record of a visit to Dhaka despite multiple invitations.[179] After the initial 2016 terrorist attacks and clearance operations, Bangladesh initially stuck to their 2013 push back policy of forced deportation and the deployment of more border guards and coast guard forces, which was heavily criticized by human rights organizations.[180] Only after the atrocities of August 2017 did Bangladesh change its approach towards the issue. The borders were opened and a harsher stance towards Myanmar was adopted by calling the Tatmadaw's actions ethnic cleansing, and using the UNGA to call for the "sustainable return of all forcibly displaced Rohingya."[181] By allowing the UN to interview Rohingya in Cox's Bazar as part of an investigation into Myanmar's crimes, Bangladesh chose a multilateral approach over a bilateral approach for the first time, highlighting the GoB's

[174] "Press Release on interview U thant Kyaw, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs," The Republic of the Union of Myanmar President Office, September 2014. Retrieved from:
https://web.archive.org/web/20140916142651/http://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=issues/foreign-policy/id-4124.
[175] Ibid.
[176] Shahidul Haque and Sufiur Rahman, "Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations and Resolution of Rohingya Crisis: A Foreign Policy Perspective," in *The Displaced Rohingyas: A Tale of a Vulnerable Community* ed. Sk Tawfique M. Haque, Bulbul Siddiqi, and Mahmudur Rahman Bhuiyan (London: Routledge, 2024), 244-245.
[177] Ibid.
[178] "Bangladesh PM vows to work with Suu Kyi on refugees," Democratic Voice of Burma, 21 September 2016. Retrieved from: https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/bangladesh-pm-vows-work-suu-kyi-refugees.
[179] Tilka Binte Mehtab, "Hasina invites Suu Kyi to Dhaka," *Dhaka Tribune*, 20 September 2016. Retrieved from: https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/5580/hasina-invites-suu-kyi-to-dhaka.
Shahidul Haque and Sufiur Rahman, "Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations and Resolution of Rohingya Crisis: A Foreign Policy Perspective," in *The Displaced Rohingyas: A Tale of a Vulnerable Community* ed. Sk Tawfique M. Haque, Bulbul Siddiqi, and Mahmudur Rahman Bhuiyan (London: Routledge, 2024), 243.
[180] Sultana Yesmin, "Policy towards Rohingya refugees: a comparative analysis of Bangladesh, Malaysia and Thailand," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* 61, no. 1 (2016): 81-82. Retrieved from: (PDF) POLICY TOWARDS ROHINGYA REFUGEES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF BANGLADESH, MALAYSIA AND THAILAND (researchgate.net).
"Bangladesh pushes back Rohingya refugees amid collective punishment in Myanmar," *Amnesty International*, 24 November 2016. Retrieved from: https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2016/11/bangladesh-pushes-back-rohingya-refugees-amid-collective-punishment-in-myanmar/.
[181] "Her Excellency Sheikh Hasina Prime Minister Statement," United Nations General Assembly, 21 September 2017. Retrieved from: https://gadebate.un.org/en/72/bangladesh.

anxiety to finally resolve the Rohingya issue. Unfortunately, internationalizing the Rohingya did not have the intended effect of pressuring Myanmar into meaningful action. The GoM was set on preventing the return of Rohingya; after the vast majority of Rohingya had fled to Bangladesh or were imprisoned in displacement camps, the GoM placed landmines along the border, and only then signed off on border security initiatives with Bangladesh.[182] Therefore, when international pressure mounted and Myanmar agreed upon repatriation in November 2017 at a pace that would take more than 12 years, it was obvious that no actual repatriation would take place.[183] The MoU concerning repatriation was signed in June 2018 by the GoM, the GoB, the UNHCR and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Rohingya were never consulted regarding this MoU, as was required by the UNHCR's Handbook on Voluntary Reparation, and issues of citizenship and human rights within Myanmar's borders went neglected.[184] Yet, National Verification Cards were a requirement for repatriation, heavily skewing the repatriation process towards Myanmar's preferences.[185] Part of the blame for this uneven MoU could be attributed to geopolitical considerations as well; Myanmar's influential neighbors China and India have consistently backed Myanmar.[186] Therefore, significant repatriation has not materialized to date but if it had, Myanmar would have gotten its wish of permanent security as Rohingya would most likely have ended up in displacement camp prisons with heavy surveillance not unlike Orwell's 1984.

**Geopolitics and the Rohingya crisis; the cases of China and India**

After the 2017 clearance operations, international condemnation was at an all time high, various sanctions were imposed on Myanmar and thus, the isolated GoM was in desperate need of powerful allies.[187] With a permanent seat on the UNSC, significant regional influence, and norms and values resembling those of Myanmar, China had historically always been a valuable ally. When under previous military governments in the 1990s Myanmar was relatively isolated, the GoM established closer relations with China.[188] For instance, Myanmar received most of its military equipment and training from the Chinese and in return China would invest in infrastructure projects to gain access to the Indian Ocean, thereby surpassing the United States' controlled Strait of Malacca.[189] During President Sein's tenure, gas and oil pipelines costing 2,45 billion USD were constructed and ran from the Rakhine Kyauk Phu port all the way to the Chinese Yunan province, which fulfilled China's desire to avoid the Strait of Malacca.[190] However, while this increased development in Myanmar, it also made the country more reliant

[182] Ibid.

Shahidul Haque and Sufiur Rahman, "Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations and Resolution of Rohingya Crisis: A Foreign Policy Perspective," in *The Displaced Rohingyas: A Tale of a Vulnerable Community* ed. Sk Tawfique M. Haque, Bulbul Siddiqi, and Mahmudur Rahman Bhuiyan (London: Routledge, 2024), 245.

[183] "Report of the detailed findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar," *Human Rights Council* no. A/HRC/39/CRP.2 (17 September 2018): 280. Retrieved from: https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/myanmar-ffm/reportofthe-myanmar-ffm.

[184] Ibid.

[185] Ibid, 279.

[186] Mohammed Nuruzzaman, "Bangladesh and the Rohingya Crisis: The Need for a Long-Term Strategy," *The Washington Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2023): 65. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2023.2260595.

[187] "EU sanctions against Myanmar," European Council, last modified 28 May 2014. Retrieved from: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-myanmar/.

[188] Yukiko Nishikawa, *International Norms and local politics in Myanmar* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 41.

[189] Hossain Ahmed Taufiq, "China, India, and Myanmar: Playing Rohingya Roulette?" in *South Asia in Global Power Rivalry*, ed. Imtiaz Hussain (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 82-83,85.

[190] Ibid, 84.

on China due to increasing debts. President Sein's solution in the brief democratization period was to foster closer relations with the West and attract their investment to offset Chinese influence, allowing Myanmar to suspend the previously agreed to Myitsone Dam construction until 2015.[191]

This brief moment of friction was used to the advantage of India by means of the Kaladan multi-Modal Transit Transport Project which sought to connect Sittwe, Rakhine, and the Chin hinterland through road and port construction, allowing India to bypass Bangladesh and offset Chinese regional influence.[192] After Suu Kyi gained power, India and Myanmar fostered a closer relationship based on economic relations and even military and security matters, which meant that India has provided training to the Tatmadaw and the Indo-Tibetan Border Police have watched the Myanmar border area in the past. In subsequent years, India and China competed for Myanmar's resources, security cooperation and influence, although China formed close relations with Myanmar in the 1990s while India only did so in the early 2000s, thereby giving China the advantage to this day.

Based on this historical close relationship, Myanmar did not have to invest too much effort into convincing both China and India of the Rohingya terrorist threat that the country was defending itself from. China in particular, was quick to adopt Myanmar's frame of a complex situation in Rakhine that did not require international condemnation but support for a sustainable solution. The fact that China had been at the receiving end of international condemnation in 2017 as well for its treatment of the Muslim minority called the Uyghurs who were held in "re-education camps" not unlike Myanmar's displacement prison camps, most likely influenced this decision.[193] China has argued that the Uyghurs constituted a serious threat based on a paranoid threat perception that interpreted violent protests against China's oppression as acts of terrorism so that by employing islamophobia the root causes could be conveniently ignored in China's War on Terror.[194] China's ambassador to the UN emphasized Myanmar's efforts to de-escalate the situation and that the next steps would "alleviate the humanitarian condition."[195] Downplaying the extent of Myanmar's atrocities by focusing on a humanitarian lens was intended to shift the attention away from the GoM so as to avoid repercussions.

With China's help in the UNSC, Myanmar managed to weaken or block UNSC resolutions in 2017 and 2018, thereby helping the GoM evade responsibility for their treatment of the Rohingya.[196] With superpower China firmly supporting Myanmar, India could not stay behind

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[191] Po P. Shang, "Myanmar's Foreign Policy: Shifting Legitimacy, Shifting Strategic Culture," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 41 no. 1 (2022): 100. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/18681034211044481.
[192] Ibid, 98.
Hossain Ahmed Taufiq, "China, India, and Myanmar: Playing Rohingya Roulette?" in *South Asia in Global Power Rivalry*, ed. Imtiaz Hussain (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 86-87.
[193] "China: Free Xinjiang 'Political Education' Detainees," *Human Rights Watch*, 10 September 2017. Retrieved from: https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/10/china-free-xinjiang-political-education-detainees.
[194] "People's Republic of China: Uighurs fleeing persecution as China wages its "war on terror," *Amnesty International*, (6 July 2004), 2-3. Retrieved from:
https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa17/021/2004/en/.
[195] "UN meeting on Myanmar spotlights Security Council divisions," *The Indian Express*, 29 September 2017. Retrieved from: UN meeting on Myanmar spotlights Security Council divisions | World News - The Indian Express.
[196] "China and Russia oppose UN resolution on Rohingya," The Guardian, 24 December 2017. Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/24/china-russia-oppose-un-resolution-myanmar-rohingya-muslims.

and stated at the UN that "we stand by Myanmar in this hour of its crisis, we strongly condemn the terrorist attack on August 24-25… we will back Myanmar in its fight against terrorism."[197] India even went one step further and threatened to expel the nearly 40,000 Rohingya refugees that had fled the violence on the basis of never having signed international refugee laws.[198] In the same vein as China, India misrepresented the events by omitting vital facts such as the reason for the terrorist attacks or Myanmar's repression of the Rohingya. Instead, all Rohingya were framed once again as terrorists and Indian Prime Minister Modi and Suu Kyi vowed to solve the "terrorist problem" together.[199] A rise in islamophobia, Myanmar's geopolitical significance and major Indian and Chinese infrastructure projects in Rakhine meant that both countries had high stakes in Myanmar and good reason to contain the unfolding Rohingya crisis to protect their investments. As a solution to this problem, China attempted to mediate between Bangladesh and Myanmar during negotiations in 2018 while India remained on the sidelines. Unfortunately, despite a Chinese letter to the UNSC proclaiming a breakthrough on respiration through the establishment of a joint working group between Bangladesh and Myanmar, after several years China has been unable to claim any actual progress on repatriation[200]

## Conclusion

For decades, the GoB had dealt with the Rohingya issue on a short term basis according to the influx of Rohingya refugees. Embarrassingly, even after all this time Bangladesh has never established a comprehensive refugee policy or signed any international refugee laws.[201] What's more, where Suu Kyi had no control over the actions of the Tatmadaw, Bangladesh was also suffering from a weak political leadership; Prime Minister Hasina's Awami League Party won the 2014 and 2018 elections through electoral malpractice, which translated into a lack of legitimacy and ineffective leadership.[202] As a result, Bangladesh adopted a tunnel vision focused on repatriation, either without a real plan, without considering the basic human rights of Rohingya or without the approval of Myanmar. On the other hand, the GoM has not only been able to convince the GoB that the Rohingya posed a significant threat requiring a permanent solution in the form of disenfranchising refugee camps with barbed wire and without freedom of movement, it has been able to permanently delay the repatriation efforts of

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Adrienne Joy, "Understanding China's Response to the Rakhine Crisis," *United States Institute of Peace* (February 2018): 2. Retrieved from: https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2018-02/sr419-understanding-chinas-response-to-the-rakhine-crisis.pdf.

[197] Subir Bhaumik, "Why do China, India back Myanmar over the Rohingya crisis?" *South China Morning Post*, 18 October 2017. Retrieved from: Why do China, India back Myanmar over the Rohingya crisis? | South China Morning Post (scmp.com).

[198] Ibid.

[199] Huizhong Wu, "Indian Prime Minister blames Rohingya violence on extremists," *CNN*, 7 September 2017. Retrieved from: https://edition.cnn.com/2017/09/06/asia/modi-india-myanmar-rohingya/index.html.

[200] "Letter dated 1 October 2018 from the Permanent Representative of China to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council," *United Nations Security Council*, 1 October 2018. Retrieved from: https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2018_880.pdf.

[201] Sultana Yesmin, "Policy towards Rohingya refugees: a comparative analysis of Bangladesh, Malaysia and Thailand," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* 61, no. 1 (2016): 98. (PDF) POLICY TOWARDS ROHINGYA REFUGEES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF BANGLADESH, MALAYSIA AND THAILAND (researchgate.net).
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Bangladesh since the 1990s. Bangladesh's weak diplomatic efforts were also influenced by the involvement of China and India. Due to Chinese and Indian geopolitical and economic interest in Myanmar, the GoM has been able to wield far more influence towards these countries than Bangladesh. Therefore, on a regional level, Myanmar managed to persuade China and India of a terrorist threat needing containment to protect their investments, so that on an international level Myanmar would be shielded from international criticism. This has led to an unresolved crisis where Rohingya have continued to live in inhumane conditions with no end in sight as a weak Bangladesh appears unable to leverage enough influence over China and India to find a workable solution.

# Conclusion

In this thesis I have given insight on the manner in which Myanmar has attempted to legitimize its treatment of the Rohingya internationally and regionally. This was done by conducting a political discourse analysis with a special focus on different framing techniques and approaches used by the GoM depending on the intended audience.

The first chapter sought to analyze the kind of discriminatory security measures that Myanmar's government had implemented nationally to face the Rohingya threat. This chapter provided an historical overview of Myanmar's decades-old persecution of a Muslim minority using permanent security as a guideline. The GoM implemented structural discrimination laws aimed at disenfranchising Rohingya, spread hate speech on social media to divide Rakhine and Rohingya communities and executed massive clearance operations at various points in time, with the final solution intent of deporting Rohingya to Bangladesh or imprisoning them in displacement camps.

The second chapter covered the various ways in which Myanmar had employed permanent security in their legitimization attempts towards the UN. This chapter highlighted Myanmar's shift in the legitimization approach; from atrocity denial and an emphasis on democratization used for manipulating and dividing UN departments, to a complete embrace of permanent security and the War on Terror logic.

The third chapter discussed the various ways in which Myanmar had employed permanent security on a regional level towards its neighbors Bangladesh, China and India. This chapter showed how Myanmar was regionally more intent on pursuing bilateral relations and strategic alliances through which it sought to convince its neighbors of the terrorist threat that had created a humanitarian crisis which would negatively impact regional security.

The last matter that remains is answering the research question: How has the Myanmar government used the concept of permanent security to attempt to legitimize their actions against the Rohingya between 2012-2017 towards the UN and towards its neighbors?

To understand the implications of this question, the actions or measures Myanmar had implemented to deal with the Rohingya threat must first be discussed. Under the discriminatory laws implemented between 2012 and 2017, Rohingya saw more and more civil and political rights disappear to the extent that the GoM breached the privacy of their homes and examined every bit of their personal life until the concept of privacy no longer existed and most had to flee their homes. The implementation of these measures translated into a national adoption of permanent security; the perception of a Rohingya threat did not emerge overnight. The GoM fostered a climate of fear and anxiety based on a long history of ethnic nationalism and used extreme nationalist organizations like the MaBaTa to construct the idea of Rohingya "infiltrating the border" and becoming an existential threat to Myanmar and its Buddhist traditions. Their combined efforts of spreading hate speech and anti-Muslim racism on social media managed to convince a vast Burmese majority that their country was under siege. Naturally, social media giants like Facebook and Twitter helped facilitate this anti-Rohingya climate by failing to effectively moderate their content, which meant that misinformation and hate speech were allowed to spread like wildfire. This was especially concerning since the GoM and the Tatmadaw adopted a final solution approach eerily reminiscent of the Second World War.

However, where Myanmar had convinced its own population of the Rohingya threat, the UN proved to be a bit of a challenge. Several bodies within the UN Human Rights department had been monitoring Myanmar's abuses for years and when the worst of the atrocities were committed in 2016 and 2017, these bodies condemned Myanmar with harsh words. Unfortunately, as has often been the case with the UN, bureaucratization and a lack of a common strategy were all used to Myanmar's advantage. Even with the UNSC in a deadlock and R2P pushed to the side, the UNGA could have intervened and turned the UN's words into action. It was not to be. Instead, Myanmar played its cards right by downplaying the severity of its Rohingya persecution and emphasizing its democratic transition, which attracted investments from Western states while detracting attention from the Rohingya issue. Only when clearance operations in 2016 and 2017 had killed hundreds of Rohingya, burned down their homes and most Rohingya were either in Bangladeshi refugee camps or in displaced prison camps, did the issue get the full attention from the UN. Never again happened…again. The case of the Rohingya is indicative of a much larger problem; the power imbalance in the UNSC has far too often resulted in inaction while the UNGA fails to use the full extent of its power. It is hard to conceive these UN laws from the 1940s have not adapted with the times, especially considering that United Kingdom's hegemony has long since been put behind us and global powers change every few decades. On an international level, it could be said that Myanmar accomplished its goal of deadlocks on the Rohingya issue for the longest time, although the recent case of The Gambia could, at least in theory, change matters and lead to some accountability.

On a regional level, Myanmar did not have to spend too much energy on pleading its case; the terrorist threat was accepted by Bangladesh, China and India, although Bangladesh needed a bit more convincing. With China backing Myanmar at the UNSC and India willing to solve the terrorist threat together, Myanmar did not have to fear regional opposition to its treatment of the Rohingya. Money has always been a higher priority than human rights and it shows. With billion dollar investments in Rakhine from both China and India, the human rights of the Rohingya were irrelevant, irrespective of the anti-Muslim sentiment that dominated both countries. In this case, geopolitics and realism were front and center during the Rohingya crisis and Bangladesh just did not have the necessary political and economic influence over China and India or a long-term vision to make a difference.

This discussion highlights Myanmar's difference in approach when it comes to legitimizing its treatment of the Rohingya. On an international level, Myanmar was far less convincing when it came to permanent security but other approaches such as sowing division within the UN and shifting the focus to Myanmar's democratic transition were effective to an extent. If the UN had put forth a united front and acted swiftly, Myanmar would most likely have faced the consequences of its actions years before the all-destroying clearance operations of 2016 and 2017. On a regional level, diplomacy through bilateral relations with a strong focus on geopolitical strategy set the tone. Major economic investments from China and India have ensured that these friendly relations did not sour in the face of the Rohingya crisis. Consequently, Myanmar's permanent security in the form of combatting the Rohingya terrorist threat through regional cooperation has found ground in neighboring countries, which meant that Myanmar has internationally often been shielded from the worst possible sanctions and which is unlikely to change in the near future. Therefore, different audiences have required different legitimization approaches by Myanmar, with the regional approach more successful than the international approach.

I would have liked to delve deeper into the regional legitimization approach by studying ASEAN, yet few studies existed on this organization and the major players such as Bangladesh, China and India, have not joined. Future research into this organization's approach to the Rohingya crisis compared to approach of Myanmar's neighbors would give a more extensive overview of the regional response to the Rohingya crisis. Furthermore, research on Myanmar's legitimization tactics following the coup of 2021 compared to Myanmar's legitimization strategy before the coup would prove to be insightful as this research has only limited itself to the period 2012-2017.

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