**Rohingya Refugees: Background and Evolution**

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**The Rohingya Muslim ethnic minority in Burma have been called “the most oppressed people on Earth”.** They continue to suffer vicious attacks and systematic abuse by Burma’s government. Denied use of their name in the recent census, Burma’s government now wants to fully erase their existence, asking the United States, the United Nations and the rest of the world not to even use the word Rohingya. [[1]](#footnote-1)

Although during the Burmese post-independence period Rohingya’s claim of separate ethnic identity was recognized by the democratic government of Premier U Nu (1948-1958), stateless without a legal nationality in 1962 when the new military rule denied citizenship, and many of them have been forced to migrate to Bangladesh, Thailand, India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia since 1978. Even though they were able to migrate to the preferred destinations, their sufferings have not ended upon reaching new shores. The irony

of fate is that the Rohingyas have been confined to a cycle of acute discrimination, escape, trafficking, poverty, detention, extortion and deportation.[[2]](#footnote-2)

If we look at the recent situation, in the beginning of 2015, Arakan Rohingya National organization (ARNO) strongly condemns the recent action of the Commanding Officer of Border Guard Police (BGP) Tin Ko Ko for threatening the innocent Rohingya villagers into accepting “Bengali” in the citizenship verification under 1982 Citizenship Law as their racial name in accordance with the wishes of the government. The Burma Citizenship Law of 1982 is an oppressive law enacted by late dictator Ne Win in violation of customary international Law and human rights standards. If we go back to history, the Rohingya were full and natural citizens by 1947 and 1974 constitutions and as such they do not legally require to apply for citizenship under 1982 citizenship law.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This paper intends to deal with the historical evolution of the idea of “ Rohingya” with special reference to the different phases of history.

**Historical Background:**

The word Arakan is definitely of Arabic or Persian origin having the same meaning in both these languages. It is the corruption of the word Arkan plural of the word Al-Rukun. There exists some controversy about the origin of the name of ‘Arakan’ on which traditional and legendary sources differ. In fact, the name of Arakan is of much antiquity. In Ptolemy’s Geografia (150 AD) it was named ‘Argyre’. Early Buddhist missionaries called Arakan as ‘Rekkha Pura’.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Possibly the history of Arakan can be classified in the following manner into 10 periods: (1) 100-788 AD (Some Hindu dynasties), (2) 788-957 AD (Chandra Hindu dynasty), (3) 957-1430 (A Chaotic period of Mongolians, Buddhists and Muslims), (4) 1430-1784 AD (Mrauk-U dynasty of Muslims & Buddhists), (5) 1784-1826 AD (Burman Buddhist Rule), (6) 1826-1948 AD (British Colonial Rule), (7) 1948-1962 (Parliamentary Democracy Rule), (8) 1962-1974 AD (Revolutionary Military Government Rule),  (9) 1975-1988 (One Party Socialist Programme Party Government Rule), (10) 1988-1999 AD (SLORC/SPDC Military Government Rule).[[5]](#footnote-5)

Buddhism would seem to have reached Arakan long before its arrival in the interior of Burma. The famous Mahamuni image of Lord Buddha, usually placed in the Shrine at Shiri Gupta hill of Dinnyawadi, an old capital and some 21 miles north of Mrauk-U may be dated from the early centuries of the Christian era. Mahamuni image was built by the king Sandathuriya (146-198 AD). There was Hindu god, which indicated that Arakan was a Hindu land until 10th century AD.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The Chandra dynasty may have been founded as early as the end of 8th century. Its capital was called by the Indian name of Vaisali. he city of Vesali was founded in 788 AD by king Mahataing Sandya. The ruins of the city are still to be seen on the bank of a tidal creek about 44 miles inland from the Bay of Bengal (from Akyab City). This city became a noted trade port to which as many as a thousand ships came annually. The Chandara kings extended their territory as far north as Chittagong; the dynasty came to an end in 957 AD being overwhelmed by a Mongolian invasion. Vesali was an easterly Hindu kingdom of Bengal. Both government and people is Indian similar to that of Bengal. [[7]](#footnote-7)

Later, The Arab Muslims first came in contact with the Indian Sub-continent and South East Asia through trade and commerce. From the time long past, spices, cotton fabric, precious stones, minerals and other commodities from South and South East Asia were of great demand in the oriental and European countries. The Arabs as seafaring nation almost

monopolised this trade between the south and South East Asia on the one hand, the oriental North Africa and European countries on the other. The Arab merchants carried goods to the ports of Mascot and that of Serif on the two side of the Persian Gulf, Basra, Yemen, Jeddah, Qulzum (Suez), for exchange with the goods of the merchants of the Middle Eastern, Central Asian, North African and European countries. For about eight centuries the Arabs monopolised the trade between the East and the West. The Arabs were born traders, and after the introduction of Islam they became a great maritime people. Their profound knowledge in navigation, in the Science of Latitude and Longitude, in astronomical phenomena and in the geography of the countries they visited made them unrivalled in mercantile activities in the Indian Ocean for centuries together.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In 680 AD after the war of ‘Karbala’ Mohammed Hanofiya with his army arrived at Arab-Shah Para, near Maungdaw in the Northern Arakan, while Kaiyapuri, the queen of Cannibals ruled this hilly deep forest attacking and looting the people of Arakan. Mohammed Hanif attacked the Cannibals and captured the queen. She was converted to Islam and married to him. Her followers embraced Islam en masse. Mohammed Hanif and the queen Kaiyapuri lived in Mayu range. The peaks where they lived were still known as Hanifa Tonki and Kaiyapui Tonki. The wild cannibals were tamed and became civilised. Arakan was no more in danger of them and peace and tranquillity prevailed. The followers of Mohammed Hanif and Kaiyapuri were mixed up and lived peacefully. The descendants of these mixed people no doubt formed the original nucleus of the Rohingya Muslims in Arakan.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In the year 957 AD, a Mongolian invasion swept over Vesali, and killed Sula Chandra, the last king of Chandra dynasty. They destroyed Vesali and placed on their throne Mongolian kings. Within a few years the Hindus of Bengal were able to establish their Pala Dynasty. But the Hindus of Vesali were unable to restore their dynasty because of the invasion and migrations of Tibeto-Burman who were so great that their population over shadowed the Vesali Hindus. They cut Arakan away from Indians and mixing in sufficient number with the inhabitants of the eastern-side of the present Indo-Burma divide, created that Indo-Mongoloid stock now known as the Rakhine Arakanese. This emergence of a new race was not the work

of a single invasion. But the date 957 AD may be said to mark the appearance of the Rakhine in Arakan, and the beginning of fresh period. [[10]](#footnote-10)

The infiltration of Arabs to Arakan has started before Muslims conquest of India. Bengal became Muslim in 1203 AD, but this was the extreme eastern limit of Islamic overland expansion. In northern Arakan close overland ties were formed with East Bengal. The resulting cultural and political Muslim influence was of great significance in the history of Arakan. Actually, Arakan served to a large extent as a bridgehead for Muslim penetration to other parts of Burma, and also Muslims attained some degrees of importance elsewhere as they did in Arakan. The Islamic influence grew in Arakan to the extent of establishing Muslim vassal state beginning in 1430 AD. Muslim’s rule and influence in Arakan lasted for more than 350 years until it was invaded and occupied by Burman in 1784 AD. [[11]](#footnote-11)

This independent kingdom turned westward, toward Bengal, as a result of the growing power of the Burmese court of Ava. In 1404 AD, the king of Arakan, Narameikhla (1404-1434 AD), was forced to flee to Gaur, capital of Bengal Sultanate, which 86 years earlier had already become independent of the Mogul Emperor in Delhi. Ahmed Shah, Sultan of Gaur, welcomed the refugee king. Narameikhla remained at the court of Gaur, where he served as an officer in Ahmad Shah’s army and fought in his wars. After the victory of the war, king Ahmed Shah handed over the throne of Gaur to his son Nazir Shah (according to Bengal History it was not Nazir Shah but Sultan Jalaluddin Mohammed Shah) in the year 1426 AD.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Then Naramaikhla pleaded help from the king to regain his lost throne at Launggyet in Arakan. As Naramaikhla agreed to six point conditions (Arakanese kings also followed and practised them while they were independent and under no obligation), in 1429 AD, Sultan Nadir Shah sent Gen. Wali Khan as the head of 20,000 Pathan army with Naramaikhla to restore the throne of Arakan to Naramaikhla. The Pathan army conquered Arakan from the control of Mon and Naramaikhla ascended the throne. Soon Wali Khan and Naramaikhla had a dispute over the No. 5 condition of introduction of Persian language as court language of Arakan. Gen. Wali Khan arrested king Naramaikhla and locked up at Balutaung fettering

him. Gen. Wali Khan ruled Arakan for one year and introduced Persian in his court which continued as state language up to 1845 AD and appointed Qazis. But some time after that Narameikhla succeeded in re-conquering Arakan with the help of a second army supplied by Nadir Shah headed by Gen. Sandi Khan. The accession of Min Sawmon to the throne ushered a new era in the history of Arakan. Upon his return, Narameikhla founded a new city, Mrauk-U on the bank of the Lembro River, now known as Mrohaung, which remain the capital until 1785 when Arakan was conquered by Burma. Narameikhla’s Muslim soldiers, who came with him from Bengal, settled in villages near Mrohaung and built the Sandi Khan Mosque, which still exists today. Muslim influence in Arakan, they may be said to date from 1430, the year of Narameikhla’s return. As a result of the close land and sea ties between the two countries, which continued to exist for a long time thereafter, the Muslims played a decisive role in the history of Arakan Kingdom. [[13]](#footnote-13)

Narameikhla ceded certain territory to the Sultan of Bengal and recognised his sovereignty. He introduced Nadir Shah’s system of coins bearing the Kalima as used in Bengal since Muslim conquest of 1203 and its fellows that the coinage of Mrauk-U was subsequently modelled. Later on he struck his own coins which had the name of the king in Arakanese letters on one side and his Muslim title in Persian on the other. [[14]](#footnote-14)

The kingdom of Arakan had come in close cultural contact with the Muslim Sultanate of Bengal since fifteen century so much so that many of the Buddhist rulers of that country adopted Muslim names for themselves. They appointed Muslim officials in their courts and, apparently under the latter’s influence, even inscribed the Kalima on their coins. Contact with a modern civilization resulted in a renaissance. The country’s great age began. From this time onwards the relation of Muslims with the Arakanese became more intimate and for about two centuries Arakan was united in a bond of friendship with Islamic lands. As a result of the impact of the civilization of the Muslims, Arakanese culture also progressed and thus the ‘ Golden Age’ in the history of Arakan.  The end of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century were a period of political instability and transition caused by the break-up of the Afghan state in Bengal and gradual advance of the Mughals. One of the social and demographic effects of this political change was the flight of a large number of Afghan

nobles and other Muslims rank and position towards the easternmost districts of Bengal. Quite a few of these people found shelter at the Arakan court where they filled up important positions in the government. In this way Arakan became definitely oriented towards the Muslim State. By the end of 1500 AD Arakan region was Islamized and stood as an independent Muslim kingdom.   It was later absorbed by the Burmese king in 1784 AD.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The Portuguese arrived in the Eastern waters about the year 1500 AD in search of trade. They were mariners and seamen of unique characters. An agreement with Portuguese was reached. When Min Bin as Zabuk Shah came to the throne he turned Mrauk-U into the strongest fortified city of the Bay, employing the Portuguese to lay out his walls and moats and to forge mount his cannon. He appointed them as military officers to train and equip a mercenary army of heterogeneous races, foreign and domestic; and he built with their aid, a large fleet manned with his own men, who were hardy boatmen, but guided and stiffened by Portuguese. King Min Bin in this way became master of a powerful modern weapon.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Early in the 17th century the Portuguese reached the shores of Bengal and Arakan. At that time too, the raiding Arakanese ships reached the source of Ganges. They came into contact with the Portuguese and permitted them to establish bases for their operations and also granted them commercial concession. In return, the Portuguese helped to defend the Arakan boundaries. In 1576 AD. Akbar the Great, Emperor of Delhi, was efficiently ruling Bengal so that Arakan was now facing the Mogul Empire itself and not only Bengal. The Portuguese knowledge of firearms and artillery was more advanced than that of the Moguls, and Arakan profited much there by. Joint Arakanese-Portuguese raids on Bengal continued until the end of the 18th century and ceased entirely with the strengthening of the British naval force in the Bay of Bengal.[[17]](#footnote-17)

n 1665 AD Moghul Empire Aurangzib ordered Shayista Khan, the viceroy of Bengal to build a fleet of boats. In 1666 AD Shayista Khan’s force of 6,500 men and 288 boats took Chittagong in 36-hours and occupied Ramu. The fall of Chittagong caused indescribable rejoicing of Bengal. It was a terrible blow to the prosperity of Arakanese and with it their century of greatness came to an end. Sanda Thudhamma’s long reign saw the power of his

race passes its zenith, and his death is followed by century of chaos. From 1685 to 1710 AD (for 25-years) the political rule of Arakan was completely in the hand of Muslims.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In 1826 AD Arakan was annexed to the British India and it was almost depopulated. A few months after the conclusion of the treaty of Yandabo Mr. Paton, the Controller of Civil Affairs in Arakan, submitted to the British Govt. a detailed report about the character of the country (Arakan), its extent, history, population, production and manners and customs of the inhabitants. There was large-scale conversion of Buddhists to Islam during 15th to 18th centuries. It may be mentioned that when the Dutch industrialists were ordered to quit Arakan they were also not a little worried because their children left in Arakan were brought up to be Muslims. Eventually, during the Second World War an estimated 500,000 Indians and Muslims fled Burma. Some were clearly following in the footsteps of the British government, but others allege that they were brutally chased out by the nationalists of Burma Independence Army or BIA. Thousands are reported to have died of starvation, disease or during sporadic military attacks in one of the darkest but least reported incidents in modern Burmese History. At that time in Arakan, many local Muslims and Buddhists said that, initially there was not really any serious trouble between two religious communities, but that it only flared up when the first BIA units entered the area (Arakan) with the Japanese Imperial Army. The BIA immediately began giving speeches about the on going expulsions of Indians and other alleged British supporters from the central Burma and asked why Rakhine nationalists were not doing the same. As a result, there was an outbreak of the first serious communal clashes from 1942 onwards.[[19]](#footnote-19)

On 9th June 1942 the Rohingya Muslims of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung area drove the BIA and Rakhine communalists from north Arakan. On 10th June 1942 the Rohingya Muslims declared North Arakan as Muslim State and Peace Committee was entrusted for administration of the area. In December 1942 Brigadier C.E Lucas Phillips of British 14th Army came to Maungdaw to contact the leaders of the Rohingya Muslims. After hard negotiation, the Peace Committee formed by the Rohingya Muslims headed by Mr.

Omra Meah and Mr. Zahir Uddin Ahmed allowed the British 14th Army re-entry through the Naf border town of Maungdaw. As per Public Notice No. 11-OA-CC/42 dated. 31st. December 1942, the British Military Administration declared the former Muslim State as “Muslim National Area”. During the Second World War, Rohingya Muslims helped the Allied Forces against the invading Japanese in Arakan Front. The Rohingya Muslims generally stayed loyal to the British and work with the under ground V-force, most Rakhine nationalists jointed either with the BIA or under ground Communist movement. The Rakhines only turned against the Japanese when the British re-invaded Burma in 1945. On 1st January 1945 Brigadier C.E Lucas Phillips became the Chief Administrator of the area and appointed members of Peace Committee as administrative officers of the area. This represents a landmark in the history of Burmese independence. The British recognised the Rohingya Muslims as a distinct racial group and the British officer-in-command promised the Rohingyas to grant autonomy in North Arakan.[[20]](#footnote-20)

After 40 years of Burmese king Bodaw Phaya’s tyrannical rule, the British colonialists annexed Arakan to British India. In 1937 the British separated Burma from India and made Arakan apart of it. A significant measure of “Home Rule” (internal self-administration) was given to her. The territory of Arakan became merely a division of the central government dominated by Burmans in 1948 under a plan pre-arranged before independence between Burman leaders and the opportunists and self-seekers in Arakan. Thus Arakan remained under colonial rule forever, with a change in her masters from the Burman to the British and then again to the Burmans. According to the London Agreement of October 7, 1947 power was handed over to the government of the Union of Burma on 4th January 1948. [[21]](#footnote-21)

On 1st May 1961, the Burmese government created the Mayu Frontier District covering Maungdaw, Buthidaung and the Western part of Rathidaung townships. It was a military administration, not autonomous rule, but as it did not involve subordination to Arakan authorities, the arrangement won the support of the Rohingya leaders, particularly since the new military administration quickly succeeded in restoring order and security to the area. When, early in 1962, the government drafted a bill for Arakan statehood, the Mayu Frontier District was not included in the territory of the projected state. After the military coup of

March 1962, the new military regime led by General Ne Win cancelled the plan to grant statehood of Arakan, but the Mayu Forntier District remained under its separate Military Administration.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The military regime called them the Revolutionary Council (RC) and abolished the Constitution and dissolved the Parliament of Burma. All powers of the State – legislative, judiciary and executive – had fallen automatically under the control of RC. In February,1963 the RC regime nationalised entire banks and business enterprises all over the country. In Arakan, most of the major business establishments were in the hands of Muslims. The Rohingya Muslims of Arakan were hardest hit in the economic crackdown by the new military regime. In Arakan even small grocery and rice shops of Muslims were not spared. The RC banned all political parties and floated a new political party known as Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). In Arakan only Rakhine Maghs were inducted to new political party. Notifications were sent by RC to Arakan Division authories to restrict the movement of Rohingya Muslims. On 1st February 1964, the Revolutionary Council of Burmese military regime abolished the Mayu Frontier District and put the area again within the jurisdiction of Akyab District under the Home ministry. All Rohingya welfare and socio-cultural organisations were also banned in 1964. The military regime cancelled the Rohingya Language Programme broadcasted from Burma Broadcasting Service (BBS), Rangoon in October 1965.In 1974, the BSPP Government convened the first Peoples Congress (Pyithu Hlut Taw) which ratified the constitution drawn by BSPP. The new constitution granted State to Arakan in the Unitary structure. The new name of the state was Rakhine State and was manned by hundred percent Rakhine and Burman Buddhists.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Since 1948, up to 1999, there have been no less than 20 major operations of eviction campaigns against the Rohingyas carried out by the successive Governments of Burma. In pursuance of the 20-year Rohingya Extermination Plan, the Arakan State Council under direct supervision of State Council of Burma carried out a Rohingya drive operation code named Naga Min or King Dragon Operation. It was the largest, the most notorious and probably the best-documented operation of 1978. The operation started on 6th February 1978

from the biggest Muslim village of Sakkipara in Akayab, which sent shock waves over the whole region within a short time. News of mass arrest of Muslims, male and female, young and old, torture, rape and killing in Akyab frustrated Muslims in other towns of North Arakan. In Mrach 1978 the operation reached at Buthidaung and Maungdaw. Hundreds of Muslim men and women were thrown into the jail and many of them were being tortured and killed. Muslim women were raped freely in the detention centres. Terrified by the ruthlessness of the operation and total uncertainty of their life, property, honour and dignity a large number Rohingya Muslims started to leave their hearths and homes to cross the Burma-Bangladesh border.[[24]](#footnote-24)

On September 18,1988 in dramatic turn of events a Ne Win orchestrated so-called military coup removed civilian BSPP Govt. President Maung Maung. The military in the name of State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) headed by Chief of Army Staff, Gen. Saw Maung, took over power. The SLORC massacred more than 3000 pro-democracy demonstrators before gaining full control of the situation. Students and political activists were hunted down and either thrown into torture cells or killed. A large number of them fled across the border into neighbouring countries or joined anti-government revolutionary groups based along the border. The Rohingya Muslims of Arakan have to bear the brunt of SLORC’s wrath. The SLORC started to take vengeance on the Rohingya Muslims. SLORC held a General Election on May 27, 1990. The opposition NLD won bulk of the seats. So, SLORC refused to recognise the results of the General Election. When the masses are becoming restive as a result of the refusal to hand over power, the SLORC employed the old method of diverting the attention of the masses from the real burning issues by creating a new Rohingya drive campaign.[[25]](#footnote-25)

In 1991-92 a more dreadful Rohingya drive extermination campaign code named “Pyi Thaya”, had been launched on 18th July 1991 by deploying thousands of brute troops by SLORC in Arakan. A new wave of violence and persecution fell upon the Rohingyas such as killing, raping of women, destruction of Muslim settlements, holy places of worship, religious institutions, and Muslim relics, confiscation of land, detention, portering and slave labour and various other atrocities rose sharply in early 1991. As a result, again Rohingyas began to leave their homeland in the thousands to seek asylum as refugees in neighbouring Bangladesh. The Rohingya refugee crisis that began in September 1991 with 10,000 refugees

entering Bangladesh had reached its peak by mid-1992 when the refugee population rose to more than 2,68,000. Rohingya Muslims who fled into Bangladesh as refugees were mainly sheltered in 20 camps with a few residing outside the camps. The camps are located mainly on both sides of the Cox’s Bazar-Teknaf highway, popularly known as the Arakan road. Despite its meagre resources, Bangladesh provided food and shelter to the Rohingya refugees. This time the refugees came mainly from Maungdaw, Buthidaung, Rathidaung and Akyab townships of Arakan State.[[26]](#footnote-26)

**Conclusion:**

After pointing out the history and the evolution of the Arakan issue, it can be said that this area has a long historical construct which has changed over a period of time under different regime. This conflict deserves a special attention keeping in mind the historical construct of the issue. Otherwise, the understanding will be one eyed and incomplete.

1. ## “President Obama, say “Rohingya”, Arakan Rohigya National Organization, 12th October, 2014

   ## <http://www.rohingya.org/portal/index.php/component/content/article/1093-president-obama-say-rohingya.html>

   ## Accessed at 12th March, 2015 at 11.30 AM

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Parnini Nashnin Syeda, *“ Non -traditional Security and Problems of Rohingyas across the Bangldesh- Myanmar Borders”,* British Journal of Arts and Social Sciences, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2012 , p.284 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.rohingya.org/portal/index.php/arno/arno-press-release/1098-press-release-stop-intimidation-to-banglanize-ethnic-rohingya.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. (as cited in) Alam Asraf Mohamed, *“ Historical Background of Arakan”,* Sayed Ahmed Arakani.

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5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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23. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-26)