Rohingya: The History of a Muslim Identity in Myanmar

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Summary and Keywords

The name *Rohingya* denotes an ethnoreligious identity of Muslims in North Rakhine State, Myanmar (formerly Burma). The term became part of public discourse in the late 1950s and spread widely following reports on human rights violations against Muslims in North Rakhine State during the 1990s, and again after 2012. Claims for regional Muslim autonomy emerged during World War II and led to the rise of a Rohingya ethnonationalist movement that drew on the local Muslim *imaginaires*, as well as regional history and archaeology. To explore the historical roots of distinctive identity claims and highlight Buddhist-Muslim tensions, one must reach back to the role of Muslims in the precolonial Buddhist kingdom of Arakan and their demographic growth during the colonial period. Civic exclusion and state harassment under Burma’s authoritarian regimes (1962–2011) put a premature end to political hopes of ethnic recognition, and yet hastened a process of shared identity formation, both in the country and among the diaspora. Since the 1970s, refugees and migrants turned to Bangladesh, the Middle East, and Southeast Asian countries, forming a transnational body of Rohingya communities that reinvented their lives in various political and cultural contexts. A succession of Rohingya nationalist organizations —some of whom were armed—had negligible impact but kept the political struggle alive along the border with Bangladesh. Although Rohingya nationalists failed to gain recognition among ethnic and religious groups in Burma, they have attracted increasing international acknowledgment. For postdictatorial Myanmar (after 2011), the unresolved Rohingya issue became a huge international liability in 2017, when hundreds of thousands fled to Bangladesh following military operations widely interpreted as ethnic cleansing. In December 2017, the United Nations’ high commissioner for human rights acknowledged that elements of genocide may be occurring.

Keywords: Arakan, Rakhine state, ethnonationalism, Rohingya, Burma, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Pakistan, state oppression, refugees

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