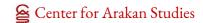Communal Tension on the Rise?

Addressing the Question of Socio-Political Cohesion in Arakan

Center for Arakan Studies

August 25, 2024
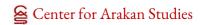
About Center for Arakan Studies (CAS)

The Center is an independent, non-partisan and research institution established in December 2021 by a group of young professionals including journalists, political analysts, researchers as well as social workers. The Center aims to promote the understanding of the situation of human rights, politics, economics, and social dynamics in Arakan, as well as issues related to Arakan affairs in Myanmar and beyond, through the publication of rigorous research papers.

The Center also intends to address the policy gaps in Arakan and Myanmar in general through analysis and recommendations in favor of democratic policy change and common solutions. The Center publishes a series of monthly reports, along with the policy briefing issues related to Arakan affairs, on its website and through various publications.

Communal Tension on the Rise?
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Executive Summary

- Arakan, known as Rakhine State, a region with a complex history of ethnic and political conflict, has seen significant developments in recent years. The region's long-standing tensions between the Rakhine and Rohingya communities, driven by conflicting historical narratives and political agendas, have continued to evolve amid changing political landscapes.

- The Rakhine and Rohingya communities hold competing historical narratives, with Rakhine perspectives focusing on the influx of Bengali migrants during British rule, while Rohingya narratives emphasize their longstanding presence and indigenous status in the region. These conflicting views fuel distrust, making social cohesion efforts challenging. Demographic and identity disputes are central to ongoing tensions. Since Myanmar's independence, both communities have pursued different political goals, with some groups advocating for autonomy and others engaging in armed struggles. Despite occasional alliances, deep mistrust has hindered lasting cooperation.

- Political developments from 2010 to 2020, including contentious elections, communal violence, and the rise of armed groups like the Arakan Army (AA) and the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), have deepened divisions. The area's history of conflict, including the 2012 communal violence and the 2016-17 Rohingya crisis, has led to deep social divides with severe repercussions for both communities. The rise of armed groups like the Arakan Army (AA) and significant foreign investments from China and India underscore its strategic importance.

- The 2020 elections and the 2021 military coup brought new challenges, impacting political dynamics and exacerbating tensions. Despite these difficulties, there have been signs of improving relations, particularly among younger people and through joint community events. However, structural discrimination and limited mobility for the Rohingya persist.

- Following the February 2021 military coup, the dynamics in Rakhine State shifted significantly. The Arakan Army (AA) focused on local governance rather than national anti-coup efforts, while Rakhine political parties initially engaged with the junta but later distanced themselves. The AA's strategy has been to consolidate regional control and manage local issues, avoiding direct confrontation with the broader anti-coup movement. For the Rohingya community, the coup exacerbated their already dire conditions, with increased arrests and blockages of aid. Despite some solidarity from anti-coup protesters, the junta's actions have worsened the Rohingya crisis, leaving little hope for immediate improvement or safe repatriation.

- The ULA/AA's policy on the Rohingya issue reflects a nuanced approach, aiming to integrate the Rohingya into local governance and improve inter-community relations. It has adopted a complex stance on the Rohingya issue, advocating for international support while attempting to integrate Rohingya into local administration. There are signs of increased social cohesion, with joint community events and a decrease in anti-Muslim hate speech. However, the role of international actors and ongoing challenges related to repatriation and military conscription add complexity to the path towards peace and understanding in Rakhine State.

- On the other hand, the ULA's efforts in repatriation discussions with Bangladesh are fraught with challenges. While there have been talks, progress has been slow due to ongoing instability and military unpredictability. Nevertheless, the AA's role remains crucial in any repatriation process, with potential shifts in Bangladesh's stance depending on evolving ceasefire and peace negotiations.

- The military recruitment by the State Administration Council (SAC) of Rohingya youths and the cooperation of Rohingya militants with the junta have further strained relations between the two communities. The military's actions have led to increased conflict and instability, compounding the Rohingya community's plight. Accusations and human rights allegations by Rohingya community members toward the Myanmar military and AA still require a balanced and comprehensive approach to addressing the crisis.

Part I: Introduction

Arakan, known as Rakhine State, situated on the eastern part of the Bay of Bengal and connected to other parts of Myanmar by the Arakan Roma Mountain Range, is a region characterized by complex political and strategic dynamics. Since 2016-17, it has been a hot spot for the Rohingya crisis and the rise of armed movements by the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA). The state's strategic importance is underscored by significant foreign investments from China and India, positioning it as a crucial connecting point for these regional powers. The Rakhine people, or Arakanese, are one of Myanmar's prominent ethnic groups, with an estimated population of around 2 million[1].

The situation in Arakan has become more complex with the outbreak of the 2012 communal violence that left scores dead and some 140,000 displaced. Like the rest of Myanmar, Rakhine State is a diverse region[2]. The largest group in the state is the Rakhine Buddhists, who make up about 60 percent of the 3.2 million total population. Muslim communities, including the Rohingya, account for about 30 percent, and the remaining 10 percent consists of the Chin (who are Buddhist, Christian, or animist) and a number of other small minorities, including the Kaman (also Muslim), Mro, Khami, Dainet, and Maramagyi[3].

Arakan has a history marked by prolonged and recurrent internal and communal conflicts. Since 2012, the state has seen escalating communal conflicts, resulting in armed confrontations, significant displacement, food insecurity, and disrupted livelihoods[4]. The 2012 tensions between Muslim and Buddhist communities in northern Arakan escalated into armed conflict involving the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the Myanmar military in October 2016, and further deteriorated with continued tensions in 2018 between the AA and the Myanmar military, exacerbating the socio-economic situation in the region[5]. Therefore, these kinds of ethno-political complexities create hardships for social cohesion among the people coexisting in the societies of the state.

Like many other conflict-stricken areas in the world, the question of social cohesion in Arakan has also become one of the most intense and sensitive issues. The concept of social cohesion acts as the adhesive that keeps a society united or coexisting peacefully. Experiences also show that societies with stronger social cohesion tend to be healthier, more capable of withstanding external challenges, and achieve greater economic advancement. Understanding social cohesion helps in comprehending various issues such as globalization, ethnic and group divisions, inequalities, and obstacles to upward social mobility[6]. Social cohesion is not merely about diversity but about how well a community works together in a diverse society. Dick Stanley's definition, "the willingness of members of society to cooperate with each other in order to survive and prosper," is fitting in this context[7]. It encompasses the strength and quality of relationships and bonds among society members, involving a sense of belonging, trust, and mutual respect. High social cohesion implies connected, supportive, and collaborative individuals, leading to a stable, harmonious, and well-functioning society with shared values, inclusive social networks, and equitable opportunities for participation and advancement.

Addressing the topic of social cohesion in the region is crucial, as Rakhine State, with approximately 3.2 million residents, is Myanmar's second poorest state, with a poverty rate of 78%. The violent conflict has significantly impacted people's lives, especially minority ethnic and religious

[1] Department of Population Ministry of Immigration and Population. (2015, May). *Rakhine State*. UNFPA Myanmar. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from https://myanmar.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Rakhine%20State%20Census%20Report%20-%20ENGLISH-3.pdf

[2] Center for Arakan Studies. (2024, February). *Forgotten Voices: Addressing Challenges Faced by the Double Minority Groups in Arakan*. Center for Arakan Studies. Retrieved August, 2024, from https://www.arakanstudies.org/ibr/24/01/ibr_01-feb_24.html

[3] International Crisis Group. (2014, October). *Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State*. Retrieved August 12, 2024, from https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/myanmar-the-politics-of-rakhine-state.pdf

[4] Htoo Htet Naing and Kyaw Zin Lin, Edited by Radka Antalíková, PhD, "Hidden Truths of the Invisible:The Experiences of Double Minorities in Northern Rakhine State during Violent Conflict", PLRI, September, 2019. (Accessed: https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/myanmar/15642.pdf.)

[5] Myint, M. (n.d). *Rakhine State: A Snapshot of Child Wellbeing*. Scribd. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from https://www.scribd.com/document/375483107/Rakhine-State

[6] UNECE. (2023, December 19). *Social Cohesion Concept and Measurement*. UNECE. Retrieved July 28, 2024, from https://unece.org/statistics/publications/social-cohesion-concept-and-measurement

[7] SCANLON Foundation. (n.d). *What is social cohesion?* Scanlon institute. Retrieved July 28, 2024, from https://scanloninstitute.org.au/research/mapping-social-cohesion/what-social-cohesion

groups, who often feel ignored by the government and suffer from poor services. These issues stem from a history of ethnic distrust, lack of trust in the government, and poor communication between local authorities and civil society organizations[8]. Limited access to public services, poor infrastructure, unemployment, low living standards, and the absence of legal mechanisms have caused mutual fear and distrust among all communities in Rakhine[9].

Although the conflict is often framed as between Rakhine and Muslim communities, Rakhine is a diverse state with many groups living together. Various governance strategies have been implemented to address the state's humanitarian, development, and political challenges[10]. Due to Rakhine's diversity, strategic location, natural and environmental resources, and human capital, there is great potential to build "a peaceful, fair, and prosperous future for the people of Rakhine"[11]. However, among all, the Rohingya have significant mistrust towards the AA mainly because of the Muslim-Buddhist religious divide in Rakhine state. As a mostly Muslim group, the Rohingya see the largely Buddhist AA as part of the dominant Burman community[12]. Therefore, the deep-seated and prolonged lack of trust between the two largest groups, Rakhine and Rohingya, and their conflicting historical narratives have made mutual relations difficult.

This report employs a qualitative research methodology, incorporating both primary and mainly secondary sources from existing literature and reports, facts from local-based newsrooms, national mainstream media, and international papers. Moreover, localized observational field visits and experiences from CAS members who are themselves from Rakhine State were used to fill the gaps and provide comprehensive insights. The research approach is designed to understand the historical, social, and political dynamics of Rakhine State and the factors influencing social cohesion between Rakhine and Rohingya communities through different eras up to the current situation. This report will cover five main parts, each exploring various aspects of Rakhine State's historical, social, and political dynamics and their impact on social cohesion. Firstly, it offers a historical overview, discussing immigration during British rule, the 1942 communal violence, and political movements from Burma's independence to 2010. Then, it will examine political developments from 2010 to 2020, including the 2012 communal violence, elections, and the rise of ARSA and AA. After that, the report analyzes the impact of the 2021 military coup, social cohesion initiatives by the ULA, and issues related to Rohingya relations. Lastly, it presents case studies illustrating specific incidents affecting social cohesion. Through this analysis, the report aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping relations between Rakhine and Rohingya communities and suggests potential paths toward a more peaceful future in the region.

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[8] Dhungana, S. K. (2020, January). *Social Cohesion through Service Delivery in Rakhine State*. Search For Common Ground-Myanmar. Retrieved July 28, 2024, from https://documents.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/SFCG-Myanmar_MTReview_Report_2020.pdf

[9] UNDP. (n.d). *Rakhine*. United Nations Development Programme. Retrieved July 28, 2024, from https://www.undp.org/myanmar/rakhine

[10] UNDP. (n.d). *Rakhine*. United Nations Development Programme. Retrieved July 28, 2024, from https://www.undp.org/myanmar/rakhine

[11] UNDP. (n.d). *Rakhine*. United Nations Development Programme. Retrieved July 28, 2024, from https://www.undp.org/myanmar/rakhine

[12] Uddin, N. (2024, July 3). *The fate of the Rohingya may be in the Arakan Army's hands*. Al Jazeera. Retrieved July 29, 2024, from https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/7/3/the-fate-of-the-rohingya-may-be-in-the-arakan-armys-hands

Part-II: A Short Historical Background

Disagreements over the existence of one group by another are at the heart of the competitive narratives and social tensions between the Rakhine and Rohingya communities. The historical portrayal of the role of the Rohingya by the Rakhine is rejected by the Rohingya and vice versa. The refusal of the Rakhine community to recognize the 'Rohingya' identity as proposed by the Rohingya group reflects the degree of discontent between the two communities. Both pro-Rakhine and pro-Rohingya accounts have different interpretations of their historical origins and narratives against each other.

Starting with the pro-Rohingya narratives, as explained by Dr. Kyaw Minn Htin, there are four main claims about their origins[13]. Firstly, an Arab prince arrived on the northern Arakanese littoral bordering Banga in the seventh century ACE. Secondly, an Arab shipwreck brought Muslims to Arakan in the eighth century ACE. Thirdly, when a sultan of Bengal put the exiled Arakanese king Maṅ: Co Mwan on the throne of Arakan in 1430 ACE, the sultan's Muslim followers came to Arakan. Finally, Muslims were integrated into the Arakanese kingdom when they ruled Banga in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

However, according to Dr. Aye Chan, a Rakhine historian, he claims the following[14] (Chan, 2005): "The Muslims in the Arakan State can be divided into four different groups: the Chittagonian Bengalis in the Mayu Frontier; the descendants of the Muslim Community of Arakan in the Mrauk-U period (1430-1784), presently living in the Mrauk-U and Kyauktaw townships; the descendants of Muslim mercenaries in Ramree Island known to the Arakanese as Kaman; and the Muslims from the Myedu area of Central Burma, left behind by the Burmese invaders in Sandoway District after the conquest of Arakan in 1784."

On the other hand, some scholars point out that both pro-Rakhine and pro-Rohingya historical narratives are not flawless or entirely logical. They wrote (Prasse-Freeman and Mausert, 2020)[15]: "Consequently, Rakhine nationalist historians assert some variety of the claim that 'Rakhaing culture is older and more advanced than that of Burma,' seeking to situate the Rakhine as the more 'pure' and direct descendants of the progenitors of the modern Bamar 'race.' For instance, for Buddhist monk-cum-historian Ashin Nyanuttara, 'Ancient Rakhaing entered into Rakhaing strip from the northeastern parts of India,' and while other races— 'Aryans and Mongoloids'—may have 'cohabited' with one another and 'entered into Rakhaing strip,' at no point did 'the races [mix] after they entered into the Rakhaing strip.'"

These same scholars have also criticized the pro-Rohingya account as follows: "While Rohingya historiography often interprets the same sources in different ways, positing that the Rohingya predated the Rakhine, it reflects a commitment to the same indigeneity imperative that privileges ancient origins. A common trope here is that shipwrecked Arabs brought their faith with them to Arakan in the late 8th century AD, establishing themselves as the progenitors of modern Rohingya. The lack of corroborating historical or archaeological records renders this claim highly speculative, however."

The paragraphs above clearly illustrate that the historical interpretations of both pro-Rakhine and pro-Rohingya accounts are mutually exclusive and destructive to each other, thus posing a significant historical barrier to the task of fostering social cohesion in the region. As some studies have pointed out, while pro-Rakhine claims highlight the historical mass immigration of Chittagonian settlers into Arakan during British rule in the 19th and 20th centuries, the pro-Rohingya assertions emphasize the existence of old Muslim communities in pre-colonial Arakan, minimizing the mass migration during British rule. Similarly, many pro-Rohingya accounts criticize that the modern-day Rakhines are merely descendants of the Marama (the old name for Rakhines) settlers from the Irrawaddy Valley in the 10th century ACE. In contrast, pro-Rakhine historians usually claim their

[13] HTIN,(2017, January) "WHERE MANDALAS OVERLAP."https://scholarbank.nus.edu.sg/handle/10635/137524

[14]Chan,(2005) "The Development of a Muslim Enclave in Arakan (Rakhine) State of Burma
(Myanmar)."https://catalog.ihsn.org/citations/49676

[15] Prasse-Freeman and Mausert,(2020) "Two Sides of the Same Arakanese Coin."
https://www.academia.edu/38522880/Two_Sides_of_the_Same_Arakanese_Coin_Rakhine_Rohingya_and_Ethnogenesis_as_
Schismogenesis_extended_pre_publication_version_

existence since the 34th century (3325) BCE. As the Kofi Annan Commission in Rakhine State noted, the 'inter-communal tension' in Arakan is also a 'clash of narratives'[16].

At the core of the Rakhine-Rohingya tension, however, lie the questions of the population and identity of the 'Rohingya.' Different conclusions and projections have emerged regarding the Rohingya population. Basically, there are two main arguments: firstly, the pro-Rohingya claim, often lacking concrete evidence, argues that Rohingya Muslims already made up one-third of the Arakan population in pre-colonial times, and therefore, the size of migration during British rule is negligible. Even if there was mass migration, it involved those who escaped Arakan due to the Burmese invasion in 1784 ACE. On the other hand, pro-Rakhine arguments, based on concrete evidence, contend that even if there were old Muslim communities in pre-colonial Arakan, their population was very small, while the number of Chittagonian Bengali migrants during British rule was very large.

As noted by some historians, the mass immigration from the Bengal areas into Arakan via the Naf River occurred due to "push-pull factors" that included: 1) scarcity of food and the high population density in the Bengal region, and 2) good economic conditions and favorable job opportunities in Arakan. According to Dr. Aye Chan, based on the reports of the British administration, the increasing percentage of the Mahomedan population, comprising both Chittagonians and old Muslims in the Akyab District, including the modern-day townships of Maungdaw, Sittwe, and Mrauk-U districts, can be seen below[17].

RACE	1871	1901	1911
MADOMEDAN	58,255 (21%)	154,887 (32%)	178,647 (33%)
ARAKANESE	171,612	230,649	209,432
OTHERS	46,804	96,130	14,1864
TOTAL	276,671	481,666	529,943

According to Dr. Kyaw Minn Htin, the increasing number of Mahomedans (Chittagonian-speaking people, including old Muslims) in Arakan can be summarized as follows:

RACE	1867-68	1869	1872	1891	1931
MAHOMEDAN	32,105 (7%)	24,337 (5%)	64,000 (13%)	126,586 (18%)	269,413 (26%)
TOTAL	434,770	447,957.	484,363	675,272	1,008,538

Based on the concrete data presented above, it is reasonable to argue that the issue of colonial Chittagonian migration from the Bengal region to Arakan is well-established by historical evidence. Consequently, finding better options for social relations between the Rakhine and Rohingya communities should not ignore these historical facts as a starting point for common solutions.

On another front, the increasing number of Chittagonian migrants and the perceived demographic threat to the local Rakhine population during British rule led to a disaster in the northern and central Arakan townships: the outbreak of communal violence in 1942. The immediate trigger for the violence was reported to be the killing of a Rakhine village headman and his brother in Rat-Chaung village of Myebon township by a group of Muslims (Rohingya). Following this incident, in March of that year, Rakhine villagers began attacking Muslims in central Arakan townships[18]. These violent incidents included setting houses on fire, destroying mosques, seizing cattle, and forcing Muslims to leave their villages in Minbya and Myebon townships in central Arakan. In response, Muslims in the northern Arakan townships, such as Maungdaw and Buthidaung, where they are the majority, retaliated against the Rakhines by killing, looting, and injuring a large number of the Rakhine population. Muslims in central Arakan had to flee to northern townships, whereas the opposite was

[16] Smith, (2019, December) "Arakan (Rakhine State) - A Land in Conflict on Myanmar's Western Frontier." https://policycommons.net/artifacts/6944210/arakan-rakhine-state/7854135/#main
[17] Chan, "The Development of a Muslim Enclave in Arakan (Rakhine) State of Burma (Myanmar)."https://catalog.ihsn.org/citations/49676
[18] Leider. (2020, March) "Violence and Belonging: Conflict, War, and Insecurity in Arakan, 1942–1952."https://www.researchgate.net/publication/369082918_2023-Leider-Violence-and-Belonging-Arakan-1942-1952

true for the Rakhine. The exact number of lives lost, and the extent of property damage cannot be confirmed, as different sources provide varying accounts.

Observers have explained the causes of this communal violence as ranging from the formation of the V-Force (Volunteer Force) by the British for the Rohingya community to the rise of a binary view of 'Buddhists' or 'Muslims' among the two communities due to different socio-economic factors. However, one significant outcome of this violence was the development of an 'us versus them' mentality, which led to continued identity separation, especially among the Muslim residents of Arakan.

Beyond these two issues, there is also a significant disagreement on the concepts of 'Arakan' and 'Rohingya' identity between the pro-Rakhine and pro-Rohingya accounts. Generally, while the Rakhine accounts, based on strong evidence such as stone inscriptions and travelers' reports, trace the origin of the term 'Arakan' back to the 8th century ACE during the Waitherli (Vesali) period and European travelers' notes, pro-Rohingya claims suggest that the term 'Arakan' comes from the Arabic word meaning 'mercy.' Disagreement is even more pronounced in the case of the term 'Rohingya.' Pro-Rohingya narratives claim the existence or origin of the Rohingya in Arakan dating back to the late 18th century ACE, while pro-Rakhine claims argue that the term 'Rohingya' is a post-colonial invention by Chittagonian settlers in Arakan to position themselves as an indigenous ethnic group of Myanmar in the 1950s. Today, even though the United Nations (UN) and other international institutions use the term 'Rohingya' based on the principle of the right to 'self-identification,' key Rakhine stakeholders reject the term, arguing that it is offensive to the ancestral history of Arakan and represents politically motivated historical claims to the land of Arakan, ignoring the mass migration during British colonial rule. Clearly, questions of population and identity remain significant barriers to promoting social cohesion and peaceful coexistence between the two communities in Arakan.

Now, it is time to examine how Rakhine and Rohingya political movements developed in post-independence Myanmar until the political opening in 2010. When Myanmar regained independence in 1948, during the parliamentary period until 1962, both Rakhine and Rohingya political actors emerged with different political objectives[19]. In the Rakhine community, the leftist Arakan People's Liberation Party (APLP), members of the White Flag and Red Flag factions, and the People's Volunteer Organization dominated many rural areas of Arakan, especially in the central and southern parts. In contrast, in the Rohingya community, it was the Mujahid Party, led by Jafar Kawal, that controlled many areas of northern Arakan. Notably, the Muslim militia at that time did not use the term 'Rohingya' for their political movement. In electoral politics, Rakhine conservative nationalists formed the 'Independent Arakanese Parliamentary Group (IAPG),' later known as the Arakan National United Organization (ANUO), which won 17 seats against the Anti-Fascist People's Liberation Front (AFPLF), which secured only 3 seats in Arakan division in the 1951 general elections. For the Muslim community, Jamiatul-Ulama North Arakan (and, in one instance, the Burma Muslim Congress) won seats in Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships in the 1947, 1951, and 1956 elections. However, the political demands of the two communities were diverse: while the Rakhine called for the creation of a Rakhine state, the Muslims called for the establishment of the Mayu autonomous area or a separate Muslim state.

When the military coup occurred in March 1962, Myanmar's political landscape shifted dramatically. In Arakan's armed politics, the White Flag Communist Party of Burma (CPB), led by U Kyaw Mya, remained the strongest force. With the decline of the Red Flag CPB, new factions formed, such as the Communist Party of Arakan (CPA) and the Arakan National People's Liberation Party (ANPLP) in the 1960s. Later, two prominent Rakhine armed groups, the Arakan Independence Organization (AIO) and the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP), were established in the 1960s and 1970s. In Rohingya armed politics, a new Mujahid Party, also known as the Muslim National Liberation Party (MNLP), was revived under Sani Jafar, a militant leader in northern Arakan. More significantly, the Rohingya Independence Front (renamed the Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF) in 1973) was founded in 1964 by a Yangon University student, Muhammad Jafar Habib. There was a connection between the Rakhine and Rohingya armed movements, as the MNLP allied with the CPA and ANLP in the Naf

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[19] Smith, "Arakan (Rakhine State) - A Land in Conflict on Myanmar's Western Frontier." https://policycommons.net/artifacts/6944210/arakan-rakhine-state/7854135/#main

River borderlands. In 1982, the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) split from the RPF, and three years later, in 1985, Rakhine armed groups like the AIO, ALP, and CPA initiated a new alliance, the National United Front of Arakan (NUFA). In 1986-87, however, a new group, the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF), emerged, demanding autonomous Muslim areas as an alliance between the RPF and an RSO faction.

The socialist regime under U Ne Win ended with another military coup in 1988. When electoral politics resumed in 1990, two political parties emerged in Rakhine politics: the first and stronger one was the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD), and the second was the Arakan People's United Organization (APUO). The Rohingya in Arakan also established the National Democratic Party for Human Rights (NDPHR). During the election, the ALD won the majority of seats against the National League for Democracy (NLD). Additionally, the NDPHR won four seats in Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships.

On the front lines of Rakhine armed politics, three other Arakan-based groups, including the veteran ANLP, the Tribal Nationalities Party, and the short-lived National Democratic Force of Arakan (NDFA), joined the NUFA. In 1991, the old 'Arakan Army,' led by Khaing Raza, was also formed. On January 4, 1994, the four main members—the ANLP, CPA, TNP, and AIO, ALP merger group—made the historic decision to merge into a single party, the National United Party of Arakan (NUPA). The AA was defined as the armed wing of the NUPA. In 1995, the ARIF and RSO joined as the Rohingya National Alliance (RNA), and three years later, a broader Rohingya National Council (RNC) and a new military front known as the Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO) were established. A breakthrough in relations between the Rakhine and Rohingya armed movements occurred when the NUPA and ARNO formed the Arakan Independence Alliance (AIA) in 2001. However, due to challenging socio-political barriers, this alliance gradually weakened. In 2005, a new armed party, the Arakan National Council (ANC), was formed, and its armed wing was also named the 'Arakan Army-AA.' However, neither the Rakhine nor Rohingya armed movements gained significant strength. In April 2009, a new 'Arakan Army-AA' was established by Twan Mrat Naing and a group of young Rakhine nationalists.

Part III: Era of Political Opening (2010 to 2020)

The period from 2010 to 2020 marks a significant phase in Rakhine's political landscape, often referred to as the era of political opening. This period is crucial for understanding the political participation of both the Rakhine and Rohingya communities and its impact on societal relations.

(3.1) The 2010 Election

During the 2010 election, both Rakhine and Rohingya political parties participated, each with distinct agendas reflecting the deep-seated tensions between the two groups. Among the 37 political parties that contested the election, the Rakhine community was represented by two key parties: the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP), with 44 members, and the Rakhine State National Force of Myanmar, with 14 members. The Rohingya community, on the other hand, was represented by two parties: the National Democratic Party for Development (NDPD) with 22 participants and the National Development and Peace Party (NDPP) with 3 candidates[20]. In the 2010 election, three of the 29 representatives elected to the national parliament from Rakhine State were Rohingya. Additionally, two Rohingya candidates were elected among the 35 members of the Rakhine state assembly that year[21].

However, the 2010 election also intensified communal tensions between these two communities. The military regime, which favored the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), granted citizenship to many Rohingya before the election, which angered the Buddhist Rakhine population. This move was seen as an attempt to secure the Muslim vote, thereby limiting the electoral success of Rakhine nationalist parties[22].

Regarding the political agendas of the two communities, the Rakhine political parties focused on promoting the rights and autonomy of the Rakhine people, seeking greater control over their regional affairs and resources. They aimed to assert their identity and protect their interests against what they perceived as the growing influence of the Rohingya community. On the other hand, Rohingya political parties were primarily concerned with securing recognition and rights for the Rohingya people, who have long faced discrimination and denial of citizenship in Myanmar. Their agenda included fighting for legal status, protection against human rights abuses, and access to basic services and opportunities[23]. These opposing goals often put the two groups at odds, as Rakhine parties viewed the Rohingya as a threat to their culture and politics, while Rohingya parties sought to secure their recognition and rights.

(3.2) The 2012 Communal Violence

During this period of political tension, there was another outbreak of communal violence in 2012. The situation became critical after a Buddhist woman was raped and murdered by Muslim men on May 28, sparking a wave of violence between the Buddhist Rakhine and Muslim communities. Hostilities had been growing, and extremist messages were spreading before this event, which led to significant violence in the northern areas and near the capital, Sittwe[24]. Later, on June 3, ten Muslim pilgrims were killed by a mob in Toungup township following the distribution of inflammatory leaflets against Muslims. The violence spread, including some attacks by Muslims on Buddhist communities. In response, the government declared a state of emergency on June 10 and deployed additional troops

[20] Toshihiro, K. (2011, January). *MYANMAR RESULTS OF THE 2010 ELECTIONS IN MYANMAR: AN ANALYSIS*. Institute of Developing Economies. Retrieved August 11, 2024, from
https://www.ide.go.jp/library/English/Research/Region/Asia/pdf/20110104.pdf
[21] Mclaughlin, T. (2015, October 1). *Rising Rakhine party looming threat to Myanmar's Muslim minority*. Reuters. Retrieved August 12, 2024, from https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN0RV5RO/
[22] International Crisis Group. (2014, October). *Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State*. Retrieved August 12, 2024, from https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/myanmar-the-politics-of-rakhine-state.pdf
[23] Ware, A. (2015, September). *The Muslim "Rohingya" and Myanmar's Upcoming Election*. Australian Institute of International Affairs. Retrieved 8 12, 2024, from https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-muslim-rohingya-and-myanmars-upcoming-election/
[24] International Crisis Group. (2012). *Myanmar Conflict Alert: Preventing Communal Bloodshed and Building Better Relations*. Retrieved August 12, 2024, from https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/myanmar-conflict-alert-preventing-communal-bloodshed-and-building-better-relations

to restore order. Although this initially calmed the situation, tensions remained, with minor incidents continuing. The violence resulted in 98 deaths and 123 injuries among both communities, with 5,338 homes destroyed—mostly belonging to Rohingya Muslims—and about 75,000 people, primarily Rohingya, being displaced[25].

A Rohingya elder reflected that the 2012 violence fundamentally changed their lives. Before, their Rohingya identity was not a daily concern, but now, after losing everything else, it has become their unifying focus. Rohingya leaders believe that defending this identity is crucial for obtaining Myanmar citizenship and combating discrimination. They view international recognition of the term "Rohingya" as key to gaining legitimacy and support for their rights[26]. Following the first wave of violence, President Thein Sein established an investigation commission on August 17 to examine the situation in Rakhine State[27]. The commission had a wide-ranging mandate to investigate the violence, assess the government's response, and suggest solutions for reconciliation and development. It included leaders from various religions and civil society, but none of the Muslim representatives specifically represented the Rohingya[28]. After extending its term due to a second wave of clashes in October, the commission released its final report in April 2013. The report called for safe shelters for the displaced, permanent resettlement, transparent citizenship processes, and state-wide development support while also addressing intolerance and ensuring law and order[29].

(3.3) The 2015 Election

Following the riots in 2012, tensions between the two communities rose steadily, and relations deteriorated due to a lack of trust. This set the stage for the 2015 election. The election brought a different political landscape and space for Rakhine and Rohingya societies as more restrictions were imposed on the Muslim Rohingyas. As mentioned earlier, in 2010 and 2012, temporary identity card holders, including some Rohingya, were allowed to vote and run in Myanmar's elections[30]. While some Rohingya could participate and even secure parliamentary seats, by 2013, there was a push to exclude them from voting and office-holding, driven by members of the (Buddhist) Rakhine National Development Party. In 2014, a Constitutional Tribunal ruling reinforced this exclusion by narrowing voter eligibility to those with citizenship. Consequently, the Rohingya's white identity cards were revoked, leading to their formal disenfranchisement[31]. Unlike the 2010 nationwide election, the political landscape for the two communities had changed by the 2015 election. While Rohingya participated in Myanmar's nationwide elections in 2010, and three of them served in Parliament until 2015, the government barred them from voting, running for office, or maintaining Rohingya-led political parties, such as the Democracy and Human Rights Party (DHRP) and the National Democratic Party for Development (NDPD) in 2015[32].

On the other hand, regarding the ethnic Arakanese political strength in the 2015 election, the Rakhine people achieved significant political unity, primarily through the Arakan National Party, formed in March 2014. This party was a merger of the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD) and the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP). The ALD was a key party in the 1990 elections but boycotted the 2010 election, re-registering in 2012. The RNDP was established to contest the 2010

[25] International Crisis Group. (2014, October). *Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State*. Retrieved August 12, 2024, from https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/myanmar-the-politics-of-rakhine-state.pdf

[26] International Crisis Group. (2014, October). *Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State*. Retrieved August 12, 2024, from https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/myanmar-the-politics-of-rakhine-state.pdf

[27] President Office Notification No. 58/2012, 17 August 2012.

[28] International Crisis Group. (2014, October). *Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State*. Retrieved August 12, 2024, from https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/myanmar-the-politics-of-rakhine-state.pdf

[29] HIll, D. C. (2013). *Myanmar: sectarian violence in Rakhine — issues, humanitarian consequences, and regional responses*. Parliament of Australia. Retrieved August 12, 2024, from https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1314/Myanmar

[30] Crouch, M. (2018). *Elections a sham in Rakhine State*. The Interpreter. Retrieved August 12, 2024, from https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/elections-sham-rakhine-state

[31] Crouch, M. (2018). *Elections a sham in Rakhine State*. The Interpreter. Retrieved August 12, 2024, from https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/elections-sham-rakhine-state

[32] Fortify Right. (2020, August 12). *Myanmar: Ensure Rohingya Participation in Elections*. Fortify Rights. Retrieved August 12, 2024, from https://www.fortifyrights.org/mya-inv-2020-08-12/

elections, winning a majority of seats in Rakhine State despite allegations of election rigging. The merger of these parties created a dominant political force expected to strongly influence the 2015 elections[33]. Moreover, during that period, the party lobbied strongly to strip Myanmar's 'temporary citizens' of their voting rights, which included the majority of the one million Rohingya living in apartheid-like conditions in Rakhine. The ANP claimed that the Rohingya are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, despite many having lived in Myanmar for generations[34].

Aye Nu Sein, the former vice-chairwoman of the ANP in 2015, stated that the annulment of identification cards for 'temporary citizens' had improved the party's chances in constituencies with many white card holders. She mentioned that the ANP supported relocating the Rohingya to camps or deporting them. She also rejected the international community's use of the term "stateless" to describe the Rohingya, insisting that they are from Bangladesh, sharing the same religion, race, and traditions as the people there[35]. These differing political spaces and perspectives between the two communities have resulted in a long-term atmosphere of social distrust[36].

(3.4) The Rising Activities of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army

In 2016-17, armed conflict broke out again with the rise of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). This triggered a severe crackdown by the Myanmar military, causing most of the Rohingya population to flee to Bangladesh. The New York Times reported that Myanmar is erasing the Rohingya's history, stating, "There is no such thing as Rohingya"[37]. In June 2016, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights warned about the fragile situation of the Rohingya Muslims and other ethnic groups in Myanmar. However, after coming to power, the new government made a series of mistakes that further alienated both the Buddhist and Muslim communities[38].

The rise of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) in Rakhine, Myanmar, marked a significant escalation in conflict after years of relative calm in Rohingya communities. Before ARSA's emergence, militant activities had largely subsided, and Muslim traditions in Myanmar were not generally radical. However, the situation changed with ARSA's arrival, particularly after the group launched a surprise attack on border posts in October 2016, killing nine policemen[39]. ARSA, initially known as Harakah al-Yaqin, quickly gained support among young Rohingya displaced by the 2012 violence. Many of these youths, having lost their homes and families, were vulnerable to ARSA's propaganda, which claimed they had "nothing left to lose." Led by Ataullah Abu Ammar Jununi, a Rohingya born in Pakistan and raised in Saudi Arabia, ARSA operated with internationalonnections and adopted a more radical approach than previous Rohingya militant groups.

Rakhine leaders were also highly aware of the Rohingya issue in the region. In Nay Pyi Taw, government officials seemed disconnected from the growing Muslim unrest, whereas Rakhine leaders were well aware of the situation. When asked in July 2016 about the "most important task" for the Rakhine State government, ULA leader Twan Mrat Naing identified the Bengali (Rohingya Muslims)

[33] International Crisis Group. (2014, October). *Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State*. Retrieved August 12, 2024, from https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/myanmar-the-politics-of-rakhine-state.pdf

[34] Mclaughlin, T. (2015, October 1). *Rising Rakhine party looming threat to Myanmar's Muslim minority*. Reuters. Retrieved August 12, 2024, from https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN0RV5RO/

[35] Mclaughlin, T. (2015, October 1). *Rising Rakhine party looming threat to Myanmar's Muslim minority*. Reuters. Retrieved August 12, 2024, from https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN0RV5RO/

[36] Smith, M. (2019). *Arakan (Rakhine State): A Land in Conflict on Myanmar's Western Frontier*. Transnational Institute. Retrieved August 12, 2024, from https://www.tni.org/en/publication/arakan-rakhine-state-a-land-in-conflict-on-myanmars-western-frontier

[37] Smith, M. (2019). *Arakan (Rakhine State): A Land in Conflict on Myanmar's Western Frontier*. Transnational Institute. Retrieved August 12, 2024, from https://www.tni.org/en/publication/arakan-rakhine-state-a-land-in-conflict-on-myanmars-western-frontier

[38] Human Rights Council. (2016, June 20). *Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Situation of human rights of Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar (A/HRC/32/18) - Myanmar*. ReliefWeb. Retrieved August 12, 2024, from https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/report-united-nations-high-commissioner-human-rights-situation-human-rights-rohingya

[39] https://www.rohingya.org/

issue as the priority. He suggested that the NLD needed to handle the citizenship crisis with "responsibility" and "accountability," warning that it would not be easy to satisfy all stakeholders[40].

The government's severe response to the conflict in Rakhine State significantly damaged the reputation of the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi. Many supporters of democracy were disillusioned by the NLD's silence and lack of opposition to Myanmar's military tactics, especially after recent offensives in Kachin State. The NLD, having failed to address violence in 2012, lost its chance to mediate and faced criticism for not speaking out, particularly from long-time supporters like human rights activist Khin Ohmar[41].NLD officials admitted they were unprepared and recognized that many in Myanmar supported anti-Muslim protests, which influenced their cautious approach to the 2015 election. Despite establishing the Kofi Annan Commission to address the Rakhine crisis, the NLD marginalized Muslims during the election, a decision somewhat accepted in diplomatic circles. However, fear also played a role in the NLD's hesitancy, especially after the assassination of U Ko Ni, a prominent Muslim and NLD lawyer, in January 2017. His death sent a clear message, marking a turning point in the NLD's first year in office, as ethnic peace and constitutional reform stalled, and the political crisis deepened[42].

(3.5) Emergence of the AA and its Interactions with the Rohingya

Amid the ongoing Rohingya crisis, the rise of the United League of Arakan (ULA) and its armed wing, the Arakan Army (AA), was often overlooked during 2016-18[43]. Despite this, the ULA expanded its presence significantly, infiltrating several townships in Rakhine State and moving close to the state capital, Sittwe. This marked the largest expansion by any armed opposition group in the region since the 1970s. By early 2019, the ULA had trained up to 7,000 troops, aiming to establish a "self-administered" area in Rakhine State. As conflict escalated in late 2018, fighting displaced many villagers, and the government responded with airstrikes and resumed military operations in Muslim communities[44].

Moreover, the exclusion from the 21st Century Panglong Agreement intensified the conflict between the government and the AA at that time. Anticipating a Myanmar military offensive, the AA intensified its attacks on government positions at the start of 2019. On January 4, the Arakan Army launched a pre-dawn raid on four border police posts in Buthidaung Township, killing 13 policemen[45]. In the weeks that followed, the conflict escalated further into Rakhine State, prompting a large deployment of Tatmadaw troops from several divisions to counter the ULA's advance. The Tatmadaw reported 97 clashes and 39 mine attacks in the first three months of 2019, a significant increase compared to the previous year[46].

The ULA officials argued that the root causes of inter-community conflict stem from a government dominated by the Bamar ethnicity. They contend that both the Myanmar military and NLD administrations, whether at regional or national levels, consistently bypass local populations,

[40] MARSHALL, A. R., & McPHERSON, P. (2018, December 19). *Fading Icon: Once a global hero, what happened to Aung San Suu Kyi?* Reuters. Retrieved August 12, 2024, from https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/myanmar-suukyi-history/

[41] MARSHALL, A. R., & McPHERSON, P. (2018, December 19). *Fading Icon: Once a global hero, what happened to Aung San Suu Kyi?* Reuters. Retrieved August 12, 2024, from https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/myanmar-suukyi-history/

[42] Smith, M. (2019). *Arakan (Rakhine State): A Land in Conflict on Myanmar's Western Frontier*. Transnational Institute. Retrieved August 12, 2024, from https://www.tni.org/en/publication/arakan-rakhine-state-a-land-in-conflict-on-myanmars-western-frontier

[43] CAS. (2024, July). *The Arakan Army's Journey: From Rebels to Rulers and A New Arakan Paradigm*. Retrieved August, 2024, from https://www.arakanstudies.org/ibr/24/03/ibr_03-July_24.html

[44] AFP. (2018). *Myanmar forces conduct 'clearance operations' after two killed in Rakhine state*. Retrieved August, 2024, from https://www.nst.com.my/world/2018/12/442553/myanmar-forces-conduct-clearance-operations-after-two-killed-rakhine-state

[45] International Crisis Group. (2019, January 24). *A New Dimension of Violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State*. Crisis Group. Retrieved August 12, 2024, from https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/b154-new-dimension-violence-myanmars-rakhine-state

[46] Smith, M. (2019). *Arakan (Rakhine State): A Land in Conflict on Myanmar's Western Frontier*. Transnational Institute. Retrieved August 12, 2024, from https://www.tni.org/en/publication/arakan-rakhine-state-a-land-in-conflict-on-myanmars-western-frontier

hindering local communities' ability to address their issues collectively. Moreover, ULA leader Twan Mrat Naing recently stated in an interview with Irrawaddy in January 2019[47]:

> "Because the Myanmar Army wants to stay in Rakhine State, it sows discord between Arakanese and Muslims. It created conflict… It doesn't just want to sow discord between Arakanese and Muslims in Rakhine State. It also wants to cause ill feelings between Arakanese and Mro, Arakanese and Khami. It paved the way for problems to create an excuse for its rule in certain places. This is what it does".

The AA leader further addressed accusations by the military government regarding the AA's relations with ARSA, stating that they have been vocal in their criticisms of ARSA's presence in Rakhine State, often citing security concerns as a pretext. He mentioned that if there had been significant conflicts with Muslims, the Myanmar military would have used this as an excuse to justify their actions to the international community. However, because such conflicts have not occurred, they are now attempting to label the AA as terrorists with alleged connections to ARSA. Despite these accusations, the AA leader emphasized that they would continue their efforts[48].

A critical moment for social cohesion occurred when the Rohingya refugees in Bangladeshi refugee camps demonstrated their solidarity with the Rakhine students' protest in Sittwe, Rakhine State[49]. Maung Kyaw Myint, spokesperson of the Rohingya Student Union, stated on September 20, 2020, that they stood together with the Rakhine students because the suffering and atrocities that the Rakhine were experiencing were similar to what they had already endured, and both communities should live peacefully together.

(3.6) Rohingya Case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and Rakhine Stakeholders' Perspectives

In November 2019, Gambia, supported by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), filed a case against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague. The case accused Myanmar of committing atrocities against the Rohingya residents in Rakhine State, claiming these actions violated several provisions of the Genocide Convention. Gambia, a signatory to the convention since 1978, invoked Article 9, which permits disputes between states concerning genocide responsibility to be brought before the ICJ[50]. In December 2019, the ICJ held hearings on Gambia's request for provisional measures to protect the Rohingya in Myanmar from genocide. The court unanimously approved these measures in January 2020. A year later, in January 2021, Myanmar, led by the NLD government, filed preliminary objections, challenging the court's jurisdiction and Gambia's right to bring the case forward[51].

During that time, over the ICJ case, the standpoints of the Rakhine and Rohingya stakeholders were noteworthy. In January 2020, a panel of 17 judges at the ICJ unanimously ordered Myanmar to take all necessary measures to prevent genocide against the Rohingya, who they determined remain at serious risk (Ongoing Human Rights Violations in Myanmar 2017-2020, 2020)[52]. The order includes

[47] Pwint, N. L. H. (2019, January 17). *Arakan Army Chief Promises Myanmar Military, Govt Eye For an Eye*. The Irrawaddy. Retrieved August 13, 2024, from https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/arakan-army-chief-promises-myanmar-military-govt-eye-eye.html

[48] Pwint, N. L. H. (2019, January 17). *Arakan Army Chief Promises Myanmar Military, Govt Eye For an Eye*. The Irrawaddy. Retrieved August 13, 2024, from https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/arakan-army-chief-promises-myanmar-military-govt-eye-eye.html

[49] BBC (Burmese). (2020, September 20). Arakan Youth Network welcomes the solidarity stand of the Rohingya with the Rakhine students' protest. ရခိုင်နဲ့အတူ ရပ်ကြောင်း မွတ်ဆလင်တွေပြသမှု ရခိုင်လူငယ်မျိုးဆက်သစ်ကွန်ရက် ကြိုဆို - BBC News မြန်မာ (youtube.com)

[50] Human Right Watch. (2022, February 14). *Developments in Gambia's Case Against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice*. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved August 13, 2024, from https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/14/developments-gambias-case-against-myanmar-international-court-justice

[51] Human Right Watch. (2022, February 14). *Developments in Gambia's Case Against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice*. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved August 13, 2024, from https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/14/developments-gambias-case-against-myanmar-international-court-justice

[52] *Ongoing Human Rights Violations in Myanmar 2017-2020*. (2020, April). Geneva International Centre for Justice. Retrieved August, 2024, from https://www.gicj.org/gicj-reports/1785-ongoing-human-rights-violations-in-myanmar-2017-2020

preventing killings and serious harm, as well as preserving evidence of any potential genocide that has already taken place[53]. Rohingya groups welcomed the ICJ's decision, viewing it as a significant step toward justice. Tun Khin, president of the Burmese Rohingya Organisation-UK (BROUK), called the ruling a crucial moment and a validation for those who have endured the genocide. Amnesty International also praised the decision, stating it sends a clear message that the world will not tolerate Myanmar's atrocities[54].

Perspectives of Rakhine stakeholders were also reported in December 2020[55]. An MP, Kyaw Zaw Oo, mentioned that the ICJ case against the Myanmar government and military could provide better opportunities for other ethnic minority groups to check the power abuse and rights violations of the Myanmar military. Other Rakhine analysts said that those Rohingya eligible for citizenship should be granted their rights, including the right to travel to other parts of the country, while another analyst said that the root cause of this problem is the lack of self-determination in Rakhine State. Additionally, the AA, as a member of the Three Brotherhood Alliance, released a statement expressing their support for the ICJ case that could punish the Myanmar government, particularly the Myanmar military[56].

(3.7) The 2020 Elections in Arakan

Given the complex situations arising from the 2017 Rohingya crisis, the emergence of ARSA, and the rise of the AA with its political ambitions, the region was mired in uncertainty as the 2020 nationwide election approached. In the 2010 election, three out of 29 representatives elected to the national parliament from Rakhine were Rohingya. Additionally, two Rohingya candidates were among the 35 members chosen for the Rakhine regional assembly that year[57]. However, in 2015, Rohingyas were excluded from voting and did not receive adequate representation.

For the 2020 general election, the NLD government had the power to change the rules and allow the Rohingya to vote. By amending the law, the NLD could have included the Rohingya in the political process in Myanmar. This change was feasible; in 2010, the USDP had reached out to the Rohingya community in Rakhine State because they needed Rohingya leaders to represent certain areas. However, many believed that neither the NLD nor the USDP were willing to include the Rohingya in the next elections[58]. Therefore, it fell to human rights advocates to push for the Rohingya's inclusion in Myanmar's political future. With few advocates and limited platforms, it might be up to the international community to intervene.

On October 16, 2020, the Union Election Commission (UEC) made a surprising and sweeping decision to cancel most of the voting in Rakhine State scheduled for November 8. This action effectively disenfranchised about 73 percent of voters in Rakhine, in addition to the Rohingya who had already lost their voting rights in 2015. The UEC defended its decision by citing ongoing armed conflict in the state, arguing that the elections could not be conducted fairly or freely. When critics questioned why elections had not been canceled in Paletwa, a war-torn area with significant security issues, the UEC decided to cancel elections in some parts of that town in Chin State while allowing them to proceed in a few village areas in Rakhine[59]. The UEC's decision significantly reduced elected representation from Rakhine State, with only 16 out of 29 national parliamentary seats and 14 out of 34 state parliamentary

[53] Beake, N. (2020, January 23). *Myanmar Rohingya: Government rejects ICJ ruling*. BBC. Retrieved August 13, 2024, from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51229796

[54] Beake, N. (2020, January 23). *Myanmar Rohingya: Government rejects ICJ ruling*. BBC. Retrieved August 13, 2024, from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51229796

[55] BBC (Burmese). (2020, December 20), Perspectives of Rakhine on the Rohingya and ICJ case. https://youtu.be/zIBEaLse-Tc

[56] Irrawaddy, The.(2020, December). Three Brotherhood Alliance Released Statement Over ICJ Case for Political Profits.https://burma.irrawaddy.com/news/2019/11/30/209543.html

[57] Mclaughlin, T. (2015, October 1). *Rising Rakhine party looming threat to Myanmar's Muslim minority*. Reuters. Retrieved August 12, 2024, from https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN0RV5RO/

[58] Crouch, M. (2018). *Elections a sham in Rakhine State*. The Interpreter. Retrieved August 12, 2024, from https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/elections-sham-rakhine-state

[59] Clapp, P. A., & Tower, J. (2020, November 5). *Election Cancellations in Rakhine State Could Signal Trouble for Myanmar*. United States Institute of Peace. Retrieved August 13, 2024, from https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/11/election-cancellations-rakhine-state-could-signal-trouble-myanmar

seats filled by Rakhine legislators. Most remaining elections were held only in urban areas, leaving rural areas, which lacked polling stations, at a disadvantage[60].

The UEC's decision to cancel elections in Rakhine State has sparked criticism from ethnic minority parties, especially the Rakhine parties, who view it as a power grab by the ruling NLD party. Most cancellations affected central and northern Rakhine State, where the ANP is dominant, while elections proceeded in southern Rakhine, an NLD stronghold[61]. This could reduce the influence of Rakhine parties, potentially leading to increased seats for the USDP and military representatives. Zaw Htay, a spokesman in the president's office, stated that the military and General Administration Department recommended most cancellations due to ongoing conflict, while the NLD had suggested fewer. Discrepancies between the UEC's decisions and military recommendations added to the confusion[62].

On the other hand, the cancellation of elections in Rakhine State and parts of southern Chin State, driven by violence between the AA and the Myanmar military, has left these areas with weak local administrative structures and limited campaigning due to COVID-19 lockdowns and internet restrictions. This situation is likely to depress voter turnout and result in elected representatives who represent only a small portion of the population. The AA, which has been undermining local administration and targeting election officials, stands to benefit as reduced representation in government could further its goals[63]. This scenario could exacerbate conflict and human rights violations, making armed resistance a more attractive option for those seeking greater autonomy, which could strengthen the AA's recruitment and influence[64].

For the Rohingya community, there was hope that the NLD government, led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, would amend the Election Law to enable their political participation in 2020. However, Human Rights Watch reported in 2020 that the Myanmar government was using the 1982 Citizenship Law and the Election Law to disenfranchise the Rohingya and prevent them from running for office, despite many having lived in Myanmar for generations. The NLD, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, has not reversed these discriminatory laws and has supported the military's actions against the Rohingya, including ethnic cleansing and possible genocide. Rohingya refugees abroad and those remaining in Myanmar, including those in camps facing severe abuses, are barred from voting. Voter lists did not include Rohingya camps and villages, further excluding them from the electoral process[65].

The Rohingya community viewed the election as neither free nor fair. In a report from Al Jazeera, Yusuf, 65, who lives in the world's largest refugee settlement in Bangladesh, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone: "Not being able to vote makes me feel really sad. It feels as though we are dead and we don't matter."He continued, "These rights are important. We want our children to become engineers and lawyers one day. But I don't see this happening any time in the future. I don't have the confidence. I don't know if we will even be able to vote in 2025"[66].

[60] NAING, K. H. (2020, October 28). *'The referee is taking bribes': Rakhine candidates fume over vote cancellations*. Frontier Myanmar. Retrieved August 13, 2024, from https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-referee-is-taking-bribes-rakhine-candidates-fume-over-vote-cancellations/

[61] Frontier Myanmar. (2020, October 20). *Rakhine armed group admits Myanmar election abductions*. Retrieved August 13, 2024, from https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/rakhine-armed-group-admits-myanmar-election-abductions/

[62] NAING, K. H. (2020, October 28). *'The referee is taking bribes': Rakhine candidates fume over vote cancellations*. Frontier Myanmar. Retrieved August 13, 2024, from https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-referee-is-taking-bribes-rakhine-candidates-fume-over-vote-cancellations/

[63] Mathieson, S. (2020, November 2). *The Arakan Army in Myanmar: Deadly Conflict Rises in Rakhine State*. United States Institute of Peace. Retrieved August 13, 2024, from https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/11/arakan-army-myanmar-deadly-conflict-rises-rakhine-state

[64] NAING, K. H. (2020, October 28). *'The referee is taking bribes': Rakhine candidates fume over vote cancellations*. Frontier Myanmar. Retrieved August 13, 2024, from https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-referee-is-taking-bribes-rakhine-candidates-fume-over-vote-cancellations/

[65] Human Right Watch. (2020, October 5). *Myanmar: Election Fundamentally Flawed*. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved August 13, 2024, from https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/05/myanmar-election-fundamentally-flawed

[66] Corbyn, J. (2020, November 6). *'We don't matter': Rohingya deprived of vote in Myanmar elections*. Al Jazeera. Retrieved August 13, 2024, from https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/6/as-though-we-are-dead-unable-to-vote-myanmar-poll-robs-rohing

Part IV: After the Military Coup in 2021

(4.1) Reactions of Rakhine Stakeholders Toward the Coup

After the military coup on February 1, 2021, the Arakan region experienced relatively less violence compared to other parts of Myanmar. While the junta focused on suppressing anti-coup movements elsewhere, the ULA established parallel governance, effectively taking control over much of the region, especially in the northern areas[67]. Although the AA shares the broader goal of overthrowing the Myanmar military, it pursues its own objectives, which differ from those of the National Unity Government (NUG). This was evident when AA Commander Twan Mrat Naing advised his followers not to join the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and nationwide pro-democracy protests in Rakhine State, which was the NUG's key strategy against the junta in early 2021. By January 2022, he reaffirmed that the ULA would "maintain distance from the ongoing struggle for democracy in Burma," noting that Rakhine State had not benefited from previous involvement in the Burmese democracy movement[68].

In an interview with Bangladeshi media in January 2022, AA chief General Twan Mrat Naing responded to the question[69]: "Our main objective is 'Rakhita,' to win back our lost sovereignty. The previous generations in Arakan wasted a lot of time following and supporting the Burmese. …We want to work towards our own objectives. It is our strategic position to remain at a distance from the ongoing struggle for democracy now in Burma. We may not be directly involved in it, but our affiliated organizations are part of the struggle. However, I would say that we have taken a smart stance".

Despite its focus on parallel governance, the Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BHAs), which includes the AA, warned the Myanmar military to halt its brutal crackdowns on protesters or face support for the Myanmar Spring Revolution following the coup. This alliance demonstrated its resolve by launching a joint attack on a police station in Lashio Township, Shan State, on April 10, in retaliation for the junta's deadly actions against protesters in Bago the day before. Although the AA was initially silent after the coup, reports from Kachin State indicated that AA troops were already engaging in attacks against the Myanmar military alongside northern allies like the Kachin Independence Army (KIA)[70]. This showed that while the AA, one of the most powerful stakeholders in the region, pursued its own political agenda, it would not support the junta's brutality against civilians[71].

The positions of other political parties on the 2021 coup are also noteworthy. The situation in Rakhine led to widespread indifference toward the resistance movement, with some political elites even showing support for the junta. While several parties, such as the ALD, openly condemned the military takeover, the ANP and AFP—the two largest Rakhine parties—chose to remain silent.

The junta quickly exploited these divisions, offering positions on its governing council to various Rakhine parties immediately after the coup. Although the ALD and AFP turned down these offers, the ANP, the largest Rakhine party, accepted. Daw Aye Nu Sein, the ANP's vice-chair, spokesperson, and policy board member, joined the national-level coup council[72]. Furthermore, on February 13, another key ANP figure, Zaw Aye Maung, took up a position as deputy ethnic affairs

[67] CAS. (2024, July). *The Arakan Army's Journey: From Rebels to Rulers and A New Arakan Paradigm*. Center for Arakan Studies. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://www.arakanstudies.org/ibr/24/03/ibr_03-July_24.html

[68] Parvez, A., Alam, S., & Ronnie, A. (2022, January 2). 'We recognise the human rights and citizen rights of the Rohingyas'. Prothom Alo English. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://en.prothomalo.com/opinion/interview/we-recognise-the-human-rights-andcitizen-rights-of-the-rohingyas

[69] Parvez, A., Alam, S., & Ronnie, A. (2022, January 2). 'We recognise the human rights and citizen rights of the Rohingyas'. Prothom Alo English. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://en.prothomalo.com/opinion/interview/we-recognise-the-human-rights-andcitizen-rights-of-the-rohingyas

[70] Hlaing, K. H. (2021, April 14). After Myanmar's Military Coup, Arakan Army Accelerates Implementation of the 'Way of Rakhita'. The Diplomat. Retrieved August, 2024, from https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/after-myanmars-military-coup-arakan-armyaccelerates-implementation-of-the-way-of-rakhita/

[71] CAS. (2024, July). *The Arakan Army's Journey: From Rebels to Rulers and A New Arakan Paradigm*. Center for Arakan Studies. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://www.arakanstudies.org/ibr/24/03/ibr_03-July_24.html

[72] The Irrawaddy. (2021, February 9). *Rakhine Party Under Pressure for Taking Position on Military Regime's Governing Body*. The Irrawaddy. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/rakhine-party-pressure-taking-position-military-regimes-governing-body.html

minister under the junta[73], despite a February 7 joint statement from 47 Rakhine civil society organizations opposing the coup[74].

Initially, the ANP supported the junta, claiming it was protecting Rakhine's interests, which led to criticism from the Rakhine public. However, after months of being ignored, the party distanced itself from the regime, with its chair stating that Vice-Chair Aye Nu Sein's cooperation was her own decision[75]. The Arakan Front Party (AFP), initially neutral, shifted its position after its leader, Dr. Aye Maung, was released from prison, showing support for the junta's electoral plans. However, by May, both the ANP and AFP rejected further cooperation with the junta[76]. Similar to the sentiments of many Rakhine people, the ANP, ALD, and AFP view the National Unity Government (NUG) as merely an extension of the NLD and have chosen not to participate in its activities[77].

(4.2) Rohingya Reactions

Initially, the Rohingya community supported the anti-coup movement and condemned the regime's actions due to the intense oppression of civilians. In response to the coup, Shabbir Ahmad, a young Rohingya activist and refugee in Bangladesh, and his peers began using Twitter to show support for anti-coup protesters in Myanmar. Although their messages initially went unnoticed, as the Myanmar military's violence against protesters mirrored the suffering endured by the Rohingya, many in Myanmar began to empathize with their plight. This shift led to an outpouring of apologies and support from Myanmar Twitter users[78].

Shabbir continued to share solidarity messages and updates from the refugee camps, including a viral tweet featuring Rohingya refugees performing the Hunger Games salute despite recent losses from a fire. This act of solidarity resonated with Myanmar users, leading to further apologies and expressions of regret[79]. While there was initial mistrust among some Rohingya refugees, Shabbir and his friends successfully persuaded many to support their outreach efforts, leading to improved relations between the Rohingya and other Myanmar communities. This unexpected positive outcome highlights the potential for reconciliation driven by grassroots efforts rather than solely by political leaders or international intervention[80].

However, since February 1, 2021, the State Administration Council (SAC) has arrested thousands of Rohingya for "unauthorized travel" and imposed new movement restrictions and aid blockages on their camps and villages[81]. These actions by the junta constitute crimes against humanity,

[73] *After Working With Myanmar's Regime, Rakhine's Major Party Remains Divided*. (2021, May 7). The Irrawaddy. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/after-working-with-myanmars-regime-rakhines-major-party-remains-divided.html

[74] Hlaing, K. H. (2022, August 10). *Myanmar's Rakhine State: Parties Split, Rebels Rise, and the Junta Schemes*. United States Institute of Peace. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/08/myanmars-rakhine-state-parties-split-rebels-rise-and-junta-schemes

[75] DMG. (2021, February 7). *Arakanese CSOs call on ANP not to accept role on State Administration Council*. DMG. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://www.dmediag.com/article/opinion/2880-anp-chairman

[76] Myanmar Now. (2021, May 5). *ANP chair says party may end its association with junta*. Myanmar Now. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/anp-chair-says-party-may-end-its-association-with-junta/

[77] Hlaing, K. H. (2022, August 10). *Myanmar's Rakhine State: Parties Split, Rebels Rise, and the Junta Schemes*. United States Institute of Peace. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/08/myanmars-rakhine-state-parties-split-rebels-rise-and-junta-schemes

[78] Olney, J., Ahmad, S., Oo, N., Ben-Natan, S., Mann, I., Gilman, D., Musalo, K., Ramji, J., Andisha, N. A., Hamilton, R., Shah, P., Balliette, A., Poltavets, U., Stetsenko, M., Navarro, F., Molnar, P., Turčalo, S., Bazard, C., Amirfar, C., … Berger, C. (2021, June 10). *Beyond the Coup in Myanmar: The Views of Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*. Just Security. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://www.justsecurity.org/76857/beyond-the-coup-in-myanmar-the-views-of-rohingya-refugees-in-bangladesh/

[79] Olney, J., Ahmad, S., Oo, N., Ben-Natan, S., Mann, I., Gilman, D., Musalo, K., Ramji, J., Andisha, N. A., Hamilton, R., Shah, P., Balliette, A., Poltavets, U., Stetsenko, M., Navarro, F., Molnar, P., Turčalo, S., Bazard, C., Amirfar, C., … Berger, C. (2021, June 10). *Beyond the Coup in Myanmar: The Views of Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*. Just Security. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://www.justsecurity.org/76857/beyond-the-coup-in-myanmar-the-views-of-rohingya-refugees-in-bangladesh/

[80] Olney, J., Ahmad, S., Oo, N., Ben-Natan, S., Mann, I., Gilman, D., Musalo, K., Ramji, J., Andisha, N. A., Hamilton, R., Shah, P., Balliette, A., Poltavets, U., Stetsenko, M., Navarro, F., Molnar, P., Turčalo, S., Bazard, C., Amirfar, C., … Berger, C. (2021, June 10). *Beyond the Coup in Myanmar: The Views of Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*. Just Security. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://www.justsecurity.org/76857/beyond-the-coup-in-myanmar-the-views-of-rohingya-refugees-in-bangladesh/

[81] Bauchner, S. (2022, June 11). *"Nothing Called Freedom": A Decade of Detention for Rohingya in Myanmar's Rakhine State*. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://www.hrw.org/content/382193

including apartheid, persecution, and deprivation of liberty[82]. Despite more than three months having passed since Cyclone Mocha struck Rakhine State, the junta continues to obstruct crucial humanitarian aid, including essential medical care needed to address outbreaks of dengue and malaria in affected communities[83].

Moreover, refugees in Bangladesh are concerned that the situation for the Rohingya could deteriorate further under the current junta, potentially exacerbating risks for those still in Myanmar and delaying any prospects for safe repatriation. One camp resident remarked that while the previous democratic government failed to address their needs, the current junta poses an even greater threat. Another expressed skepticism about any positive outcomes from the military coup, citing the Tatmadaw's history of injustice. The prevailing fear among refugees is that large-scale repatriation will remain unfeasible as long as Myanmar is under military control[84]. Junta leader Min Aung Hlaing has reinforced these concerns by rejecting the Rohingya's identity and right to return, indicating that without significant changes in Myanmar's governance, resolving the Rohingya crisis remains highly unlikely[85]. Overall, even though there was some degree of Rohingya participation in anti-military coup activities in refugee camps in Bangladesh and diaspora locations, Rohingya in Rakhine State have very limited opportunities to join the pro-democracy movements happening in other parts of the country.

(4.3) The Policy Stance of the ULA/AA on the Rohingya Issue

The Rohingya issue presents a significant challenge for the ULA/AA and its governance, both currently and in the near future. To analyze the ULA/AA's policy stance on the Rohingya community, it is essential to evaluate it based on two critical aspects: its stance on the repatriation process and its governance policies regarding the Rohingya community within Arakan. On September 19, 2022, marking the first statement since the 2017 'regional clearance' operations by the Myanmar military against the Rohingya in northern Arakan, the ULA/AA spokesperson outlined the movement's position on refugee repatriation from Bangladesh as follows[86]:

"Some people consider the ULA has a responsibility for the resolution of the Rohingya crisis. If it is to be so, there shall be two things. First, the international community and Bangladesh should recognize the ULA/AA as the main stakeholder in the resolution of this crisis. Secondly, Bangladesh and other Great Powers, including the United Nations, should give full support and stand together with us."

Moreover, ULA/AA leader General Twan Mrat Naing also acknowledged the complexity of resolving the Rohingya issue during an interview reported by Bangladeshi media in January 2022. He emphasized that the Rohingya problem cannot be addressed with simple solutions and requires international collaboration, particularly between Bangladesh and Myanmar[87]. While human rights and citizenship rights have been recognized, he highlighted the need for a nuanced approach to human rights and identity issues, noting that the Rohingya identity has become a contentious topic intertwined with historical and political factors. The strong sense of nationalism and historical grievances among the Rakhine people contribute to this division. The Arakan Army advocates for unity among all groups

[82] Human Right Watch. (2023, June 20). *Myanmar: Junta Blocks Lifesaving Cyclone Aid*. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/20/myanmar-junta-blocks-lifesaving-cyclone-aid

[83] Human Rights Watch. (2023, August 20). *Future Bleak for Rohingya in Bangladesh, Myanmar*. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/08/20/future-bleak-rohingya-bangladesh-myanmar

[84] Olney, J., Ahmad, S., Oo, N., Ben-Natan, S., Mann, I., Gilman, D., Musalo, K., Ramji, J., Andisha, N. A., Hamilton, R., Shah, P., Balliette, A., Poltavets, U., Stetsenko, M., Navarro, F., Molnar, P., Turčalo, S., Bazard, C., Amirfar, C., … Berger, C. (2021, June 10). *Beyond the Coup in Myanmar: The Views of Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*. Just Security. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://www.justsecurity.org/76857/beyond-the-coup-in-myanmar-the-views-of-rohingya-refugees-in-bangladesh/

[85] Tostevin, M., & Birsel, R. (2021, May 24). *Myanmar junta leader casts doubt on return of Rohingya*. Reuters. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/myanmar-junta-leader-casts-doubt-return-rohingya-2021-05-24/

[86] Lynn, K. (2023, January 26). *The Emergence of the ULA/AA and Question of the Rohingya Crisis*. Transnational Institute. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://www.tni.org/en/article/the-emergence-of-the-ulaaa-and-question-of-the-rohingya-crisis

[87] Parvez, A., Alam, S., & Ronnie, A. (2022, January 2). *'We recognise the human rights and citizen rights of the Rohingyas'*. Prothom Alo English. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://en.prothomalo.com/opinion/interview/we-recognise-the-human-rights-and-citizen-rights-of-the-rohingyas

in Arakan against external pressures, recognizing Bangladesh as a crucial partner in finding a resolution[88].

In a related statement during an interview with Asia Times, the ULA leadership emphasized their recognition of the human and citizenship rights of all residents in Rakhine State. However, they cautioned that a large-scale repatriation of refugees under the current conditions could provoke further instability. The ULA leader also noted that the term "Rohingya" remains largely unacceptable to the majority of the Rakhine population[89].

To date, there has been limited reaction from both the Rohingya population and the international community regarding the ULA's recent position on refugee repatriation. However, this statement marks a significant shift in the ULA's approach to resolving the Rohingya crisis. Historically, the ULA has viewed engagement on this issue as politically perilous, potentially falling into the Myanmar military's 'divide-and-rule' tactics. Following the ULA's statement, rumors circulated about political maneuvers by the SAC, including the clandestine distribution of pamphlets in Mrauk-U and Sittwe questioning the AA's alignment with Rohingya and Muslim interests. Pro-SAC media also began to question the AA's commitment to Rakhine interests, further fueling tensions[90].

(4.3.1) ULA's Approaches Toward the Remaining Rohingya in Arakan

During the initial ceasefire with the junta beginning August 1, 2021, the AA capitalized on the opportunity to address judicial and administrative issues systematically. They encouraged residents in Rakhine State to report criminal incidents directly to their administration[91]. Since then, the AA has initiated plans for social cohesion, essential for peaceful and successful governance in the region, particularly between Rakhine and Rohingya communities. Initially, the approach involved inclusive governance structures for all communities, including Rohingyas residing in Arakan State. This strategy was optimistic and warmly welcomed by both Rohingyas and other residents in the region as a forward-looking initiative[92].

The ULA is considered to have been working to foster reconciliation and integrate the Rohingya community into local administration in Arakan. By promoting intercommunal harmony across Rakhine State through various initiatives, the focus has primarily been on improving Rakhine and Rohingya relations, while also including other ethnic and religious groups. To foster inclusivity, ULA/AA representatives have encouraged referring to Rohingya as "Muslims" rather than the term "Bengalis," which implies foreignness and questions their citizenship status. Additionally, the ULA/AA has emphasized the importance of improving the Rohingya's freedom of movement. The approach includes[93]:

- **Community Engagement:** The ULA organizes events such as football matches, traditional festivals, and live music performances in rural areas under their control. These gatherings aim to promote social cohesion and community interaction between Rohingya and Rakhine residents. Rohingya leaders and media are invited and participate in publicizing these events, which are seen as efforts to enhance mutual understanding and inclusion[94].

[88] Parvez, A., Alam, S., & Ronnie, A. (2022, January 2). *'We recognise the human rights and citizen rights of the Rohingyas'*. Prothom Alo English. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://en.prothomalo.com/opinion/interview/we-recognise-the-human-rights-and-citizen-rights-of-the-rohingyas

[89] COAR. (2023, September 27). *A Governance Tapestry: Layered Administrations and Revolutionary Service Delivery in Western Myanmar - COAR*. COAR Global. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://coar-global.org/2023/09/27/a-governance-tapestry-layered-administrations-and-revolutionary-service-delivery-in-western-myanmar/#_ftn71

[90] Lynn, K. (2023, January 26). *The Emergence of the ULA/AA and Question of the Rohingya Crisis*. Transnational Institute. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://www.tni.org/en/article/the-emergence-of-the-ulaaa-and-question-of-the-rohingya-crisis

[91] DMG. (2021, August 3). ULA introduces a parallel justice system for Arakan State. DMG Newsroom, Sittwe. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://www.dmediag.com/news/3235-ula-introduces

[92] CAS. (2024, July). *The Arakan Army's Journey: From Rebels to Rulers and A New Arakan Paradigm*. Center for Arakan Studies. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://www.arakanstudies.org/ibr/24/03/ibr_03-July_24.html

[93] CORA. (2023, September 27). *A Governance Tapestry: Layered Administrations and Revolutionary Service Delivery in Western Myanmar - COAR*. COAR Global. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://coar-global.org/2023/09/27/a-governance-tapestry-layered-administrations-and-revolutionary-service-d

[94] CORA. (2023, September 27). *A Governance Tapestry: Layered Administrations and Revolutionary Service Delivery in Western Myanmar - COAR*. COAR Global. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://coar-global.org/2023/09/27/a-governance-tapestry-layered-administrations-and-revolutionary-service-d

- **Administrative Inclusion:** The ULA has incorporated Rohingya individuals into various administrative roles, including the military, police, and judiciary. For example, a Rohingya soldier was featured in a video interrogating locals in their language, and the ULA's governance in areas like Minbya township has been noted for reduced corruption and improved community relations.

These efforts are intended to improve intr-community relations and increase the Rohingya's participation in local governance, contrasting with the more segregated and contentious environment in SAC-controlled areas. The social interactions between Rohingya and Rakhine communities are notably more frequent and positive in ULA-controlled rural areas compared to the more segregated and tense environments found in SAC-controlled urban and suburban regions[95]. Regarding these activities by the ULA/AA, a Rohingya community leader commented after a football event in January 2022 in Kyauktaw township:

> "I believe that the essence of the football match held by the ULA is to achieve social cohesion and community reconciliation among the diverse groups, and we were also allowed to discuss and participate in it from the beginning."

Moreover, improvements in ULA governance were highlighted in an RFA report from August 23, 2021, when the ULA announced the creation of police and judiciary departments in Buthidaung township. Lar Lar Myar, a local Muslim resident, remarked[96]: "When the [majority ethnic Bamar] were in control [of Rakhine State], our community faced discrimination and was excluded from participating in civil service, defense, or internal affairs. We were never given the opportunity to take any training courses".

In addition to fostering inclusive governance, the ULA/AA's fair treatment of all communities was highlighted during emergencies like COVID-19 and natural disasters, particularly Cyclone Mocha in May 2023[97]. The ULA's collaboration with the Muslim community became evident as it coordinated disaster responses before and after the cyclone. By May 13, nearly 102,000 people, primarily from Rakhine and Muslim communities, were relocated to safer areas. The ULA provided shelter, food, medication, and security. After the cyclone, ULA teams offered healthcare, food, and support for rebuilding, irrespective of race, ethnicity, or religion[98]. These constructive approaches by the ULA/AA toward the inclusion of all ethnicities and residents in the region are steps toward improving social cohesion and achieving peaceful coexistence.

(4.4) The State of Social Cohesion in Rakhine State after the Coup

After the coup in 2021, the situation regarding social cohesion between Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists has improved and can be regarded as more promising. While structural discrimination against Muslims and tense Buddhist-Muslim relations persist, there are signs of greater openness toward Muslims, especially among younger generations. Analysis of social media by the author has revealed a noticeable decline in anti-Muslim hate speech among Rakhine netizens since the coup. Additionally, the Rakhine public is increasingly less likely to associate the Myanmar military with the Bamar population as a whole. These changes challenge the narratives of Rakhine political parties and could threaten their long-term relevance, particularly if they continue to collaborate with the junta's State Administration Council (SAC)[99].

There have also been efforts to foster social cohesion between the two communities. Eid-ul-Fitr (Kurbani Eid) was celebrated in July 2022 for the first time by Muslim university students and Rakhine

[95] Lynn, K. (2023, January 26). *The Emergence of the ULA/AA and Question of the Rohingya Crisis*. Transnational Institute. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://www.tni.org/en/article/the-emergence-of-the-ulaaa-and-question-of-the-rohingya-crisis

[96] RFA. (2021, August). *Arakan Army Eclipsing Government in Administering Myanmar's Rakhine State Amid Cease-fire*. Retrieved 2024, from https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/aa-08232021210057.html?fbclid=IwAR3cN3AyOT5a4B2LFevOrd72omd7zBbNXq5BIHk8lAoJE9ryHZwpTxzZo2I

[97] BNI. (2022). ရခိုင်တွင် ဘာသာမတူ လူမျိုးမတူသူများအကြား သဟဇာတဖြစ်ရေး အဓိကထားဆောင်ရွက်နေဟု ULA/AA ပြော. BNI. Retrieved 2024, from https://www.bnionline.net/mm/news-91538

[98] Satt, M. (2024, May 5). *The Arakan Army and Bengali Muslim Community in Arakan*. Global Arakan Network. Retrieved August 18, 2024, from https://www.globalarakannetwork.com/post/the-arakan-army-and-bengali-muslim-community-in-arakan

[99] Hlaing, K. H. (2022, August 10). *Myanmar's Rakhine State: Parties Split, Rebels Rise, and the Junta Schemes*. United States Institute of Peace. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/08/myanmars-rakhine-state-parties-split-rebels-rise-and-junta-schemes

civil society groups together in Sittwe, the capital of Arakan (Rakhine) State. The event, held at SS Restaurant on July 11 at 3 p.m., was organized by Muslim students, Rakhine youth and student organizations, and other minority ethnic members, with NGO representatives also in attendance[100].

This celebration was notable as it marked the first time both Muslim and Buddhist communities participated in the festival together. Student unions from various universities in Sittwe, including the All Arakan Youth Association, Basic Students Union, Women Generation, Pichaung Institute, and Kaman ethnic groups, participated in the event. All attendees enjoyed traditional Muslim snacks during the function[101].

Ko Zaw Min Tun, a Muslim student involved in the event, praised the collaborative spirit and expressed hope that it would foster future unity in Rakhine State. He highlighted the positive understanding and mutual respect demonstrated by the Rakhine people and emphasized that the Eid festival could contribute to greater harmony among the communities in the State[102]. Although freedom of movement for the Rohingya has not dramatically improved across all townships, the ULA/AA has made notable strides in enhancing their mobility in several areas by working with Rakhine villagers and reducing the presence of Myanmar armed forces and police[103]. For instance, in Rathedaung Township, a Rakhine farmer mentioned in an interview with CORA: "Muslim people can now travel through and enter Rakhine villages because the Arakan People's Authority (APA) informs Rakhine people not to restrict them." Similarly, a Rohingya leader in Sittwe Township shared how the ULA/AA's efforts have facilitated greater movement and access to livelihoods: "They [the ULA/AA] told us to seek their help if any Rakhine people cause security issues when we visit their villages. This support allows us to travel and work more freely in Rakhine areas"[104].

The ULA/AA's approach to the Rohingya, focusing on inter-ethnic and inter-religious harmony, stands out compared to past political movements in Rakhine State. While the motivations behind this inclusive stance remain complex—some suggest it is driven by the international focus on the Rohingya issue—the shift is a significant progression[105]. International agencies engaging in western Myanmar should take note of this change, recognizing the ULA/AA's understanding that communal harmony is crucial for building peace and stability in the region. However, despite these advancements, challenges persist, particularly regarding discrimination and bias. While the ULA/AA's top leadership may advocate for intercommunal harmony and non-discrimination, the extent of this policy's support among local administrators remains uncertain.

(4.5) Relations of the ULA with Bangladesh and the Repatriation Question

As 2023 unfolds, the ULA emerges as a prominent and proactive player in discussions surrounding the repatriation of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh. The relationship with the Rohingya community has reached a crucial juncture, yet the path forward is likely to be fraught with challenges and intricate developments[106]. The ULA leader, General Twan Mrat Naing, has expressed his stance on the Rohingya repatriation issue and his engagement with Bangladesh. Despite several

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[100] Narinjara. (2022, July). *Muslim University students, Rakhine civil society group participated in Eid festival*. Retrieved August, 2024, from https://www.narinjara.com/news/detail/62ce688b21f2d423422dc79e

[101] Narinjara. (2022, July). *Muslim University students, Rakhine civil society group participated in Eid festival*. Retrieved August, 2024, from https://www.narinjara.com/news/detail/62ce688b21f2d423422dc79e

[102] Narinjara. (2022, July). *Muslim University students, Rakhine civil society group participated in Eid festival*. Retrieved August, 2024, from https://www.narinjara.com/news/detail/62ce688b21f2d423422dc79e

[103] CORA. (2023, September 27). *A Governance Tapestry: Layered Administrations and Revolutionary Service Delivery in Western Myanmar - COAR*. COAR Global. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://coar-global.org/2023/09/27/a-governance-tapestry-layered-administrations-and-revolutionary-service-delivery-in-western-myanmar/

[104] CORA. (2023, September 27). *A Governance Tapestry: Layered Administrations and Revolutionary Service Delivery in Western Myanmar - COAR*. COAR Global. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://coar-global.org/2023/09/27/a-governance-tapestry-layered-administrations-and-revolutionary-service-delivery-in-western-myanmar/

[105] CORA. (2023, September 27). *A Governance Tapestry: Layered Administrations and Revolutionary Service Delivery in Western Myanmar - COAR*. COAR Global. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://coar-global.org/2023/09/27/a-governance-tapestry-layered-administrations-and-revolutionary-service-delivery-in-western-myanmar/

[106] Lynn, K. (2023, January 26). *The Emergence of the ULA/AA and Question of the Rohingya Crisis*. Transnational Institute. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://www.tni.org/en/article/the-emergence-of-the-ulaaa-and-question-of-the-rohingya-crisis

attempts to engage with the Bangladeshi government to find a resolution to the Rohingya crisis, the ULA has not yet achieved the desired response. General Twan Mrat Naing has emphasized the importance of discussing the issue with Bangladeshi policymakers and is awaiting a favorable outcome[107].

Regarding the visit of Myanmar's central minister for rehabilitation to Rakhine State and media reports about potential plans for Rohingya rehabilitation, General Twan Mrat Naing remains skeptical. He highlighted that the situation is not yet conducive to repatriation, citing the instability and unpredictability of the Burmese military's position. The ongoing conflict and the uncertain status of the ceasefire contribute to the mistrust surrounding the military's commitment to resolving the issue[108].

In January 2022, Myanmar and Bangladesh resumed discussions through an online meeting. By March, the SAC authority in Rakhine State reported receiving a list of 700 "Muslims" for repatriation, although no further details have been released by either side since then[109]. Given the strong influence of the Arakan Army (AA) in Rakhine State, its consent—whether direct or indirect—will likely be essential for any large-scale repatriation efforts to proceed. General Twan Mrat Naing, the AA's leader, has expressed that his group does not oppose repatriation, acknowledging that it is "only natural" for Rohingya refugees to want to return. However, he has also warned that the current conditions are not stable enough for such a process and that a large-scale return could potentially cause "unrest." Supporting repatriation is a sensitive issue for the AA, as it risks backlash from its hardline Rakhine supporters who still view most Rohingya as illegal immigrants. Nonetheless, the AA may agree to limited, organized returns if it sees potential gains, particularly in terms of legitimacy and international recognition. International stakeholders should encourage the AA in this direction[110].

The AA's role as a governing authority raises significant considerations for Bangladesh. Although the AA has sought to build ties with the Bangladeshi government, Dhaka has remained hesitant due to its policy of avoiding engagement with insurgent groups that challenge the sovereignty of neighboring states. However, with the AA now holding partial or full control over much of the territory from which Rohingya refugees originated, and with reduced conflict between the AA and Myanmar's military regime, Bangladesh might reconsider its stance. If the AA and Naypyidaw were to formalize a ceasefire, Dhaka may be more inclined to adjust its approach sooner[111].

(4.6) SAC's Military Conscription of Rohingya and Allegations Against the ULA

The SAC's enforcement of forced conscription, based on the 2010 People's Military Service Law, has exacerbated tensions between the Rohingya and Rakhine communities. Under the law, men aged 18-35 and women aged 18-27 face imprisonment if they refuse mandatory military service. This policy has been extended even to the Rohingya, despite their stateless status in Myanmar[112]. The conscription plan has further destabilized communal relations, as the Rohingya, who have long been

[107] Parvez, A., Alam, S., & Ronnie, A. (2022, January 2). *'We recognise the human rights and citizen rights of the Rohingyas'*. Prothom Alo English. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://en.prothomalo.com/opinion/interview/we-recognise-the-human-rights-and-citizen-rights-of-the-rohingyas

[108] Parvez, A., Alam, S., & Ronnie, A. (2022, January 2). *'We recognise the human rights and citizen rights of the Rohingyas'*. Prothom Alo English. Retrieved August 14, 2024, from https://en.prothomalo.com/opinion/interview/we-recognise-the-human-rights-and-citizen-rights-of-the-rohingyas

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[110] International Crisis Group. (2022, June 1). *Avoiding a Return to War in Myanmar's Rakhine State*. Crisis Group. Retrieved August 18, 2024, from https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/avoiding-return-war-myanmars-rakhine-state

[111] International Crisis Group. (2022, June 1). *Avoiding a Return to War in Myanmar's Rakhine State*. Crisis Group. Retrieved August 18, 2024, from https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/avoiding-return-war-myanmars-rakhine-state

[112] Olney, J., & Ahmed, A. (2024, May 8). *Rohingya Face Fresh Uncertainty in Myanmar*. United States Institute of Peace. Retrieved August 18, 2024, from https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/05/rohingya-face-fresh-uncertainty-myanmar

marginalized and denied citizenship, are now being targeted for recruitment by the same military responsible for past atrocities against them[113].

In early 2023, around 100 Rohingya were arrested for refusing conscription as the junta began enforcing the draft ahead of its official implementation. According to a BBC report, in mid-February 2024, Mohammed recounted how a camp leader approached him late at night with orders for military training. "These are army directives," he was told. "If you refuse, they've threatened to harm your family." Several other Rohingya individuals also confirmed to the BBC that military officers have been visiting camps, instructing young men to report for mandatory training[114]. However, diverse reports also mention that not all Rohingya are forcibly recruited by the Myanmar junta, and there is also active collaboration among Rohingya armed groups and pro-SAC collaborators, such as administrators and businesspersons[115].

As with previous tactics, the military has been deliberately fueling tensions between the Rohingya and Rakhine communities through forced recruitment and other coercive measures, echoing strategies used during the 2012 ethnic cleansing campaign, according to Human Rights Watch. In late March, the military forced Rohingya residents to join anti-Arakan Army protests in Buthidaung and Sittwe townships, using threats such as burning down their homes, launching artillery strikes, or detaining them if they refused. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights noted that these protests were likely orchestrated by the military to destabilize Rakhine State by inciting communal conflict for its own benefit[116].

When clashes broke out in the region, particularly in Buthidaung township, many Rohingya residents were affected and fled following the '1027 Operation' in Shan State and resurgences of armed clashes in the region in November 2023. According to an OHCHR report, the capture of Buthidaung led to the displacement of approximately 70,000 individuals, primarily Rohingya, who fled west and south due to ongoing attacks. On May 18, the Arakan Army declared that it had taken control of all Myanmar junta bases in Buthidaung[117].

By April 2024, conflict had surged in the predominantly Rohingya townships of Buthidaung and Maungdaw, home to approximately 240,000 Rohingya. Reports, satellite imagery, and local media indicate that both junta forces and allied Rohingya armed groups engaged in arson attacks against ethnic Rakhine villages on the outskirts and within Buthidaung. The report mentioned that a resident who escaped from Ward 2 in Buthidaung described the situation: "The Arakan Army surrounded the town without any prior conflict. They began using heavy weapons and setting houses on fire simultaneously. People fled in panic, leaving behind the elderly and children in the burning buildings."

Accusations against the AA, particularly from the Rohingya side, were abundant regarding human rights violations during recent border conflicts with the junta. The ULA has typically denied these allegations and pointed out that international observers are failing to address the atrocities committed by the Myanmar junta and Rohingya armed groups against Rakhine and other minority groups in the region[118].

[113] Latifi, A. M., & Gully, A. (2024, March 19). *Rohingya trapped in the middle of Myanmar's escalating conflict*. The New Humanitarian. Retrieved August 18, 2024, from https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2024/03/19/rohingya-trapped-middle-myanmars-escalating-conflict

[114] BBC. (2024, April 7). *Myanmar's army massacred Rohingyas. Now it wants their help*. BBC. Retrieved August 18, 2024, from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-68730994

[115] TNI. (2024,June 7). Arakan at the Crossroads:Addressing Newly-Emerging Military and Political Dynamics,https://www.tni.org/en/article/arakan-at-the-crossroads

[116] *Myanmar: Armies Target Ethnic Rohingya, Rakhine*. (2024, August 12). Human Right Watch. Retrieved August 18, 2024, from https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/08/12/myanmar-armies-target-ethnic-rohingya-rakhine

[117] *Myanmar: Armies Target Ethnic Rohingya, Rakhine*. (2024, August 12). Human Right Watch. Retrieved August 18, 2024, from https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/08/12/myanmar-armies-target-ethnic-rohingya-rakhine

[118] ULA Press Briefing (2024, July), https://t.me/khaingthukha/1296

Part V: Conclusion

Rakhine State, also known as Arakan, remains one of the most underdeveloped, unstable, conflict-stricken, and disconnected regions in the 21st century. Although it is surrounded by the Arakan Roma and other parts of Myanmar, its only international border with Bangladesh is plagued by armed clashes, communal violence, transborder crimes, human trafficking, and drug trafficking, rather than trade, communication, and border visits. The Rakhine and Rohingya, the first and second largest ethnic groups based on cultural-linguistic characteristics, have established competitive and often conflictual historical narratives regarding their existence and perceptions of one another. While the Rakhine view the Rohingya as descendants of Chittagonian Bengali immigrants from the British colonial era, the Rohingya claim to be an indigenous ethnic group with roots in pre-colonial Arakan. The immediate communal violence that erupted in 1942 was largely due to the political vacuum created by World War II and the structural deficits of that time.

Since Myanmar's independence in 1948, both communities and key stakeholders have pursued diverse political motivations and ambitions, often clashing with one another. Rakhine leaders have generally sought more autonomy or sovereignty for their region, while Rohingya leaders have aimed either to establish their own autonomous entity by building a better relationship with the central Burmese government or to fight against it. Despite the emergence of different generations of political leadership, there has never been effective cooperation or collaboration between the two political movements in their struggle against the central Burmese authority. Radical elements from both communities frequently disrupt the fragile trust and platform created by moderate actors.

The lack of political or social cohesion between the two communities can also be seen as a result of the 'divide and rule' tactics employed by successive central Burmese authorities. While the Rakhine believe that the government has favored the Rohingya to undermine the Rakhine movement, the Rohingya often feel that the Burmese authorities prioritize the Rakhine due to their similar religious and cultural practices. At the heart of the tragedy is the failure of post-colonial nation and state-building, resulting from ineffective and non-transparent governance. The Rohingya community faced existential threats, especially in the 1970s and 1990s, from the Burmese government. Similarly, the Rakhine have felt suppressed by the central Burmese government since the fall of Mrauk-U in 1784 and in the modern era following independence in 1948. Armed struggles by both communities have been harshly suppressed rather than resolved through political means by the Burmese military.

When political openings occurred in the 2010s, both communities viewed each other as competitors. The culmination of this 'win-loss' struggle was evident in the 2012 communal violence, an example of the government's failure to control and contain the spread of violence. The asymmetric response of the Myanmar military to ARSA violence in 2017 led to the exodus of several hundred thousand Rohingya to Bangladesh. Feeling insecure and disrespected, armed violence became a viable option for both communities, particularly among the Rakhine. The emergence of the ULA/AA-led armed movement, especially after 2018, resulted in a fundamental shift in power and authority within the triangle of Rakhine, Rohingya, and Burmese authorities. The ULA became a prominent stakeholder, ruling over a large area when a de facto ceasefire was introduced in November 2020. Many Rohingya came under ULA authority, which they viewed as a new Rakhine polity.

Following the military coup in February 2021, both sides responded in different ways but with similar sentiments. Both Rakhine and Rohingya felt dissatisfied with the NLD government's handling of their crises, making the military takeover neither a significant improvement nor deterioration for them. Although both sides view the military-led authoritarian rule as inadequate, they see it as a potential opportunity. Rakhine stakeholders, especially the ULA, have committed to pursuing their own path without necessarily joining the nationwide pro-democracy movement. Rohingya participation in this movement has been limited for various reasons. After three years of the coup, while the AA has continued capturing most township centers across the region, the Rohingya community remains skeptical of the AA's actions and intentions. The results of the social cohesion efforts, primarily initiated by the ULA and other civil society organizations, appear to be diluted, with a fresh wave of inter-communal tension on the rise. The issues of communal tension and social cohesion remain among the most challenging between the Rakhine and Rohingya communities in Arakan. This state of affairs is reflected in the competitive, conflictual, and often exclusive historical narratives held in the psychological sphere. Under the most severe conditions, competition and conflict between the two

groups lead to physical violence, including armed clashes and fights with sticks, knives, and other deadly weapons. Additionally, the differing structural approaches mean that community members and key stakeholders view the root causes of their problems and suffering differently. While the Rakhine attribute the crisis to the loss of sovereignty and lack of autonomy for their region, the Rohingya view the lack of recognition of their 'Rohingya identity' and status as an indigenous ethnic group as the key motivators of their plight.