

The Dilemma of Hard Choices

A Complexity Analysis of Rohingya Refugee Repatriation between Bangladesh and Myanmar



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Photo - A Rohingya hawker carries baskets in Kutupalong refugee camp, in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar district, on December 18, 2025. (AFP)

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Contact

Email: info@arakanstudies.org

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Rohingya refugee repatriation issue represents one of the most protracted humanitarian crises along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border. This study applies complexity theory to examine four key characteristics: heterogeneity of agents, absence of problem ownership, uneven policy adoptions, and non-linearity. The crisis has evolved through multiple displacement waves since 1978, with the 2017 exodus resulting in approximately 963,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. The repatriation process, initially governed by bilateral agreements, has become increasingly complicated by the 2021 military coup, shifting territorial control in Rakhine State by the Arakan Army (ULA/AA), and ongoing international legal proceedings regarding genocide allegations.

The heterogeneity of stakeholders presents a fundamental challenge. Key actors include the Bangladesh and Myanmar governments, the Rohingya refugee community with fragmented representation, camp-based organizations, armed groups (ARSA, RSO, ARA, RIM), diaspora networks, the ULA/AA as de facto authority, international organizations, and regional powers (China, India, ASEAN, OIC, EU, US). The refugee community exhibits deep divisions through competing bodies such as the United Council of Rohingya (UCR), camp-based groups, armed factions, and diaspora coalitions. This diversity of actors with conflicting interests creates a landscape where no single stakeholder can unilaterally determine the repatriation outcome.

A critical feature is the absence of clear ownership regarding responsibility. While Bangladesh and Myanmar are sovereign states with primary obligations, each deflects responsibility. Myanmar maintains that procedures are established, while Bangladesh argues Myanmar must create conducive conditions. The Rohingya community possesses agency over whether to return, yet their conditions—including citizenship recognition, identity acknowledgment, security guarantees, and property restitution—remain largely unaddressed. The ULA/AA, controlling border townships designated for resettlement, has become indispensable despite lacking international recognition. Regional and international actors exercise influence without implementation monopoly, creating fragmented responsibility that perpetuates deadlock.

The issue exhibits significant non-linearity where actions produce unintended consequences. Prolonged displacement has generated host-community tensions, environmental degradation, armed group violence, coercive relocation to Bhasan Char, movement restrictions, and secondary migration to Malaysia, Indonesia and India. On the Myanmar side, ULA/AA territorial gains, junta collaboration with Rohingya militants, land allocation disputes, and mutual atrocities have created new return barriers. These interconnected dynamics create a feedback loop where displacement generates new challenges that further obstruct voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable repatriation, demonstrating that the path from displacement to return follows no straightforward trajectory.

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Lists of Acronyms (Part I)

Acronym	Full Form
AA	Arakan Army
APBn	Armed Police Battalion (Bangladesh)
ARA	Arakan Rohingya Army
ARNA	Arakan Rohingya National Alliance
ARNC	Arakan Rohingya National Council
ARSA	Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army
ARSPHR	Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CAS	Complex Adaptive System
CSC	Citizenship Scrutiny Card
CT	Complexity Theory
EU	European Union
FDMN	Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICG	International Crisis Group
ICJ	International Court of Justice
IIMM	Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar
IISS	International Institute for Strategic Studies
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
IR	International Relations
JRP	Joint Response Plan
MoDMR	Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (Bangladesh)
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Myanmar)
NLD	National League for Democracy

Lists of Acronyms (Part II)

NRC	National Registration Card
NUG	National Unity Government
NVC	National Verification Card
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OIC	Organization of Islamic Cooperation
RCC	Rohingya Consultative Council
RCPR	Rohingya Committee for Peace and Repatriation
RFA	Radio Free Asia
RIM	Rohingya Islamic Mahza
RRRC	Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (Bangladesh)
RSO	Rohingya Solidarity Organization
RYA	Rohingya Youth Association
SAC	State Administration Council (Myanmar)
TRC	Temporary Registration Certificate
UCR	United Council of Rohingya
UK	United Kingdom
ULA	United League of Arakan
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
US	United States
USIP	United States Institute of Peace
WFP	World Food Programme

Timeline of Key Events (Part I)

HISTORICAL WAVES OF DISPLACEMENT

Year	Event
1823	Cutoff date under 1982 Citizenship Law for "indigenous ethnic groups"
1978	First major exodus: "Ngamin" (King Dragon) military operation displaces over 200,000 Rohingya to Bangladesh
1980	Most refugees repatriated under UN auspices
1989	Myanmar replaces National Registration Card (NRC) with Citizenship Scrutiny Card (CSC); Rohingya issued Temporary Registration Certificates ("White Cards") instead
1991-1992	Second wave: "Operation Pyi Tharyar" targets RSO; over 260,000 Rohingya flee to Bangladesh
1992	Bangladesh establishes Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC)
1993	Bilateral repatriation agreement signed between Bangladesh and Myanmar
1996	Approximately 190,000 refugees officially repatriated under UNHCR
2000	Over 100,000 Rohingya reportedly remain in Bangladesh
Mid-2016	Rohingya population in Bangladesh recorded at approximately 232,974

2016-2017 CRISIS AND EXODUS

Date	Event
October 2016	Third wave: ARSA attacks border guard posts in Maungdaw and Rathedaung; approximately 70,000 displaced
August 25, 2017	Fourth and largest wave: ARSA attacks multiple security posts; Myanmar military launches "clearance operations"
August-September 2017	Over 725,000 Rohingya flee to Bangladesh; join existing 350,000 refugees
November 2017	Bilateral repatriation agreement initiated based on "1992/93 repatriation pact"

2018-2020: REPATRIATION TALKS AND INTERNATIONAL LEGAL PROCEEDINGS

Date	Event
2018-2020	Myanmar authorities verify over 800,000 refugees for potential repatriation
November 201	ICC investigation process commences
December 2019	Gambia (backed by OIC) files genocide case at ICJ against Myanmar; ICJ accepts proceeding
January 2020	ICJ imposes "provisional measures" on Myanmar

Timeline of Key Events (Part II)

Mid-2020	Bangladesh attempts repatriation; refugees unwilling due to fear of abuse
November 2020	NLD government focuses on general election; repatriation momentum wanes

2021: MILITARY COUP AND AFTERMATH

Date	Event
February 1, 2021	Myanmar military stages coup against NLD government; State Administration Council (SAC) formed
June 2021	NUG releases policy statement recognizing Rohingya ethnic identity; guarantees collective rights, citizenship, and safe return
September 30, 2021	Prominent Rohingya leader Mohibullah (ARSPHR head) assassinated in Bangladesh camp; suspected by ARSA
October 2021	UN and Bangladesh sign agreement to relocate 80,000 Rohingya to Bhasan Char island

2022-2023: DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS AND PILOT PROJECT

Date	Event
January 2022	Bangladesh resumes repatriation talks with SAC officials
March 21, 2022	US Secretary of State Antony Blinken formally declares Myanmar military committed genocide against Rohingya
September 2022	ULA/AA spokesperson acknowledges role in Rohingya crisis resolution under certain conditions
December 8, 2022	Chinese Ambassador expresses hope for repatriation within next year
February 2022	Naypyidaw spokesperson states repatriation plan predates coup; designated areas defined
March 2023	Bangladesh PM states Myanmar not responding positively to repatriation
May 5, 2023	First "pilot project": 20 Rohingya refugees visit 15 designated resettlement villages
May 2023	Pilot project fails; refugees demand citizenship and security guarantees before return
August 2023	UNHCR emphasizes voluntary, dignified return as most desirable yet acknowledges many challenges

2023-2024: ESCALATING CONFLICT AND NEW DISPLACEMENT

Date	Event
November 2023	"1027 Operation": AA resumes armed operations in Rakhine State
2024	Escalating clashes between AA and Myanmar military in northern Rakhine
2024	Approximately 150,000 Rohingya flee to Bangladesh; rights groups document abuses including extrajudicial killings, torture, forced labor, arson

Timeline of Key Events (Part III)

Late 2024	ARSA and RSO tensions intensify after brief truce breaks down
Late 2024	Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships fall to AA; junta outposts collapse
November 2024	Bangladesh acknowledges need for credible Rohingya leadership; camp-level elections held forming UCR
December 2024	Myanmar's political and security situation further deteriorates; AA controls majority of Rakhine State

2025-2026: CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

Date	Event
April 4, 2025	Myanmar junta agrees to accept approximately 180,000 verified refugees; lacks territorial control in designated areas
September 2025	Amnesty International reports northern Rakhine "nowhere near ready" for safe return
2026	Growing gap between diplomatic pledges and implementation capacity
Mid-July 2026	Bangladesh establishes 11-member National Strategy Formulation Committee on Rohingya Affairs, headed by PM Tarique Rahman
August 15, 2026	Myanmar MOFA releases press statement rejecting international narratives; claims evidence over 300,000 individuals previously lived in Myanmar
August 16, 2026	UCR outlines key conditions: identity recognition, citizenship, security, property restitution, UNHCR-led verification
August 18, 2026	Bangladesh states only sustainable solution is safe, dignified, voluntary repatriation

ONGOING KEY DYNAMICS

Factor	Current Status
Rohingya Population in Bangladesh	~963,038 (UNHCR, August 2022) / 1.2 million (Bangladesh PM claim)
Rohingya Population Inside Myanmar	~600,000 (UN estimate)
Bhasan Char Relocation	~30,000 relocated (August 2023); 120 shelters with capacity for 100,000
UCR Recognition	Bangladesh government recognizes UCR as sole representative body
Territorial Control in Rakhine	ULA/AA controls ~90% of Rakhine State as of mid-2026
ICJ Proceedings	Ongoing genocide case; provisional measures in place
US Designation	Genocide and crimes against humanity officially recognized (2022)
NUG Position	Recognizes Rohingya identity and collective rights; rejects junta-led repatriation
Key Hurdles	Citizenship, security guarantees, ULA/AA recognition, ongoing conflict, fragmented refugee representation

Part-I

A. Introduction

On August 15, 2026, Myanmar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) released a press statement on the questions related to the Rohingya refugee [repatriation issue](#). It rejected international media narratives on Rakhine State's displaced persons as one-sided and misinformation, attributing the 2016–2017 exodus to “terrorist attacks” of Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) that triggered defensive military actions. Besides, it stated that over 540,000 “Bengalis” fled to Bangladesh, while more than 200,000 remained, and disputed claims of over one million displaced. Overall, the statement showed different backgrounds, numbers and narratives on the long standing question of the Rohingya crisis taking place for decades along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border.

From an anthropology perspective, Rohingya [is a group](#) of Chittagongnian Bengali dialect-speaking people inhabited mainly in the northernmost townships of Rakhine State, Myanmar and the southeasternmost district of Cox Bazar, Bangladesh. However, for self-identification, the Rohingya [believe that](#) their community has inhabited Arakan, present-day Rakhine State, for centuries and consider the region as their homeland. The 62-kilometre-long ‘Naf River’ also serves as a part of the 272 km boundary between Bangladesh and Myanmar. Before the 2017 mass exodus, the vast majority of the Rohingya population approximately lived in the three townships of northern Arakan such as Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has described that the ‘August-2017 violence’ led to the fleeing of [more than 742,000](#) people into Bangladesh. After that juncture, the United Nations (UN) estimated that there are now around [600,000 Rohingya people](#) remaining inside Arakan. Still, there could be gaps and differences in the volume of populations between the Myanmar authorities and other sources.

What we today call the ‘Rohingya Crisis’ can be traced back to its roots at least four periods: British colonial rule, the Second World War, the post-independence parliamentary government, and the current situations that emerged early in the post- 2021 military coup in Myanmar. From another perspective, this issue will also be one of the main political tragedies or a part of the Myanmar national political crisis as a whole. Until now, there are still divergent opinions on how the issue should best be addressed. On the other hand, many scholarly studies and publications also present a somewhat incomplete picture of the issue whether from the pro or anti-Rohingya perspectives based on their epistemological approaches and ontological assumptions.

The Rohingya crisis along the border between Myanmar and Bangladesh has various perspectives involving many actors from the local, national, and regional to the international sphere. More importantly, there are also different segments in the issue ranging from current repatriation issues to the rights to citizenship, ethnic identity recognition and ongoing judicial mechanisms at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) under the ‘Genocide Convention’. As

such, the issue has brought very competitive and often conflictual claims starting from the historical dimensions, the volume of the populations, to the degree of rights that the Rohingya people deserve.

Since recent decades, as the impacts and gravity of the crisis increased, more and more internal and external actors have come to be involved in this issue, and it has led to more complex situations where none of the hegemonic stakeholders alone can dominate the landscape of conflict resolution. In return, lack of monopoly by a centralized actor or the involvement of many veto actors in the problem brings more uneven policy arrangement. Besides, the dynamics of the Rohingya issue itself have the characteristics of non-linearity meaning the situations on the ground are hardly under straightforward development.

The current study is an effort to present and analyze the various components of the Rohingya refugee repatriation, which is a part of the broader crisis, based on the lens of complexity theory. The paper will address critical questions surrounding the issue ranging from involving key stakeholders, their policy adoptions, and the non-linearity of the issues concerning the key segments of the crisis.

B. Brief Conceptual Framework

Since the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar has its unique root causes and inter-connected segments ranging from the local, national, regional, and international scales, the conceptual development provided by complexity theory or complexity thinking is essential to better understand the dynamics and ecosystem of the issue.

In [a study](#) about the relationship between complexity theory and public administration, the questions of non-linearity, self-organization and co-evolution have been explored. This study has stressed that although the observations on complex thinking come from various branches and theories, all of these findings share the same idea. It means that the whole (system) is more than the collection of its (individual) parts, and the development of that system also stems from the interaction among the various parts or agents in the system.

Another research study on the issue of public management by the application of a complex adaptative system (CAS) [outlined](#) that this framework is useful due to the nature of accommodation of independent, heterogeneous agents interacting and adapting to one another over time in a changing environment. Then, in [a report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development \(OECD\)](#) published in September 2009, it has mentioned nine key characteristics of the complex system but not all complex problems need to share all these traits. These characteristics include adaptability, emergence, self-organization, attractors, self-organized criticality, chaos, non-linearity, phase transitions, and finally power laws.

More importantly, when it comes to ‘epistemology’, [Paul Cairney \(2012\) stated](#) that complex thinking can also be used to dispute the conventional approach of ‘positivism’ which usually

promotes a ‘vision of society based on order, laws and progress’. Not only that, it is also useful to challenge the ‘reductionist methodologies’ which are only applicable to issues like elections with ‘rules and orderly manners’ but not for unpredictable political occasions and significant levels of uncertainty and ambiguity. Then, in [another research paper](#), complexity thinking is said to be applicable to focus on the multiple levels of scale and individual actors involved in a system and how they interact with each other in the systems so that all can be viewed via the multi-scalar complexity lens.

In a research paper on [the refugee problem on the Thai-Myanmar border](#), the complexity lens is said to be useful due to three key reasons such as the scope of the social unit of analysis, dynamic development (time), and guidance on methods of policy development and implementation. Finally, [Faruque \(2020\)](#) has also pointed out how the regime's complexity has caused the government of Bangladesh to prefer the International Office of Migration (OIM) over the UNHCR in the early Rohingya arrivals 2017 in handling the management of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

All the above theoretical presentations and applications outlined that the complexity theory is robustly appropriate in addressing and understanding the complex Rohingya refugee crisis. Out of many critical characteristics expressed in the ‘complexity analysis’, the report is intended to apply the four particular key concepts that can be useful and applicable to the current refugee repatriation issue along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. These concepts include 1) the heterogeneity of the agents, 2) no ownership of the problem, 3) uneven policy adoptions among the different actors and finally, 4) characteristics of non-linearity in the issue.

C. Research Design and Method

To test this theoretical framework, the CAS team has used various kinds of sources that include government documents, research papers, reports from the UN and INGOs, news articles, secondary interviews, journals, and news articles, etc. The research will also cover the direct conversations presented in the media outlets by various stakeholders such as the governmental authorities, Rohingya community, UN, INGOs and other de facto authorities such as the ULA/AA, among others.

Beyond the introduction part which includes background information, a short historical background, and a theoretical presentation, the study has provided a short background of the repatriation issues along the border between Bangladesh and Myanmar. Moreover, as the key findings, the research is intended to cover 1) identification of the various stakeholders involved in the issue, 2) how the issue has no ownership, 3) unevenness in the policy adoptions and 4) non-linearity of the issue.

D. Background of the Rohingya Repatriation

In a nutshell, the exodus of the Rohingya people from the northern part of the Rakhine state, Myanmar into Bangladesh side is not a new problem. Historically, there have been at least two waves of instability along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border causing the fleeing of the Rohingya population to the side of the Bangladesh border. As mentioned [in a well-noticed report](#), the first incident happened when the Myanmar authority attempted to conduct the ‘local census operation’ under the name of ‘Ngamin’ (King Dragon Operation in collaboration with the military in February 1978. During a few months of the operation, over 200,000 Rohingya were reported to have fled to Bangladesh. Then, only in 1980, most of the refugees were allowed to come back under the UN auspices. The second wave of exodus came out in 1991 around 14 years after the first incident. At that time, the Myanmar military targeted the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), a Rohingya armed group under the name of ‘Operation Pyi Tharyar’ (Operation of Clean and Beautiful Nation) and this action in turn led to the flight of over 260,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh again. Later, as of 1996, around 190,000 were reported to officially repatriate under the auspices of the UNHCR.

Before that in 1989, the Myanmar government had introduced a policy of replacing the “National Registration Card” (NRC) with the “Citizenship Scrutiny Card” (CSC) for the inhabitants of the country but almost all of the Rohingya people in Rakhine state were rejected in this process. Instead, Rohingya people were issued with Temporary Registration Certificates (TRC) or commonly known as “White Cards” which allowed only a few rights of their livelihoods and security. Due to that factor, around 50,000 Rohingya refugees were reported not to come back to Myanmar. By 2000, the number of people in Bangladesh who identified themselves as ‘Rohingya’ was recorded [over 100,000](#) and as of mid-2016, the number was said to be around 232,974.

During recent years, the third and fourth waves of Rohingya exodus also happened. The third wave happened [in October 2016](#) when a new Rohingya armed group, the ARSA, attacked three border guard posts of the Myanmar security apparatus in Maungdaw and Rathedaung townships. In turn, the attack of the Myanmar military was reported to displace around 70,000 civilians including many being killed and civilian property being destroyed. Although the total Rohingya population fleeing into Bangladesh is not well-recorded, the number of Rohingya refugees on the side of Bangladesh is described to [pass 300,000](#) including the previously existing volume.

The fourth, but the biggest wave of Rohingya exodus was reported to break out when the ARSA again attacked several Myanmar security posts on August 25, 2017, and in response, during the ‘clearance operation’ of the Myanmar military, around 725,000 people were reported to flee into Bangladesh joining the already existing 350,000 Rohingya refugees there. As of August 2022, the UNHCR in collaboration with the Bangladesh authority, has [officially claimed](#) that there was a total population of 963,038 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

One month later, however, the Bangladesh Prime Minister claimed that there was a 1.2 million Rohingya population in Bangladesh. But these numbers are certainly that the Myanmar authority would reject as seen above. The repatriation effort of the Myanmar government after [the fourth wave of Rohingya flights in 2017](#) started in November of that year. It came out with an agreement after a meeting between the two governments and is said to be based on the “1992/93 repatriation pact”. But, the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh camp are not recognized refugees but as the “forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals” (FDMN) to avoid formal legal obligations under international law. Bangladesh is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, meaning it does not have a domestic legal framework for formal refugee status. The FDMN status denies them access to fundamental rights and public services, including education, and restricts their movement within camps and bars access to courts or justice mechanisms. Consequently, higher education remains aspirational rather than attainable.

Still, the uneasy repatriation negotiation continued for two years. In September 2019, the Union Minister of the Office of the State Counsellor, Myanmar [claimed](#) that their priority is to expedite repatriation and to create a more conducive environment for the verified returnees in collaboration with Bangladesh, the UN, Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN), and others. Still, no tangible implementation has come out. At the end of this year, the background of the ‘repatriation process’ became more complicated when the ‘genocide charge’ against Myanmar under the ‘Genocide Convention’ by the Gambia, a small African country backed by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), was accepted to proceed by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in December 2019.

And, in the year 2020, there was rising tension in the repatriation task and the ICJ imposed ‘provisional measures’ on Myanmar in January. On the other hand, the investigation process of the International Criminal Court (ICC) also [continued since November 2019](#). In mid-2020, the UN news [claimed](#) that although the government of Bangladesh attempted to organize several official repatriation works, these failed due to the unwillingness and fear of abuse by the refugee community in Myanmar. The momentum of the repatriation talks between Bangladesh and Myanmar authorities seemed to weaken and waned in these months, and for the NLD government, the upcoming November ‘general election’ also became a key political priority.

Then, the repatriation talks between Bangladesh and Myanmar authorities continued and on January 20, 2021, the Bangladesh foreign minister again claimed that they had proposed the repatriation to start in the first quarter, but Myanmar said the logistical arrangement would take some more time. Controversially, a media report [said that](#) Myanmar has made all necessary arrangements for the repatriation.

The international characterization of the 2017 crisis also added another layer of complexity to the repatriation question. On March 21, 2022, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [formally announced](#) that members of the Myanmar military had committed genocide and crimes against humanity against the Rohingya in Rakhine State. This condition further linked the question of

repatriation with broader issues of accountability and international justice. Rather than remaining solely a bilateral humanitarian and diplomatic issue between Bangladesh and Myanmar, the Rohingya question became increasingly [connected to](#) international legal proceedings. Consequently, questions of safety, citizenship, rights, accountability, and recognition of past atrocities became increasingly intertwined with the practical negotiations over refugee return.

E. 2021 Military Coup and Subsequent Challenges

A sudden nationwide political crisis came out when the Myanmar military staged a military coup against the NLD government on February 1, 2021, on account of the ‘electoral fraud’ during the ‘2020 general election.’ The next day, the military formed a new governmental body called the ‘State Administration Council’ (SAC). A national political breakdown in the country emerged with the anti-military coup popular uprising all across the country. This public outrage against the military coup later transformed into armed movements in many parts of the country mainly in the Bamar majority lowland areas of the country especially in Sagaing and Magway regions. This critical juncture also caused the hope for the Rohingya refugee repatriation to fade.

Only in January 2022, then, the Bangladesh authority [resumed](#) the talk with the SAC officials. But, at this time, there was little confidence in the side of the Myanmar authority. A former Bangladesh foreign secretary said, “Resolving the Rohingya crisis through bilateral negotiations with Myanmar is unlikely to succeed.”

Six months later, the NUG appointed Human Rights advisor, Aung Kyaw Moe, a Rohingya leader, [said on August 24](#) that “Not much had improved in Rakhine State and the situation is almost the same as in 2017,” referring to the violent situation during the fourth wave of Rohingya flight. On the other hand, [the NUG has released](#) a ‘policy statement’ on the Rohingya issue recognizing the ‘Rohingya ethnic identity’ and guaranteeing the ‘collective rights’, ‘rights to citizenships’ and a safe, voluntary, and dignified return of refugees into Myanmar since June 2021.

As of [May 5, 2023](#), a delegation of 20 Rohingya refugees accompanied by seven Bangladesh officials at the request of Myanmar authorities reportedly visited two of the 15 villages designated to resettle the returned refugees. Ten days later, a group of Myanmar authorities also went to Bangladesh to see the lists of the refugees as a part of the repatriation process.

In line with the news report, [the ‘pilot project’](#) is intended to send around 1000 refugees into Myanmar. However, the initiation failed as the refugee community members themselves thought that it was not the right time to go back to Myanmar due to the lack of citizenship and security guarantee for them. One of the delegation team members said that the Rohingya wanted to return home with “all our rights and security.

The latest major wave of Rohingya displacement occurred in 2024 amid escalating clashes between the Arakan Army (AA) and the Myanmar military in northern Rakhine State. Rights

groups documented serious abuses against Rohingya civilians, including extrajudicial killings, torture, forced labour, and [large-scale arson](#) since mid-2024. As a result, an estimated 150,000 Rohingya were reported to have fled to Bangladesh, further increasing the refugee population and adding new challenges to efforts toward safe, voluntary, and dignified repatriation.

The political and territorial circumstances surrounding repatriation changed further after the well-known “1027 Operation” when AA resumed armed operations in November 2023 and the subsequent deterioration of Myanmar’s political and security situation. Although the Myanmar military continued to present repatriation as a policy objective, its ability to implement such a process became increasingly constrained by the changing balance of power in Rakhine State. By late December, 2024, the townships of Buthidaung and Maungdaw neighboring Bangladesh fell to AA. Then, on April 4, 2025, as a sign of good gesture, Myanmar junta [agreed to accept](#) around 180,000 refugees who had been verified by Myanmar authorities between 2018 and 2020. With no territorial control, however, this raised serious questions about its ability to implement repatriation. In September 2025, [Amnesty International reported](#) that conditions in northern Rakhine State were not suitable for the safe return of Rohingya refugees, highlighting the words “nowhere near ready”, citing ongoing armed conflict, insecurity, abuses, and worsening humanitarian conditions.

By 2026, the continued gap between diplomatic pledges and implementation had become more apparent. Recent assessments [have highlighted](#) the gap between Myanmar’s repatriation commitments and its capacity to implement them on the ground. As the latest developments under a new regime in Napyidaw, on 15 August 2026, [Myanmar’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs \(MOFA\) stated](#) that, after verifying the more than 800,000 names submitted by Bangladesh, evidence had been found that more than 300,000 individuals had previously lived in Myanmar. At the same time, Bangladesh [continued to pursue](#) institutional mechanisms to advance repatriation, including the establishment of a new repatriation committee. However, such national-level coordination cannot by itself overcome the political and territorial constraints inside Myanmar. All these issues and developments highlight that the question of Rohingya refugee repatriation is much more complex than border issues demanding border and comprehensive approaches.

Part-II

Application of Complexity Theory (CT) to Refugee Repatriation

The ‘Complexity Theory’ (CT) has a strong analytical power in trying to understand the various segments of the ‘Rohingya refugee repatriation’ question. As mentioned in the theoretical presentation, there are four key components that the theory presents in addressing a complex particular problem and these segments include 1) the heterogeneity of the agents, 2) no ownership of the problem, 3) uneven policy adoptions among the different actors and finally, 4) characteristics of non-linearity in the issue.

On the other hand, in addressing the definition of ‘Rohingya repatriation’, it is critical to note that the repatriation issue is only a component of the overall ‘Rohingya crisis’. The current study is an effort to address this repatriation question. In resolving all these components, there are many different actors currently involved ranging from the local, national, regional to the global levels.

1. Heterogeneity of the Agents

The heterogeneity of the agents is not just about the number of agents or actors involved in this issue. It means that there are different actors with various interests and experiences, and their actions can also have diverse consequences on the future resolution of the problem. Similarly, in the current repatriation issue, the Rohingya refugees in the camps inside Bangladesh should be regarded as the key stakeholders in deciding the future scenarios. At the same time, many groups are organized by the people in the camps and some influential ones include the Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights (ARSPHR), Rohingya Youth Association (RYA), and many others. However, it is unclear which particular camp-based group truly represents the political will of the community there.

Apart from this civil sector, there are also some active Rohingya armed groups such as the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), ARSA and newly formed Arakan Rohingya Army (ARA) and Rohingya Islamic Mahza (RIM). These groups mostly operate along the border areas with Bangladesh and inside the refugee camps, representing the different armed factions. The two-armed groups, especially RSO and ARSA are also often in clash with each other and reciprocal assignments between the members of the two groups continue. Still, [none of the armed groups](#) seems to have popular support among its population, thus it is very difficult to consider that their opinion represents the will of the camp population.

Beyond that layer, there is also still a Rohingya population inside Arakan. The perceptions of these people, especially living in Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung townships could have considerable impacts on the public opinion of the camp population as they have a day-to-day connection via various kinds of communication channels. Besides, as there are many Rohingya diaspora groups and influential individuals who mostly live in countries like Malaysia, and other

European and North American countries, their advocacy movements and opinion-shaping activities can certainly have consequences on the will of the camp population in the repatriation process. Among many others, a relatively new coalition like [the Arakan Rohingya National Alliance \(ARNA\)](#)¹ could be considered as one of the most important Rohingya coalitions which includes key figures from other Rohingya organisations. However, the group is still criticized as not truly representing the camp population and other community leaders on the ground. Individuals like Mr Aung Kyaw Moe, the former deputy minister of the NUG's Ministry of Human Rights can also be regarded as a key figure representing the Rohingya community. But he can still have the conflictual stands between the NUG's policy and the will of the Rohingya community. Lately, it has also been reported that another group known as the Rohingya Consultative Council (RCC) [was formed on March 26, 2024](#), to cultivate a coherent and impactful Rohingya political entity by harnessing and aligning diverse Rohingya perspectives, expertise, and experiences.

Another significant development in Rohingya representation was the emergence of camp-level elections in Bangladesh, which resulted in the formation of the United Council of Rohingya (UCR). The process was presented as a step toward developing representative Rohingya leadership, following concerns over the long-standing leadership vacuum within the refugee community. In [November 2024](#), Bangladesh's Foreign Affairs Adviser Touhid Hossain acknowledged that successive governments had not allowed credible Rohingya leadership to develop and emphasized the need to support legitimate Rohingya representatives.

However, UCR remains highly controversial and voters only represent approximately 0.3 percent of the Rohingya refugee population in Bangladesh according to figures from [the Convening Committee](#). The emergence of the UCR has therefore not eliminated competing claims of representation. Currently, however, the UCR, backed by the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) of the Bangladesh government, is considered as one and only representative body of the refugees in the camps by the Bangladesh government.

Meanwhile, the camp-based groups, including the Rohingya Committee for Peace and Repatriation (RCPR), an armed and politically affiliated network, continue to maintain their own supporters, while diaspora-based organizations and political figures also advocate different positions on Rohingya rights and repatriation. The latter groups include organizations associated with figures such as Arakan Rohingya National Council (ARNC) led by Tun Khin, RRC indirectly led by Aung Kyaw Moe and Arakan Rohingya National Congress (ARNC) led by former Parliament member U Shwe Maung. Consequently, the UCR may have gained institutional recognition from the Bangladesh authorities, but this does not necessarily mean that it represents the collective preferences of the wider refugee population. The coexistence of elected representatives, camp-based organizations, armed groups, diaspora organizations, and

¹ [ARNA](#) was founded on November 20, 2022, to achieve the “right of self-determination”, “right of return” and all other goals of the Rohingya people within the Federal Democratic Union of Burma/Myanmar.

individual political leaders further demonstrates the heterogeneity of agents involved in the repatriation question.

Beyond the Rohingya community, there are still many other stakeholders in the repatriation question. The most critical key actors are, of course, the governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar. Even if the theoretical perspectives in the field of International Relations (IR) usually consider the states as ‘a unitary actor’, there could be variations among the various departments and layers of the government. The key ministries and agencies dealing with the repatriation issue include foreign ministries, immigration offices and local security agencies from both sides. The Office of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) established in 1992 under the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (MoDMR) in Bangladesh is a key agency for handling the current Rohingya refugee issue.

More recently in mid-July, 2026, the Bangladesh government [established](#) an 11-member **National Strategy Formulation Committee on Rohingya Affairs**, headed by Prime Minister Tarique Rahman, to develop a national strategy for the swift and sustainable repatriation of Rohingyas and coordinate the roles of relevant ministries, law enforcement agencies, and intelligence organisations. The committee’s composition, which brings together political, administrative, security, and intelligence actors, further demonstrates that Bangladesh’s approach to repatriation involves multiple institutions with potentially different priorities and interests. As these actors may pursue different, and sometimes conflicting, institutional interests and ‘de facto’ policies, such internal variations can significantly shape the repatriation process and its outcomes. The Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner, additional inspector general of police (Special Branch), and five other officials have been included as supporting members.

In Myanmar case, although the policy agreements with Bangladesh have been initiated since the rule of the previous National League for Democracy (NLD) government, the post-coup political crisis and current regime in Napyidaw created a complicated scenario in which none of the Naypyidaw regime or NUG has been internationally recognized as the rightful government representing Myanmar at the international and regional bodies like United Nations (UN), and Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN). While the NUG has been praised and politically accepted as the ‘legitimate government’ of Myanmar by some Western nations and Myanmar’s ambassador to the UN has pledged toward the NUG movement, the Naypyidaw regime has maintained a normal diplomatic presence via the embassies in several countries around the world, including Bangladesh. Besides, it is important to note that the Naypyidaw regime still has legality and ‘de facto control’ inside many parts of Myanmar. More importantly, the current post-2015-16 elections government installed by pro-military parliament in Napyidaw and [its reengagement](#) with powerful neighbors and allies created more complex and challenging scenarios for pro-democracy groups like NUG in seeking international recognition for its movements. Finally, the position of the NUG leadership can also have a certain degree of influence and impact on managing this repatriation issue whether they will support or oppose it if the repatriation process was to happen under the Naypyidaw authority.

Moreover, another de facto and more legitimate actor in most parts of Arakan, the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA), is also important as the whole parts of Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships designated to settle the repatriated population are also now under the control of the ULA. By mid-2026, the ULA-led Arakkha government now controlled [90 percent](#) of territory in Rakhine state, excluding only three townships of Sittwe, Kyaukphyu and Manaung. Although they cannot grant legal recognition of the status of the Rohingya, the role of the ULA authorities is essential to maintain the stability and security of the Rohingya community in both wartime and peacetime. In addition, as the ULA leadership has not just de facto authority but also the influence over the opinion of the majority Rakhine population, no long-term and sustainable repatriation process is possible without the meaningful consultation and involvement of the ULA authority.

More importantly, the role of the international and regional powers should not be excluded in analyzing the possible scenarios of the refugee repatriations. These include the UN and its key agencies like UN High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR), UN Development Programme (UNDP), World Food Programme (WFP). Next, other UN mechanisms like the Independent Investigate Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) are also involved in the process of the documentation and protection of the rights of the Rohingya population in both Myanmar and Bangladesh. Not only, but there are also other international mechanisms such as the International Criminal Court (ICC), and universal jurisdiction in the court of Argentina concerning the Rohingya issue.

Other countries and groupings are the United States of America (USA), European Union (EU), Canada, United Kingdom (UK), China, India, OIC and ASEAN, etc. Among the regional powers, the role of China [became more visible](#) in this issue in recent years when the Beijing government even hosted several times of ‘triparty meetings’ between Bangladesh and Myanmar within its country. [Regional organizations](#) like ASEAN also expressed their concerns and interests in this issue. Groups like OIC and EU are also critical in both ICJ legislation and humanitarian assistance of the refugee population meanwhile the US competition with China in the region has increased in recent years. [India](#) being a regional power bordering both Bangladesh and Myanmar can also be considered an important actor as it also faced the migration of the Rohingya population into its border.

2. No Ownership of the Problem

Another unique characteristic of the Rohingya refugee repatriation issue is ‘no ownership of the problem.’ It means that none of the actors mentioned above will stand that they alone have the full responsibility to make the repatriation process happen. In this issue, at the first stage, it can be argued that there are two key sovereign states, Bangladesh and Myanmar that are primarily responsible for the effective implementation of the repatriation process. However, it is the ‘Rohingya refugee community’ which has its own ‘agency’ and ‘autonomy’ to decide whether it

is the right time and circumstance to go back to Myanmar under a ‘voluntary’, ‘safe’ and ‘dignified’ repatriation process.

Under international refugee and humanitarian norms, repatriation should be voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable. These conditions are particularly important because the Rohingya community retains agency over whether and when to return. However, the current situation in Myanmar, particularly in Rakhine State, does not provide the conditions necessary for such a return. The humanitarian and security situation deteriorated further between 2024 and 2026 as fighting between the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army intensified, resulting in additional displacement of Rohingya within Rakhine State and further cross-border movements. According to the UNHCR, approximately [150,000 Rohingya refugees](#) entered Bangladesh from Rakhine State following the renewed fighting that began in November 2023. The continued displacement therefore illustrates the gap between political commitments to repatriation and the actual conditions required for a voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable return.

From a state-centric perspective, it seems that the Myanmar authority has full responsibility to create that kind of situation. But the definition of terms like ‘voluntary’, ‘safe’ and ‘dignified’ can be interpreted by the government of Myanmar in different ways. For instance, the former spokesperson of Naypyidaw, [in February 2022, said](#) that the repatriation plan has already been there since before the military coup and the designated areas for the repatriated population have also been defined. But it is another side (i.e. Bangladesh authority) that does not allow the refugees to go back. There are Hindu people who want to come back, and the government is also ready to accept them phase by phase. But, when the day is on, they (Hindu people) do not come back because the Bangladesh authority does not allow it as they have a hidden political agenda.

One year later, the former Prime Minister of Bangladesh also [answered](#) in an interview in March 2023,

“We started to talk with Myanmar authorities that Rohingya are Myanmar citizens and should be taken back. Unfortunately, they are not responding very positively. I think these people should go back to their own land and own homes”.

In theory, sovereign governments are responsible for what is happening within their territory as they have the ‘legitimate monopoly of violence’ to enforce rules and regulations. But, in this case, the legitimacy in the sense of ‘public recognition or support’ especially from the concerned refugee community on the actions of these two governments is very critical. In post-coup politics, however, the current regime is widely considered an ‘illegitimate authority’ in the eyes of many stakeholders at both national and international levels. More importantly, it has now lost control of border areas with Bangladesh.

Concerning this issue, [on February 24, 2022](#), the founder of the ‘Rohingya Youth Association’ (RYA) said that they welcomed the announcement of the Myanmar regime about the repatriation but asked whether the SAC can create pre-conditions under which the refugees can come back.

They cannot trust the military dictatorship that only wants to manipulate the issue for international recognition and the regime is also in lack of true political will. In addition, he said that the Rohingya people will come back no matter which authority takes responsibility for the issue only if their demands are addressed well.

Another similar position was also echoed by [another prominent Rohingya activist](#), Ro Nay San Lwin that the same superficial things were also told by the Naypyidaw at the ICJ, but in reality, the latter has no political will to address the issue. He added that the military at the moment is also committing nationwide crimes against humanity, and only a handful of people might come back under this criminal gang rule and a large majority of the refugee population will only come back when they achieve the tangible rights and live peacefully.

Taking the ‘power versus responsibility’ concept in this repatriation process, these two governments can be seen as the most responsible entities for the successful implementation of this process. However, in reality, these three stakeholders might think about the amount of responsibility to various degrees. From the perspective of the Rohingya community, the government of Myanmar (i.e. Napyidaw regime) is fully responsible for the creation of sustainable and conducive situations as they have already demanded. These situations particularly include the rights to citizenship, recognition of ‘Rohingya ethnicity’, security and livelihood guarantee, freedom of movement, land ownership, etc. But, from the side of Myanmar authorities, it is the [responsibility of Bangladesh authority](#) and the refugee community to make this process happen because there have been procedures and practices regulated in the past after the first and second waves of repatriation and they have also created the conditions in line with these practices.

And, from the Bangladesh side, the perception could be similar to that of the refugee community but might also want to force the refugee community to go back as fast as possible. Indeed, it is Bangladesh bearing the burden of the refugee community ranging from humanitarian assistance, transboundary crimes within the camp population, discontent of the local community in Cox’s Bazar district to environmental degradation. Thus, from that point of view, it can be assumed that the Bangladesh government is the most willing entity to initiate and complete the repatriation task. Sometimes, there are news and reports that highlight the ‘coercive and deceptive methods’ employed by the Bangladesh authorities to implement their objectives. But, again, there are still limits on the autonomy and ability of the Bangladesh authority for the quick implementation of this process.

More recently, Bangladesh’s interim government has continued to frame repatriation as the only sustainable solution to the crisis. In February 2026, Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus [stated](#) that the “problem began in Myanmar” and that “the solution must also come from there,” while also describing it as Bangladesh’s responsibility to ensure the Rohingyas’ return “in peace and dignity.” This statement illustrates the continuing ambiguity over responsibility: Bangladesh acknowledges a responsibility to facilitate repatriation, while simultaneously locating the

fundamental responsibility for resolving the crisis in Myanmar. Its latest statement on August 18, 2026 [stated that](#) the only sustainable solution of the crisis lies in safe, dignified, and voluntary repatriation of the Rohingyas to Rakhine state, Myanmar.

At the secondary level, there are still many actors that can be considered as if they have responsibility for the implementation of this process. In a ‘pragmatic sense’, the ULA/AA which maintains [de facto control](#) in the northern townships of Rakhine state and along the border with Bangladesh, has a ‘responsibility’ in implementing this repatriation process. [A report by the International Crisis Group \(ICG\)](#) in June 2022, for example, mentioned that the governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar should open a dialogue with the Arakan Army on Rohingya repatriation. Besides, in a commentary by Brig Gen (Retd) Hasan Md Shamsuddin [in January 2023](#), it is also argued that the repatriation of Rohingya needs to be discussed with AA and then ULA will develop a roadmap for Rohingya repatriation based on mutual consent. It is also an important event in the ongoing process, he added.

These perceptions on the inclusion of the ULA in the refugee repatriation process are realistic in many ways, given its territorial control in Rakhine State. However, it is important to note that there are still different interests among the key stakeholders in this process. The inclusion of the ULA/AA does not resolve the problem of ownership; rather, it adds another layer of complexity to an already fragmented responsibility structure. But, it is a must. Both Napyidaw and ULA might view this issue as a competition for ‘recognition’ and ‘interests’ in the regional and international spheres and thus, a likely ‘win-lose’ scenario also exists between them. While ULA leadership consider the refugee crisis created by the Myanmar military in 2017, statements by Naypyidaw frequently put the blame that the repatriation process is hindered by the AA attacks in northern Arakan.

In another sphere, regional and global actors like UN and its agencies, EU, US, UK, China, ASEAN, India, and other powers can participate at the different levels of ‘influence’ and ‘interest’, but one thing is quite clear they do not have ‘monopoly of ownership’ in the effective implementation of this repatriation process.

3. Uneven Policy Adoptions Among the Different Actors

As the third component of the Rohingya repatriation issue, a state of ‘uneven policy adoptions among the different actors’ can also be found. The policy of the individual stakeholders can be found in written documents, interview replies, speeches, declarations, statements, etc. In this repatriation case, the policy arena can also be at least divided into two spheres such as the (written) technical or procedural and (unwritten) political ones and these two spheres are also interrelated.

As partly mentioned above, the Myanmar authorities (i.e Napyidaw) consider the current repatriation issue as largely similar to the previous waves of refugee exodus. Adding some modifications to the existing ‘1993 repatriation agreement’, the Myanmar authority has

designated at least four stages to decide whether the refugees were to be given the right to citizenship or not. In line with their plan, *first*, refugees will be registered whether they are the ones who fled from Myanmar. *Second*, after this ratification, these people will be accepted phase by phase based on the number and feasibility. A report on the first [‘pilot project’](#) in May 2023, mentioned that there are around 1,100 people. Then, in the *third* stage, the returnees will be housed at the transit camps for around two months. During this stage, the National Verification Card (NVC) will be offered to the individuals, but there is no guarantee that they will be offered the ‘citizenship rights’. Finally, in the *fourth* stage, the individuals will be resettled in permanent houses or on a land plot in [one of the 15 ‘designated villages’](#) where they can also build a home through a cash-for-work program.

But, from the perspective of the Rohingya refugee community, these situations are considered as ‘too little’ with the lack of guarantee and there is also uncertainty about whether they will be given the right to citizenship or not. In line with the [‘1982 Myanmar Citizenship Law,’](#) there are three layers of citizenship such as 1) full citizenship, 2) associate citizenship and 3) naturalized citizenship. The first layer of citizenship is only applicable to those ‘indigenous ethnic groups’, who have been residing inside Myanmar since ACE 1823. As Rohingya are not considered one of those ‘135’ officially recognized groups, Rohingya refugees cannot be eligible for the first layer of citizenship. But they can still become ‘associate citizens’ or ‘naturalized citizens’ in the country, sometimes equal to the Indian and Chinese ethnic groups who are regarded to come into Myanmar during the British colonial rule.

On the Rohingya refugee front, in its 16 August 2026 statement, [the UCR outlined](#) key conditions for Rohingya repatriation, including recognition of Rohingya identity, citizenship, security, property restitution, and independent UNHCR-led verification. It rejected Myanmar’s existing verification process and the use of the term “Bengali,” while expressing distrust of previous repatriation arrangements that failed to ensure durable protection. On the other hand, competing camp-based organizations, armed groups, diaspora organizations, and political figures continue to advance different priorities and positions.

Although it is not quite clearly mentioned which level of citizenship is demanded by the refugee community, it will probably be the one enjoyed by ‘other indigenous ethnic groups’ in the country. There are also two parallel narratives presented by the Rohingya community in connection with citizenship rights. The first one is the demand for the ‘identity recognition’ and ‘indigenusness’ of Rohingya in Arakan so that they can apply for the right to ‘full citizenship.’ Second, it is the demand to ‘amend’ or ‘liberalize’ the limits of the ‘existing citizenship law’ that hinders their accessibility to ‘associate’ or ‘naturalized’ citizenship. It seems what the refugee community in Bangladesh want is the first demand that calls for the recognition of the Rohingya as “an indigenous ethnic group” along with the full citizenship and security guarantee.

Therefore, the ‘deadlocks’ imposed on the progress of the current repatriation process are not just about the procedural policies on how to best manage the stages of the repatriation task but

also the divergent perceptions on root causes and future scenarios of the refugee community. In this case, it is quite interesting to know how the government of Bangladesh, being one of the key stakeholders in the current process, stands on this disagreement. In a research study by [Faruque in May 2020](#), it is mentioned that in September 2013, Bangladesh's Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a strategy paper which acknowledged the presence of around 300,000-500,000 'undocumented Myanmar nationals' together with another 35,000 recognized Myanmar-origin refugees who fled there since 1991-92 influx. When the fourth wave of refugee exodus [happened in August 2017](#), the Bangladesh authorities designated the new arrivals as "Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals", not "refugees" as they wanted to deny the internationally defined legal obligations and disincentive further arrivals of Rohingya, he highlighted. Even if the Bangladesh officials [principally stand on](#) the 'voluntary, dignified, safe and sustainable repatriation', there are still some actions in the respective authority's effort to push the speed of the repatriation as fast as possible, thus faced with deep criticism.

On another front, the changing territorial and administrative realities in Rakhine State also create a challenge for Bangladesh's existing approach to repatriation. As effective control over areas of potential return has become increasingly fragmented, relying exclusively on negotiations with Myanmar's central authorities [may no longer be sufficient](#). Bangladesh may therefore need to establish pragmatic communication with actors exercising de facto authority in the areas where refugees may eventually return. Such functional engagement does not necessarily imply formal diplomatic recognition, as governments may communicate with non-state or de facto authorities for practical purposes such as border management, humanitarian access, and civilian protection. This further demonstrates the uneven and evolving nature of Bangladesh's policy toward the different actors involved in the repatriation process.

The political and policy stands of the ULA-led government, a de facto authority in the northern parts of Rakhine State, are also worthy of knowing. During a press briefing [in September 2022](#), its spokesperson said,

"Some people consider that 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 stakeholders 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."

For the ULA government, it seems the key priority is to maintain peace and stability and social cohesion with the remaining Rohingya inside Arakan. But, if the international community including the government of Bangladesh wants them to be involved in it, they are prepared to participate under certain conditions. This includes peace and stability along the border with Bangladesh, especially eliminating Rohingya militant groups in joint cooperation with Dhaka authority, restoring border trades and opening up the humanitarian channels, etc. In fact, these things could only happen with the recognition of ULA as the government of Arakan.

It is also interesting to note that one of the key Rohingya diaspora coalitions known as the ARNA [has the willingness](#) to start the negotiation with the ULA on the repatriation plan. However, there are still questions that the ULA still does not have the ‘legality’ to prove the legal and citizenship status of the refugee community especially if there is limited regional and international cooperation.

On another front, Myanmar's Permanent Representative to the UN, U Kyaw Moe Tun (who has pledged toward the NUG movement) also [remarked in August 2023](#) that he would like to urge not to force the Rohingya refugees from very difficult situations in the refugee camps into a state of ‘total security absence’. He also sees that as long as the Myanmar junta is in power, like many other citizens in the country, the returned refugees will not be able to come back in a safe and dignified manner.

At the regional and international levels, China as a regional power is more active than the UN and other Western countries in initiating the current repatriation effort. Concerning the involvement of China in the refugee repatriation issue in recent years, it [was reported on December 8, 2022](#), that the Chinese ambassador to Bangladesh said in a meeting with the Bangladesh PM that they expressed hope that the return of Rohingyas to their own country would start within the next year.

China should also be given concrete responsibilities rather than another general request to “help with repatriation.” Analysts claim that [Bangladesh should ask](#) Beijing to support internationally monitored return areas, humanitarian access, infrastructure reconstruction, civilian guarantees and a reporting mechanism for violations. India should be approached through regional security interests rather than moral language alone, noting that protracted statelessness contributes to trafficking, irregular maritime migration, illicit economies and potential armed mobilisation, posing a threat to the region.

In a news report by [the Prothomalo in May 2023](#), it was mentioned that the long-drawn-out Rohingya crisis poses a threat to the security and stability of the region, besides Bangladesh and Myanmar. Therefore, China considers it necessary to begin the repatriation process as soon as possible. China suggested that Bangladesh start the repatriation process albeit on a limited scale citing it would assist Bangladesh and Myanmar in this regard. In recent news on August 26, 2023, China's Ambassador to Bangladesh, Yao Wen, is also reported to point out a curious observation, suggesting that those who claim Myanmar's situation is not conducive to repatriation often have limited firsthand knowledge of the region. In addition, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in China, [has also stated](#) that as the current prolonged Rohingya crisis threatens not just Bangladesh and Myanmar but also regional peace and stability, neighbouring China is intervening to initiate the repatriation process as fast as possible between Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Rather than limiting China's role to general calls for repatriation, Bangladesh [could seek](#) more concrete forms of Chinese engagement, including support for internationally monitored return

areas, humanitarian access, infrastructure reconstruction, civilian protection guarantees, and mechanisms for reporting violations.

Some observers remarked that the focus of China in this repatriation process is mainly due to the interest of the ‘regional stability’ and ‘its economic interests’ in Rakhine state, including the [Kyaukphyu deep-sea port](#) and energy corridors linking the Indian Ocean with Yunnan Province and Myanmar. Consequently, Beijing has shown limited willingness to exert sustained pressure on Myanmar regarding citizenship, accountability, and ethnic rights, while its position at the UN Security Council has often constrained stronger international action against Myanmar. On the other hand, China’s intervention on the repatriation issue is also suspiciously viewed by the key stakeholders in the Rohingya community. A more radical view on the involvement of China in this process [was expressed](#) by U Shwe Maung, a former MP in Maungdaw township. He said that refugee repatriation under the China initiative could lead to the ‘Uyghur Muslim’ like ‘concentration camps’ situation in China.

Apart from China, India is another important regional actor whose approach to the Rohingya issue has been shaped largely by strategic and security considerations. India’s Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, which connects Kolkata with Sittwe Port in Rakhine State through India’s northeastern region, passes through areas where the AA has increasingly established de facto control. As the conflict has reshaped the political and territorial landscape of Rakhine State, New Delhi has [reportedly engaged](#) with the Arakan Army to safeguard its connectivity interests and the implementation of the Kaladan project, despite continued concerns over the situation of Rohingya civilians. India’s approach, like China’s, has therefore tended to prioritize regional stability, border security, and strategic connectivity over sustained pressure for the political and structural changes necessary to facilitate safe and sustainable Rohingya repatriation. Although China and India support Rohingya repatriation in principle, their approaches remain largely shaped by strategic interests, regional security, and economic connectivity rather than sustained pressure for Rohingya rights. This reflects the uneven policy priorities among regional actors.

Then, in recent years, the general focus of western countries and grouping such as the US, UK and EU has reduced and shifted from Rohingya refugees in terms of funding, resource allocation and political and diplomatic investments. These changes have caused refugees to face more hardship but they remain connected to the principal focus on refugee issues in line with international rules and standards. On another front, the position of the UN in this process can be seen in a UNHCR statement [released on March 19, 2023](#). It said that the agency is not involved in the bilateral pilot project between Bangladesh and Myanmar and stated that every refugee has a right to return to their home country based on an informed choice, but that no refugee should be forced to do so. Five months later, the UNHCR on August 17, 2023, [reported that](#) ‘they emphasized the ‘voluntary, dignified return to Myanmar by the Rohingya refugee is the most desirable solution but acknowledged that there are many challenges that need to be overcome’.

4. Non-Linearity of the Issue

Another crucial characteristic that the question of the ‘refugee repatriation issue’ contains is the ‘non-linearity of the issue’. Non-linearity can especially be found in a situation in which the casualty of a particular can produce non-straight lines and unintended consequences. The concept of ‘non-linearity’ has been popularly described in the theory of the ‘butterfly effect’ as well. In the case of the ‘Rohingya refugee repatriation’, there are also many things that can be related to the trait of ‘non-linearity’.

Firstly, the issue of ‘dynamic development’ comes out on the side of refugee camps in Bangladesh. A research report released by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) [in April 2023](#) mentioned that there are signs of increasing discontent in the Bangladesh host community over insecurity, economic costs, and other negative effects of the refugee camps. The report also addressed other crucial factors such as the increasing negative perceptions of the Bangladeshi host communities toward the Rohingya refugees especially as they think that the government is supporting continued assistance to the refugees. Besides, the host communities also see their interactions with the refugees as ‘negative’ and consider ‘violence’ as an acceptable response to their grievances. This report by the USIP pointed to a new dynamic happening on the side of the Bangladesh border.

These pressures are particularly significant in Cox’s Bazar, where approximately one million Rohingya refugees live alongside a local population of [around 2.8 million](#). More than 95 per cent of Rohingya refugees depend on humanitarian assistance for basic needs, placing additional socioeconomic and environmental pressure on the host area. A similar position was also confirmed by another [video report in May 2022](#). The news has highlighted that the Rohingya refugees have occupied the local job and business market, causing environmental degradation, committing crimes, and drug smuggling and many local Bangladeshi become increasingly frustrated and think the government and International Non-governmental Organizations (INGOs) are not doing enough for them similarly what they do for the refugee community. The report finally concluded that the local Bangladeshi became a ‘minority’ in the Cox’s Bazar district as the Rohingya refugee population is around 1.2 million whereas the local is only 0.5 million.

Adding to the currently complex scenario is the resettlement of some portion of the refugee population into ‘Bhasan Char’ island. [In March 2019](#), a video report mentioned that the government of Bangladesh had a plan to build shelter and houses on the island to relocate refugees since 2015. When the mass exodus of Rohingya refugees happened in August 2017, the plan had been accelerated with the construction work starting in early 2018 with a total cost of \$ 272 million within one and a half years. The government then asked the UN and other humanitarian agencies to include the areas in the [‘Joint Response Plan’ \(JRP\)-2020](#), sometimes by coercive means.

As of December 2020, another report [highlighted](#) that the 120 shelters on the island could accommodate around 100,000 persons and about 2000 individuals had been moved at the time of reporting. Besides, some Rohingya in the camp have also been deceived by the community leaders that they will be the first on the list to go back to Myanmar if they agree to go to Bhasan Char Island. Around one year later in October 2021, [the New York Times reported](#) that the UN and Bangladesh authorities signed an agreement which could bring another 80,000 refugees to the island. But, the report has also [added](#) that at least 700 have tried to flee the island by paying \$150 per person and the police arrested and sent back at least 200.

Complexity in the issue mounted in late 2021 when [Human Rights Watch \(HRW\) demanded](#) the Bangladesh authority halt the current relocation of the refugees until the freedom of movement and other rights of refugees are protected. Five months later, [a commentary revealed](#) that around 19,000 people are estimated to live on the island. On September 30, 2022, [a UNHCR news release expressed](#) that as of August, the total number of settlers on the island is around 26,043 and 80 per cent of them are women and children. As the latest update, HRW in August 2023 remarked that the Bangladesh authority [has already relocated](#) around 30,000 refugees into the isolated silt island and with ‘no recognised legal status’ in Bangladesh, the refugee population is on a precarious footing under domestic law, making them vulnerable to rights violations.

It seems the plan of Bangladesh to resettle around 10,000 persons is still only 30 per cent of the completion in 3 years. Critics have also pointed out both the processes and ends of this project. The objections include using coercive and deceptive methods to the vulnerable refugees, unsustainability, and unsuitability of the location from both civic, social, and environmental perspectives. In mid-2021, [an RFA report](#) revealed that the Dhaka authority has promised payment and ‘Bangladeshi citizenships’ to the refugees who moved to the island, based on an INGO report.

Another aspect of the dynamic developments that emerged in the camp environment is the increasing crimes and instability between the groups in the camps and between the local security authorities and refugee community members. In line with [a report by the HRW in July 2021](#), the Bangladesh authorities have reported over 88 Rohingya being killed by the various Rohingya armed groups in the first half of 2023. Other criminal activities that happened in the camps also include kidnapping, torture, rape, sexual assault, human trafficking and forced marriage. The report also [revealed](#) that there are at least 11 Rohingya armed groups, and among them, the ARSA is the most active in many parts of the camp population. Among the several killings against the camp population, the assassination of the prominent community leader, Mohibullah, the head of the ARSPH, [on September 30, 2021](#), was the most notable. The killing [was suspected](#) to be carried out by the ARSA, which the group denied. The key reason for this motivation is considered because the ARSA does not want the alternative leadership of Mohibullah over the Rohingya community and his campaign to repatriate the refugees to Myanmar. A Rohingya activist told HRW, “These armed groups decided to increase violence in the camps, killing

people, targeting majlis and activists, to create an environment of fear so that they can operate in the camps without interruption by Bangladesh authorities.”

The security situation in the camps has become increasingly complex, with tensions also emerging between rival Rohingya armed groups. [In November 2024](#), tensions between the ARSA and RSO reportedly intensified after a brief truce between the two groups broke down. Such developments indicate how prolonged displacement can generate new forms of insecurity within the refugee population itself. As insecurity increases, some refugees may become more willing to seek alternative destinations outside the camps, including through irregular migration routes. People-smuggling networks reportedly charge as much as [US\\$4,000 per person](#), although such costs constrain the number able to undertake these journeys.

Second, there is also another dimension of violence that took place between the Bangladesh authority and the camp population. As of [October 2021](#), [a report](#) mentioned that around 109 Rohingya, who were allegedly involved in drug trafficking, were killed by the Bangladeshi security forces. In [September 2023](#), a report titled “This Persecution is the Worst There Is,” by the ‘Youth Congress Rohingya’ mentioned restrictions on the Rohingya freedom of movement happening inside Bangladesh.

The report highlighted that the data in the report are collected from a total of 295 Rohingya respondents from 30 camps across the Cox’s Bazar District. It comprehensively uncovered that even 99 per cent of the survey respondents pointed out that their freedom of movement is under restriction and 96 per cent said that it has impacts on their daily lives. Besides, 62 per cent also mentioned that they faced punishments related to the movement and out of this, 96 per cent was carried out by the ‘Armed Police Battalion’ (APBn). In addition, findings uncovered that 97.5 per cent of the respondents reported experience or knowledge of corruption. More importantly, in line with the findings, 65 per cent of the respondents believed the restrictions in Bangladesh are even worse than in Myanmar. A large majority of the participants also think that the key reasons behind the current coercive environment imposed by the Bangladesh authorities were 1) to forcibly relocate to the undesirable Bhasan Char Island Camp or return to Myanmar and 2) to attempt to displace Rohingya from the camps.

As a consequence of the current unhealthy situations in the camp environment, there are also many reported cases of refugees attempting to illegally migrate to other parts of Bangladesh and neighbouring and regional countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, India and more. Instead, prolonged displacement can generate further movements, new humanitarian vulnerabilities, and additional regional security concerns, thereby creating further barriers to repatriation. Neither Malaysia nor Indonesia is a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention; they officially regard the Rohingya as “illegal migrants” rather than refugees. Despite this, both countries have become primary destinations. Malaysia, with its established Muslim-majority society and informal economy, currently hosts [an estimated 109,700 Rohingya](#), who often work in the shadows, vulnerable to exploitation by traffickers and authorities. Indonesia, while not a traditional

destination, has seen a sharp increase in arrivals, particularly in Aceh Province, where local communities, driven by Islamic solidarity, have historically provided temporary shelter. In 2025 alone, [over 2,300 Rohingya landed](#) in Aceh, including hundreds of women and children. These maritime journeys are catastrophic; smugglers pack hundreds onto rickety boats without adequate food or water, and many perish at sea, with the UN documenting nearly 900 deaths in the region in the past year.

This ongoing exodus has created a severe and divisive regional crisis for Malaysia and Indonesia. While both nations occasionally provide temporary refuge on humanitarian grounds, they are fundamentally unwilling to absorb the Rohingya permanently. Malaysia has repeatedly detained and deported arrivals, while Indonesia, despite Aceh's local hospitality, has faced political pressure to "push back" boats to sea, a practice condemned by human rights groups. This reluctance is driven by national security concerns, economic fears, and growing public fatigue. In Malaysia, Rohingya presence is often politicized as a strain on public resources, and in Indonesia, many communities worry about social cohesion and the potential for criminal networks to infiltrate the refugee population.

In the case of India, as of [May 2023](#), the report by 'Refugees International' has mentioned that there are at least 20,000 UNHCR-registered Rohingya refugees in India. However, the government of India has estimated the number in 2017 as '40,000' and there could be additional after 2017. The report continued to mention that the key reasons why Rohingya refugees left Bangladesh for India are not giving all the benefits that earlier refugees received, including shelter and rations at the camps. The situations of the Rohingya refugees are also quite vulnerable in India and the key challenges include detention, deportation, limited access to education and healthcare including livelihood opportunities and poor living conditions, the report has uncovered. Therefore, it can be said that possibility of further displacement also extends beyond Bangladesh. Insecurity in the camps, limited livelihood opportunities, and restrictions on movement can encourage secondary migration to neighbouring countries, including through dangerous maritime routes. This demonstrates that the consequences of the original displacement do not necessarily follow a linear path from Myanmar to Bangladesh and eventually back to Myanmar. A similar but more brutal pattern also took place as several hundreds of refugees tried to migrate towards Malaysia for better job opportunities and livelihoods.

On the Myanmar side, new developments also took place in recent years. The active collaboration between Myanmar junta and Rohingya militant groups during 2024 conflicts bring new tensions and hostilities between the two sides. Reports by a well-known research institute, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), [mentioned that](#) around 5,000 Rohingya fighters joined armed conflicts in northern Arakan, committing serious crimes against the Rakhine and other minority populations. When the final junta outpost in Maungdaw fell to AA in late 2024, these fighters escaped back to Bangladesh for refugee and these incidents created another layer of barriers on the future of the repatriation issue.

While the repatriation of Rohingya have numerous restrictions and challenges including, political and social, logistic and humanitarian, rights and protection, conditions in Rakhine may also have the same issues of acceptance by the ULA and protection under the ULA control area. It is because the Rohingya leaders and rights groups have accused the ULA of committing serious crimes against the Rohingya, including targeted killing and arson attack on the civilian infrastructures.

The Refugees demand to relocate in their original villages rather than resettlement locations. However, the local sources stated that some of the abandoned areas are allocated to the Rakhine families. Such [reports claimed that](#) throughout 2024, settlement construction has expanded across farmland and residential plots that were previously owned by Rohingya families. The ULA described these allocations as a strategy for the Protection from the Rohingya militant groups while the Rohingya believe that it is converting the land previously owned by Rohingya to other communities with the intention of capturing.

In brief, those kinds of situations demonstrate the non-linear nature of the Rohingya repatriation issue, as prolonged displacement has generated unintended consequences beyond Cox's Bazar, including host-community tensions, camp violence, armed-group activities, radicalization, socioeconomic pressures, and restrictions on refugees. These conditions can encourage secondary migration, dangerous maritime movements, and gradual local integration, while renewed conflict in Rakhine continues to produce further displacement. These interconnected dynamics create a feedback loop in which the consequences of displacement generate new social, political, and security challenges, which in turn create further barriers to voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable repatriation.

Part-III

Findings and Analysis

A central finding is the extreme fragmentation of stakeholders. The text dispels the notion of a unified Rohingya community, detailing camp-based groups (ARSPHR, RYA, and the controversial UCR), armed factions (RSO, ARSA), and diaspora organizations (ARNA). The UCR's establishment in November 2024, while backed by Bangladesh, does not resolve the representation deficit; its electoral base represents a mere 0.3% of the refugee population, highlighting a deep legitimacy gap. This fragmentation means no single group can credibly commit to repatriation on behalf of the community, making durable political solutions elusive.

This fragmentation extends to state actors. In Bangladesh, multiple ministries, intelligence agencies, and the National Strategy Formulation Committee pursue potentially conflicting "de facto" policies. In Myanmar, a three-way power struggle complicates matters: the Naypyidaw regime lacks international legitimacy, the NUG possesses symbolic recognition but no territorial control, and the ULA/AA exercises de facto authority over northern Rakhine townships designated for resettlement. The authority signing repatriation agreements is not the authority controlling the territory of return, rendering bilateral deals operationally meaningless without ULA/AA consent.

The text powerfully illustrates "no ownership of the problem," where key actors deflect responsibility. Naypyidaw maintains it has prepared infrastructure for repatriation and blames Bangladesh for failing to facilitate the process. However, the Rohingya community rejects these "superficial" offers, arguing the regime lacks the political will to guarantee safety and citizenship. Bangladesh's Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus emphasizes that while Dhaka bears the hosting burden, the "solution must also come from [Myanmar]."

The ULA/AA's role further complicates ownership dynamics. The analysis argues it is a "must" to include the ULA due to its territorial control. However, the ULA views involvement as leverage for broader political recognition, creating a "win-lose" scenario with Naypyidaw, each blaming the other for hindering progress. While Bangladesh is the most "willing" entity to complete repatriation, its ability is fundamentally constrained by the lack of a cooperative, capable, and legitimate partner in Myanmar.

A profound mismatch exists between the policy priorities of different actors. Myanmar's Naypyidaw regime adheres to a rigid framework based on the 1993 agreement and 1982 Citizenship Law—offering National Verification Cards and resettlement in "designated villages" but no clear pathway to "full citizenship" for the Rohingya, who are not among the 135 official indigenous ethnic groups. The Rohingya community, as articulated by the UCR in August 2026, demands recognition of "Rohingya identity," full citizenship, property restitution, and

UNHCR-led verification, effectively dismantling the legal architecture Myanmar uses to process them.

Bangladesh is caught between these intractable positions. While officially supporting "voluntary, dignified, safe, and sustainable repatriation," it has employed "coercive and deceptive methods" to push the process, such as relocating refugees to Bhasan Char island. Dhaka's policy is uneven and pragmatic; it must navigate Myanmar's legal framework, refugee demands, and ULA/AA realities. This has forced Bangladesh to consider pragmatic communication with the ULA for border management, creating an ad-hoc policy satisfactory to no party.

This final pillar demonstrates how the crisis generates unpredictable, self-reinforcing negative cycles. Protracted displacement has created dynamics actively working against repatriation. First is conflict *within* the camps such as the 2021 assassination of leader Mohibullah and ARSA-RSO clashes, fostering fear and making refugees more reluctant to return.

Second is intensifying strain on host communities in Cox's Bazar. The local population, now outnumbered by refugees, faces environmental degradation and economic competition, resulting in hostility and a feeling of being "minoritized." This social friction presents a significant regional security issue. Meanwhile, inhumane conditions and movement restrictions (reported as worse than Myanmar by 65% of respondents) have triggered secondary migration: refugees are paying traffickers to move to Malaysia and India, contradicting repatriation goals and creating new crises.

Finally, the situation in Rakhine State is not static. Renewed conflict between the AA and Myanmar military in 2023-2024 displaced an additional 150,000 Rohingya, replenishing camp populations. Concurrently, the ULA/AA's redistribution of Rohingya land to Rakhine families creates new facts on the ground. This "feedback loop" demonstrates that the longer repatriation is delayed, the more difficult it becomes to restore pre-crisis conditions, potentially making return impossible for many.

Part-IV

Conclusion

The application of Complexity Theory (CT) to the Rohingya repatriation issue reveals a crisis that defies conventional state-centric solutions. The analysis has demonstrated that the repatriation deadlock is not merely a bilateral dispute between Bangladesh and Myanmar, but a structurally embedded problem arising from a fragmented system of heterogeneous actors, diffused responsibility, incompatible policy frameworks, and non-linear feedback loops that continuously reproduce and deepen the crisis.

The heterogeneity of agents—ranging from competing Rohingya camp-based groups and armed factions to diaspora organizations, multiple state institutions, and de facto authorities like the ULA/AA—ensures that no single actor possesses the legitimacy or capacity to represent the Rohingya community or enforce a durable settlement. This fragmentation is compounded by the problem of ownership, where states, armed groups, and international bodies each deflect responsibility while pursuing narrow strategic interests. Bangladesh, though most eager to expedite repatriation, remains constrained by the absence of a credible and capable partner in Myanmar, where authority is divided between the internationally isolated Naypyidaw regime, the symbolically recognized NUG, and the territorially dominant ULA/AA.

The uneven policy adoptions among stakeholders further entrench the impasse. Myanmar's rigid adherence to the 1982 Citizenship Law and its verification-based repatriation framework directly contradicts the Rohingya demand for full citizenship, identity recognition, and property restitution. Bangladesh, caught between these irreconcilable positions, has resorted to coercive measures such as Bhasan Char relocation, creating further distrust and humanitarian concerns. Meanwhile, the ULA/AA conditions its participation on international recognition, while regional powers like China and India prioritize strategic connectivity and stability over sustained pressure for Rohingya rights.

Finally, the non-linearity of the issue demonstrates that prolonged displacement generates unintended consequences—camp violence, host-community tensions, secondary migration, Rohingya militants' cooperation with Myanmar junta and land appropriation in Rakhine—that actively work against repatriation. Each delay creates new facts on the ground, making the original conditions of return increasingly unattainable. The way forward requires abandoning the illusion of a linear, comprehensive political settlement. Instead, a pragmatic, adaptive, and multi-track approach is essential. This entails functional engagement with the ULA/AA on security and humanitarian access, sustained international pressure on Myanmar to reform its citizenship laws, and genuine empowerment of credible Rohingya representation. Without such a shift, the repatriation question will remain an enduring symptom of a deeper regional crisis, with the Rohingya people continuing to bear the heaviest cost.

