

Opinion – Identity Politics and COVID-19 in Myanmar’s Rakhine State

Written by Sinmyung Park

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Despite the signing of the Panglong Agreement in 1947, in which Myanmar’s founding father General Aung San and some of the largest ethnic groups agreed to establish the federal union for all ethnic groups, Myanmar has suffered from a series of long-running ethnic disputes that persist across its territory. Chief among these disputes is the armed conflict between the Arakan Army (AA), an extreme Buddhist insurgent group, and the Myanmar Armed Forces (Tatmadaw) in the northern part of the Rakhine State. On April 10, 2020, the 11th anniversary of the AA, the armed group’s commander-in-chief reiterated its goal of reviving the past glory of the Kingdom of Arakan, a Buddhist kingdom that was conquered by the Bamar Konbaung Dynasty during the 1700s. He emphasized the support of the Rakhinese: ‘one of the main reasons why the Arakan Army can firmly stand up and resist full-force offensive attacks of the enemy is because the entire population of Arakan supports us ... Our Arakan Army is absolutely legitimate in Arakan where the people of Arakan support us with their own will and political recognition.’ Popular support among the Rakhinese is important to the AA because its ‘legitimacy’ is the only factor enabling it to make the fight against the Tatmadaw a stalemate. Otherwise, the AA’s armed uprising would have been quelled already, as the group is outnumbered by the Tatmadaw, both on the battlefield and in available resources.

The question then arises as to what makes the Rakhinese support the AA. Economic alienation may be one explanation. According to the World Bank Group (PDF), the poverty rate in the Rakhine State was 78 percent as of November 2014, which was significantly higher than the national average of 37.5 percent. The directly proportional relationship between economic hardship and the rapid growth of insurgency is evident in many case studies, such as post-war Afghanistan, Nigeria’s Delta region, and the Guatemalan civil war. It is not uncommon for decades of economic failure to generate discontent with the government—and Myanmar’s Rakhine State is no exception. According to the Final Report of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, the state suffers from economic stagnation and a deficiency of livelihood opportunities. Thus, the Rakhine State’s failing economy may have accelerated its residents’ dissatisfaction with the public authorities and increased popular support for the AA.

Another factor contributing to the rise of the AA lies in the history of the Rakhine State. From the Bamar Konbaung Dynasty’s conquest of the Arakan region in December 1784 to the infamous terrorist acts by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army in 2017, the Rakhinese have been in a state of restlessness for centuries. The AA understands this context very well. It has successfully identified Rakhinese grievances against the Bamar, taking advantage of the accumulated resentment in the conflict-torn Rakhine State. The AA formed a group identity that differentiated itself from the rest of Myanmar, thereby creating a self-versus-others dynamic to the conflicts in the Rakhine State. As Francis Fukuyama, an American political scientist, explained in his book *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, identity can be formed through feelings of pride, shame, and anger. His explanation captures the AA’s emergence, as it is the anger of the Rakhinese that legitimizes *de facto* political recognition of the AA. The armed group’s success stems from forming its identity as a viable alternative authority that provides not only security but also protection of Rakhinese dignity and pride.

In the meantime, the Myanmar government does not seem to fully grasp how identity politics in the Rakhine State continue to unfold. The Myanmar Police Force’s unexpected arrest of Dr. Aye Maung, former chairman of the Arakan National Party, is one such example. Apart from Dr. Aye Maung’s questionable charges of treason, a more prudent

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approach would have been preferable, given his symbolic status in Rakhinese politics. The Myanmar government could have avoided strengthening the prevalent perception among the Rakhinese of its indifference towards them. Another example is the Myanmar government’s official designation of the AA as a terrorist group and unlawful association in March 2020. This decision is understandable because the AA has posed serious security threats, especially for the last two years, in the northern part of the Rakhine State. However, this official designation also stigmatizes the identity of the AA as an organization that cannot be negotiated with.

At this point, it is noteworthy that the Rakhine State has been a place where separatists, including the AA, always have been active. Conflict in the Rakhine State was not an unforeseen variable in Myanmar’s peace process but instead a constant that has existed for some time. Knowing how widespread the separatist movements have been in the Rakhine State historically, one might conclude there is no answer to this conundrum, and under normal circumstances, the response to this rather pessimistic conclusion would have been ‘yes’. However, as the world faces the unprecedented global health crisis of COVID-19, there may be room for unusual solutions—even for the conflict in the Rakhine State.

At first glance, the spread of COVID-19 might have been an obstacle to the Myanmar government’s efforts for peace and stability. All peace talks have been postponed as the number of COVID-19 confirmed cases in Myanmar continued to show an upward trend. Nevertheless, history has shown that conflicts can be resolved sometimes in disaster settings as opposing parties come together. As an old Burmese saying goes, ‘There is no enemy like disease.’ The common enemy—COVID-19—is indeed a disaster on a scale never before witnessed for centuries. At the same time, it can draw health cooperation among the warring parties, and thus provide an opportunity to pave the way for the Rakhine State.

The recent situation in the Shan State is a good example that such cooperation between enemies is possible. In early May 2020, some armed groups in the Shan State, including the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the largest ethnic armed group in Myanmar, sought outside help to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In response to their request, the Tatmadaw dispatched its medical teams to the armed groups. The UWSA chairman recently invited Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, Myanmar’s military chief, to visit the Wa State. Had it not been for COVID-19, such cooperation would have been unmanageable considering the previous tension between the Tatmadaw and the UWSA. The latter had held a grand-scale military parade in April 2019 as if it were an independent government. The series of events that occurred in the Shan State may similarly unfold in the Rakhine State as COVID-19 continues to spread in Myanmar. Just as the UWSA called for help in the wake of the pandemic, the possibility of the AA adopting a similar response cannot be ruled out.

In conclusion, along with historical resentment, identity politics, which describes the opponent as an object to subdue, is the main driving force of the conflicts in the Rakhine State. While the single-track military solution keeps proving its incompetence, there indeed seems to be no prompt remedies to the AA problem at this time. Nevertheless, as the unparalleled challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic may lead to abrupt changes in the Rakhine State’s political landscape, all stakeholders should bear in mind that the disease provides not only a justification for them to exit the present lose-lose game but also a rare opportunity to advance the seemingly impossible goal of peace that the Rakhinese have longed for. The lessons learned from the 1947 Panglong Agreement—that the mediation process can be done when all stakeholders patiently stick to political approaches involving dialogue and negotiations—are needed now more than ever during this time of uncertainty.

About the author:

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