

# Theoretical Explanations of the Prevailing Instability of Myanmar's Rakhine State

Written by Sinmyung Park

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SINMYUNG PARK, JUN 12 2021

Armed conflicts, whether great or small, do not appear to cease within Myanmar's Rakhine State. The Rakhine conflict is multifaceted, with financial, socio-political, religious, and nationalistic causes, none of which are mutually exclusive. Amid several armed skirmishes of high intensity, some of the recent conspicuous disputes have been the displacement of the Rohingya population and the rapid emergence of a Buddhist armed group named the Arakan Army (AA). There is less scholarly work exploring the substance behind these immediate phenomena; relying on current explanations that do not address the potential historical root causes or complexity of the conflict delays effective political responses. What is required in this regard is a comprehensive theoretical approach that utilizes a holistic framework to examine past and present conflicts in Rakhine State.

Understanding the current status of the Rohingya issue must entail a theoretical elucidation of 1) how political scapegoating may give birth to a militaristic form of nationalism that advocates violence toward the 'othered' population and 2) how these series of events might lead to the enactment of a citizenship law which provides legal justification for such discrimination. Furthermore, it is important to understand the intention behind the AA's use of religious and nationalistic appeals in its expanding strategy. Thus, this article aims to provide a theoretical grounding for examining the historical developments to contextualize the prevailing instability of Myanmar's Rakhine State.

### Historical Background

Various armed clashes in Rakhine State have received extensive attention from the international community. The Rohingya displacement is undoubtedly the most well-known problem as it was widely televised and reported across the globe. Without a doubt, the modern history of Rakhine State left the Rohingya Muslims with a deep skepticism of the Myanmar authorities. It should be noted that the recent forced migration of Rohingya Muslims to neighboring countries is not a new phenomenon as the Rohingya conflicts date back to the Burman kings' conquest of the Kingdom of Arakan (the modern-day Rakhine State) in the 1700s. The Rohingya issue has recently gained global attention after the Gambia filed a lawsuit against Myanmar in November 2019, accusing it of the genocide of the Rohingya refugees. The case is currently being heard by the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Since the military coup d'état staged in Myanmar on 1 February 2021, there have been voices calling for the recognition of the Rohingya Muslims' rights (see here and here). It is indeed essential to continue observing the development of these movements.

Another determinant that shakes the political landscape of Rakhine State is the rapid emergence of the Arakan Army (AA). Founded in 2009, the AA is a relatively new Buddhist armed group operating actively in Myanmar's northwest regions, including Rakhine and Chin States. The AA has been in the spotlight since the beginning of 2019, when it mounted several attacks on the Tatmadaw and Myanmar police forces. The AA's goal is to revive the past glory of the Kingdom of Arakan, an ancient kingdom in the Arakan region conquered by the Burman kings. However, under the banner of religious nationalism, the Buddhist armed group's true motive is to seek greater autonomy within the region. In fact, it is widely known that the AA's ambition is to gain the level of autonomy that the Myanmar authorities have granted to the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the largest ethnic armed organization in Myanmar. The UWSA enjoys the status of the Self-Administered Division, as stipulated in Myanmar's Constitution. In the interview with

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Frontier Myanmar, Twan Mrat Naing, the AA's Commander-in-Chief, openly proclaimed that his organization has 'an expectation for no less than the UWSA.' The Tatmadaw's spokesperson likened the AA's goal to 'the thoughts of a child daydreaming.'

## The Relevance of Durkheim: Scapegoating and the Sacred-Profane Dichotomy

Keeping in mind that these complex historical incidents have resulted in the ongoing persecution of the Rohingya, Émile Durkheim's idea of scapegoating may be one of the most relevant contributions to building a sound theoretical framework for interpreting the construction of the 'othered' identity of Rohingyas. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1995), Durkheim aptly describes the essence of the scapegoat as an outsider who is less able to evoke sympathy and solidarity. Put differently, when society encounters suffering, it seeks the focus of public censure, a target of criticism that can be accountable for its misfortunes. Interestingly, Durkheim's idea of scapegoating resembles Myanmar's modern history through which the Rohingya Muslims have been regarded as 'others' and kept from acquiring Myanmar citizenship. The Rohingyas have been a convenient target, and advocating for the denial of their fundamental rights has become common among the political elites and the general public. Numerous hate speeches directed toward the Rohingya Muslims on social media have been one attestation of this discriminatory phenomenon. The main argument of such hate speeches typically boils down to attacking differences that are readily apparent to outside observers, including religion and ethnicity.

Between these two notable identity markers, many speculate that religion holds more significance since nearly all Rohingyas are Muslims living in a predominantly Buddhist country. For Durkheim as well, religion constitutes an essential aspect of the human condition. It is important to note that Durkheim regards religion as a social institution; in essence, the outcome of human activity. Durkheim defines religion as 'a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them' (1995: xxxiv). According to this definition, religion consists of two elements: 1) the beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, and 2) a moral community. The essential keywords are 'sacred' and 'community,' since the former represents a dichotomy that provides a theoretical basis for scapegoating, and the latter helps define religion as a social construct. In *Seven Theories of Religion*, Daniel Pals (1996) commented that, in Durkheim's theory, the sacred refers to the interests of the group, and in particular, unity. The question then arises as to what constitutes the profane. It can be inferred that profanity, the opposite of the sacred, would naturally be deemed as violating social codes and disturbing social harmony. This dichotomous approach to sacredness and profanity is worth noting as it closely resembles the historical circumstances surrounding the establishment of the scapegoated identity of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. Borrowing the words of French philosopher René Girard, 'the persecutors always convince themselves that a small number of people, or even a single individual, despite his relative weakness, is extremely harmful to the whole of society' (1986: 15). In the case of Myanmar's Rakhine State, it is justified to state that both the Myanmar government and the public viewed the Rohingya Muslims as harmful scapegoats against whom they could cultivate a sense of unity. That is, the Myanmar community convinced itself that the Rohingyas deserve discrimination since recognizing their rights is likely to lead to the disintegration of social harmony.

Through such marginalizing discourses, Myanmar society formed a 'moral community,' which Durkheim mentions in his definition of religion. As morality entails a standard of right and wrong, it once again brings the dichotomy reinforced in the sacred-profane framework back to the center of discussion. Myanmar's ancient and modern history testifies to the notion that the persecution of the Rohingya was justified, as this practice was historically considered normal and proper. Through these socially accepted acts of exclusion, a sense of solidarity becomes strengthened among the community members. This process can be best explained by Durkheim's functional model of ritual punishment. According to Durkheim, ritual punishment causes social integration, which leads to the formation of solidarity. In the context of the Rakhine State, the idea of ritual punishment can be compared to the Myanmar authorities' historical persecution of the Rohingya population. On the other hand, however, 'solidarity is prone to disruption by the third variable in the schema, external threats' (Inverarity, Lauderdale, and Feld, 1983: 131). Here, the perception of Rohingya as outsiders can lead to them being regarded as an external threat. As Inverarity et al. cogently point out, these external threats disrupt solidarity and may thereby lead the community to facilitate 'the relationship between repressive justice—of which scapegoating is one special form—and social solidarity' (1983:

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156). In other words, religion and its rituals, including scapegoating, are a part of the socially learned doctrines and discourses that effectively function as a means of strengthening social bonds when confronted with existential threats. This point confirms Durkheim's argument that religion is a social process and that the continued identity crisis of the Rohingya Muslims living in a Buddhist country can be interpreted within such a theoretical context.

## The Relevance of Weber: Ethnicity and Citizenship

Citizenship is crucial for the development of an identity. Granting citizenship ensures an individual's legal status and political rights and affects the formation of one's identity. Hence, the Rohingya Muslims' inability to acquire Myanmar citizenship is a significant factor contributing to their gradual marginalization from every social, economic, and political facet of Myanmar society. As stated previously, the Rohingya's social exclusion has existed for hundreds of years; however, it is the 1982 Myanmar Citizenship Law that permanently stripped the Rohingya Muslims of the opportunity to become citizens of Myanmar. Under this law, one's full citizenship can only be acknowledged if the person belongs to one of the 135 distinct ethnic groups recognized by the Myanmar government. Despite residing in Myanmar for generations, the Rohingya are not included in the list of national races. The 1982 Citizenship Law is primarily based on ethnicity and is thus severely discriminatory. International NGOs, including Human Rights Watch, have repeatedly advised the Myanmar government to amend the 1982 Citizenship Law as per the recommendations of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, but to no avail. Since the 1982 Citizenship Law places a great emphasis on ethnicity, it is crucial to examine the definition of ethnicity, and Weber has something to offer on the subject.

Weber defines ethnicity as "the belief of social actors in common descent based on racial and cultural differences, among other factors" (Jackson, 1982: 5). In other words, it is not the fact of, but the belief in a common descent that is the core idea in Weber's definition of ethnicity (2013). After all, tracing the common ancestor of various ethnic groups is an impossible task. This is significantly more so in the context of Myanmar, a country with hundreds of distinct ethnic groups. Regarding the development of the 1982 Law, one might adhere to the popular misconception that the Rohingya issue is a religious conflict (i.e., Buddhism versus Islam). However, this interpretation of the enactment of the 1982 Law is only partially correct since the Rohingya issue is more political than religious. The existence of other Rakhine ethnic groups, such as the Kaman, attests to the political, rather than religious, nature of the Rohingya conflict. The Kaman are an ethnic group primarily residing in Myanmar's Rakhine State. Most of the Kaman are Muslims. Hence, they share the same identity markers—both in terms of their historical residence and religion—as the Rohingya. Nevertheless, the Kaman are broadly recognized as Myanmar citizens because the 1982 Myanmar Citizenship Law classifies them as one of the seven ethnic groups of the Rakhine State and one of the 135 official national races (Thant Myint-U, 2007).

Considering how the 1982 Law effectively perpetuated the denial of the Rohingya's citizenship, it is worth discussing the power of laws as a causal force rather than merely descriptive knowledge. Unlike Durkheim, who saw the purpose of research to be finding laws, Weber viewed laws as a means for research, particularly for finding causal explanations. To put it simply, Durkheim interpreted laws as an ends, whereas Weber considered laws as means (Jensen, 2012: 76). In the Rakhine context, Durkheim might view the enactment of the 1982 Citizenship Law as a result of the dynamics of social capital, including religion and community development. On the contrary, Weber is likely to argue that the 1982 Citizenship Law is indeed the turn where the metaphysical hatred toward the Rohingyas began manifest physically, concretizing the ubiquitous animosity in the form of a written law. For Weber, the systematization of the law is an essential precondition for material changes. For example, in *Economic and Society: An Outline of Interpretative Sociology*, Weber argues that 'the functioning of the legal process...constituted one of the most important conditions for the existence of capitalist enterprise, which cannot do without legal security' (1978: 853). Likewise, it can be inferred that the functioning of the 1982 Myanmar Citizenship Law officialized the prevalent discrimination against the Rohingya Muslims.

## Understanding the Rise of the Arakan Army through the Theories of Gramsci

The rapid emergence of the Arakan Army lies in its effective use of religious and nationalistic discourse within the Rakhine State's particular historical context. The AA's Commander-in-Chief recently reiterated the armed group's

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goal of reviving the past glory of the Kingdom of Arakan, a Buddhist kingdom conquered by the Konbaung Dynasty in the 1700s. The AA commander's reference to rebuilding an ancient Buddhist kingdom stems from the widespread sentiment among the Rakhinese that the Burman ethnic majority has marginalized them historically. With this context in mind, the AA is successfully establishing a sense of solidarity, which reaffirms a shared value of ethnic separatism: the identity of victimhood developed throughout the historical conflicts between the kingdoms of Burma and Arakan. Indeed, it is crucial to understand the rise of the AA through the lens of their historic political discourse, which is proven to be effective as the AA has rapidly increased in size, claiming that they currently have 7,000 active soldiers at their disposal.

The AA has acquired the image of being a noble cause, allowing them to peddle their influence within the region. How did the AA come to acquire substantial popular support in the Rakhine State? This question can be best answered by considering Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. Gramsci defines hegemony as being more than simply dominance through coercion. Generally, the Gramscian hegemony is understood as the ability of the ruling groups to impose their interpretation of reality as the natural state of affairs upon the ruled. Thus, according to Gramsci, dominant groups maintain their position through a mix of coercive force and consent from subordinate groups. Interestingly, the AA's governance mechanism perfectly aligns with Gramsci's definition of hegemony: the Buddhist armed group possesses sufficient military power to engage in head-on battles with the Myanmar military and enjoys widespread support and consent among the Rakhinese.

At this point, it is important to examine how the AA has gained hegemony in Myanmar's Rakhine State. For Gramsci, hegemony can be strengthened via the practices of institutions and intellectuals who promulgate for the interests of the ruling power. According to Oliverio, 'institutions such as education, media, and government organizations are involved in a process of generating information that appears simple and devoid of any intrinsic political problems or philosophical critiques' (1998: 6). Furthermore, Gramsci himself notes in *Prison Notebooks* that "the intellectuals are the dominant group's 'deputies' exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government" (2018: 97). In the Rakhine context, Buddhism and the monks play the role of those institutions and intellectuals. 'I was a monk. Most of us used to be...When I heard about this army, I really wanted to join. You know, in Rakhine State, we need to defend Buddhism.' Brenner, an expert in the political economy of armed ethnic conflicts in Myanmar, introduced this comment made by a former Rakhinese monk. This comment is a testament to the Rakhine Buddhist monks' support of the AA.

In fact, the monks have always been an active force promoting Rakhinese political aspirations. According to the Transnational Institute's recent field report on Myanmar's Rakhine State, following British Burma's separation from India in 1937, 'Buddhist monks encouraged the different Rakhine associations to join together as the Arakan National Congress...Such united fronts have since become a feature of Rakhine politics...It was from this latter formation that the armed nationalist movement later grew.' Thus, the AA is successfully capturing historical Rakhinese grievances and, in Gramscian terminology, implements two strategies for social change: the war of maneuver, which involves a strategy of a direct and violent confrontation, and "the war of position as a slow, protracted struggle that involves a diverse means, including 'non-violent' aspects of civil society" (Lauderdale, 1998: 148). The Rakhine monks are particularly essential in carrying out the latter war as organic intellectuals.

For Gramsci, the role of organic intellectuals is similar to that of contemporary scholar-activists. Rakhine monks' demonstration in May of 2019 is an excellent example of this. On 19 May 2019, a group of Rakhinese monks took to the streets and called for an end to the fighting between the Myanmar military and the AA. Their march was a response to the inaction of the Myanmar authorities to the letter sent by senior monks on 9 May of the same year. An interesting fact about this demonstration is that the monks sent their letter to the President, the State Counsellor, and the Senior General; however, no letter was sent to the Arakan Army, the other axis of the current Rakhine conflict. This very action implies that the monks of the Rakhine State believe that the Myanmar authorities are more responsible than the AA for the current state of affairs in Rakhine State. Thus, with their respected social position, the Rakhinese monks perform the role of organic intellectuals, which Gramsci defines as intellectuals who 'can no longer consist in eloquence...but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, 'permanent persuader' and not just a simple orator' (2018: 95). Through their teachings and actions, the Rakhinese monks, as the Gramscian organic intellectuals who speak for the ruling powers of the Rakhine State in the time of each respective historical

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period, have been at the forefront of Rakhinese nationalism and will continue to wield their influence in the future.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to explore the unique circumstances of the multifaceted Rakhine conflict from the theoretical perspectives of Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Antonio Gramsci. These three thinkers' theories are applicable to discussing Rakhine State's history, society, politics, and culture in an integrative manner, which reveal the following: the relationship between individuals and institutions, the political identity formation that establishes national identity, and the governance mechanism that seeks to align the interests of the ruling group through the dissemination of socially constructed realities to the everyday life of the people of Rakhine. As the Rakhine conflict hinges on the assimilation of ethno-religious nationalism and identity politics, it requires further study with greater attention paid to the future direction of Myanmar in the aftermath of the Myanmar military's takeover of the government in 2021, and the developments that will follow the ICJ's final ruling on the Rohingya genocide.

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