

The Rohingya in the shadow of the Arakan army

There is a complex level of conflict and suffering that continue to enshroud the Rohingya community

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“Instead of getting killed at the frontline by taking up arms for the junta, we would rather fight them and join the Arakan Army (AA).”

This sentiment comes from a young Rohingya man just as the Myanmar junta on February 16 reportedly reached out to Rohingya village leaders in Buthidaung and Sittwe mandating the mobilization of men for training aimed at preventing AA forces from entering their communities. The AA's involvement with the Northern Alliance and its recent strategic victories have become a major headache for the Myanmar military and signals a deepening conflict.

This development follows closely on the heels of the junta's revival of the 2010 People's Military Service Law on February 10, marking a stark escalation in the regime's attempts to formalize conscription. Under this law, Myanmar citizen men aged 18 to 35 and women aged 18 to 27 are now eligible for military service.

Alarmed by these troubling developments, a Facebook live meeting held on February 19 featuring prominent Rohingya figures such as Ro Nay San Lwin, Reza Uddin, and Tun Khin, voiced a powerful call to action. The speakers urged the Rohingya community to stand united against the military's oppressive tactics, emphasizing the importance of not aiding the junta's efforts.

They recounted the historical injustices faced by the Rohingya and highlighted the need for peaceful coexistence with other ethnic groups, particularly the Rakhine. The speakers provided an analysis of the current political and military dynamics in Myanmar, noting the military's diminishing power and the broader national resistance against military rule. They observed that the military's strategy includes escalating tensions among religious and ethnic groups as a diversion from its weakening grip on power.

However, the narrative takes a complex turn when examining the actions of the AA in Rakhine State. Ro Nay San Lwin and Tun Khin vocally highlighted the dire risks associated with the Myanmar military's strategy of forcibly recruiting Rohingya men, warning of their potential use as “human shields” in the conflict-ridden regions of Rakhine State. However, both conspicuously omit the ongoing and similar use of Rohingya villages as human shields by the AA, a selective silence that raises questions about the impartiality of their condemnation.

The tactics employed by the AA in Rakhine State, as documented by Human Rights Watch and a UN report, have led to severe consequences for Rohingya villages, particularly in south Buthidaung township. In late January 2024, AA fighters positioned themselves within the Rohingya village tract of Hpon Nyo Leik, ostensibly to gain strategic advantage over a nearby Myanmar military command.

This action prompted severe military responses, including helicopter gunship attacks, artillery shelling, and ground assaults, resulting in significant civilian casualties and the destruction of property. By effectively using these villages as human shields, the AA's presence has led to tragic outcomes: Over a dozen Rohingya civilians killed, up to 100 more injured, and more than 100 homes damaged or destroyed.

Nay San Lwin's social media timeline



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provides numerous such examples over the years. The AA's actions have not only jeopardized the lives of the Rohingya but also disrupted their livelihoods, with families displaced, food supplies dwindling, and medical facilities overwhelmed and unable to cope with the influx of injured residents. This situation shows a harrowing aspect of the conflict, where the AA, despite promising security, has contributed to the peril faced by the Rohingya, caught between the clashing forces with no immediate relief in sight.

Curiously, the three spokespersons avoided all mention of these events. Indeed, Nay San Lwin in his press interviews repeated the “human shields” tactics the Myanmar military might use but did not refer to the same tactics being deployed by the AA. Attempts to contact two of the Facebook live speakers for comment yielded no response.

In stark contrast to the selective approaches of Ro Nay San Lwin and Tun Khin, Ambia Parveen of the European Rohingya Council presents a more sceptical and critical view of the Arakan Army (AA) and its impact on the Rohingya community, as she explained in an interview I conducted with her.

Parveen suggests that the best course of action for the Rohingya, particularly the youth, is to unite and form their “own force capable of joining the federal army and the People's Defense Force (PDF).” Moreover, she advocates for initiating “meaningful political dialogues with the AA, the National Unity Government (NUG), and other ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) to ensure recognition of Rohingya ethnicity and federal rights.”

Crucially, she highlights the urgent need for political dialogue and a united front against all oppressors, “including the Arakan Army/United League of Arakan.” Her incendiary critique of the AA and the broader Rakhine role in the Rohingya genocide underlines a complex and fraught relationship. By characterizing the Rakhines, and by extension the AA, as executors of the military's genocidal agenda, Parveen challenges the softly-softly approach that minimizes Rakhine complicity.

Parveen's critique extends to the AA's implementation of “Rakhita,” which she sees as a significant threat to the Rohingya's existence and rights within Arakan. She accuses the AA of adopting a supremacy ideology, aiming to protect only the Rakhine people and Buddhism, thereby excluding the Rohingya.

This approach, according to Parveen, contravenes the principles of diversity, federalism, and multiculturalism, which are fundamental to the Rohingya's vision for their future in Myanmar. She calls for constitutional guarantees to secure the Rohingya community's rights, and expressed a profound mistrust of the AA's policies and actions.

The situation surrounding the Rohingya community in Myanmar has been further complicated by a recent interview given by Twan Mrat Naing, the leader of the AA, to the BBC. His comments have ignited controversy, particularly for their implications regarding the Rohingya people's history, identity, and their indigeneity in Rakhine State.

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Twan Mrat Naing's assertion that we must “acknowledge the historical creations and narratives honestly” has been interpreted as a veiled denial of the Rohingya's historical narratives, suggesting their accounts of their history in Rakhine State are either fabricated or misleading. This challenges the Rohingya's claims of their historical presence in the region, hinting at a broader denial of their identity and rights.

Furthermore, his remarks subtly portray the Rohingya as newcomers or outsiders to Rakhine State, rather than as indigenous people. This narrative supports exclusionary ideologies that depict the Rohingya as foreign interlopers, thus undermining their claims to citizenship and rights within Myanmar. The conflation of Bengali, Chittagonian, and Rohingya identities by Twan Mrat Naing also serves to dilute the distinct ethnic and cultural identity of the Rohingya, aligning with narratives that deny their existence as a distinct ethnic group.

Twan Mrat Naing's discussion of “national rights” for the Rohingya, while seemingly extending an olive branch, actually offers

a recognition far removed from the full citizenship rights granted to Myanmar's 135 officially recognized ethnic groups. Geoff Aung, a Burmese researcher and lecturer at the University of Vienna echoed this assessment, stating that ““taingyintha” recognition would be a bigger step than an acknowledgment of citizenship right,” highlighting the limited nature of the rights being offered to the Rohingya.

The AA leader's comments have sparked outrage among educated Rohingya youth in the refugee camps as well as international observers. They have also drawn criticism from scholars like Penny Green, Professor of Law and Globalization at Queen Mary, University of London and a Director of the International State Crime Initiative, who characterizes Twan Mrat Naing's statements as having “racist undertones,” appealing to international audiences while aligning with the Myanmar military regime's narrative.

This narrative falsely portrays the Rohingya as “illegal interlopers” with a fabricated identity that disrupts the peace of Rakhine State, framing them as the problem rather than “as a group against whom great genocidal harm has been perpetrated.”

In response to Twan Mrat Naing's comments on Rohingya identity, Aung Kyaw Moe, a Rohingya deputy minister at the Ministry of Human Rights, National Unity Government of Myanmar, emphasized the critical nature of identity in the discussion of equal rights.

He stated, “In the context of identity politics, where identity is the backbone of ensuring equal rights, we cannot discuss equal rights without first recognizing the very identity itself.” This underlines the fundamental issue at hand: The recognition of the Rohingya's identity as a prerequisite for discussing their rights and status in Myanmar.

Against this backdrop of ongoing debate over identity and rights, Nay San Lwin's comments during a Facebook live stream offer a glimpse into the personal and collective challenges faced by the Rohingya. In the live stream, he remarked, “the Rakhine have made various mistakes against us,” employing a remarkably mild euphemism for actions he identifies as genocide in different contexts.

That's not all. The quote at the outset of this article was shared on X (formerly Twitter) by Nay San Lwin and reposted by Tun Khin, capturing an individual Rohingya's preference to side with the AA over being coerced into service with the junta -- a sentiment reflecting a personal stance rather than a widespread movement within the Rohingya.

Their decision to broadcast this specific quote, while not bringing attention to a more damning observation from the HRW report that “We Rohingya are dying, caught between the two parties,” subtly suggests a careful and shifting approach in their portrayal of the AA. Their choice not only captures the dire predicament of the Rohingya but also reveals the complex levels of conflict and suffering that continue to enshroud their community. ●

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