Federalism, Freedom and Fear-Mongering: Democratization and Violent Conflict in Rakhine State, Myanmar

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Abstract:

This study examines how the implementation of a federal constitution and the process of democratization in Myanmar have led to increased violent conflict between two ethnic groups: the Rakhine Buddhists and the Rohingya Muslims. Electoral competition, new democratic freedoms and the opportunity to wrest power from the central government through taking control of state level parliaments has invigorated ethnic tensions. These new opportunities create incentives for Rakhine nationalist parties to propagate myths and stoke fears on violent Rohingya intentions, positioning themselves as the only entities capable of preserving the Rakhine race.

The paper focuses on the period from June 2012- April 2017, examining electoral data, the evolution of political parties in Rakhine State, the impact of Rakhine civil society, the violent clashes of 2012, 2014 and 2016, and the measures taken by the government to restrict Rohingya rights. In highlighting the limitations and challenges of structural and systemic reform in mitigating inter-ethnic conflict, this paper emphasizes the importance of understanding context and cultivating institutions before transitioning to democracy.
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1. Introduction

“After entering our home, the army raped my two sisters, 14 and 17 years old, before the eyes of my elderly parents. They were raped collectively by at least eight army men. They had severely beaten my parents prior to raping my sisters.”¹ A 22-year-old former resident of the Rohingya village of Myaw Taung had reported this incident to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. After the Myanmar military’s October 2016 “area clearance operations” in northern Rakhine State in response to attacks by Rohingya Muslim insurgents, over 90 000 Rohingya Muslims (henceforth the Rohingya) have fled Myanmar, with the majority seeking refuge in Bangladesh.² Violence at the hand of Myanmar’s state and local security forces is not new to the Rohingya. The 2016 response to insurgent attacks by the Myanmar military and ethnic Rakhine Buddhists (henceforth the Rakhine/Arakan) is the latest iteration of violent inter-ethnic conflict in Myanmar’s Rakhine State between the Rohingya and the Rakhine.

Despite receiving international acclaim in 2010 for a successful democratization process after almost fifty years of dictatorship, the inability to effectively resolve over sixty years of ethnic conflict, particularly in Rakhine state, is an enduring stain on Myanmar’s transition. Over the last five years, an escalation in inter-ethnic tensions in Rakhine state has taken over 1000 lives and has internally displaced over 140 000.³ While some of the roots of the Rakhine-Rohingya conflict can be traced back to the late 1700s when a powerful Rakhine kingdom once

existed, the character of and imperatives behind violent conflict in Rakhine state today is heavily influenced by the process of democratization that began with the country’s new constitution, ratified in 2008. The Rakhine historical narrative asserts that the invasion by the Burmese kingdom in 1785 had stolen Rakhine glory; the annexation by the British empire had stolen Rakhine sovereignty; the rule of the military stole Rakhine self-determination, and the migration of the “Bengalis” had stolen Rakhine prosperity and threatened Rakhine security. On the other hand, the history of the Rohingya is a history of migration, false promises and the active denial of basic human rights. The UN has identified the Rohingya as one of the world’s most persecuted minorities, and one of the largest groups of stateless people.\(^4\) Rohingya migration happened in waves with evidence of Muslim migration from Bengal to modern day Rakhine in the late 1600s, from parts of the British Raj when the empire was still in power, and in the post-World War II era with refugees returning to their homes. After Myanmar became independent from the British in 1948, Rohingya and Rakhine insurgencies had emerged in the early 1950s and late 1960s seeking rights to self-determination from a central government dominated by Myanmar’s majority ethnic group, the Burmans (also Burmese/ Bamar/ Myanmar all connoting the same ethnic group). The dictatorship’s seizure of power in 1962 institutionalized Burman domination with Burmanization policies based on the concept of “Buddha-bata Myanmar-lumyo,” meaning that to be a Myanmar is to be a Buddhist.\(^5\) While both the Rakhine and Rohingya have been politically, economically and culturally marginalized by a formerly unitary state in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, one small saving grace for the Rakhine not

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privy to the Rohingya, is that they are still considered an indigenous ethnic group of Myanmar endowed with the full privileges of citizenship. A politics of indigeneity has existed in Rakhine for decades depicting the Rohingya as illegal immigrants viciously seizing the already limited resources available to the Rakhine. Violence and displacement are not new to Rakhine state in the post-independence era with operations in the late 1970s and early 1990s displacing hundreds of thousands. However, “the pattern, nature, level, frequency and impact of anti-Muslim” and particularly anti-Rohingya violence since the transition to a quasi-democratic regime have been influenced by the changes in Myanmar’s political environment.

This paper argues that Myanmar’s transition to federal democracy created the incentives and conditions for Rakhine politicians to engage in ethno-nationalist fear-mongering, which in turn precipitated inter-ethnic violence between the Rakhine and Rohingya from 2012-2016. The ratification of a federal constitution in 2008 and the democratization of the country beginning with successful elections in 2010 created unprecedented opportunities for the Rakhine to assert self-determination. If the Rakhine could secure an electoral majority in the newly established Rakhine state parliament and win as many seats as possible in the national parliament, they could enact and amend legislation privileging Rakhine interests. Two key conditions made nationalist mobilizing a politically expedient and viable strategy. Primarily, Rakhine populations were receptive to chauvinistic and anti-Rohingya sentiment as political elites could capitalize on centuries of Rakhine grievances, instrumentally manipulating ethnic identity as a tool to mobilize populations. Secondly, weak democratic institutions and a liberalized political environment

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facilitated popular mobilization. Strengthening allegiance to the Rakhine cause became an effective tool in guaranteeing electoral victory for Rakhine political parties. The propagation of hateful anti-Rohingya rhetoric contributed to widespread feelings of mutual distrust, and insecurity, creating a context that enabled inter-ethnic violence. In illustrating this argument, this paper will first trace narratives of historical grievances of both the Rakhine and Rohingya. It will then examine the literature on and delineate a theoretical framework for the interplay between the phenomena of democratization, ethnic parties, nationalism, and electoral violence. Finally, it will explore electoral imperatives surrounding episodes of inter-ethnic clashes in 2012, 2014 and 2016, outlining the ways that nationalist Rakhine mobilization contributed to violence.

2. Myanmar’s History and the Politicization of Ethnicity

The entrenchment of ethnic grievances in Myanmar more broadly and in Rakhine state can be explained by the politicization and manipulation of ethnicity. This paper espouses a constructivist definition of ethnicity arguing that ethnicity is not inherently divisive or significant, yet can be leveraged as a tool to mobilize groups in seeking to derive material benefit. Max Weber, Kanchan Chandra and Donald Horowitz identify a “subjective belief” in “common descent” as an essential component of ethnic identity. In particular, Horowitz’ inclusive definition of ethnicity will be used in this paper, treating ethnicity as a broad category encompassing “differences identified by color, language, religion, or some other attribute of common origin.” He further states that ethnicity is rooted in a “myth of collective ancestry, which carries with it traits believed to be innate.” Ashutosh Varshney argues that this subjective belief of innate commonality among ethnic groups becomes significant in explaining

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conflict where political elites are able to manipulate ethnicity as a vehicle for attaining power and access to resources.\\(^{11}\)

Contemporary violent conflict in Rakhine State finds its roots in the historical construction and entrenchment of Rakhine and Rohingya identities. Jack Snyder explains that the cultural-rivalries conception of ethnic conflict assumes that “humanity is divided into distinct peoples, each of whom has the natural desire to rule itself in its own way.”\\(^{12}\) Under this view, cultural animosity is a force independent of political systems, and a country’s democratization process merely facilitates the liberalization necessary to express deeply rooted hatred.\\(^{13}\) While there is credence to the notion that cultural rivalries can be entrenched over long periods of time, in the case of the Rohingya and the Rakhine, conflict is not necessarily a product of innate cultural incompatibilities, but is a result of decades of pre-colonial, colonial, and military policies pitting communities against each other.

The cultural rivalries view is refuted by evidence of peaceful co-existence between Rakhine and Muslim populations that was disrupted by repeated invasion and conquest. The fall of the Mrauk-U Rakhine Kingdom (1430-1785), which encompassed parts of modern day Bangladesh and Rakhine state, continues to be one of the roots of contemporary Rakhine nationalism.\\(^{14}\) This Kingdom was founded by Rakhine King Narameikhla with the military support of the Sultan of Bengal, gaining independence in 1531.\\(^{15}\) At the time the Kingdom was founded, the King’s Muslim soldiers from Bengal had accompanied him, settling in a village

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\(^{12}\) Jack L. Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict*, 34.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 33.


near the city of Mrauk-U where they had built a mosque. Furthermore, in 1660 the Mughal empire’s Prince Shah Shuja was granted sanctuary by the King in Mrauk-U with some of his soldiers. The knowledge of this sanctuary encouraged Bengali Muslim migration to Mrauk-U where they coexisted peacefully with their Rakhine neighbours. The Mrauk-U Kingdom flourished and developed in relative isolation from the Burmese Kingdom due to the geographical barrier of the Rakhine Yoma mountain range. In 1785, this separation was violently overcome by the invasion of the Burmese Kingdom, destroying much of Mrauk-U and causing around 200 000 Rakhine to flee the Kingdom. Burmese conquest of the Rakhine was brief. In 1825, British forces overthrew Burmese forces in Rakhine state, and the state was formally subsumed into British India in 1886. The needs of an expanding British India, that now encompassed Burma, were met by migrant Bengali Muslim labourers. In arriving en masse to expand rice cultivation in Rakhine state, these labourers “changed the ethnic and religious mix, created socio-economic problems,” and bred Rakhine resentment. This was exacerbated in the 1940s as the powers fighting World War II (WWII) coopted ethnic tensions. The British solicited Bengali Muslim support while the Rakhine sided with the Japanese, culminating in heinous massacres committed by both sides between 1942 and 1943. Violence within these two years led to the separation of the two ethnic groups. Many Bengali Muslims moved to northern Rakhine state (nRS) where they became the majority ethnic group, and remained in the port of

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16 Penny Green, Thomas MacManus, and Alicia De La Cour Venning, *Countdown to Annihilation: Genocide in Myanmar*, 46.
18 Ibid., 3.
19 Ibid.
Sittwe (currently the capital of Rakhine state) while the rest of the state is predominantly ethnically Rakhine.\textsuperscript{21}

The legacy of pre-colonial and colonial domination was etched into the collective memory of the Rakhine and Rohingya. Owing to their support in WWII, the British had promised Muslim populations an autonomous region in nRS, encouraging Muslims to take responsibility for local administration and development projects. However, the promise of the British would fail to materialize as Burma gained independence in 1948. The number of Muslims living in Rakhine state grew rapidly after WWII, as a result of increased immigration, and Muslim refugees returning to Rakhine after fleeing during the war. The legacy of the war caused the Rakhine to see the returning Muslims as “imperialist invaders, responsible for stealing local employment opportunities and cultivating fertile soils for the benefit of the British enemy.”\textsuperscript{22} This perception, coupled with the memory of the 1942-1943 massacres, legitimized and intensified nationwide antipathy towards Muslims.

Burma’s independence process and the decade that followed was rife with instability, heightening the Rakhine and Rohingyas’ sense of oppression and marginalization. In 1947, the Burmese government and the Shan, Kachin and Chin ethnic groups convened to hold the historic Panglong conference, deciding to seek independence from the British as a federation. The Panglong Agreement promised the signatories the “right to exercise political authority of administrative, judiciary and legislative powers in their own autonomous national states and to preserve and protect their language, culture and religion in exchange for voluntarily joining the Burman in forming a political union.”\textsuperscript{23} Despite the Rakhine’s existence on Burmese soil for

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Azeem Ibrahim, \textit{The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar’s Hidden Genocide} (London: Hurst & Co. , 2016), 80.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Penny Green, Thomas MacManus, and Alicia De La Cour Venning, \textit{Countdown to Annihilation: Genocide in Myanmar}, 47.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Lian H. Sakhong and Paul Keenan, \textit{Ending Ethnic Armed Conflict in Burma}, 8-9.
\end{itemize}
centuries with the history of a majestic Kingdom, the Rakhine were not invited to the Panglong Conference, and neither were the Rohingya. This exclusion from the conference symbolized an exclusion from political authority and representation. Outraged, the Rohingya, and several other ethnic groups had initiated insurgencies, seeking the right to self-determination. At this time, the name “Rohingya” was not yet widespread, and populations of nRS identified more often with the Muslim cause. The Muslim rebellion sought the manifestation of a British era promise: an autonomous Muslim territory.  They were compelled by what they saw as a mere exchange of colonial oppressors, citing subjugation at the hands of the Rakhine. Muslim rebels strategically targeted the interests of the central government and Rakhine communities, taking control of much of nRS and forcing many Rakhine villagers to flee. The Rakhine feared that Muslims wanted to dominate the Rakhine race, citing higher Muslim birthrates and Muslim businesses that posed a dire threat to Rakhine livelihoods. In a context of increasing insecurity due to insurgent activity, ethnic tensions intensified during this period. After the Muslim rebellion was defeated in 1960, the government had established the Mayu Frontier Administration in nRS overseen by the army. The identification as “Rohingya” gained traction during this period as the population of nRS began to develop a collective consciousness of their shared oppression at Buddhist hands. Instrumentally catering to Rakhine fears and Rohingya grievances in courting votes, in the 1960 Burmese elections, the Prime Minister U Nu promised that Rakhine state would become an officially recognized ethnic state, and that the Rohingya would be granted autonomy in nRS. 

Neither of these promises materialized as General Ne Win’s military dictatorship seized power in 1962, brutally institutionalizing Burmese superiority culturally, economically, and politically, and in doing so, eroding the rights of the Rakhine. Ne Win sought to cultivate an ethnically homogenous and unitary state with a motto of “one voice, one blood, and one nation.” He instituted a number of national language policies as a means of “forced assimilation” including laws prohibiting publications in ethnic languages. Beyond restrictions on culture and language rights, Rakhine leaders cited human rights violations, discretionary land confiscations, economic exclusion and poverty levels much higher than those in ethnically Burmese states. Moreover, poverty levels were particularly alarming, as they could have been easily reduced, by leveraging Rakhine state’s abundance in natural resources. Under the dictatorship, the vast majority of these resources were shipped to ethnically Burmese states or to other countries in the region. The Rakhine were blocked from reaping the benefits of their resource rich state, leaving them impoverished, with few avenues to improve their livelihoods. Organizing “for freedom and ethnic rights for Rakhine people,” the Arakan Liberation Party formed in 1967 with an armed wing engaging in insurgency called the Arakan Liberation Army. The insurgency was no match for the Burmese army, and the regime, which became the Burma Socialist Program Party, further enshrined Burman dominance through the adoption of its new constitution in 1974. While this constitution formally recognized Rakhine as one of the country’s seven ethnic states, it had no provisions for the administration of the Mayu Frontier/ nRS, and it also declared the

30 Penny Green, Thomas MacManus, and Alicia De La Cour Venning, Countdown to Annihilation: Genocide in Myanmar, 29.
Myanmar language as the only official language of the Union of Burma, with no state institutions guaranteeing protection for ethnic languages.\(^{32}\)

The regime’s focus on nation-building and homogenizing the Burmese state materialized not only in the efforts to undermine ethnic rights, but also through efforts to exclude and marginalize perceived enemies of the nation. In 1977, the violent unfolding of Operation Nagamin or “dragon king” targeted so called “illegal immigrants” in Myanmar, namely Muslims in nRS, causing almost 200 000 to flee to Bangladesh.\(^{33}\) The Operation also re-entrenched the physical separation of the Rakhine and Rohingya. Most Rohingya fled to nRS where they became 90\% of the population in Maungdaw township, and 80\% in Buthidaung township, reducing the Rakhine to a minority.\(^{34}\) Moreover, this campaign was expanded and legitimized, particularly targeting the Rohingya, with the passage of the 1982 Burma Citizenship Law. The law officially recognized 135 indigenous ethnic groups of the Union of Burma, and while the Kaman Muslims (an ethnic group also in Rakhine state) were included, the Rohingya were not listed. Prior to this law, the Rohingya held National Registration Cards (NRCs), which did not signify citizenship, but gave the Rohingya de facto citizenship rights. The new law stated that NRCs would be replaced by Citizenship Scrutiny Cards (CSCs), and while many Rohingya had abandoned their NRCs, they were never issued CSCs, effectively leaving them stateless. From the mid 1990s onwards, many Rohingya were given Temporary Registration Cards (TRCs) which guaranteed significantly fewer rights than those conferred upon citizens.\(^{35}\) This legal assault was coupled with a reinvigorated military campaign waged by the new regime, the State


Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). In 1989, the SLORC began with another measure to reinforce Burman superiority, by renaming the country Myanmar. The name Myanmar, “refers exclusively to one particular ethnic group in the country, while the term ‘Burma’ refers to a post-colonial multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-culture plural nation-state of the Union of Burma.” The military regime’s renewal recommenced the campaign against perceived illegal immigrants in nRS, with widespread land confiscations, arbitrary tax impositions, forced labour, and other human rights abuses causing an exodus of almost 250 000 Rohingya to Bangladesh. While the majority returned to Myanmar, there is evidence that the repatriation process was not voluntary in many cases. From 1990-2008, there were intermittent clashes between the Rakhine and Rohingya, breaking out into riots first in 2001 and again in 2004 between students at Sittwe University. Almost fifty years under military dictatorship heightened the sense of oppression and exclusion felt by both Rakhine and Rohingya communities.

3. Getting to the Present: Federalism, Democratization and New Opportunities

Contrary to the cultural rivalries view, history demonstrates that what drives the Rakhine-Rohingya conflict today is not an innate antagonism, but is rather a legacy of conquest and colonial and dictatorial oppression. The manipulation and politicization of ethnicity by the British and the Burmese divided communities in Rakhine state. It instilled within each group a collective consciousness of a separate ethnic identity rooted in a common history of marginalization, and constructed in opposition to the other.

Adam Burke also argues that it is not merely external oppression that drives the conflict, but internal threats as well heightening Rakhine grievances. He asserts that the Rakhine have experienced horizontal inequalities with two levels: first, inequality nationally between the

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Rakhine and the Burmese, and second, inequality locally between the Rakhine and Rohingya in Rakhine state. In examining this second level of inequality, not only did the Rohingya seek to minimize Rakhine territory through a movement for autonomy, they continued to present an economic threat to an already impoverished Rakhine population. Today, Rakhine state is the second poorest state in Myanmar with a poverty rate of 78% compared to 38% nationally. While Rakhine state’s Shwe natural gas project creates 500 million cubic feet of natural gas daily, the Rakhine are completely excluded from the ownership, management, or revenue collection of this project. 80% of the natural gas is allocated to be shipped to China over thirty years. Of the remaining natural gas production, the majority will be transported to Mandalay, an ethnically Burmese state. In Rakhine state, only the headquarters of the Western Navy Command, the city of Kyauk Phyu, and a few neighbouring villages received electricity in 2013 from the Shwe Gas project. In 2014, less than 50% of Rakhine state’s 17 townships had access to electricity. This already minimal access to natural resources has effectively rendered the Rohingya a threat to what little remains for the Rakhine. The fishing industry is vital for the economic survival of both communities in Rakhine state. Rakhine fishermen have claimed that the Rohingya have repeatedly reneged on their sides of informal fishing agreements threatening the stability of Rakhine livelihoods. The Rakhine fear four key threats: first, a demographic one believing that a growing Rohingya population would displace the Rakhine; secondly, a socio-cultural threat: after decades of Burmese oppression, the Rakhine believe their culture has been

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weakened, and would be further undermined by a Muslim way of life incongruent with their practices; thirdly, the economic threat, as delineated above, and finally, the security threat citing historical violence and the episodes of violence this paper will explore in 2012, 2014 and 2016.\footnote{42 International Crisis Group. \textit{Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State}, 14.}

The contemporary iteration of the Rakhine-Rohingya conflict is largely influenced by Myanmar’s democratization process, and the perceived opportunities created by its 2008 constitution. The SLORC military regime took power in 1988 with the primary goal of stabilizing the political scene by instituting a new constitution that would “legally secure a military tutelage over national politics.”\footnote{43 Renaud Egreteau, "Myanmar: Transition, praetorian politics, and the prospects for democratic change," in \textit{Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Democratization} (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 413.} A seven step “Roadmap to democracy” was initiated with a national convention in January 1993, and culminated in May 2008 when the constitution finally came into force.\footnote{44 Ibid.} The 2008 constitution does not transition Myanmar to a full democracy, yet takes many important steps to address ethnic grievances. Prominent Burmese intellectuals have hailed federalism as a panacea for almost sixty years of civil war, as it would guarantee ethnic minorities a measure of self-determination via constitutionally stipulated self-rule and shared rule.\footnote{45 Nicole Topperwien. \textit{Peace Mediation Essentials: Federalism and Peace Mediation}. Bern: The Mediation Support Project, 2009. Accessed October 12, 2016. \url{http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/PME_Federalism.pdf}.} The constitution created fourteen state and region governments with a measure of separations of power between the central government and its federal units. While this signified a monumental shift from the centralized control of the dictatorship, the constitution also guaranteed that 25\% of seats in the national and state/regional parliaments would be reserved for members of the armed forces serving as MPs.\footnote{46 Kim N.B. Ninh, and Matthew Arnold. "Decentralization in Myanmar: A Nascent and Evolving Process." \textit{Journal of Southeast Asian Economies} 33, no. 2 (2016): 224-225.}
limited administrative and fiscal decentralization, with the central government continuing to exercise significant influence over ethnic states.47


Despite this lack of a meaningful decentralization of powers, the very introduction of democratic competition and the opportunity to exercise some measure of self-determination created incentives for Rakhine politicians to mobilize along ethnic lines. The ability of any democratic transition to increase the accommodation of ethnic minorities is contingent on the context within which democratization occurs. The presence or absence of certain variables can cause the democratization process to harden ethnic identities and creates spaces for violent conflict.48 “Democratization is a complex, potentially protracted, and non-linear process that encompasses the liberalization of an authoritarian regime.”49 Snyder argues that preconditions for mature democracies include sound government policy, elected representatives chosen through free and fair elections, a clear commitment of officials to constitutionally enshrined civil liberties, freedom of speech, and the inclusion of various perspectives in mass media. A democratizing state on the other hand, possesses “one or more of these democratic characteristics, even if they retain important non-democratic features.”50 The absence of some of these democratic characteristics coupled with the presence of certain contextual factors can cause the erosion of minority rights during democratization. The objective of securing state power exclusively for one’s own ethnic group is heightened in poorer states that experience democratic

50 Jack L. Snyder, From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict, 26.
transition. Where elections are held in countries having a per capita income below $1000, minimal or non-existent civic education, and patronage networks, political parties will tend to form and mobilize along ethnic cleavages.\textsuperscript{51} This complexity is compounded in ethnically heterogeneous states where the relative power of various ethnic groups is different from state to state.\textsuperscript{52} While democratic systems ought to foster meaningful institutions for ethnic minority political participation, enshrine minority rights, and guarantee equitable decentralization of power, this did not occur in Myanmar’s democratization process.\textsuperscript{53} In ethno-federal states like Myanmar possessing already high levels of income inequality, increased institutional opportunities through decentralization can in fact harden ethnic identities where one ethnic group seeks to obtain access to resources at the expense of another.\textsuperscript{54} Where an ethnic group is a minority with minimal influence in the central government, it has the incentive and opportunity to obtain an electoral majority in state level parliaments where it can wield significant authority.\textsuperscript{55} The liberalization of political space in Myanmar has stoked Rakhine ambitions to redress the indignation of decades of poverty, oppression, and human rights violations. With a decentralized constitution, the Rakhine now have electoral channels to exert influence and obtain benefits by seeking a parliamentary majority in the Rakhine state parliament, and representation in the national parliament. The context of democratization and the existence of longstanding historical grievances has made it politically expedient for the Rakhine to stoke fears of the Rohingya in order to solidify Rakhine electoral support.

\textsuperscript{52} Donald L. Horowitz, \textit{Ethnic Groups in Conflict}, 617.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{55} Donald L. Horowitz, \textit{Ethnic Groups in Conflict}, 617.
Rakhine political elites have maximized this support by forming ethnic parties. The historical politicization and entrenchment of ethnic identity in Myanmar, coupled with the opening of political space lends itself to the formation of political parties along ethnic lines. An ethnic party is one “that overtly represents itself as a champion of the cause of one particular ethnic category or set of categories to the exclusion of others, and makes such a representation central to its strategy of mobilizing voters.”

Ethnic parties “reflect the mutual incompatibility of ethnic claims to power.” Where ethnic groups have been marginalized by a dominant state or by other ethnic groups, ethnic parties act almost as lobby groups, advancing group claims. However, the extent of and insistence upon ethnic group claims is contingent on the incentives and spaces created in the political market. In Myanmar where structural and systemic changes were introduced in the country’s government, ethnic group claims harden, and both ethnic party elites and masses of voters see incentives to rally around a divisive conception of ethnicity.

In a democratizing state, ethnic party elites stand to gain by promoting ethnic nationalism and ethnocentric fears as a tool to guarantee power for themselves and consolidate their support base. Nationalism can be defined as the “doctrine that a people who see themselves as distinct…should rule themselves in a political system that expresses and protects those distinctive characteristics.” Ethnic nationalism then, is the idea that distinct ethnic groups have the right to self-rule. Snyder argues however that the consciousness of a unique nationality is not entrenched until there is political organizing en masse along ethnic lines. Going further, he espouses the view that “democratization gives rise to nationalism as it serves the interests of

57 Donald L. Horowitz, Ethnic Groups in Conflict, 294.
58 Jack L. Snyder, From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict, 24.
powerful groups within the nation.” If an equitable democracy were established where all
groups had equal rights and proportionate access to the political system, this democratic
competition would threaten the economic interests and societal positions of power of ethnic
elites. Full democracy would signify the loss of elite power. In this context, a useful strategy for
elites to curb widespread calls for the enjoyment of democratic rights, is to use nationalist
rhetoric calling for so-called enemies of the nation to be denied these rights, including suffrage
and citizenship. The greater the threat experienced by elites by the institution of full democracy,
the greater the incentive to propagate nationalist rhetoric. Ethnic groups’ primary interests are
the survival and prosperity of their groups. Elites can appeal to these interests, secure support,
and maintain their positions of power by stoking fear. Promoting ethnic nationalism by citing
grave collective danger at the hands of another ethnic groups encourages indifferent voters to
pledge their allegiance.

Democratization creates ripe conditions for ethnic party elites to propagate hatred of
other groups and catalyze collective action. “Ethnocentric appeals…are most successful when
representative institutions, political parties, and journalistic professionalism are weakly
established during the early phase of the democratic transition.” In the early phases of
transition, loosening the clamps on a mass media that was highly censored under dictatorial rule
creates ideal conditions for ethnic nationalists to purvey myths. In an underdeveloped and newly
opened political marketplace, journalists are unable to effectively ensure that the mass media
consists of contrasting viewpoints. Moreover, it is difficult to ensure that populations even have
exposure to competing ideas and narratives:

59 Ibid., 36.
60 Ibid., 37.
61 Donald L. Horowitz, Ethnic Groups in Conflict, 332.
62 Quoted in Jacques Bertrand and Oded Haklai, "Democratization and ethnic minorities," 8.
In newly democratizing states, demand in the marketplace of ideas is especially likely to be segmented. Sometimes segmentation reflects cultural divisions of traditional society or a legacy of authoritarian policies of divide and rule. Politicians in transitional states often use their control over levers of persuasion to exploit latent divisions.63

The separation of elements of the market enables ethnic elites to establish media monopolies and propagating an unchallenged narrative of the immense threat posed by other ethnic groups. This lack of checks and balances in the media due to weak democratic institutions is critical in enabling nationalist elites to successfully shape and homogenize public opinion against a common enemy. In rallying support, ethnic nationalists often construct opponents as existential threats to their group with intractable demands and resolve.64 Republican ad maker Rick Wilson said that “fear is the simplest emotion to tweak in a campaign ad. You associate your opponent with terror, with fear, with crime, with causing pain and uncertainty.”65 This fear can enable ethnic elites to “present themselves as guardians of the electorate.”66 It unifies and invigorates members of ethnic groups joining in collective action to quell the perceived threat they face.67

While stoking xenophobic sentiment can rally support for an ethnic party, cementing this support and securing legitimacy during democratization drives ethnic party elites to harden claims of indigeneity. A key corollary of political authority is land ownership. Those that own the land can then regulate it as they see fit, reaping symbolic and economic benefits. In newly democratizing ethnically diverse states, a claim of indigeneity legitimizes an ethnic party as the rightful guarantor of an ethnic group’s interests. However, as Horowitz argues, “it is not…an objective question of who actually came first that governs the strength of claims to

63 Jack L. Snyder, From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict, 60.
64 Ibid., 67.
67 Jack L. Snyder, From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict, 50.
indigenousness, rather it is the political context of such claims and the uses to which they can be put that matter." 68 Ethnic parties can cite historical glory and evidence of prior rule as a way to claim that they are the rightful owners of territory. Such exclusionary ethnic groups can seek the renewal of a rightful homogenous past citing their superiority, according other groups the inferior status of “guest” 69 This designation becomes an important element of ethnic parties’ strategy during election campaigns. Gabrielle Lynch and David Anderson argue that in new democracies where institutional supports for elections are lacking, elections can become a period where violence is a tool “to assert rights to the ownership and political control of territory.” 70 During this volatile time, ethnic parties can emphasize the importance of their group maintaining unity, taking collective action, and rallying behind them to ensure that alleged guests would not seize land that was rightfully theirs. This collective action is advantageous not only to elites, but also to voters who seek optimal means of securing benefits for themselves. Conditions in a democratizing Myanmar highly resemble a patronage democracy, which Kanchan Chandra defines as a system where the state maintains complete discretion in the allocation of resources and access to employment. She argues that in a patronage democracy, the state is the primary vehicle through which individual voters can secure their economic and physical security. 71 In exchange for votes, elites promise voters that they will work to meet their basic needs. Voters seek to maximize the value of their vote in order to ensure they receive their promised benefits. Forming blocks gives voters greater bargaining power: as a group, voters can more effectively hold ethnic party elites accountable. 72

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68 Ibid., 203.
69 Ibid., 199
72 Ibid., 54-55.
Using ethnicity as a commonality around which to form groups is advantageous to voters. In conducting a study of Zambian voter expectations in the 1990s, Daniel Posner found that almost unanimously, voters expected politicians to favour their ethnic group. He cited four key reasons, the “functional superiority of ethnic networks,” institutional histories that have accorded special benefits to ethnic identities, assumptions of ethnic similarity that makes it easier for patrons to engage in exchanges of benefits, as well as the political significance accorded to ethnic identity. Thus, voters experience top-down and bottom up pressures to organize in groups as a way of ensuring the victory of ethnic parties. Where their physical well-being is threatened by outsiders, and their material well-being can be guaranteed by ethnic parties, ethnic identities will tend to harden.

Voter and elite imperatives in a context of fear and increased political opportunities make elections in new democracies vulnerable periods with incredibly high stakes. During democratic transitions where state institutions are weak and underdeveloped, elections can bring about cycles of violence. In Kenya, the introduction of elections without the adequate cultivation of democratic institutions caused the 2007 elections to be a period of intense inter-ethnic violence. The Sabaot ethnic group propagated fears of the grave consequences of opposition victory and traced a historical narrative of oppression at the hands of the opposing ethnic group. The group carried out violent attacks prior to the elections to obstruct opposition campaigns, displace opposition voters, and deprive them of their voting rights. In sum, the benefits that ethnic elites and ethnic voters seek to gain in democratizing states from the “instrumental manipulation of ethnic identities” gives rise to inter-ethnic conflict.

5. 2012 Violence

The context of nationalist fear-mongering by elites in a democratizing Myanmar, and particularly in a divided Rakhine state, led to deadly inter-ethnic violence. “On May 28, Thida Htwe, a 27-year-old Rakhine Buddhist was robbed, allegedly raped, and murdered in Ramri Township.” Three Rohingya men were found guilty, sparking outrage among the Rakhine community who called for reprisal. June 3rd saw the manifestation of this call. In Rakhine state’s Toungup township, a Rakhine mob of three hundred dealt collective punishment in brutally murdering ten Muslim pilgrims traveling from central Myanmar. This action sparked a series of retaliatory riots. During the afternoon of June 8th, Rohingya Muslims rioted in Maungdaw township demolishing Rakhine buildings and murdering seven Rakhine. The violence spread to yet another township in central Myanmar, “where Rakhine and Rohingya clashed with killings and arson attacks on homes and businesses by both Rohingya and Rakhine.” The government’s response meant to quell the violence only exacerbated it. On June 10th, President Thein Sein announced a state of emergency in Rakhine state and deployed additional security forces who contributed to an increasingly violent crackdown on the Rohingya. Government data stated that at the end of this episode of violence, there were 98 casualties and 123 wounded overall, with the majority of the victims being Rohingya. 5338 predominantly Rohingya homes were razed to the ground, and 75 000, again mostly Rohingya, were displaced.

In August 2012, tasked by the President with determining the underlying causes of rioting in Rakhine state, the Rakhine Inquiry Commission alleged that “violence was due to mutual

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76 Ibid., 19.
77 Ibid., 20.
mistrust and religious differences between the two groups that triggered hatred and
vengeance.” However, Adam Burke and Min Zin argue otherwise. They assert that the
“changes of opportunity structure,” namely the establishment of state level parliaments creating
expectations for decentralized powers, gave politicians the incentive for collective action.80
Rakhine politicians have stated that their priority is to secure control over the Rakhine state
parliament to decentralize the power clenched in the hands of the Burmese government for
decades. Among other powers, this decentralization would enable the Rakhine to take back some
control of the ever-important and highly profitable natural gas industry.81 Given that the military
would automatically be accorded 25% of the seats in the Rakhine state parliament, securing
control to achieve decentralization would require Rakhine politicians to win a majority. The
2010 elections presented the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP) with their very
first opportunity to seek out a majority. As the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD) had
boycotted the elections, the RNDP were the only ethnic Rakhine party contesting elections.82
The RNDP’s resentment over the perceived military efforts to undermine their electoral success
had an important hand in the events of 2012.

Interethnic violence was a consequence of the efforts by the military-backed government
to facilitate the Rohingya vote in 2010 elections, undercutting the potential for Rakhine electoral
success. As Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD) had also boycotted the
2010 elections, the primary competition for power over the Rakhine state parliament was
between the RNDP, and the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), widely known as

79 Center for Diversity and National Harmony, Rakhine State Needs Assessment, 101; Nehginpao Kipgen,
"Addressing the Rohingya Problem," 237.
80 Min Zin, "Anti-Muslim Violence in Burma: Why Now?," 376; Adam Burke, "New Political Space, Old Tensions:
History, Identity and Violence in Rakhine State, Myanmar," 266.
“the political vehicle for many of Burma’s former military leaders.” As referenced earlier, most Rohingya held Temporary Resident Cards (TRCs). While these TRCs still deprived the Rohingya of numerous rights and did not grant them citizenship, it did give them the right to vote. The 2010 elections brought out roughly 150,000 Rohingya voters in nRS. In the race to the elections, the USDP knew that to secure votes in Rakhine state, they would have to court Rohingya populations as the Rakhine vote would almost inevitably go to the RNDP. The overt historical politicization of ethnicity and the legacy of oppression at the hands of the Burman military dictatorship predisposed the Rakhine to ethnic voting. While this meant that the RNDP could more or less rely on Rakhine support, the USDP courtship of the Rohingya posed a significant threat to their ability to win constituencies where the Rohingya outnumbered the Rakhine. The USDP carried out a grassroots effort, which turned out to be effective. The party cultivated alliances with important community figures in the nRS townships of Buthidaung and Maungdaw where the Rohingya are the majority. Overall, the 2010 elections saw important electoral gains for the RNDP. They became the only ethnic party in Myanmar to receive more seats in the state level parliament than the USDP, winning 18 seats to the USDP’s 16. However, they were unsuccessful in winning seats precisely in the nRS townships where the USDP was active. In the eyes of the Rakhine, the USDP’s decision to enfranchise TRC holders was a targeted move to undermine the RNDP’s ability to shape state level politics. Moreover, the

84 Ibid., 11.
Rakhine perceived this as a particularly malicious move by the USDP, as they did not believe the Rohingya to be legitimate voters, citing their enduring claim that the Rohingya were illegal immigrants. Given these circumstances, there is strong evidence to indicate that RNDP efforts in the years following the election centered around amassing as much electoral support as possible by strengthening their own support base and disenfranchising and displacing the Rohingya threat wherever possible. This meant that violence was not limited to north Rakhine.

The violence of June 2012 occurred in townships in central Rakhine state where large Rohingya minorities would have posed a threat to RNDP success in 2015 elections.

Violence was not a predictable consequence of the 2010 election, but was a product of sustained fear-mongering and nationalist mobilizing, facilitated by the democratization process. From 2011 onwards, reduced censorship, the introduction of freedom of association rights, and the rapid growth of telecommunications enabled Rakhine nationalists to “propagate a discourse of racial hatred and incitement to violence against Burmese Muslim populations, and Rohingyas in particular.”

There was also a rollback of the military with a withdrawal of forces, creating an environment where the formerly hardline approach to security was softened. This however, also “increased space for local violence.” While Burke and Min acknowledge that this liberalization of the political environment facilitated nationalist appeals, what they do not examine is how Myanmar’s history created the geographic divisions necessary to successfully propagate these appeals. As Snyder discusses, market segmentation can reflect historically entrenched divisions of ethnic groups. As referenced earlier, in the 1940s the colonial era manipulation of the

91 Adam Burke, "New Political Space, Old Tensions: History, Identity and Violence in Rakhine State, Myanmar," 266.
Rohingya and Rakhine led to massacres in both communities, as well as a segregation of populations with Muslims predominantly in nRS and the port of Sittwe, and the Rakhine remaining the majority in the rest of Rakhine state. This segregation was only reinforced by Rohingya claims for autonomy in nRS, and the military’s Operation Nagamin in 1977 that targeted the Rohingya causing them to flee to nRS from other parts of Rakhine. A newly unfettered media enabled Rakhine politicians to take advantage of this pre-existing divide by monopolizing the media and disseminating a single uncontested narrative of the Rohingya threat to Rakhine communities.

Rakhine politicians were not the only ones who had an interest in this fear-mongering; Buddhist monks and institutions worked alongside the RNDP in a common effort to incite hatred and violence against the Rohingya for mutual gain. As the religion practiced by the majority of Myanmar citizens, Buddhism has always held an important status in Myanmar, and the dictatorship institutionalized this status with its doctrine of “Buddha-bata Myanmar-lumyo,” that to be a Myanmar is to be a Buddhist. However, the idea of Buddhist indigeneity is distinct from the power and influence of Buddhist individuals and institutions. The Buddhist elite in Myanmar has significant incentives to work with the RNDP to retain power in a context of democratization. Myanmar’s monks played a noteworthy role in the country’s transition to democracy, gaining international acclaim for leading the Saffron revolution of 2007. This effort gave them a position of moral authority and leadership, having mobilized widespread populations. However, the liberalization of the regime and the loosening of restrictions, including those on the freedom of association, threatened the importance accorded to the Buddhist elite in Myanmar’s political hierarchy. “Monks’ political influence declined as new,

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secular civil society organizations, such as unions, farmers associations, political parties and student organizations were created.”93 Just as ethnicity can be instrumentally manipulated, religious elites may call for violence against a religious threat as a way to uphold their interests, which can include the preservation of religious institutions, or the strengthening of their political influence and religious networks.94 While Kyaw San Wai argues that antipathy towards Muslims is “deep-seated” in Myanmar, the context of democratization created political opportunities where transforming this antipathy into targeted violence served elite interests.95 “Scapegoating, and the exploitation of majority fears against a minority, was a powerful tool because it allowed monks to position themselves as guardians of a Buddhist national identity against a perceived threat from Muslims.”96 The RNDP was using similar means to extremist Buddhist monks to achieve similar ends. It leveraged the legitimacy accorded to Buddhist leaders and worked alongside them, developing a mutually beneficial relationship.

The narrative devised by Rakhine political elites was one claiming that the Rakhine were the only rightful inhabitants of Rakhine state, and that they had to rally together to protect their interests lest they face destruction, or worse, extinction, at the hands of their opponents. The anti-Rohingya campaign began gaining traction in November 2011, and was an effort undertaken by various facets of the population ranging from diaspora communities to university professors. In the months leading up to inter-ethnic violence in June 2012, malicious pamphlets were distributed by Rakhine community members asserting that the global Islamic agenda had taken root in Rakhine state, stoking suspicions and fears.97 This threat was grossly exaggerated and

93 Ibid., 11.
94 Ibid., 3.
95 Ibid., 2.
96 Ibid., 11.
97 Nehginpao Kipgen, "Addressing the Rohingya Problem, 242."
virtually unfounded given the legal and economic marginalization of the Rohingya giving them meagre means with which to wage any assault, and the fact that they are vastly outnumbered by the Rakhine majority. Yet the propagation of myths and attributions of blame continued unimpeded. Even before the perpetrators of the May 2012 rape and murder of Thida Htwe were confirmed by authorities, a prominent Rakhine news agency, Narinjara, began publishing articles identifying them by the derogatory term for Rohingya, “kalar.” In the days that followed the incident, there were accounts of individuals disseminating even more extremist pamphlets about the Rohingya, and pictures of Thida Htwe’s body circulating on the internet, coupled with calls for revenge. Days later, the first attacks on the Rohingya occurred. The ideological foundations for the anti-Rohingya narrative originated from Buddhist monks, namely, those making up Myanmar’s Buddhist extremist movement, 969, that has taken root across the country. In Rakhine state, monasteries have developed a mutually beneficial alliance with the RNDP, giving extremist monks in Rakhine disproportionate influence over politics. These monks worked with the RNDP and its chairman, Dr. Aye Maung, as well as with smaller political parties and civil society organizations to mobilize against the Rohingya. In the wake of June 2012 violence, extremist monks distributed pamphlets imploring the Rakhine to suspend all economic activity with the Rohingya. In late June, another round of pamphlets was sent out to Rakhine communities stating that the “Bengalis (Rohingya) who dwell on Arakanese land, drink Arakanese water, and rest under Arakanese shadows are now working for the extinction of the

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101 Azeem Ibrahim, The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar’s Hidden Genocide, 80-82.
Arakanese.” 102 The term Bengali is insisted upon, as the name Rohingya is discredited as an artificial ethnic category. To the Rakhine, accepting the term Rohingya would be akin to accepting the indigeneity of the group in Myanmar, creating the risk of them asserting claims to land, or worse, autonomy. Moreover, this acceptance would be evidence of Rohingya presence and influence in Rakhine state, and would discredit the Rakhine historical narrative suggesting that they are the only rightful heirs to Rakhine territory. 103 The very existence of the Rohingya as an entity posed a threat to the symbolic and economic power of the Rakhine, and Rakhine elite did everything they could muster to discredit any Rohingya claims of legitimacy. The RNDP propagated myths that the Rohingya were working with Al-Qaeda to massacre the Rakhine, and that they were storing weapons in their mosques in preparation. The only way that the Rakhine were able to successfully propagate these myths, was through maintaining monopolies of traditional media outlets and taking advantage of social media proliferation. These myths were broadcasted on the radio and were then reinforced on social media, which were then taken up by news broadcasters as legitimate sources of information. In this way, the Rakhine media served as the wing of RNDP elites in transforming myth into fact in the Rakhine consciousness. 104 On July 5, 2012 the anti-Rohingya campaign was reinvigorated when Buddhist monks held a meeting in Rathedaung township and announced a 12-point statement articulating a plan for the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya, including a call prohibiting Rakhine from hiring any Rohingya. On July 9, 2012, a similar statement was released by an association of monks in Mrauk-U, stating that “Bengalis (Rohingya)… use their money to buy weapons to kill Arakanese people. For this

reason and from today, no Arakanese should sell any goods to Bengalis.”

A final meeting with a similar purpose was held in late September 2012 in Rathedaung, yet with a significantly larger crowd of Rakhine. Becoming the largest public gathering in contemporary Rakhine history, the two-day event brought out roughly 2000 Rakhine community members from over 17 townships representing political parties, community organizations and monk associations. This Rathedaung statement called for measures including the curbing of Rohingya birth rates, the segregation of Rohingya and Rakhine communities, and most importantly, the formation of armed peoples’ militias among Rakhine villagers for protection against the alleged Rohingya threat. Within weeks of this meeting, violence occurred in late October, and was the product of joint and sustained efforts between extremist monks and the RNDP, “which worked to break any remaining links between the Rohingya and the Rakhine.”

October 22, 2012 saw a second wave of violent conflict targeting the Rohingya, and displayed a level of tact and coordination unseen in the June attacks. Armed Rakhine mobs numbering thousands entered nine townships attacking Rohingya communities. They carried everything from machetes to homemade guns. Their primary strategy was to raze Rohingya mosques then proceed to do the same with Rohingya villages, burning all homes to the ground as a targeted strategy to force villagers to flee. Clear evidence of prior planning was highlighted where these attacks occurred at exactly the same time in townships that were considerably far from each other. Moreover, Rohingya in various townships reported that they had never seen their attackers before, with some fishermen even providing accounts that masses of Rakhine

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106 Ibid., 27-30.
arrived in boats equipped with weapons to perpetrate these attacks.\textsuperscript{110} On October 23\textsuperscript{rd}, a second round of planned attacks took place in the Rohingya villages of Mrauk U, Kyauk Pyu, and Pauktaw. Evidence was documented of state and local security forces engaging in violence long after Rakhine mobs had left.\textsuperscript{111} Government figures estimate that 75 000 were displaced, 94 people were killed, 124 were wounded, and 3276 homes were razed to the ground. The Rohingya constitute the majority of these figures.\textsuperscript{112}

6. 2014 Violence

After violence had subsided in 2012, the government implemented “conflict prevention measures” that deepened the marginalization of the Rohingya and entrenched the divisions between both communities. One of the first measures was to ensure that the Rakhine and Rohingya were separated in Sittwe. Rohingya not already residing there were prohibited from entering the city; Rakhine were prohibited from entering Rohingya communities, and the Rohingya whose homes had been destroyed were confined to Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps. The Rakhine Inquiry Commission formed by the President presented its findings after these measures were implemented, highlighting that this separation would only cause a deterioration of local dynamics.\textsuperscript{113} Varshney argues that civic organizations can be a factor in explaining the presence or absence of community-level conflict. If these organizations are not inclusive of diverse ethnic groups, there is a higher likelihood of communal tensions.\textsuperscript{114} In Rakhine state, and particularly in Sittwe, “where once, lived experience of shared community resources, friendships, working partnerships and multicultural education all combined to counter

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{111} Azeem Ibrahim, \textit{The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar’s Hidden Genocide}, 84.
\textsuperscript{112} International Crisis Group, \textit{Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State}, 94.
\textsuperscript{113} Center for Diversity and National Harmony, \textit{Rakhine State Needs Assessment}, 101.
\textsuperscript{114} Ashutosh Varshney, "Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflict," 290.
stigmatisation, those positive social controls no longer exist.”

The violence of 2012 served as a means to an end enabling Rakhine political elites to mobilize masses and strengthen their networks while perpetuating divisions. While this would be advantageous to Rakhine interests, it was not enough to guarantee the ultimate objective of Rakhine politicians.

In 2013, Rakhine politicians merged parties to strengthen their chances of electoral success in order to push for greater decentralization. In June 2013, the RNDP, and the party that had boycotted 2010 elections, the ALD, came together to form the Arakan National Party (ANP). Party officials claimed that the merger was not formed with 2015 elections in mind, and was instead an initiative to work collectively for national reconciliation. However, in the wake of the merger, former RNDP Chairman Aye Maung stated that a unified Rakhine party would fare better against the NLD and the USDP. Aye Thar Aung stated that the intent of the ALD and the new ANP was “to amend the 2008 constitution…to get federalism and internal peace.” While national reconciliation and federalism were professed goals, the party articulated a chauvinistic ideological foundation, evidencing that it never sought to work for an equitable conception of these goals. The ANP motto of “First, Arakan (Rakhine) nationalism, Second, solidarity, Third, development,” was reinforced by pamphlets it distributed saying, “love your nationality, keep pure blood, be Rakhine and vote ANP.” Memories of the 2012 violence and targeted propaganda made the Rakhine particularly receptive to nationalist sentiment, and this was precisely what the ANP were counting on, as the stakes were high in the upcoming election. In 2010 elections the RNDP won 18 seats in the 47 seat Rakhine state parliament. While the USDP

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115 Penny Green, Thomas MacManus, and Alicia De La Cour Venning, *Countdown to Annihilation: Genocide in Myanmar*, 32.


had only won 16 seats, they were able to work with military MPs, who held 12 seats, to maintain decision-making power. The newly formed ANP would need a majority to shape the local parliament’s agenda. Recognizing this reality, ANP legislator Pe Than said, “if we win six more representatives in this election, we will have the influence and power in Parliament this time.” Estimating that many townships in southern Rakhine state would go to the NLD, and that some in the north would go to local candidates, the townships in central Rakhine state where the 2012 violence occurred, were crucial to ANP success in 2015 elections.118 However, they also recognized that this would not be enough and announced that they would also be contesting seats in two Rohingya majority nRS townships, Maungdaw and Buthidaung, which are each accorded two seats in the Rakhine state parliament.119 The fight was also for influence in the national parliament where the ANP would be able to vouch for constitutional amendment. It declared that it would be vying for a potential 63 seats overall.120 While the consolidation of the ANP in 2013 occurred in a background of subsiding inter-ethnic tensions, this context of relative calm was short-lived.

In January 2014, controversy over an attack in a Rohingya village provided grounds for a renewed mobilization of Rakhine nationalist sentiment. United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay had announced that she had found credible evidence that 48 Rohingya were killed in the predominantly Rohingya village of Du Chee Yar Tan in nRS, the most extreme attack to occur since October 2012. Navi Pillay reported that eight Rohingya men were killed on January 9th by Rakhine villagers. 40 were then killed on January 13th after a group

119 Long, Kayleigh. "Northern Rakhine facing major political shake-up."
120 Penny Green, Thomas MacManus, and Alicia De La Cour Venning, *Countdown to Annihilation: Genocide in Myanmar*, 41.
of Rohingya men had attacked a police officer, eliciting a violent crackdown by security forces.\textsuperscript{121} The government however, denied that such an attack had ever occurred despite irrefutable evidence, including the uncovering of at least 10 severed heads of Rohingya men in a water tank.\textsuperscript{122}

The rhetoric leading up to and following these attacks evidence the expanding influence and organization of Rakhine civil society in reinforcing nationalist myths engineered by Rakhine political elites and advancing their objectives. Aid organization Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) was the primary organization treating the victims of this deadly attack. However, buying into the government’s narrative that such attacks had never occurred, Rakhine communities were outraged that the Rohingya appeared to be receiving unwarranted international support. Rakhine activists making up a civil society organization called the Rakhine Social Network (RSN) joined with the ANP to protest the work of MSF and other international aid organizations in Rakhine.\textsuperscript{123} To them and to the wider Rakhine community, MSF’s work in 2014 confirmed a narrative of international aid bias favoring the Rohingya. After the violence of 2012, the international community’s widespread condemnations of Rohingya persecution and its pledges of symbolic and material support for Rohingya communities fostered the impression that Rakhine needs were an afterthought. While both communities received humanitarian aid, the majority of this aid went to the Rohingya, signalling to an already impoverished Rakhine population that there was

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favouritism towards the Rohingya. Well before the January attacks and MSF’s support, pamphlets were distributed calling for violence against any Rakhine that worked with the UN or any other international aid organization. The pamphlet stated: “We recognize all of those who are directly or indirectly working for the development of kalars, as traitors, and thereby our enemy.”

This antipathy towards the UN and international organizations was not rooted solely in concerns over aid, but also concerned a UN-led initiative that would result in increased rights for the Rohingya. For the first time since 1983, Myanmar would be undertaking a census led by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA). The international community’s fears that this census could ignite tensions in the early phases of Myanmar’s democratization process, materialized in Rakhine state. While the government had assured the UNFPA that individuals would be able to “self-identify their ethnicity,” this decision sparked widespread protest. In early 2014, the monks making up the 969 movement formed a more formal organization, the Ma Ba Tha (i.e. Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion). Under the guise of this organization, extremist monks were empowered to exert greater influence over Rakhine state’s social and political movements. The Ma Ba Tha, the RSN, and ANP politicians mobilized Rakhine masses in voicing their fervent opposition to international aid biases, and the potential that the Rohingya could register their ethnic identification in the census. Rakhine measures escalated as protest proved unsuccessful. From March 26-27, 2014, a Rakhine mob attacked offices of the

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124 Long, Kayleigh. "Northern Rakhine facing major political shake-up."
UN and other international organizations in Sittwe.\textsuperscript{128} The three-way coalition was triumphant on both accounts.\textsuperscript{129} MSF was expelled from the country; other aid groups were going to be heavily monitored for biases in aid allocation, and the night before the census commenced, March 29\textsuperscript{th}, 2014, the government notified UNFPA officials that foreigners in nRS could identify only as Bengali, or would not be accounted for.\textsuperscript{130} While the ANP disavowed any affiliation with the March attacks and its perpetrators, it spearheaded the protests and propagation of vitriolic rhetoric that precipitated the violence. Moreover, the ANP appears to have co-opted civil society organizations to do its bidding. The central government has provided funding for the Ma Ba Tha and has urged the Chief Ministers of state/ regional level parliaments to deepen ties with the Ma Ba Tha by cultivating “patron supporter relationships between Buddhist monasteries and regional administrators.”\textsuperscript{131} In addition, while the RSN is not an official wing of the ANP, it functions as its de facto mouthpiece. The nationalist sentiment stoked surrounding periods of violence deepened the strong and almost uniform “desire for the ANP to achieve electoral success.”\textsuperscript{132} Violence from January to March further legitimized the narrative that Rakhine interests are under attack, and only a nationalist guardian such as the ANP would be able to save them. In determining what measures the ANP would take to save the Rakhine, a second Rakhine conference, resembling the one held in Sept. 2012, was convened in April and May of 2014.

The Rakhine National Conference became an avenue for politicians, monks, and community organizers to call for measures wresting power from a central government that continually marginalized Rakhine interests. The conference in Kyaukphyu township surpassed

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\textsuperscript{129} Min Zin, "Anti-Muslim Violence in Burma: Why Now? 384.
\textsuperscript{131} Min Zin, "Anti-Muslim Violence in Burma: Why Now? 383.
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its 2012 predecessor in size and organization affirming the entrenched informal networks linking Rakhine civil society and politicians. The conference “was widely seen as a coming-out party for the ANP,” enabling them to articulate a platform receiving widespread Rakhine support. Echoing the 2012 calls for a peoples’ militia, this conference took the proposal a step further calling for the establishment of an “Arakan National Defense Army.” The Rakhine alleged that state security forces were doing an inadequate job of protecting them. Given that the Rakhine were a minority in nRS townships, many conference delegates believed that armed Rakhine units were necessary to protect them. This call came after President Thein Sein had already deployed significant additional security forces in Sittwe to maintain the separation of the Rakhine and Rohingya, evidencing the legitimization of an exaggerated fear. Furthermore, the ANP’s foremost objective in this conference was to call for the implementation of federalism through meaningful decentralization. As referenced earlier, despite being resource rich, the Rakhine have been excluded for decades from any involvement in resource extraction and revenue collection. Section 37 (a) of Myanmar’s 2008 constitution gives the central government complete control over all natural resources, including the very air the Rakhine breathe: “the Union is the ultimate owner of all lands and all natural resources above and below the ground, above and beneath the water and in the atmosphere.” The conference called for amendments to Section 37 that would decentralize ownership, control and management, and revenue collection over all natural resources, even passing resolutions stating that 50% of all oil and gas revenue should go to the Rakhine. In July 2015, an amendment to Section 261 of the constitution was introduced that

135 Arakan Oil Watch. "Breaking the Curse: Decentralizing Natural Resource Management in Myanmar." 13; Aubrey Belford, "As Myanmar's Rakhine Buddhists gain strength, so does anti-Muslim apartheid."
would allow state level parliaments to elect their Chief Ministers (CM) instead of accepting central government appointments. The amendment was shot down by military MPs.\textsuperscript{136} ANP Chairman Aye Maung had a stake in the passage of this amendment, hoping to become Chief Minister himself. Having articulated a concrete roadmap for decentralization, the ANP’s next order of business was securing a majority to enact this roadmap.

The strengthening of popular allegiance to the Rakhine cause and the perceived confirmation of nationalist myths in 2014 enabled Rakhine politicians to restrict democratic rights, namely the right to vote, in increasing their chances of electoral victory. After 2010 elections, the Rohingya had five MPs in parliament, running on USDP tickets.\textsuperscript{137} In September 2014, the central government modified the political party registration laws, barring TRC holders from membership in or leadership of political parties. As the majority of Rohingya were TRC holders, this measure effectively blocked them from political party affiliation, giving them the right to run only as independents. However, some hope remained as the national referendum bill of February 2015 confirmed that TRC holders would still hold the right to vote in November elections.\textsuperscript{138} This concessional glimmer of hope was short-lived as mass protests broke out opposing the decision. Elite and mass incentives existed to disenfranchise the Rohingya. The Rohingya would never vote for an ANP candidate. The ANP had cultivated the impression that if they were to improve their state-level election performance by a mere six seats, they would single-handedly elevate the livelihoods of all Rakhine through legislation. Rakhine voters had every reason to favour the complete disenfranchisement of the Rohingya. In addition, an ANP

\textsuperscript{136} Penny Green, Thomas MacManus, and Alicia De La Cour Venning, \textit{Countdown to Annihilation: Genocide in Myanmar}, 43.
majority would benefit the Buddhist extremist movement. The process and consequence of mobilizing against TRC-holder voting rights would yield Buddhist extremists increased political influence. In running country-wide campaigns, the Ma Ba Tha has been able to shape political party actions. With respect to the issue of TRC holders, they have leveraged a politics of indigeneity and stoked Buddhist nationalism alleging that the NLD and USDP were Muslim sympathizers effectively abandoning the Buddhist cause if they failed to take away the voting rights of non-citizens. Ma Ba Tha protests discredited the NLD and USDP in Rakhine eyes, and further entrenched Rakhine perceptions that their prosperity lay in the hands of the ANP. Leveraging a renewed and rising tide of nationalist sentiment, Rakhine parliamentarians brought a case to Myanmar’s Constitutional Tribunal arguing that Article 391 of the constitution made no mentions of suffrage for TRC holders. After deliberating on the matter, the Tribunal ruled that voting rights for TRC holders was unconstitutional. A mere month after the national referendum, on March 31st, 2015, the government announced that TRCs would expire, and voting rights were suspended. Not only did this move erase over 500 000 Rohingya from voting lists, it deprived a stateless population of the already minimal rights they held with TRCs. For the Rohingya, the right to vote was the last remaining vehicle through which they could exert any kind of influence and have a voice in decision-making. This was precisely what the ANP sought with the hopes of becoming the dominant voice in Rakhine state politics in 2015.

7. 2016 Violence

Despite five years of concerted efforts to sway the electorate and guarantee electoral victory, the ANP narrowly missed their target, leaving the party divided. In the 2015 elections,
they won 22 seats in the national parliament, and 22 seats in the Rakhine state parliament falling two seats short of the majority they sought.\textsuperscript{143} ANP grievances were exacerbated by the fact that despite making up the largest bloc in the Rakhine state parliament, they were not consulted in the appointments of Chief Minister and Speakers of the new Rakhine state cabinet. While the constitution empowers the central government to make these decisions, they believed that their plurality warranted the right to form the administration, or at the very least, the right to make joint decisions with the NLD. Diverging opinions over how to work alongside the NLD have caused divisions within the ANP. The ANP has publicly refused to cooperate with the NLD in the state level parliament, but former ALD members of the ANP have opposed this decision, advocating a conciliatory approach.\textsuperscript{144} Though early 2016 became a period of soul-searching for a fractured ANP, events of late 2016 facilitated renewed resolve.

In October and November 2016, inter-ethnic violence of an unprecedented scale occurred in nRS. On October 9\textsuperscript{th}, approximately 400 Rohingya militants descended on three Border Guard Police (BGP) posts in the nRS townships of Maungdaw and Rathedaung, killing nine police officers. Militants had also stolen 10,000 rounds of ammunition and 62 firearms. This was the first time in the conflict’s history that such a coordinated and violent Rohingya resistance had emerged. Rohingya militant strategy displayed the characteristics of an organized insurgency as they continued to target security forces in clashes that spanned from October 10-12\textsuperscript{th}, killing four soldiers. The attacks inspired fear in Rakhine villagers who were the minority in nRS, causing


almost 3000 to flee south.\textsuperscript{145} In responding to the attacks, the government blocked all humanitarian aid to nRS on October 10\textsuperscript{th}.\textsuperscript{146} The military and BGP initiated “area clearance operations,” their term for standard military counterinsurgency strategy, in cutting militants off from their four key means of survival: food, intelligence, funds, and recruits. Territory in nRS was sealed off to focus operations. While the purported targets of this strategy were Rohingya militants, there were disproportionate levels of civilian collateral damage. Food supplies were destroyed, women and girls were raped, and entire villages were razed to the ground. Rohingya militants displayed undeterred resolve in the face of retaliation when around 60 armed members of their group fought against a military column on November 12\textsuperscript{th} in nRS’s Pwint Hpyu Chaung village, killing one soldier and injuring several others. Violence continued in neighbouring Gwa Son village as hundreds of villagers clashed with security forces using anything they could find including “guns, sticks, and spears.”\textsuperscript{147} After a lieutenant-colonel was killed, security forces retreated, only to return with a disproportionately robust violent crackdown. At least 1500 Rohingya buildings were destroyed. Troops on the ground shot at fleeing villagers, and helicopters fired indiscriminately into Rohingya villages.\textsuperscript{148} Over 100 people have died, and more than 90 000 Rohingya have fled Myanmar since October.

Spurred by the desperation of Rohingya communities, the October and November violence is evidence of how the sustained nationalist mobilizing of Rakhine political elites contributed to the outbreak of a violent resistance. Harakah al-Yaqin (HaY, “Faith Movement” in Arabic) is the group claiming responsibility for the late 2016 attacks. The group formed in the


\textsuperscript{147} Feliz Solomon, "Unrest in Burma's Arakan State: A Timeline," Time World, November 21, 2016

wake of 2012 violence and is managed by Saudi Arabia based Rohingya leaders. Rohingya villagers of nRS make up the majority of the group’s several hundred fighters, and over the years received training in “weapon use, guerrilla tactics, and…explosives and IEDs.”149 The group appears not to have a transnational terrorist agenda, articulating instead an objective sought by the Rohingya as early as the 1950s, an autonomous region in nRS. While the group does not have an explicitly religious agenda, it derives legitimacy from religious ideology as “several foreign clerics have ruled that, given the persecution Muslim communities face in Rakhine State, the campaign against the security forces is legal in Islam.”150 Despite developing for years, HaY waited until late 2016 to attack, and this might be explained by three key developments in 2015: the complete disenfranchisement of the Rohingya, a growing sense of desperation given the complete disavowal of the Rohingya cause by Myanmar politicians, and the closing of migration pathways to Malaysia.151 The ANP appears not to have any direct affiliations with this episode of violence; however, its efforts from 2011 onwards in entrenching ethnic hatred, protesting against international support for the Rohingya, working to disenfranchise them and leaving them completely marginalized from political life created the conditions for a violent Rohingya resistance, and an even more violent military response. While the Myanmar government has previously stoked fears over the threat of a terrorist Rohingya group called the Rohingya Solidarity Organization that has been inactive since the early 2000s, the emergence of HaY has elevated the nature of the conflict from inter-ethnic violence to insurgency.

There are strong grounds to suggest that Rakhine political elites also benefitted from the attacks perpetrated by HaY as they appear to have confirmed nationalist myths, and to have

150 Ibid., 14.
151 Ibid., 21.
produced electoral victory for ANP Chairman Aye Maung. In 2015, despite being the hardliner leading the chauvinist Rakhine movement with aspirations of becoming Chief Minister, Aye Maung suffered an embarrassing loss in the 2015 election for a seat in the Rakhine state parliament. The 2017 by-election held on April 1st was an opportunity for Aye Maung to redeem himself, contesting a seat for the national parliament in Rakhine’s Ann township. In cementing support for this election, the party rolled out a concerted campaign effort, relying again on its signature approach of nationalist fear-mongering. Ann township ultimately went to the ANP, with Aye Maung securing almost 50% of the vote. This whopping victory is unprecedented and surprising in Rakhine state, as Ann township had been a USDP stronghold in 2010 and 2015 elections. Moreover, the residents of Ann are not known to be receptive to extreme nationalist ideology, speaking a dialect sharing a greater similarity with Burmese than Rakhine, and having successful business relationships with Burman majority regions. Despite these distinctions between Ann and the rest of Rakhine state, HaY attacks in 2016 confirmed a terrorist threat in Rakhine state and contributed to feelings of insecurity across the board. Speeches by Aye Maung and his representatives almost exclusively centred on the threat of “Bengali Muslims” to the Rakhine race and the oft cited myth of their inherently violent tendencies and accelerating birth rates. One representative stated that, “the union level parties (the NLD and USDP) are not interested in this, so we have to solve the problems on our own…you have to vote for Dr. Aye Maung, an ethnic Rakhine like you, to solve this problem.” While HaY attacks did occur in the north, they targeted only security forces, and have the objective of securing a region in nRS,

155 Mratt Kyaw Thu, "Why did Aye Maung win in Ann?"
unconcerned with dynamics elsewhere. HaY also poses no genuine threat to a robust Myanmar military, and has been significantly weakened by the military’s 2016 crackdown. Despite the lack of a genuine threat to Ann, a township in central Rakhine far removed from the violence, fear became an effective tool to mobilize otherwise disaffected voters. The myths Rakhine politicians had propagated for years about the terrorist and secessionist intent of a Rohingya population bolstered by international Muslim support, appeared to materialize in 2016. The independent candidate who was also contesting the seat said, “the ANP are putting this ideology to the innocent people in very small villages, who have a lack of knowledge. The Bengali-Muslim problem is a good way for the party to convince people to vote for them.”

No direct links between the ANP and the military’s violent crackdown in 2016 have been established; however, it would appear that the ANP directly benefitted from the violence.

8. Conclusion

Since 2012, media coverage of the Rakhine-Rohingya conflict has implicitly furthered an essentialist conception of ethnicity, repeatedly asserting that the Rakhine are hell-bent on cleansing their state of the Rohingya, simply because they are illegal Muslim immigrants. Coverage has constructed the conflict as an exception to Myanmar’s monumental transition to democracy, rather than a product of it. This paper has argued otherwise asserting that democratization produced opportunities and incentives to instrumentally manipulate ethnic identity and mobilize nationalist sentiment, creating the conditions for inter-ethnic violence.

The institution of federalism in 2008 became the critical underlying variable in shaping the objectives of violent conflict. For centuries, the prosperous Rakhine Kingdom presided over a vast territory, securing Rakhine livelihoods. This prosperity came under three rounds of attack

\[156\] Ibid.
over two centuries at the hands of the Burman empire, the British colonizers, and the military dictatorship. The dictatorship has been the foremost contributor to contemporary grievances, having institutionalized Burman superiority for decades, marginalizing ethnic minorities through a robust unitary state. Federalism presented the Rakhine with their first opportunity in decades to elevate themselves from poverty and reclaim their stolen glory through self-determination. Democratic competition for the state and national legislatures became the vehicle for the Rakhine to manifest their hopes for a prosperous future.

Seeking to secure electoral victory, Rakhine political elites strengthened popular allegiance to the Rakhine cause by exploiting longstanding grievances, engaging in nationalist fear-mongering, and leveraging weak democratic institutions. While federalism and the promise of decentralization created unprecedented opportunities, the Rohingya threatened the Rakhine ability to take advantage of them. Rakhine-Rohingya antipathy can be traced back to colonial era policies; however, this antipathy became particularly salient with the introduction of democratic competition. Rohingya voters would undermine Rakhine abilities to privilege Rakhine interests in the local parliament, and to lobby for these interests in the national parliament. Thus, demonizing the Rohingya became an effective tool to marginalize the Rohingyas’ political participation and strengthen the appeal of Rakhine political parties. This strategy became viable due to weak journalistic institutions and segmented populations that enabled Rakhine to control the narrative propagated by the media. The weak establishment of the rule of law, the lack of enshrined minority rights, and inadequate institutional supports made elections particularly vulnerable to cycles of violence. The act of violence mobilized and unified the Rakhine in a common purpose: quelling the alleged Rohingya threat. The consequence of the violence was the
displacement and disenfranchisement of Rohingya communities, ultimately contributing to electoral victory for the Rakhine.

Democratization is not a quick fix that can immediately right the wrongs of decades of historical oppression. It is necessary to understand both the potentially positive and negative outcomes arising from the opportunities created by political liberalization. To achieve the country’s oft professed goals of peace and national reconciliation, Myanmar’s national and local governments must work to demonstrate that inclusion of ethnic minorities yields considerably greater benefits than exclusion.
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