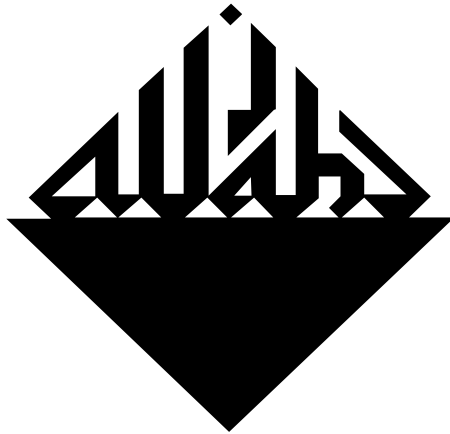


STUDIA ISLAMIKA

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TRUSTING IN GOD:
RELIGIOUS INSCRIPTIONS ON MALAY SEALS

Annabel Teh Gallop

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AND THE PATH TO DEMOCRATIZATION IN MYANMAR

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Muhammad Wildan

The Persecution of Rohingya Muslims and the Path to Democratization in Myanmar

Abstract: *Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar have long endured severe discrimination and persecution. Although the Rohingya have lived in Myanmar for centuries, their existence is not fully accepted by the majority of Buddhist society. Rohingya Muslims residing in the north-western area of Rakhine are considered stateless people. In the last ten years, Rohingya Muslims have been treated severely and even expelled from their place of birth. This humanitarian crisis has attracted many international organizations that are aiding Rohingya and urging Myanmar's civilian government to recognize Rohingya as an official ethnic group. This article explores the roots of Islamophobia in Myanmar and analyses its effect on Muslims' daily life in Myanmar, and in particular for the Rohingya. Ultimately, it is important to discern the path of democratization in Myanmar, as currently led by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), analyzing the present state and future of democratization of the country, especially on a socio-political level.*

Keywords: Hatred, Islamophobia, Discrimination, Persecution, Power-Sharing.

Abstrak: *Muslim Rohingya di Myanmar telah lama mengalami diskriminasi dan penganiayaan berat. Meskipun etnis Rohingya telah tinggal di negara itu selama berabad-abad, keberadaan mereka tidak sepenuhnya diterima oleh mayoritas masyarakat Buddha. Muslim Rohingya yang tinggal di Rakhinedianggap sebagai komunitas tanpa kewarganegaraan. Dalam sepuluh tahun terakhir, Muslim Rohingya tidak hanya diperlakukan secara kejam di dalam negeri, tetapi juga terusir dari tanah kelahirannya sendiri. Krisis kemanusiaan ini telah menarik banyak organisasi internasional baik untuk membantu Rohingya dan juga untuk mendesak pemerintah sipil Myanmar untuk mengakui Rohingya sebagai kelompok etnis resmi negara itu. Artikel ini mencoba mencari akar dari Islamofobia di Myanmar dan menganalisis pengaruhnya terhadap kehidupan sehari-hari umat Islam di Myanmar khususnya bagi Rohingya. Pada akhirnya, penting juga untuk melihat arah demokratisasi negara yang saat ini dipimpin oleh partai National League for Democracy (NLD), Aung San Suu Kyi. Oleh karena itu, penting untuk menganalisis demokratisasi saat ini dan masa depan negara, terutama pada tataran sosial politik.*

Kata kunci: Kebencian, Islamofobia, Diskriminasi, Penganiayaan, Pembagian Kekuasaan.

ملخص: يقد عانى مسلمو الروهينغا في ميانمار، منذ فترة طويلة، التمييز والاضطهاد الشديد. وعلى الرغم من أنهم عاشوا في البلاد منذ قرون، إلا أن وجودهم غير مقبول تمامًا من قبل غالبية المجتمع البوذي. ويُعتبر مسلمو الروهينغا الذين يعيشون في راخين مجتمعًا عديم الجنسية. وفي السنوات العشر الأخيرة، لم يتعرضوا للإساءة داخل بلادهم فحسب، بل طُردوا أيضًا من وطنهم. وقد اجتذبت هذه الأزمة الإنسانية انتباه العديد من المنظمات الدولية لمساعدتهم، وحث الحكومة المدنية في ميانمار على الاعتراف بهم كمجموعة عرقية رسمية في البلاد. ويحاول هذا المقال العثور على جذور الإسلاموفوبيا في ميانمار، وتحليل تأثيرها في الحياة اليومية للمسلمين في ميانمار، وخاصة في الروهينغا. ومن المهم، في نهاية المطاف، رؤية اتجاه التحول الديمقراطي في البلاد الذي يقوده حاليًا حزب الرابطة الوطنية من أجل الديمقراطية (NLD)، بقيادة أونغ سان سو كي، وذلك بهدف تحليل الديمقراطية الحالية ومستقبل البلاد، لا سيما على المستوى الاجتماعي والسياسي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكراهية، الإسلاموفوبيا، التمييز، الاضطهاد، تقاسم السلطة.

Myanmar (a.k.a. Burma) is known not only for its struggle for democracy, led by Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, but also more recently for the plight of the Rohingya Muslims, who are persecuted by Myanmar's Buddhist-majority society. The misery of Rohingya Muslims has escalated with their expulsion from their homeland in the northeast area of the country, near the border with Bangladesh. Their cause has become a humanitarian issue at the international level. To outsiders, it is quite shocking that Buddhists who are generally not known for having a strong political ideology could turn radical and even violent. Although Myanmar is undergoing significant political change towards democratic government, the fate of Rohingya Muslims has not shown signs of improvement. Violence against Rohingya Muslims has become even worse, becoming an anti-Islam movement reinforced by the government. The Pew Research Center (Pew) scored Myanmar among the highest in the world on both the social hostility index (SHI) and the government hostility index (GHI) (Pew Research Center 2015, 51, 54).

As a multi-ethnic country, Myanmar has long been vulnerable for social conflicts, especially over religious issues. Buddhist-Muslim conflict has a long history in Myanmar, dating back to the arrival of Muslims from Bengal Bay into the Arakan region in the 14th century. During the 49-year rule of the military junta government (1962-2011), Myanmar's Muslims, especially those of Indian-ethnic origin, were severely restricted in religious freedom from both society and the government. Strangely, the worst discrimination, ending in the persecution of Rohingya Muslims, was in 2012, just a year after the dissolution of the military government. The monk-led riots also escalated in early 2013 in some parts of Rakhine State. The police – who are mostly Rakhine Buddhists – reportedly did not take much efforts to stop the attacks and were, in many reports, even accused of being complicit in the violence (International Crisis Group 2013, ii). Human rights organizations eventually described the Rohingya's as the “most oppressed people in the world” (Kelly 2016). The most fundamental issue is that the government now considers Rohingya Muslims as stateless people, since they could not provide documentation to prove that they have lived in Arakan State for more than 60 years.

Through the tough and lengthy dispute on ethnicity and citizenship status of Rohingya Muslims, their identity is being toyed with by the government. While most ethnic groups initially fought for independence, today almost all of them are accepted as part of the Union of Myanmar, and have sought equality within the new federal state. The government, however, still suspects them of planning to separate from the country, and sees this as an excuse to repress and enforce fierce policies on the minority Muslims (International Crisis Group 2003, i). The policy of “Burmanization,” or the propaganda of Burma for Burmese, has to some extent expelled the existence of Indian-descent Muslims, who were labelled as ethnic Rohingya. Along with all of the above socio-political challenges, Myanmar is undergoing a process of democratization. The long endeavour to realise a democratic Myanmar has rendered Rohingya Muslims political victims. This article addresses questions concerning the historical background of Muslims in Myanmar, the roots of Buddhist-Muslim conflict, the government’s policies toward Muslims and the future of democratization of the country. The limitation of this article, however, is written during 2020 and, therefore, it does not cover the coup d’état of the democratically-elected leaders by the Tatmadaw—Myanmar’s military in 1 February 2021.

Muslims in the Diverse Ethnicities of Myanmar

There is no precise data on the current number of Muslims in Myanmar. Pew estimates that Muslims number roughly 1,900,000, or 3.8% of the population (Pew Research Center 2011, 158), while the 2014 census recorded 4.3%, excluding Muslims in some parts of Rakhine state (Ministry of Immigration and Population 2014, 4). Other independent studies suggest the number could be as high as 13-15% (about 7,000,000) out of a population of 51.4 million (in 2014) (US Department of State 2006; Veen 2005). In term of ethnicity, the majority of Muslims in Myanmar are Indian Muslims, who have lived in Myanmar since the country was under British rule. The others are Bengali and Burmese who have converted to Islam. As has happened in other Southeast Asian countries, like Indonesia and Malaysia, the conversion of local inhabitants to Islam has more often been by choice than through coercion (Jilani 1999, 63). This type of Islamization has formed quite a distinct variant of Islam compared to most Arab countries.

Most of Myanmar's ethnic minorities inhabit areas along the country's mountainous frontiers, especially in the north (Veen 2005, 6).

Historically, Arabs were the first Muslims to reach the shores of Arakan region (at the time under the Arakan kingdom) in the 9th century, followed by Persians, Moghuls, Turks and Bengalis in later centuries, and Indians in the 14th and 15th centuries. European travellers Anthanasius Nitikin and Ralph Fitch arrived in Burma in the 15th and 16th centuries, noting there were beautiful ports and cities and the existence of some Muslims communities (Yegar 1972, 4). Other accounts confirm the existence of an Islamic Sultanate that controlled the Arakan region from 15th century, collapsing after an attack from Buddhist forces in 1784 (Kettani 1986, 204). It is also worth noting that the last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah II, and his family and followers were exiled to Yangon, Myanmar. He died in custody and was buried there in 1862 (Yegar 1972, 93).

As early as the 16th century, through to the early 19th century, many Muslims served the kings of the Burmese region, typically as riflemen or artillerymen. Before the arrival of the British empire, the Burmese regions were under the reign of several kings of the Toungoo Dynasty, which were active in expanding the empire to the Arakan and Indian regions. During their wars, many kings, such as Sa Nay Min Gyi (1674-1714) and Alaungpaya (1714-1760), brought back thousands of prisoners of war, many of whom were Muslims. Since then, many Muslim prisoners settled in many parts of the country and especially in Rangoon (now Yangon), and assimilated to form a Burmese Muslim community that served the Buddhist kings as their most trusted soldiers. The Burmese king Pagan Min (1846–1853) even employed Muslims in his inner circle, as governor of the capital city of Amarapura, royal bodyguards, soldiers, couriers, Persian interpreters and advisers (Yegar 1972, 10–11).

The influx of Muslims in Burma cannot be separated from the British Burma government, existing as a province of British India and the colony of the United Kingdom from 1824 until 1948. After the collapse of the Islamic Sultanate of Arakan, the number of Muslims decreased significantly, becoming a minority community. To support social and economic development in the mid-19th century, the government of British Burma invited more Indian Muslims to settle in the Arakan region. After they established themselves economically, the

immigrant Muslims improved their religious activities by establishing mosques and religious institutions. After development, a better socio-economic situation attracted many locals to convert to Islam, and many Muslims also married local people. In the longer term, this situation has generated tensions between Muslims and Buddhists (Yegar 1972, 33–38).

The wave of immigrant Muslims from across the Bengal Bay (at the time a part of India but now part of Bangladesh) was continuous, and they settled mostly in British Burma in the early and mid-20th century, following Burma's independence in 1948. Rakhine historian Jacques P. Leider argues that, based on their Bengali lingua franca (Safdar 2015), the problem of Rohingya is not ethnicity but rather a political construction (Chia 2016). Based on his research, the term Rohingya has rarely been used in a Burmese historical context except to name the last surrenders of Mujahidin in 1961. Since that time, the term has been quite common in a political context but has not gained widespread national recognition. Rohingya became a common name for Rakhine Muslims after the violence of 2012 (Leider 2017). However, it is more precise to identify Rohingya as Muslims of Bengali ethnic origin, who have been living with other diverse, Buddhist Burmese groups in the Rakhine region for quite a long time. The current social tension and conflicts reflect that different ethnic and social backgrounds have not succeeded in coexisting under a single identity but rather have been socially polarized. Based on an estimate from the 2014 census, the current number of Rohingya Muslims is about 1.3 million (BBC News 2015). All communities in Rakhine State suffer from poor social services and a scarcity of livelihood opportunities, and the poverty rate is nearly twice the national average.

Currently, there are quite sizeable Muslim populations in Rakhine State other than the Rohingya. Among them are the Indian-Muslim community in Rangoon, the Chinese Muslims known as Panthay, the Malay-Muslims in Kawthaung, children of inter-ethnic marriages between foreign Muslims and Burmese females known as Zerbadi Muslims, and Kamein, a government-recognized ethnic minority native to Rakhine State (Hooker 1983, 168). The miscellaneous origin of Islam has given rise to diverse schools and sects of Islam in the region, such as the Sunni majority and the Shi'ite minority, Ahmadi and Isma'ilite (Harji 2014).

The most interesting and challenging social aspect is the diversity of ethnicity and religion in the country. According to the *World Fact Book*, the largest groups among the 135 recognized ethnicities in Myanmar are Bamar/Burmese (68%), Shan (9%), Karen (7%), Rakhine (4%), Chinese (3%), Mon (2%), Indian (2%), and others (5%) (The World Fact Book, 2017). In term of religion, other than the majority Theravada Buddhism (87.9%), there are a considerable number of minority religions, such as Christianity (6.2%), Islam (4.3%), Hinduism (0.5%) and animism (0.8%) (Ministry of Immigration and Population 2014). The number of Christians is comprised of both Catholics and numerous denominations of Protestants, most famously Baptists. There is also a tiny Jewish community which has a synagogue in Yangon but there is no rabbi to conduct services (Katz and Goldberg 1988). Although each of the minority groups at the state level experience discrimination to some degree, most living in central parts of the country enjoy a reasonable degree of religious freedom (International Crisis Group 2013, 21).

Violence and Discrimination against Muslims in the History of Burma

Although knowledge of restrictions and discrimination against Muslims has only spread internationally in the last ten years, it has a long history long dating back to before the creation of modern Myanmar. The relationship between Muslims and the Buddhist majority during the traditional kingdom of Burma will only be briefly elaborated upon. Rather, this article focuses on more recent cases and on the policies of the current Myanmar government toward Muslim communities.

History records that although Muslims have played various roles for the Burmese kings, tensions and discrimination could not be avoided. King Bayinnaung (1550-1581), for example, had imposed restrictions on Muslims, including banning Islamic ritual slaughter (*Īd al-adḥā*) and prohibiting Muslims from consuming halal meats (Yegar 1981, 10). Social tensions also arose in the 17th century between Muslims, followers of a Mughal Prince Shah Shuja (1616-1661), and the powerful Arakan pirate Sandathudama (1652-1687), which ended in the assassination of all Shuja followers (Yegar 1981, 33–34). Tensions and conflict continued under King Alaungpaya (1752-1760), who prohibited Muslims from practicing the slaughter of cattle during Īd

al-adhā, and King Bodawpaya (1782-1819), who arrested and killed four prominent Burmese imams after they refused to eat pork (Yegar 1981, 10).

Under the occupation of the British empire, economic pressure and xenophobia gave rise to racial tensions and rioting against Indian Muslims intensified. As the majority of Muslims in Burma in the early 20th century were of Indian descent, Burmese Muslims, which then numbered around 500,000, were collectively referred to as Indian (Yegar 1981, 29). Due to the persecution of Buddhists in India by the Mughal empire in the early 20th century, and also to the economic competition between Indian migrant Muslims and native Burmese Buddhists, anti-Indian sentiment was aggravated, sparking anti-Indian riots in May 1930 that killed approximately 200 Indian workers and injured more than 2,000. The riots spread rapidly throughout Burma, targeting Indians and Muslims (Sciences Po, 2009). In 1939, anti-Muslim riots broke out in several cities amid the hatred campaign of “Burma for Burmese,” resulting in the murder of 204 Muslims, a further 1,000 injured and 113 mosques damaged (Ahmed 2012; Yegar 1981, 38).

After Burma gained independence in 1948, the Muslim struggle for greater freedoms had limited success. Muslims established an Islamic political party called the Burma Muslim Congress (BMC) at almost the same time as the establishment of the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL) in 1945. The collaboration between Buddhist and Muslim nationalists in the pre-independence period resulted in the assassination of six members of cabinet in July 1947, including Aung San, the leader and founder of Burma, and Abdul Razak, a Muslim nationalist politician (Yegar 1981, 76). Following the independence of Burma in 1948, U Nu (the leader of AFPFL) became the first Prime Minister in 1956. U Nu dissolved the BMC and merged its board members into the AFPFL and declared Buddhism the state religion of Burma, neglecting the existence of religious minorities.

Following the coup d’état by General Ne Win in 1962, which placed Burma under military control, the status of Muslims became even worse. They were expelled from the government’s army and marginalised both socially and politically. Socially, Muslims were often called as “Ka-la,” Burmese slang for anyone dark-skinned, usually of Indian origin. This insulted all those whose ancestors fought for the country and who consider themselves wholly Burmese (Priestley 2006).

It was as early as 1982 that General Ne Win's government passed the Citizenship Law of Myanmar, which does not recognize the Rohingya Muslims as one of the 135 national groups eligible for citizenship by birth, rendering them stateless. The Law considers only Rakhine people who settled in the Burma territories from a period anterior to 1185 AD as Burmese citizens. Therefore, most Rohingya Muslims are considered new immigrants (Human Rights Resource Center 2015, 13). From that moment the term "Rohingya" increased in usage among Rohingya communities (Tonkin 2014).

Along with the political oppression and economic turmoil following the junta's military control, social unrest and anti-Muslim riots have occurred. Sporadic protests against the military rule in 1975, 1976 and 1977 were violently suppressed by overwhelming force. In 1988, the security forces of the military government killed hundreds of pro-democracy demonstrators across the country. Finally, the government formed the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which in 1989 changed the official name of the country from the "Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma" to the "Union of Myanmar." Politically, it became worse when the government conducted the first free general election in 1990 and 80 percent of the seats were won by the National League for Democracy (NLD), the party of Aung San Suu Kyi. The military junta, refused to cede power. Still under military rule, anti-Muslim riots broke out in Mandalay in March 1997 following reports of the sexual harassment of a Buddhist girl by a Muslim man. News spread fast and it escalated into a mob of about 1,000-1,500 monks that targeted 18 mosques, burning the Qur'an, looting and destroying Muslim shop-houses and properties. The attacks by Buddhist monks then spread out to the capital, as well as to the central towns of Pegu, Prome and Toungoo (Minority at Risk 2017). At least three people were killed and around 100 monks arrested.

After the turn of the century, social hatred toward Muslims grew and flared up with some riots. The rise of radical Islamism world-wide since 2001 could easily be used to nurture anger among Burmese Buddhists who feared it would endanger their Buddhist majority country. Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu began his anti-Muslim hate speech and coined the *969 Movement*, fighting against the supposed influx of Islam into what he defined as a traditionally Buddhist country. The movement was supported by Ma Ba Tha (the Association of the Protection of Race

and Religion) and it produced much anti-Muslim propaganda through sermons, social media, pamphlets and stickers (Kadoe and Husein 2015, 140). The movement was also fuelled that year by the Taliban's destruction of Buddhist images in Bamiyan, Afghanistan. As a result, in May 2001 anti-Muslim riots broke out in Taungoo, resulting in the death of 200 Muslims, the destruction of 11 mosques and the burning of over 400 houses. Regrettably, the military junta supported the riots by providing bulldozers to raze ancient mosques in Tuangoo (Human Rights Watch 2002). In 2012, widely spread Islamophobia resulted in worse sectarian riots. Wirathu continued his anti-Muslim movement, claiming that Myanmar would turn into a majority Muslim country like Indonesia (Szep 2013). Riots took place in various cities in central and eastern Myanmar. Eventually, many media called Wirathu the 'Buddhist bin Laden' or 'Burma's bin Laden' to highlight their similarities as the leader of a radical religious group (MacGregor 2013). A senior member of NLD once said that "Wirathu has a network for everything that is happening in the country. If he wanted Islamic households in Bago to be destroyed, all he would have to do is snap his fingers." Since then, riots have recurred in many regions and have started to become an international issue. Many questions have arisen as to why Islamophobia and racism are perpetuating in a Buddhist majority country.

Hatred and the Spread of Islamophobia toward Rohingya Muslims

The long history of life under an authoritarian military regime and the steep road of democratization may have resulted in the spread of hatred and Islamophobia in this Buddhist majority country. The authoritarian government, which brought about a lot of political and economic suffering, has distracted society by blaming Muslims, using Rohingya as their scapegoat. Religious freedom was initially granted by the constitution but has been disregarded by the military junta ever since (US Department of State 2006). Instead of permitting most adherents of registered religions to worship as they want, the authorities imposed restrictions on certain religious activities of minority groups, and frequently abused the right of religious freedom. Rohingya Muslims are one such group that has faced restrictions and abuse.

Although almost every city or town in Myanmar has a Muslim community, Arakan (Rakhine) State in the north-west has the highest concentration of Muslims. Most of the population have been living

there for hundreds of years, while some others arrived from British India after the British's annexation of the region in 1824. The vast majority of today's Muslims, however, were born in Myanmar and have ancestors of various ethnicities as a result of intermarriages over generations. As explained in the previous sub-chapter on the religious intolerance and riots that occurred in almost every city of the country, racial and religious tension against non-Buddhists has become worse for Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State. As an ethnic and religious minority, Rohingya have long suffered discrimination that has more recently turned into Islamophobia.

The root of the problem may lie in the nationality status of Rohingya, who are not considered citizens under Myanmar's strict citizenship law. As they cannot obtain national identity cards (ID), they have difficulties accessing education, carrying on social relations, obtaining employment with private companies, conducting business, owning land and even travelling. Although there are some Muslims who are able to get ID cards have jobs as both civil servants and in the military, they cannot work as traders or day labourers. In combination, these factors create a severe social and economic situation for the Rohingya, who are socially and structurally impoverished.

Sadly, the authoritarian government's policy toward Rohingya stimulated anti-Muslim sentiment and stigma among Myanmar's other ethnic communities, which now see them as foreigners, illegal immigrants, job-stealers, poor and uneducated. The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and its predecessor government (State Law and Order Restoration Council, SLORC) often use religious issues to gain more support from Myanmar's Buddhist community in the hope that they will forget their growing anger over their repression by the Myanmar Army. In 1991-92, for example, the regime launched a pogrom against the Rohingya Muslims of Rakhine State, which was not supported by Rakhine Buddhists. The pogrom displaced over 250,000 Muslims into Bangladesh, which were later forcibly repatriated to Myanmar by the Bangladeshi government in cooperation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (Cochrane 2017). However, discrimination and persecution from both the government of SPDC and Rohingya Buddhists continues today.

The Myanmar's Constitution (2008) clearly states that all races, ethnicities and religions have the same rights before the law. Although

Myanmar also recognizes Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Animism, it clearly states that Buddhism has a special position as the faith of a majority of the country (The Ministry of Information of Myanmar 2008). Any discrimination is also lucidly stated: “The Union shall not discriminate any citizen of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar based on race, birth, religion, official position, status, culture, sex and wealth” (The Ministry of Information of Myanmar 2008). On a practical level, however, the government of SPDC has attempted to use Buddhism as a political weapon by giving financial support for building lavish pagodas and offerings ceremonies to make the population believe in the role the government plays in their religion. By contrast, the government has increasingly limited the religious freedom of Muslims over the last five years, including banning the building of new mosques and by making it difficult for Muslims to hold religious ceremonies and celebrations (AsiaNews 2012).

After the military junta government was dissolved in March 2011 and following the victory of the National League for Democracy (NLD) party in the first openly contested election in November 2015, it was expected that democratization would be the path of Myanmar's future. These occurrences emerged largely due to intense international criticism and political and economic stagnation that led the regime to acknowledge that the only option was to compromise with the opposition party (Thawngmung 2003, 457). On the political rights of Muslims, some months earlier the government disenfranchised about 700,000 people by eliminating their right to vote. After over 50 years of military rule, Myanmar is finally making the long-awaited transition to elected government. Although the party has an absolute majority of seats in both chambers of the national parliament (BBC News 2015), the NLD leader is constitutionally barred from the presidency. Interestingly, Suu Kyi's struggle for democracy was not reflected in her political candidates. None of the NLD's 1,151 candidates standing in regional and national elections were Muslim (Safdar 2015). Finally, on March 15, 2016, Htin Kyaw was elected as the first non-military president of the country since the military coup in 1962, and on April 6, 2016 Suu Kyi was assigned a newly created role of State Counsellor (Moe and Ramzy 2016). The military, however, still maintains significant power in the government and parliament. Inter-religious tensions, especially Islamophobia, do not yet appear to be decreasing.

Moreover, political change among the elites do not have much influence on the fate of Rohingya Muslims. Following several mobs in Bago region and Kachin state in June and July 2016 that resulted in the destruction of some mosques, Myanmar military forces and Buddhist extremists began persecuting Rohingya Muslims in the western region of Rakhine State. The security forces led riots that spread widely and caused extensive human rights violations including killings, gang rapes and other brutalities. The military operations forced thousands of Rohingya Muslims to flee to neighbouring countries. Hundreds of them were killed and over 300,000 displaced (Holmes 2016). In addition to the thousands of Rohingya living in Bangladesh, many more were stranded at sea trying to reach Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. The persecution of Rohingya Muslims drew criticism from various quarters such as the United Nations, human rights groups and the governments of Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia and Turkey. A senior UN official accused Myanmar of ethnically cleansing the country of its Muslim minority (BBC News 2016). The UN and international human rights organizations have cautioned that if Rohingya's human rights are not properly addressed and they remain economically marginalized, they will become vulnerable to involvement in extremist activism and even radicalization (Arabnews 2017).

International Responses and Reactions

Rohingya Muslims face severe conditions and await responses to the appeals to many international humanitarian aid organizations. A Human Rights Watch officer said more than 1,500 buildings were destroyed in Maungdaw alone during October and November 2016. Amnesty International alleged that the military have killed civilians, raped women and razed villages to the ground (Human Rights Watch 2016). The UN notes that more than 3,000 severely malnourished children within Myanmar may die without help. Tons of food and medical aid from many different international humanitarian organizations and countries has been suspended by the military government. Human rights groups have described the military's behaviour as crimes against humanity (Kelly 2016). Nowadays, the fate of Rohingya Muslims as the most vulnerable ethnic group remains as uncertain as it was before. Along with the thousands who fled the country, over 100,000 Rohingya live in internment camps provided by UNHCR at Sittwe

on the western coast (Bodetti 2016). While waiting for international organizations' negotiations with the government, they live with limited facilities provided by international aid.

The crisis of the Rohingya Muslims concerns not only religious and ethnic issues but also humanitarian ones. Many international organizations have actively engaged and responded to the issue, including some humanitarian and religious organizations. These include the United Nations (UN), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The United Nations believes that the crisis of Rohingya in Myanmar is a humanitarian issue. Based on the fact that hundreds of Rohingya have fled to neighbouring countries and also the dire conditions in Rakhine state, the UN believes that Myanmar wants to expel its entire Rohingya population. Many international advisers have termed it genocide. Many actions and interventions have been conducted by UN bodies, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), to reduce further humanitarian crises. Since November 2019, the case of the Rohingya has entered the International Court of Justice (ICJ), with accusations Myanmar has violated the 1948 Genocide Convention. Requests have been made for the Court to order provisional measures to prevent and protect the community from further harm. In January 2020, the ICJ granted these provisional measures and required Myanmar to "take all measures within its power" to protect the Rohingya from genocide. After four months, there has been little meaningful follow-up of Myanmar's compliance with the ICJ order (Amnesty 2020).

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has strongly condemned human rights violations against Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine state. Since the heightened incidence of Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine state in 2012, OIC has taken several humanitarian and political actions to reduce the potential for worsening situations. Aside from humanitarian aid, the IPHCR has called on all OIC member states to urge Myanmar to uphold and protect the rights of Rohingya Muslims and to voice their concerns at international fora. It is interesting to list some of the efforts taken by OIC and its bodies on Rohingya issues. The OIC Secretary General denounced violence in Myanmar in 2012, the OIC special envoy for Myanmar went to the United States to get support for Rohingya issue in 2015, the OIC proposed a Resolution

on Human Rights of the Rohingya which was later adopted by the UN Human Rights Council in 2015. The OIC Secretary General met Aung San Suu Kyi in 2016 and the OIC called for Emergency Meetings in New York, Brussels and Geneva to address the crisis. The OIC Secretary General visited European Union to meet High Officials in 2017 and the OIC raised the plight of the Rohingya at UNHRC in Geneva in 2019. In a special OIC meeting in Malaysia in January 2017, the Myanmar government announced its regret that the Prime Minister of Malaysia initiated and hosted the meeting to exploit another country's crisis for political interests. With no clear solution for this apartheid-like tragedy, the OIC has asked the UN to adopt a resolution to enforce Myanmar's government to solve the issue decisively (Slodkowski 2017). In 2020 the OIC welcomed the unanimous decision taken by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to order Myanmar's government to take provisional measures to prevent further acts of genocide against the Rohingya (Organization of Islamic Cooperation 2020).

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has also struggled to solve the crisis. In 2017, the foreign ministers of ASEAN countries expressed concern over developments in Rakhine State and condemned the violence in the region that had resulted in the destruction of homes, displacement of huge numbers of people and the loss of civilian lives (ASEAN 2017). However, there was internal disagreement on the statement as it did not identify the Rohingya as one of the affected communities (ABS-CBN News 2017). ASEAN also urged the Myanmar government to revise the citizenship law of 1982 to grant the Rohingya full citizenship and acknowledge them as an official ethnicity (Airoidi 2017). There are, however, many critics pushing ASEAN to expand its efforts. This is due to the fact that ASEAN tends to employ soft measures, known as the "ASEAN Way." These include the principles of sovereignty, non-interference and consensus decision-making, as enshrined in numerous ASEAN agreements and declarations. ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights criticised the ASEAN Report, "Emergency Response and Assessment Team," for allegedly smearing the persecution of the Rohingya (Aljazeera 2019). Many observers are also concerned that the socio-economic crisis in Myanmar and also the failure of the state to provide protection could stoke the kind of religious extremism and radicalism that has occurred in other countries.

Muslim majority countries responded aggressively to crisis in Myanmar. Indonesia, Malaysia and Turkey have been among the most responsive. Hundreds of Rohingya refugees have taken up residence in parts of Indonesia and Malaysia. Beside condemning the persecution of the Rohingya, Indonesian President Joko Widodo has sent about 34 tons of relief supplies for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi visited Myanmar and Bangladesh in September 2017 to discuss the situation with State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak labelled the persecution of Rohingya as genocide and dispatched tons of aid for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Malaysia also insisted on a stronger stance from ASEAN on Myanmar's human rights violations. In addition, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Prime Minister Binali Yildirim also described Rohingya persecution as genocide. While visiting Rohingya refugee camps in 2017, the First Lady Emine Erdogan and Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu promised to send 1,000 tons of relief supplies (Jones 2017).

Long Road for Democratization of Religious Freedom

At a glance, it seems that there is not much hope for Rohingya Muslims to have their national and religious rights restored and live as equal citizens. The authoritarian regime's denial of their citizenship has closed many doors. Many observers and peace activists regret that Aung San Suu Kyi has kept silent on the fate of Rohingya. Many international organizations and the independent and collective efforts of other countries are focusing more on humanitarian aid rather than political reform. However, recent political changes among the elites of Myanmar, with the inauguration of a non-military president and the newly established role of State Counsellor, may open a pathway for the democratization of Myanmar.

Anti-Muslim propaganda, which has been widely spread throughout the country, is not merely at the societal level but also through the government. Myanmar remains a rumour driven society. Fear that Muslims would turn the country Islamic is the main reason for the anti-Muslim sentiment (Chia 2016). A survey in 2016 found that anti-Muslim propaganda has become a common discourse among the society. The authoritarian government has systematically supported Myanmar's Buddhist majority to build more pagodas while discouraging

and even prohibiting minority religions from contracting new places of worships. However, there are no reports of forced conversions to Buddhism. Myanmar's government has on several occasions responded diplomatically that the government has taken some necessary steps to solve the problem.

The election of Htin Kyaw and Aung San Suu Kyi is somewhat of a flashlight in the darkness of the future of religious freedom in the country. It is difficult for Suu Kyi, who is herself a Buddhist, to portray herself as a neutral arbiter. After being imprisoned in her home for 15 years, the case of Rohingya Muslims is a dilemma for her. Her bitter experience under the custody of an authoritarian regime taught her a lot. Many international supporters could not change her fate during her incarceration. Therefore, her silence on anti-Muslim tensions and the military abuses of Rohingya Muslims could be part of her strategy to gain mass support from the Buddhist-majority society and preserve the legitimacy of her leadership. Suu Kyi and her NLD present the only way to gently solve the problem; through democracy. Suu Kyi still considers her late father Aung San an influence on her political thinking. Aung San's endeavour to form the nation-state of Burma cannot be separated from the role of Muslims and their sacrifice, especially Abdul Razak, who died with her father. Her Western educational background and social experiences have crafted deeply in her mind ideas about democracy and other western values relevant to building a better Myanmar. Finally, her position as the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate is somewhat of a binding title for her, with many international peace activists reminding her of the issue. At the Rohingya camps in Sittwe, for example, she gently stated, "If you want to bring an end to long-standing conflict, you have to be prepared to compromise" (Chia 2016).

Democracy is the only solution for Myanmar. It is a remedy for any nation-state facing social and political complications. Among the pillars of democracy are the recognition and protection of fundamental rights (Perry 2009, 622), such as the freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN General Assembly 1948). In the case of Myanmar, the above values are already stated clearly in the Constitution of the State. The long history of brutal religious wars and persecution of different religious sects in Western Europe has given rise to the modern notion of religion as a matter of individual conscience, rather than an official policy of

the state. Although religious freedom in Myanmar is clearly decreasing right now, in the long-term democracy is the necessary course for the country, regardless of the steep changes required. The transition of the elites to non-military figures and the reduction of the military's seats to a quarter can be seen as significant progress.

At the empirical level we can see some progress towards democratization of the country. The shift from military-led to civil-led government marks a significant turning point for Myanmar. Although Myanmar is predominantly Buddhist, which has shaped Burmese identity, there have been efforts among some religious leaders to create an interfaith dialogue that comprises representatives of Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. The right to freedom of religion is still a novel concept in Myanmar's newly emerging political and social milieu. However, since emerging in 2011, Myanmar's so-called political liberalisation has grown. Amendments to the constitution by the ruling party to reduce the military's involvement in politics bodes well for the future.

However, amending Myanmar's 2008 Constitution is very difficult. The half century-long domination by the military has resulted in many articles of the constitution securing its position. The NLD has promised to make the constitution more democratic. The most significant amendment revokes the special privileges granted by the constitution to the military. In 2019, the NLD proposed 114 amendments for the democratic consolidation and demilitarization of state institutions. However, the reforms were unsuccessful, rejected by the veto-holding military. Out of 114 constitutional proposals, only four minor changes were achieved on some charters (Aung 2020). Nevertheless, there are still hopes for the next general election, scheduled for November 8, 2020. It will elect members of both upper and lower houses of the Myanmar parliament, excluding seats reserved by the military. Hopes are based on the fact that there are younger and educated people from many different ethnicities joining in the coming elections, who can contribute to the country's democratic reforms.

Conclusion

Although Rohingya Muslims may be well-known internationally for their persecution, historically most Muslims have experienced discrimination and Islamophobia, even during the medieval period

of Islam in the country. Most Muslims came through Bengal Bay (now Bangladesh) from the Indian sub-continent over many centuries. Among the diverse ethnicities in the country, Rohingya Muslims have not been officially recognized as citizens of Myanmar. Undeniably, almost all other ethnic groups throughout the country have been recognised for hundreds of years. Since the time of the ancient Myanmar kings, they have lived peacefully and harmoniously. Some kings even gave equal treatment to all under the major religions – Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and Hinduism – and permitted the performance and practice their religious duties. The role of Muslims during the struggle for independence from the British empire, who took part in the formation of the nation-state of Burma, cannot be overlooked.

It is not religion that has predominantly driven social tensions and the persecution of Muslims but rather politics and socio-cultural motivations instead. The traditional teachings of Buddhism are peaceful and Buddhism is generally perceived as the religion least associated with violence, although there have been many acts of violence fomented or inspired by Buddhists (Jerryson and Juergensmeyer 2010, 22–24). Michael Jerryson, an expert on Buddhism, asserts that riots and violence could easily flourish due to discrepancies between reality and precepts, especially during Myanmar's current transition to democracy (Irinews 2013).

Social competition, democratization, and the flourishing of radical Islamism globally are among the factors causing social tensions and the radicalization of the monks. Muslims have long been perceived as foreign immigrants who 'steal' jobs and land. Although many Muslims are not economically successful, they are often seen as economic competitors. The emergence of radical Muslims in many countries has been seen as a threat toward the existence of Buddhism in the country. The existence of some armed resistance groups fighting for greater freedom in Myanmar has led to the All-Burma Muslim Union (ABMU) being labelled a terrorist organization (Karen Human Rights Group 2014). Apparently, the persecution of Muslims could even foment Islamic extremism in the country. Quite similar phenomena may be seen in some other developing countries. This is to say that radicalisation of Buddhist monks is due in part to the failure of society to grasp the socio-political changes taking place in the country.

Finally, the current political changes in Myanmar are a worthy step toward democratization. Regardless of the disappointment of some human rights activists such as Kofi Annan and some Nobel Laureates, such as Desmond Tutu and Malala Yousafzai, Aung San Suu Kyi is on a precise trajectory towards democracy, human rights, and ethnic conciliation (Kelly 2016). As the military still have quite significant power in the government (25%), it will take time for her to drive the country to democracy, as Myanmar was not created in a day. Over time the military has come to invite the opposition party to build a new Myanmar in the form of a power-sharing arrangement between the military and a civilian government. This will likely reduce human rights abuses and create a better political and economic atmosphere. Despite continuing repression and political restrictions, Myanmar is gradually moving away from despotism and on the path toward democracy. As with many other countries striving for democracy, social tensions and violence feature along the way to a more peaceful and prosperous country. Despite the slow efforts of the government to solve social and religious problems, future talks between the groups power-sharing should lead to better arrangements for the role of the military in the future Myanmar's politics and also greater rights for minority groups (Thawngmung 2003, 458–59). With the visionary leadership of Suu Kyi and international support, hopefully Myanmar will gradually foster a culture of tolerance and dialogue to ensure peace and harmony in Myanmar. The forthcoming general election at the end of 2020 will also be a significant step in Myanmar's political reforms towards becoming a more democratic country.

Endnotes

1. In the Myanmar Constitution of 2008, chapter III verse 59b clearly states that the qualification of president and vice president shall be a citizen of Myanmar with both parents born in the territory under the jurisdiction of the Union and being Myanmar Nationals.

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Guidelines

Submission of Articles

S*tudia Islamika*, published three times a year since 1994, is a bilingual (English and Arabic), peer-reviewed journal, and specializes in Indonesian Islamic studies in particular and Southeast Asian Islamic studies in general. The aim is to provide readers with a better understanding of Indonesia and Southeast Asia's Muslim history and present developments through the publication of articles, research reports, and book reviews.

The journal invites scholars and experts working in all disciplines in the humanities and social sciences pertaining to Islam or Muslim societies. Articles should be original, research-based, unpublished and not under review for possible publication in other journals. All submitted papers are subject to review of the editors, editorial board, and blind reviewers. Submissions that violate our guidelines on formatting or length will be rejected without review.

Articles should be written in American English between approximately 10,000-15,000 words including text, all tables and figures, notes, references, and appendices intended for publication. All submission must include 150 words abstract and 5 keywords. Quotations, passages, and words in local or foreign languages should

be translated into English. *Studia Islamika* accepts only electronic submissions. All manuscripts should be sent in Ms. Word to: <http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/studia-islamika>.

All notes must appear in the text as citations. A citation usually requires only the last name of the author(s), year of publication, and (sometimes) page numbers. For example: (Hefner 2009a, 45; Geertz 1966, 114). Explanatory footnotes may be included but should not be used for simple citations. All works cited must appear in the reference list at the end of the article. In matter of bibliographical style, *Studia Islamika* follows the American Political Science Association (APSA) manual style, such as below:

1. Hefner, Robert. 2009a. "Introduction: The Political Cultures of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia," in *Making Modern Muslims: The Politics of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia*, ed. Robert Hefner, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
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5. Utriza, Ayang. 2008. "Mencari Model Kerukunan Antaragama." *Kompas*. March 19: 59.
6. Ms. *Undhang-Undhang Banten*, L.Or.5598, Leiden University.
7. Interview with K.H. Sahal Mahfudz, Kajen, Pati, June 11th, 2007.

Arabic romanization should be written as follows:

Letters: ' , b, t, th, j, ḥ, kh, d, dh, r, z, s, sh, ṣ, ḍ, ṭ, ḏ, ḡ, f, q, l, m, n, h, w, y. Short vowels: a, i, u. long vowels: ā, ī, ū. Diphthongs: aw, ay. *Tā marbūṭā*: t. Article: al-. For detail information on Arabic Romanization, please refer the transliteration system of the Library of Congress (LC) Guidelines.

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تم اعتماد ستوديا إسلاميكا من قبل وزارة البحوث والتكنولوجيا والتعليم العالي بجمهورية إندونيسيا باعتبارها دورية علمية (رقم القرار: 32a/E/KPT/2017).

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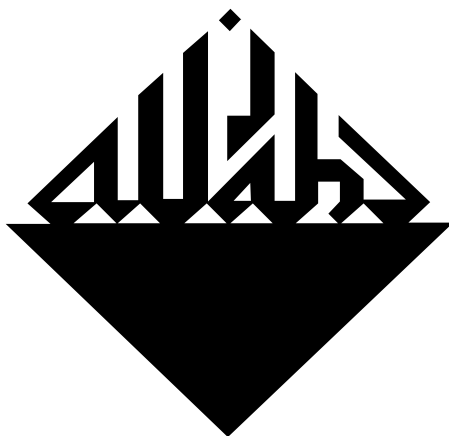
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