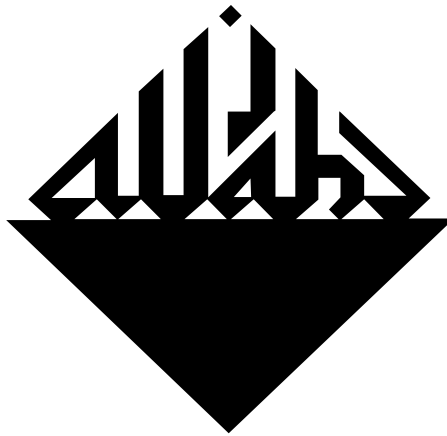


# STUDIA ISLAMIKA

**INDONESIAN** JOURNAL FOR ISLAMIC STUDIES

Volume 22, Number 1, 2015



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# **STUDIA ISLAMIKA**



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Indonesian Journal for Islamic Studies

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Editorial Office:

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Ciputat 15419, Jakarta, Indonesia.

Phone: (62-21) 7423543, 7499272, Fax: (62-21) 7408633;

E-mail: [studia.islamika@uinjkt.ac.id](mailto:studia.islamika@uinjkt.ac.id)

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*Ahmad Suaedy & Muhammad Hafiz*

## Citizenship Challenges in Myanmar's Democratic Transition: Case Study of the Rohingya-Muslim

**Abstract:** *As a part of the Myanmar transition to democracy, which began after the election in 2010, the census on March-April 2014 refused to count the Rohingya ethnic group. This was symbolic of the Myanmar government's rejection of Rohingya people as citizens. The paradox is that democracy necessitates a guarantee of fundamental freedoms and recognition of all group identities. Through in depth interviews with a number of Rohingya political and social leaders at the end of March 2014, in Yangon, this research details the Rohingya struggle to secure their rights in the political process. A number of documents both from the Rohingya and from the Myanmar government justify why and how the process of exclusion and discrimination occurs. This research will conclude with a discussion of the challenges and recommended steps for the future to accommodate the Rohingya as Myanmar citizens, and of the need for international and regional support.*

**Keywords:** Rohingya, Rakhine, citizenship, democracy, transition, Myanmar.



**Abstrak:** *Sebagai bagian dari peralihan menuju demokrasi, pemerintah Myanmar yang dimulai setelah Pemilu 2010, melakukan sensus penduduk pada Maret-April 2014 yang menolak untuk memasukkan etnis Rohingya-Muslim menjadi bagian dari penduduk Myanmar. Ini merupakan simbol penolakan secara total terhadap Rohingya sebagai warganegara Myanmar. Paradoksnya adalah bahwa demokrasi meniscayakan adanya jaminan kebebasan dan penerimaan secara setara semua warganegara. Melalui wawancara mendalam dengan sejumlah tokoh politik dan sosial Rohingya di Yangon pada akhir Maret 2014, penelitian ini menggali usaha para pemimpin Rohingnya dalam memperjuangkan hak-haknya sebagai warga negara. Berbagai dokumen baik dari kalangan Rohingnya sendiri, maupun pemerintah yang bisa diakses memperjelas bagaimana dan mengapa diskriminasi dan eksklusi itu terjadi. Tulisan ini akan diakhiri dengan mendiskusikan tantangan dan suatu masukan tahap-tahap akomodasi di masa depan terhadap Rohingnya sebagai warganegara Myanmar, serta perlunya dukungan dari dunia internasional dan kawasan Asia Tenggara.*

**Kata kunci:** Rohingya, Rakhina, kewarganegaraan, demokrasi, transisi, Myanmar.

**الخلاصة:** نظرا لكونه جزءا من التحول نحو ديمقراطية دولة ميانمار (بورما) ابتداء من عقد الانتخابات العامة لسنة ٢٠١٠م، أجرت الحكومة الميانمارية إحصاء لتعداد السكان في الفترة ما بين شهري مارس إلى ابريل ٢٠١٤م. بيد أنه في التطبيق، لم توافق الحكومة أن تُضم الجماعة العرقية روهينغيا المسلمة إلى قائمة السكان الذين أُجري عليهم الإحصاء. يعد عدم الموافقة هذا إشارة إلى رفض الروهينغيا أن يكونوا مواطنين لميانمار. والمفارقة هنا هي أن الديمقراطية تفترض وجود ضمان للحرية والمساواة بين جميع المواطنين. من خلال حوار عميق أُجري مع عدد من الشخصيات السياسية والاجتماعية من الروهينغيا بمدينة يانغون Yangon أواخر مارس ٢٠١٤م، يقوم هذا البحث بدراسة جهود قادة الروهينغيا وجهادهم من أجل الحصول على حقوقهم كمواطنين. بالاطلاع على الوثائق سواء كانت فيما بين أيدي الروهينغيا وبين أنفسهم أم لدى الحكومة التي يمكن الوصول إليها، يتبين كيف ولماذا حدثت تلك التفرقة العنصرية وعملية القتل. ويختتم هذا المقال بمناقشة التحديات وتقديم مقترحات حول الاستيعاب مستقبلا إزاء الروهينغيا كمواطنين لميانمار، وكذلك ضرورة الحصول على التأييد الدولي والإقليمي.

**الكلمات الاسترشادية:** روهينغيا، راخين، والمواطنة، والديمقراطية، والانتقال، وميانمار.

In Myanmar's population census from 30 of March – 10 of April 2014, the first in three decades, the Myanmar government refused to count the Rohingya ethnic group (ICG, 2014).<sup>1</sup> The census was part of the Myanmar transition to democracy, which began after the election in 2010, and was funded by the UNFPA or UN Population Fund (*Time Magazine*, 1 April 2014). This restriction was representative of the Myanmar government's rejection of Rohingya's as citizens. The paradox is that democracy necessitates a guarantee of fundamental freedoms and recognition of the diverse group identities of citizens. However, in practice democracy in Myanmar is justifying discrimination and exclusion of the Rohingya ethnic minority in the country, and also against the other non-Buddhist minority group, such as the Christian Kachin community. The stagnant dominant role of the military and increasing religious sectarianism makes fighting against the discrimination and exclusion faced by the Rohingya difficult.

Discrimination against certain minorities and conflict between majority and minority groups are common in democratic transitions due to religious or ethnic reasons, at least in the Southeast Asian region as in Myanmar. Discrimination and conflict occur in both Muslim majority countries such as in Malaysia between Chinese and Indian ethnicities (Suaedy, 2010a), and in Indonesia against particular minority religious groups (Suaedy, 2011a and 2012).

The Muslim minority in Southern Thailand in the Buddhist-majority of the Thailand (Suaedy 2010b) and the Muslim minority in the Mindanao in the predominantly Catholic country of the Philippines (Suaedy 2011b) also still struggle for equal rights. However, the discussion in this paper will only focus on the case of Myanmar's Rohingya ethnic struggles in the transition to democracy after the 2010 elections.

Myanmar's democratic transition since 2010 has raised substantial questions over the position of ethnic and religious minorities, particularly regarding the ethnic Rohingya. Democratization has led to reconciliation or accommodation between civil society and the military junta who ruled for 20 years, with the first general election being held in 2010 and another election for legislative members in 2012. However, the process of accommodation between the military and civil society, and democratization in general has also led to ethnic "cleansing" of the Rohingya, an indigenous ethnic minority who have lived in the Rakhine

state (previously known as Arakan) for centuries. Discrimination against other religious and ethnic minorities still continues as well against the Muslim or not-Buddhist believers in Myanmar.

Discrimination against minorities in Myanmar have not only occurred during the transition phase, but also much earlier (Leider, 2014: 252). However, the most severe discrimination against the ethnic Rohingya started in the process of democratic transition and has continued till now. Think tank and research institutions, as well as international NGOs, mentioned that Myanmar government's treatment of the Rohingya is an act of "ethnic cleansing" because they are not recognized as citizens. The State denied their identity as citizens, and half of Rohingya were displaced by the government and majority Buddhist population in Rakhine. The situation of Rohingya's ethnic cleansing leads to the question in this paper: why the systematical and massive discriminations occurred against the Rohingya and how the Rohingya community are fighting for their rights in the process of Myanmar's democratic transition.

In principle, according to anthropologist Leider (2013: 205), the recognition and confession against a particular ethnic or religious group in the context of the real state nationalism is not something given but a political negotiation process until the minority's existence is awarded citizenship. In other words, the existence of an ethnic group and claims against their identity are not always existent and automatically parallel with the recognition of a certain ethnicity and religion in a development of the nation building of a country. It follows a political process and negotiations between and within groups of citizens. The contrary could also be assumed. The rejection of certain ethnic and religious groups in a country is not something given but is a political process that involves negotiations (Leider, 2013: 255).

Thus, rejection of ethnic Rohingya in Myanmar is part of a process of political negotiations in a development of the nation itself. Article 26 of International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights stated that "*In those State in which ethnic, religious or linguistic exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the rights... to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practices their religion, or to use their own language*". Therefore, based on this view, the claim of identity depends on the group itself, whether it wants to be recognized, and if so, with which identity. It is not an offer enforced by outside parties. Outsiders or even

a State should allow a group to claim their identity and they should not be forced to use their identity in accordance with the will of the state or the majority. However, the political process requires that negotiations should occur. This paper will explore how the Rohingya community, through its leaders is fighting for their identity as Rohingyas because in the process of democratic transition in Myanmar the majority population and the government officially rejected their identity.

### **The Debate on the Rohingya Ethnic Identity and Muslim**

Rohingya's claim on their identity is disputed amongst academics, the majority population and the government of Myanmar (Leider, 2013). However this article does not have the capability and pretensions to clarify the truth of each claim, whether the truth is in the Buddhist majority and government of Myanmar's claim or otherwise the claim of the Arakanese/Rakhine Rohingya. Rather, this paper reviews how the opposite sides are argued, with all the dynamics occurring, whether to reject the Rohingya identity or to fight for the recognition.

In depth and detail, Leider (2013) investigated the origin of the word "Rohingya" and the movement fighting for the identity of Muslims in the Rakhine state. According to Leider, the word Rohingya is very old, and known since the ninth or tenth century AD. The name of Rohingya as a nickname or ethnic identity as a group of Arakanese actually became popular in the 1950s and later Rohingya was identified as a fighting movement for the ethnic Muslim group who live in the Arakan region. Later, according to Leider, the Rohingya identity became a symbol of the struggle for rights and was popular among the international media and human rights NGOs, including the United Nations. In terms of language, the origins of the word "Rohingya" is also debated. Some considered that the word Rohingya was derived from "Arabic" and due to local pronunciation it became *Rohang* and therefore became a place where individuals referred to themselves as the Rohingya. Identity then became a kind of ethnic Rohingya for those who live in the region of Rohang. However, Leider said, another perspective also stated, that the Rohingya originated from Indian misspelling of the "Rakhine", a region which has now become one of Myanmar provinces where part of Rohang is inhabited by the Muslim majority (Leider: 2013).

Meanwhile Yegar (1972) states that the Muslim community has been in this area since the inception of Islam around the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD. An

Islamic Kingdom in Bengal (now part of the territory of the state of Bangladesh) ruled this area and dealt with the kingdom of Arakan. Most of the populations are from there and part of them also originated from Arabic, Persian, or Indian groups. The Muslim community had established a kingdom in the region and was confronted with Arakan kingdom. The Islamic kingdom was then conquered by the Burmese kingdom at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. After the British colonization, there was a massive migration of Indian Muslims to this region. Therefore, the Rohingya community claimed that the Rohang region is the origin of the Rohingya and not from Bengali (Abu Tahay, 2010).

According to Leider, previously, in the era of British ruling, for example, they were known as Arakan Muslims, although some historians and writers started calling them the Rohingya. Leider also showed the existence of a political dimension in the claims of identity by the Rohingya Muslims of Arakan/Rakhine, namely the motivation to claim of their area against acquisition in Arakan that is now inhabited by some of those who once as a kingdom were ruled by Muslims for more than 350 years (Leider 2013: 231-232). In a scene of post-independence history, they even fought for independence and division of the territory from the State of Burma/Myanmar. Even Leider also linked this movement with the emergence of the Islamic militant groups that has penetrated the region (Leider 2013: 248-249). Ethnic-based tensions with the central and/or federal state government occurred in the Myanmar, including the desire of these groups to be separated from the central state, which is a common phenomenon in this country (Walton, 2008: 889). However, the context of the post-democratization in 2010 showed that there is a shift phase where Muslims who claim to be Rohingya in Arakan, as far as the findings of this study, did not demand the independence of their region but required equal rights and recognition as Rohingya.

Leider (2013) further concluded that the wide spread of identity claims by Rohingya in recent years became a kind of localization of regional, original identity. This situation included not only Muslims in the Arakan as Rohingya, but also other Muslims in Myanmar generally, especially those who have the similar physical characteristics (Leider, 2009: 343).

Rohingya leaders have several arguments for their claims regarding the identity concerns of the Rohingya. According to a Rohingya leader

and Director of the Rohingya Resource Network, Abu Tahay, historical evidence shows that the Rohingya are the original inhabitants of a region known as Rohang in the state now referred to as Rakhine. Tahay states:

There is significant evidence that shows that the Rohingya are part of the ethnic Myanmar population, and have in fact been the indigenous ethnic group of Rakhine State for centuries. A number of documents, both archaeological and academic and even English colonial and Myanmar post independence government documents state that the Rohingya are the original inhabitants of Myanmar, and are ethnically distinct from the Bengalis, Hindus or Khymer. (*Tempo Magazine*, 13-19 April 2014, p. 112).

Thus, in Myanmar there is evidence of discrimination against Islam and other minority groups, such as the Christian Kachin. The discrimination against the Rohingya is due to their identity as Rohingya and against Muslims generally. Through a number of different ways, after reformation the Myanmar government has sought to strip the Rohingya of their status as original Myanmar citizens.

## **Myanmar and Democratic Transition**

Myanmar has been known for its repressive government under Military ruling (Amnesty International 1990: 1), since the 1962 military coup until elections in 2010. Aung San Suu Kyi's opposition party won the first election in 1990, but the military junta refused to acknowledge it and retained power. The military also arrested a number of political leaders and activists, including Aung San Suu Kyi, in an attempt to silence the democratic movement. In doing so, the junta reinforced its image as a repressive leader.

However, the Myanmar government has shown evidence of opening up since 2008. Eminent international pressure was applied following the massacre of the prodemocracy demonstration in 2007, which was dominated by Buddhist monks and the so-called "*Saffron Revolution*" referring to the uniformity of monks (Robert H. Taylor, 2008: 247). In 2008 the Myanmar military junta announced, through the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), a plan to create a new constitution as part of a planned progression towards realizing democracy in Myanmar and give the opportunity for international parties, including international NGOs, to engage with the process (ICG, 2009: 3). This was accompanied by the release of the Noble

Peace Prize winner and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi from the house arrest she had been subject to since 1990, as well as the release of about 200 other political prisoners. Aung San Suu Kyi was also allowed to revive her party and participate in the elections. This new openness presented the possibility to raise discussions on the position of minorities in Myanmar, which had been discriminated since the military coup in 1962 (*The Guardian*, 10 July 2014). As such, a number of political parties were formed and took part in the elections, including those established by minority religious and ethnic groups (Smith, 2010: 215).

The opposition strongly criticized the draft of the new constitution proposed by the junta in 2008, because, among other things, it automatically allocated 25% of seats to the military in the legislative council and banned those who had married foreigners to be presidential candidates – which was suspected of being a way to prevent Aung San Suu Kyi, who had married an English man, from running for the presidency in the 2010 election (ICG: 6). However, the military junta still proposed the draft at a referendum. A report on *Election Report, 2010, Burma (Myanmar)* by Burma News International (2010) stated that the referendum was held under a militaristic environment, full of intimidation, and eventually on 25 May 2008 the military announced that the draft had been supported by 92.4%, or a total of 99% across 2/3 of the regions in Myanmar and that it was now the legal constitution.

After the referendum and 2010 election – which was also held under a militaristic and intimidating atmosphere – Myanmar received a lot of international attention. The Foreign Minister of the United States, Hillary Clinton, became the first US Foreign Minister to visit Myanmar in 50 years when she visited on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2011. For the first time in history, the US President, Barack Obama, did likewise one year later. In 2012, after having been postponed for several years due to the authoritarian junta, Myanmar was finally appointed to head ASEAN, and in 2014, with help from the United Nations, Myanmar undertook its first population census in 30 years.

For the 2010 election, the military was behind the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which represented the interests of the Myanmar elite and the military, which tended to be the status quo. USDP won the election outright, while Aung San Suu Kyi's opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), boycotted the elections

because of the article in the constitution and law which hindered the chance of the NLD winning the election and prevented Aung San Suu Kyi from running for the presidency. However, there were a number of smaller parties representing different religious and ethnic groups, which partook in the elections. Some of those leading these parties were from the Rohingya ethnic group, which had supported Aung San Suu Kyi in the 1990 election and had a reputation of opposing the junta. As a result, a certain number of them won seats at the council in the election, but these were revoked by the military (Tahay, interview 21/3/14). Abu Tahay was the political leader of the National Democratic Party for Development, before he established and became chairman of the UNDP and won five seats, but all were annulled and given to the party that supported the government, USDP. The UNDP took the case to court and it was ruled that the candidates from the Rohingya as a party had won the seats but that they were revoked because they were Rohingya candidates (Tahay, interview 21/3/14).

In subsequent developments, a number of negotiations and compromises enabled Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), to participate in the 2012 election. This time, the opposition leader became a member of parliament for her region and secured 41 of the 44 seats available in the region. Aung San Suu Kyi now hopes for further changes to the constitution that would enable her party to win the election and for herself to run as president in the 2015 election. She plans on boycotting the election if the required constitutional changes are not made.

It is necessary to note here that the governmental systems in the provinces or federal states in Myanmar are based on the ethnic or religious groups and the majority of them consist of Buddhist and Burmese ethnicities, where the states are determined by ethnicity or religion. As such, the parties formed after the opening of Myanmar also represent ethnic, religious or regional identities. The ethnic Burmese, being the majority, support several political parties, including the ruling USDP and the largest opposition party, the NLD. In the context of democratization, a number of the smaller parties based on religious or ethnic minorities supported Aung San's political party. However, these parties are also quite plural, and include parties from the Rohingya ethnic group (Tahay, 2014).



## **Interethnic and Interreligious Relations in Myanmar: Problems of the Minority**

Approximately 60-65% of the population in Myanmar is ethnic Burmans or Burmese, who adhere to Theravada Buddhism, and they dominate the government and military. Historically, the ethnic Burmese majority was marginalized by the English colonisers, which led not only to their dislike of the English but also of the minorities who, at the time, worked with the English. English discrimination against the majority and favoring of minorities led remote states, which were inhabited by ethnic minorities, to take up arms against the British and support central government in the post independence era (Ekeh and Smith, 2007; Taylor, 2007: 70). Eventually, General Aung San, the father of Aung San Suu Kyi and a young military leader who became an independence hero, united these ethnic groups under the Panglong Agreement of 1971 (Walton, 2008: 889).

Official Government data shows that Myanmar is home to 135 ethnic groups, not including the different sub-ethnicities within each ethnic group, which reside in particular areas and are the majority in those areas. Even today, several ethnic groups still have separatist aspirations or wish to secede (Thawngmung, 2011: 3-4). States in Myanmar tend to be based on ethnic identity, and many have their own political organisations or parties that are based on the same ethnic identities. These identities are distinct, but many are concentrated in certain areas and constitute the majority in those areas. However there are also some that are spread across a number of regions, particularly in larger cities such as Yangon, the former capital of the country.

The first president elected in Myanmar's "democratic" era, General (ret.) Thein Sein, was considered unable to resolve the conflict and discrimination against minorities. Thein Sein tended to follow the wishes of the military junta and the Theravada Buddhists, both of whom discriminated against and marginalized the minority in regards to politics and citizenship. These minorities included the ethnic Kachin who are Christian and the Rohingya, who are Muslim (Report from CSW, 2012). The Rohingya, but also Muslims in general, faced the greatest discrimination. The government was unable to protect the Rohingya victims of discrimination, and, according to some reports, even participated in acts of violence and helped evict them from the land in which they had resided for hundreds of years. A video from a New

York Times journalist (Ellick and Kristof, 2014) supported evidence of inhumane treatment of the Rohingya, both at the hands of society and the government, particularly in the state of Arakan (Rakhine).

The former political prisoner and activist, who now leads a think tank for democracy in Myanmar, Myo Yan Naung Thein, criticized President Thein Sein for treating citizens unfairly. “*After dressing up as a reformer, President Thein Sein is adopting an increasingly nationalist stance,*” Myo said (The Guardian, 2013). This was spoken in reference to President Thein Sein’s inability to resolve violence by the Buddhist majority against the Muslim and Rohingya minorities in the southwest of the state of Rakhine (Arakan) in 2012 and in Meiktila in a city in central Burma, which resulted in at least 200 deaths in 2013 (ICG, 2013: 12).

The most recent case of official discrimination by the government has been its refusal to include the Rohingya as citizens in the population census at the end of March and beginning of April 2014. The Rohingya were not included on the government list of 135 official minority groups. Although one official responsible for the census, Myint Kyaing, Director General of the Department of Population under the Ministry of Immigration and Population, stated that the Rohingya could be included in the census under the category “other”, in practice they were not recorded and have faced eviction (*Radio Free Asia*, 2014). Whereas, according to Rohingya activists and politicians, between 800,000 to 1 million Rohingyas have lived in the Arakan state and across a number of regions in Myanmar, for hundreds of years, since independence and even before British colonization, and as such should be recognized as citizens. Although previously existing group of followers of Islam lived in the area, Yegar (1972) noted that massive Muslim migration to the region occurred after the British colonized Burma after the 18th century (p. 20). In support of their position, the Rohingya leaders, referred to article 6 of the Citizenship Law of 1982, which states that anyone who is “*already a citizen on the date this law comes into force is a citizen.*” In interviews, Rohingya activists and politicians in Myanmar always clarified the status of the Rohingya in Myanmar, both through administrative evidence of the presence of the Rohingya in Arakan state or through empirical historical evidence surrounding the Myanmar’s recognition of their presence in the early years of independence before the 1962 coup and military rule.

A number of reasons have been put forward as to why the Rohingya are not considered as Myanmar citizens. The main argument is that the Rohingya are considered not to be a native Myanmar ethnic group, but are of the Bengali ethnic group who migrated from Bengali, Bangladesh. The Rohingya themselves believe that their name originates from the place “Rohang” an area that takes place in Arakan state, which is where the majority of the Rohingya live. However the state insists that the Rohingya are illegal immigrants from Bengali who have no citizenship rights in Myanmar, and that they should be referred to by their native ethnicity, as “Bengalis” not as Rohingyas, which suggests that they originate from Rohang (Perlez, 2014; Tharoor, 2015). This was expressed by a conservative monk in Myanmar during a discussion on the freedom of religion and belief in the ASEAN’s People Forum, where the author was a speaker, at the Myanmar Convention Center, Yangon, Myanmar, on 22 March 2014. This is just one example of the general perception of Myanmarian society, particularly the monks, concerning anti-Rohingya propoganda. As such, the majority of Myanmar citizens do not like to refer to the Muslims living in Arakan as Rohingya, but call them “Bengalis”.

Historically, according to Rohingya sources, they have lived in Rohang for hundreds of years, before the British arrived in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As such, according to Myanmar’s first constitution after independence, ethnic and religious minorities deserve the same recognition and status as all citizens, including Rohingya and other groups. The recognition of Rohingya was established and existed before independence until the 1962 coup, they lived as all other citizens in Myanmar, and participated in elections without any issues as to the status of their citizenship (*The Guardian*, 2014).

In addition to issues over ethnicity, another challenge for democracy in Myanmar is the relation between Theravada Buddhists and non-Buddhists. The threat towards Islam increased when the state started to participate in discriminating minorities, by ignoring the violence occurring and by allowing hardline monks to spread hatred. “*Hate speech is everywhere and every time (sic), there’s no law enforcement from the government or police*”, said Myo Win, an imam and Muslim activist in Yangon, who is interested in peace and development (Interview in Yangon 23/03/14).

Hate speeches and negative propaganda against the non-Buddhist community, in particular the Rohingyas, has influenced civil society and

pro-democracy groups, who have tended to counter the government's anti-democratic politics. Pro-democracy and civil society groups have inclined to be quiet on issues of religion and ethnicity, because they face threats from the government and community groups. During the ASEAN People's Forum from 21-24 March 2014, for instance, at which the author was present, NGOs highly critical of the government in Myanmar across a variety of fields refused to have their recommendations concerning discrimination against the Rohingya included in the recommendations report produced by the forum because they were scared of political consequences, both by the government and Buddhist society. In a report at the end of 2014, the Pew Research Center described Myanmar as having the most fragile guarantees of freedom of religion and belief due to the increased restrictions such as the bill on birth restrictions for Muslim families and threats by the state and society towards non-Buddhist minorities (*Pew Research Institute*, 2014: 8).

The discrimination is apparent in a number of policies prepared by the government, which are currently being discussed in parliament, as a result of pressure from the Buddhist "969 movement" led by U Wirathu. The "969" movement was an anti-Islam movement in Myanmar, led by a radical Buddhist monk, Ashin Wirathu. Wirathu was a young monk involved in the Saffron Revolution in 2007, named for the colour of the clothing worn by demonstrators, including monks, who opposed the military junta. At the time Ashin Wirathu was not so well known, but after his release from prison in January 2011 he became famous for his provocative anti-Islam activities. Wirathu often travels to regions in Myanmar to give provocative sermons in front of the masses. Early 2014, he called for the boycott of anything associated with Islam, such as trade or daily interactions.

The three digits "969", which now appear on cars, motorbikes, shop doors, houses, and other public places in Myanmar, basically signifies the reemergence of pride in Buddhism and a return to its essence. "But, in the new Myanmar, 969 is actually a vehicle of anti-Muslim hatred and Buddhist brainwashing" (Alexandre Marchand, 2013). Wirathu himself declared, "*I am proud to be called a radical Buddhist*" and "*Muslims are fundamentally bad. Mohammed allows them to kill any creature. Islam is a religion of thieves, they do not want peace*". Ashin Wirathu claims to be the Burmese Bin Laden, associating himself with the late Islamic terrorist (Alexandre Marchand, 2013). Wirathu rejects claims of evicting and killing Muslims in Myanmar, but the

actions he takes have inspired the majority to partake in violence, eviction and arson attacks against Muslim families in Myanmar, in particular the Rohingya in Rakhine state. The 969 movements is, under Wirathu's leadership, currently proposing a bill in Parliament to ban people to convert from Buddhism and from interreligious marriage, particularly between a Buddhist female and a Muslim male (Thompson, 2013).

These policies include a bill which bans Buddhists from marrying non-Buddhists; bans conversion from Buddhism to another religion; provides protection to female Buddhists who are forbidden to marry non-Buddhists unless the male converts to Buddhism, with the stipulation that should he revert to his original religion all his assets belong to the female; bans anything but monogamy, which specifically targets the practice of polygamy in the Muslim community (Myo Win, 23/03/ 2014). With regards to the issue of religious conversion, the bill grants township-level officials from various government departments sweeping powers to determine whether an applicant has exercised free will in choosing to change religion. Chapter 5, Article 14 (a) of the Myanmar Religious Conversion Bill, stated: "*No one is allowed to apply for conversion to a new religion with the intent of insulting, degrading, destroying, undue influence or pressure*", violation of which could be punished by up to two years' imprisonment (2014). Although not explicitly stated, a number of religious minorities as well as several national and international human rights organisations believe that policy is aimed at preventing all conversion from Theravada Buddhism to any minority religion. On 14 June 2014, coordinated by the Chin Human Rights Organization, 80 civil society organisations across the world presented a petition to the Myanmar government to immediately revise or halt discussion of the bill because it threatened minority religious groups in Myanmar.

As regards the Law on Interreligious Marriage, U Wirathu made a number of statements in the media, to the effect that he and hundreds of other monks had long pushed and waited for such a law. In one release, he stated "*This marriage law means Myanmar girls can marry people of different religions, but their future husbands have to become Buddhist... When Myanmar girls get married to Muslim men, they are pressured to convert to Islam, so this marriage law will prevent this and protect our society*" (Australian Network News, 2013). Aung San Suu Kyi,

who has become increasingly stronger after the NLD secured a number of seats in parliament, has not had any effect on the discrimination and violence against minorities. She has been practically silent on the issue, even though many of the minority parties, especially the Rohingya ones, have supported her since the 1990 election and even some members were jailed as a result. Aung San Suu Kyi seems to have lost her moral credibility. As a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize and an advocate for democracy, her silence on the issue of religious violence in her country, with regards to the Rohingya case, seems inconsistent especially since she is a member of parliament (Loxton, 2012).

A report by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) in 2013 revealed that the increase in violence against the Rohingya did not only occur in Arakan, the region in which the majority of Rohingyas live, but also in Yangon, the largest city in Myanmar and the former capital of the country. CSW reported that on 20 March 2013 religious violence broke out against the Muslim minority. It began in the district of Meikhtila, Mandalay and spread to four other cities in Mandalay and eight in Pegu, and lasted for more than nine days. Around 44 people were killed in Meikhtila and more than 12,800 lost their houses. Although not a target, tension emerged in Yangon, where shops closed early due to fear of violence and vandalism (CWS, 2013: 4; Szep, April 2014).

This incident received international attention. The UN envoy to Myanmar, Vijay Nambiar, deplored the violence. He also emphasized that President Thein Sein had not honored his promise to resolve the violence (*UN News Center*, 22 March 2013). The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Burmese human rights, Tomas Ojea Quintana (2013), also concluded that there was government involvement in the attack, particularly in regards to its duty and that of the security apparatus to protect victims. According to his report, at least 40 people were killed and a number of mosques in central Burma were burnt after 20<sup>th</sup> March. “*I have received reports of State involvement in some of the acts of violence,*” Tomas Ojea Quintana said in a statement after investigation (UN OHCHR, 2013). In fact, he added, communal conflict in Arakan over the last few years has killed at least 200 people, with about 120,000 others losing their homes, the majority being stateless Muslim Rohingyas (*VoA News*, 2013).

## The Rohingya Position

Historically, the Rohingya, who are largely Muslim, lived in Rakhine or Arakan state for hundreds of years before the British arrived. They reside in a region known as Rohang, after which their ethnic identity is named. According to Abu Tahay, the founder of the Rohingya political party the Union Nationals Development Party (UNDP). Abu Tahay is also the Director of the Rohingya Resources Centre in Yangon. Tahay (2014) noted that the oldest records suggested that the ethnic Rohingya are of Indo-Aryan descent, and converted to Islam in the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD. They then met and mixed with Arabs, Bengalis and Moguls, as recorded in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century AD. As a result, the Rohingya have resided in Rohang, in Arakan state, well before the arrival of the British. The British recorded the Muslim as Arakan Muslims in the 1872 population census (Tahay, tt.: 1; *Tempo Magazine*, 13-19 April, 2014, p. 112).

Since English colonization, throughout the years of independence established in 1947, and by the constitution after independence, the Rohingya were recognised as part of the original or native inhabitants of Myanmar and participated in post-independence elections (Tahay, 2014, 6). However, the military *coup d'état* in 1962 introduced discrimination against minorities, including the Rohingya. Discrimination and acts against minorities have increased since 1965 and continue to this day (Ekeh and Smith, 2007). A number of policies and practices of the Myanmar government act to exclude the Rohingya. This included the new regulation on citizenship established in 1982, the Burmese Citizenship Law 1982. The law stated that the Rohingya were not included as an official ethnic group in Myanmar and the 1982 regulation included a list of other minority ethnic and religious groups, that were devalued (Interview with Kyaw Min, 23/3/14). The government campaign favored the majority by citing the argument that the Rohingya are not native Myanmarians, but are of Bengali ethnicity and are illegal immigrants (Abdelkader, 2013: 104).

As a result of the 1982 legislation, Rohingya national identity cards were revoked and they are no longer legal documents. The proof of citizenship was confiscated, and only a few people living in the capital cities or larger cities were able to obtain new documents under different religious or ethnic group identities (Tahay, n.d.: 7).

In addition, a wide scale anti-Rohingya campaign broke out, over the accusation that they were illegal immigrants. The disturbances involved the majority of Arakan residents, including monks, Buddhist leaders and the local government. As a result, the Rohingya have been evicted from Arakan.

The seriousness of the situation in which the Rohingya find themselves, and the lack of any positive indication from the government as to a change in stance, has led to increased international attention. International institutes have published reports either on the general situation in Arakan, or more specifically on individual incidents as they occur.<sup>2</sup> A Human Rights Watch (HRW) report labels the violence and attacks against the Rohingya since June 2012 as crimes against humanity, which tend towards 'ethnic cleansing'. The Burmese government itself wants to evict or remove all Rohingya from Myanmar. The government, community figures, conservative religious leaders and monks, backed by the military, organized Arakan residents to attack and evict Muslim Rohingyas in October 2012 (International Crisis Groups, 2013). This caused tremendous damage and prevented international humanitarian aid from reaching victims (Human Rights Watch, 2013: 24). As a result, the victims, particularly those evicted from their houses, had no access to food, healthcare or water (*BBC News*, 2013), because the Buddhist militants also attacked and vandalized homes, possessions and places of worship, evicting inhabitants (*Time*, 2013), including women and children, who were also victimized in other ways (Abdelkader, 2013: 1-34).

Also according to the HRW, President Thein Sien formed a team to investigate the violence, but apparently was not serious about resolving the issue. Rather, he issued a policy to separate or segregate the Rohingya from the Buddhists, with the intention to evict the victims from Myanmar (HRW, 2013: 6). The situation, made worse by the anti-Muslim propaganda, was not only fuelled by the Arakan community and local government, but also by Buddhist militants. This movement, known as the '969' movement, is led by monk U Wirathu, and focuses on spreading anti-Muslim propaganda to motivate mass violence and destruction. In fact, U Wirathu refers to himself as the "Burmese Bin Laden," referring to the Muslim terrorist Osama Bin Laden (Alt Asean, 2013: 6).



## The Experiences of Four Rohingya Activists

Based on historical facts and evidence, Rohingya activists<sup>3</sup> believe that the Rohingya are legal and indigenous citizens of Myanmar. They have resided in the region for hundreds of years before British colonization and when there was no discrimination against Rohingyas. There were no issues about Rohingya citizenship either in the constitution after independence or the post-independence election as to their status as citizens sharing equal rights with all other citizens. General Aung San, father of Aung San Suu Kyi and one of Myanmar founders, embraced all ethnic groups in Myanmar's efforts towards liberation and building a new country. Zul Nurain, alias Kyaw Min, a prominent Democracy and Human Rights Party (DHRP) activist, said *"After independence the question of citizenship became more serious and important. The 1948 citizenship act was enacted. Under 1947 constitution and 1948 Burma citizenship act, no official rejection against specific ethnic group including Rohingya and they recognized with full citizenship rights"* (Interview 23/3/14).

The change in the way minorities were treated occurred after the military coup in 1962. In 1965 the junta issued a list of 135 Myanmar ethnic and religious groups, from which the Rohingya were omitted. However, the Rohingya are not the only ones to have faced discrimination since then. In 1982 the government issued the law on citizenship, in which the Rohingya were not recognised as citizens and the government withdrew their national identity cards. The Rohingya were no longer considered Myanmar citizens, but were seen as ethnic Bengalis who had migrated illegally from Bangladesh and were allowed to reside in the Rakhine state by the British. The policy was accompanied by a wide scale anti-Rohingya campaign supported by the government and the majority of citizens both nationally and in Rakhine state (Kway Min and Tahay, 21 and 22/03/14).

In 1974 Myanmar issued the Emergency Immigration Law to prevent immigration from India, China and Bangladesh. In the law, Myanmar issued new identity cards to all Myanmar citizens (National Registration Certificates), except the Rohingya in Rakhine state only received temporary cards known as Foreign Registration Cards, in evidence of the fact that the Rohingya were not recognised as citizens but were being given the right to reside (as migrants) in the region. This policy was continued with the Nagamin (Dragon King) Program

to select which individuals could live in Myanmar, and take action against those considered not to be citizens. Unfortunately, this program became justification for the Myanmar government to evict on mass the Rohingya who lived in Rakhine, because the majority did not have temporary identity cards. The Rohingya began to flee from their homes.

The exclusion increased and became more systematic when the government issued the new Citizenship Law in 1982 and firmly stated that the Rohingya were not Myanmar citizens. In response to the 1982 Citizenship Law, Chaimen Ne Win, Head of Junta Military 1962 – 1981, a political and military leader at the time, said that anyone who migrated to Myanmar after the war in 1824 did not have citizenship rights, (was also stated in Article 3 of the Myanmar Citizenship Law of 1982) even though the Rohingya have lived in Myanmar for more than a century. In addition, the 1982 Citizenship Law also formed 8 major races in Myanmar from 135 ethnic groups. The Rohingya were indirectly excluded from the 8 major races as they were not included as an ethnic group in Rakhine state.<sup>4</sup> As such, the law strengthened the Myanmar government's insistence that the Rohingya were not Myanmar citizens and that they should be excluded from the 8 major races in Myanmar. In 1990 the government issued an additional regulation that banned the Rohingya from participating in public elections, and since 1991 hundreds of thousands of Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh.

Activists have attempted to reinstate the status of the Rohingya as citizens through a number of different ways, both involving political parties and social organisations, NGOs and professionals. This included Rohingya leaders joining the opposition ranks in the 1990 election, which was won by Aung San Suu Kyi's party, but was denied by the military junta.

After the 1962 coup, it was not until 1990 that Myanmar held a general election, although it was still under the control of the military junta. The election was part of a promise by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which held power at the time, to transfer political power in Myanmar through a multi-party election (Tonkin, 2007: 6). The election was held on 27 May 1990, with 15 million voters and 93 political parties for the People's Assembly or *Pyithu Hluttaw*, in accordance with Election Law No. 14/89 decreed

by the military regime on 31 May 1989 (Tonkin, 2010). Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party won 392 of 485 seats (80.8%) (Eleven, 2014), however since 1990 the regime reneged on its pre-election commitment to transfer power to an elected Parliament, and elected MPs continue to be targeted for harassment and imprisonment as reported (ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus, 1990).

NDPHR ran in the 1990 election, representing the Rohingya residents of Arakan. However the junta through Law disbanded the party No. 8/92 on 18 March 1992. U Kyaw Min was a member of the party's Central Executive Committee, and the party's leader went into exile and in 2003 Maung Sein alias Mohiuddin Yusof established the National Democratic Party for Human Rights in New York.

One person who was targeted by the military junta was U Kyaw Min alias Zul Nurain, an MP from the National Democratic Party for Human Rights (NDPHR) and member of the Committee Representing People's Parliament (CRPP), of the Buthidaung Township constituency (*The Irrawaddy*, 2010).<sup>5</sup> In an interview (22/03/ 2014), Kyaw Min confirmed that he was elected to be a member of parliament and was arrested by the Myanmar government on 17 March 2005 after several activities in February. The government also imprisoned his wife and family, revoked his citizenship, and sentenced him to 47 years in prison under the Immigration Act and State Protection Act. "*I was imprisoned for 15 years by the military junta before I was finally released*", he said. He was only released by the government in January 2012 (Alam, 2012: 4).<sup>6</sup>

After NDPHR was disbanded and initiated activities outside of Myanmar, Rohingya political leaders tried to establish a framework for struggle through new political parties, especially after Myanmar announced a general election in 2010. This was based, amongst other things, on the consideration that the Rohingya political aspirations needed to be voiced by political candidates, particularly in Sittwe, Buthidaung, Maungdaw and Rathedaung in Arakan State; Kyaukse, Meiktila and Yamethin in Mandalay Division; Mingalar Taung Nyunt, Thingangyun and Tamwe in Rangoon Division; and Moulmein in Mon State. These areas are particularly important because the Rohingya are the second largest ethnic group in the Arakan State, after the Rakhine. Rohingya are in the majority in Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung townships, in the northern part of the state. They

comprise nearly 30 percent of the state's population of 2.75 million people. Interestingly, these parties do not use the name "Rohingya" in their names (*The Irrawaddy*, March 30, 2010).

According to Abu Tahay (Abu Taher/U Tha Aye) in interview with him on 21 March 2014 at Yangon, Myanmar, since the 2010 election the Rohingya have four political parties through which they express their aspirations. However, only two parties are officially registered. The party led by Abu Tahay is one of those yet to register. Although his party is not yet registered,

Abu Tahay is a prominent Rohingya leader in the Burmese arena and he candidate in the parliamentary election in 1990 represented Rohingya party. He is the founder of the National Democratic Party for Development (UNDP), before he established and became chairmen of the UNDP (*Rohingya News Agency*, 26 October 2013). Abu Tahay states that the main issue the Rohingyas face is citizenship, because without it being recognised, Rohingyas face discrimination and violence. He said: "*This issue of citizenship had been ongoing since the military coup in Myanmar, it's systematic, and the Myanmar government clearly allows it to occur even today*" (Tahay, 21/03/14). In this regard, Abu Tahay notes that the issue is an ethno-religious matter that must be resolved through dialogue with the government.

There are three issues that Abu Tahay (2014) and the UNDP focus on, namely: denial of the historic presence of Rohingya in Arakan and Myanmar; the 1982 Citizenship Law; and retrospective effect. In seeing the Rohingya issue as an issue of citizenship, Abu Tahay and UNDP then seek to facilitate dialogue between the Rohingya and the higher levels of the Myanmar government, emphasizing the importance of implementing the law and constitution. In order to hold such dialogue, three things are required, namely proof of the citizenship of the Rohingya who live in Arakan, revoking of the 1982 Citizenship Law, and preventing future rejection of the Rohingya. UNDP has conveyed these ideas to the higher echelons of the Myanmar government, including the opposition, as well as international actors and representatives of other nations, in the hope that it benefits the current situation of the Rohingya in Myanmar.

The two Rohingya party in Arakan registered in the Myanmar election are the National Democratic Party for Development (NDPD) and the Democracy and Human Rights Party (DHRP).<sup>7</sup> NDPD won

sufficient support amongst Rohingyas and won two seats (5.7%) in Arakan state (35 seats),<sup>8</sup> which is home to more than 5 million residents (Ahamed, 2010: 5).

U Maung Maung Ni, whose headquarters are located on Bo Sun Pek Road, Pabedan Township, in Rangon, leads NDPD. The party was formed on 4 June 2010. The vision and mission of the NDPD are presented by Chairman U Maung Maung Ni during the National Democratic Party for Development, stance and work programmes (9 October 2009). Although influential, NDPD faced considerable challenges, and the government party (Union Solidarity and Development Party) did not allow NDPD sufficient chance to influence the Myanmar people, especially the Buddhist-majority.

A number of reports states that intimidation and arrest of supporters by local authorities, both before and after the election. There were heightened tensions in the Arakan state as well, particularly while USDP supporters sought to marginalize the ethnic Rohingya party, NDPD, which was competing in several constituencies with high Muslim populations (*The Irrawaddy*, 22 October 2010). This was the same for Abu Tahay (Abu Taher) who was elected to the People's Parliament, Buthidaung Township in the 2010 election, but the USDP forcedly denounced his victory and gave the position to Shwe Maung of the USDP. Abu Tahay won 56,882 votes and Shwe Maung from USDP won 53,702 votes, according to election watch in Buthidaung report. (*Arakan Magazine*, January 31, 2012: 3; *Kaladan Press*, 6 January 2012; Burma Fund UN Office, 2011: 36). "I won the 2010 election, but the USDP denounced it and took my seat", he said in an interview with the author on 21 March 14 in Yangon, Myanmar.

Besides NDPD, Democracy and Human Rights Party (DHRP) is the other registered Rohingya party, led by Zul Nurain alias Kyaw Min. DHRP pays particular attention to the Rohingya issue in Myanmar, especially concerning the legal status of Rohingya citizenship and argues that the majority of Myanmar citizens do not understand the history or geo-politics of Arakan, as expressed by Kyaw Min (Zul Nurain) in *Arakan Monthly* (2012: 2; Min, 2012). Worse, Kyaw Min said during interview that, "The majority of Myanmar citizens believe that "a Burmese is a Buddhist", so if a Myanmar citizen is Muslim, then he is not a Myanmarian".

In response to this, Kyaw Min, an important figure of the DHRP and hope for Rohingya citizens, confirmed in an interview with the researcher that basically the DHRP seek to address the Rohingya issue by convincing the Myanmar state and public that the Rohingya are not foreigners who came to Myanmar. On the contrary, they are native inhabitants of Myanmar, since before Myanmar obtained independence in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Interview on 22/03/14).

### **The Program Implies to “Ethnic Cleansing” of the Rohingya**

After the population census in March-April 2014 that excluded the Rohingya, the Myanmar government implemented a more specific project targeting the Rohingya. They send state officials to directly verify the citizenship status of the Rohingya currently in refugee camps. This operation offers the Rohingya a choice between becoming naturalized citizens and removing all trace of an ethnic Rohingya identity by becoming ethnic “Bengalis”, or refuse to become Myanmar citizens and face detention as stateless people. However, almost all Rohingya refuse to identify themselves as Bengalis, and as such they are left with only one choice to be stateless or in same word are not recognised as Myanmar citizens.

This policy is based on the 1982 Citizenship Law that states that anyone who can prove that he/she and his/her family have lived in Arakan since before 4 January 1948 can apply for naturalization. According to Abu Tahay, Director of the Rohingya Resource Network, the government is currently implementing a pilot project to assess the citizenship status of Rohingya residents in Myebon Township, Sittwe District, Arakan State. It has granted 40 residents status as citizens and 169 persons as naturalized individuals citizens status, from a total of 353 residents who have been identified as Rohingya. The total number of Rohingya in the region is about 1.940.000, with the remainder being considered not eligible for citizenship. *The Irrawaddy* (7 August 2014) announced that the pilot project had been in force since June 2014.

If it is considered successful, the program will be implemented in several other regions in Rakhine state. Should the project be implemented throughout Rakhine, then, as above, all Rohingya will be faced with the two choices, to become naturalized Myanmar citizens and lose their identity as Rohingyas or lose their citizenship. Further, this assessment and granting of citizenship will lead to the eradication of the Rohingya ethnic group from Myanmar, because naturalized

citizenship is the equivalent to taking an identity as a “Bengali” (*Kompas Daily*, October 19<sup>th</sup> 2014: p. 5.).

In response to the policy, Rohingya activists have run activities to urge the government to stop the pilot project. They continue to convince the Myanmar government and the international community on their legitimate citizenship as Rohingya Burmese. Through the Rohingya Resource Center, Abu Tahay has undertaken research and gathered documents proving that the Rohingya are part of the original inhabitants of Myanmar, who have resided in the region since well before independence, since the 8<sup>th</sup> century. However, he has not taken a frontal assault on the government, preferring a diplomatic approach through dialogue. He still hopes that the Myanmar government will recognise the Rohingya as original inhabitants and give full citizenship to all Rohingya, both within and outside of Myanmar (*Tempo Magazine*, 13-19 April, 2014, p. 112.).

Currently, through meetings with international representatives both within and outside of Myanmar, he is urging countries, which have been building diplomatic relations with Myanmar, to also pay attention to the Rohingya issue. He is also campaigning for discourse on multiculturalism and nationalism to non-governmental communities in Myanmar and internationally, with the hope that the process will lead to improve Rohingya situations in Myanmar. As a part of this, during a week visit to Indonesia, facilitated by the author, Abu Tahay emphasized the importance of support from the entire Indonesian society in building a better life for the Rohingya, and voiced a need for the Indonesian government and ASEAN to engage in dialogue with the Myanmar government in order to realize a non-discriminative long term solution (*Tempo Magazine*, 13-19 April, 2014, p. 112.).

### **Aung San Suu Kyi and Hope of Rohingya in the Future**

On the issue of Suu Kyi, Kyaw Min understood it was very difficult for Suu Kyi to fight for the Rohingya. According to Kyaw Min, the two elections in Myanmar in 2010 and 2012 have been indicative of the change in power the military regime in Myanmar holds. The legislative members in 2010 were all appointed by the regime in an unfair process. However, in 2012 when the election for

legislative members was held again, Suu Kyi had the chance to select her own candidates to become members of parliament (Interview with Kyaw Min, 22/03/14). In addition, the strength of religious influence in Myanmar politics has helped counter Suu Kyi's strong legitimacy in the eyes of the monks in Myanmar, because over time the government has given the monks special positions and sufficient facilities which make it hard for them to support the opposition party.

Things were coordinated by Kyaw Min basically also become an important part of the aims and policies of his party, DHRP. In a joint statement with the National Democratic Party for Development (NDPD), DHRP said that both parties have committed to building peace and stability in Arakan State. As to concerns related to the census, both parties confirmed that the 2014 census was threatening the existence of the Rohingya people and lead to the destruction of the data for Rohingya ethnic population in Myanmar ("Join Press Conference by NDPD and DHRP", January 10, 2014).

Although DHRP, NDPD, and the UNDP are different, at least in the context of ideological aspect, that the NDPD uses "religious" reasons as a spirit of movement,<sup>9</sup> they both hold the same objectives, to protect the Rohingya and these parties demand the recognition of Rohingya as a official ethnic in Myanmar. They often work together to urge the government to act on issues related to the Rakhine State. In addition to holding press conferences, as mentioned above, in the last population census both parties sent letters to the President and Prime Minister a month before the census. This was according to an interview with one NDPD official, Head of the NDPD Foreign Affairs Department, Ali Naeem (interview, 23/3/2014). Although they received no response from the government, NDPD was convinced that the government and PM had received the letter and were aware that it was to ensure that the issue of Rakhine was not ignored.

In accordance with the department he heads, Naeem works more closely with building communication and cooperation with the political elite in neighboring countries, particularly Malaysia and Indonesia, through meetings or the humanitarian aid they give to Rohingya residents. According to Naeem, the primary and fundamental objective of NDPD is to fight for the fundamental rights of its constituents, namely the Rohingya of Rakhine State. For instance, in



terms of education, there are a number of schools in Rakhine, but the government does not provide teachers. Similarly with health facilities, the Rohingya people in Rakhine State are not allowed to be treated in government hospitals, and if they insist, the Rakhine police will prevent them from entering the hospital. In fact, the Rohingya are not granted freedom of movement in their own areas, from one city to the next. It was for these reasons that NDPD was established, “*Not because we want to become ministers; not because we want to be MPs; No, that’s not our purpose*”, Naeem said during the interview on 23 March 2014 in Yangon, Myanmar.

As a result, although there are two registered Rohingya parties and a party that has not been yet registered (UNDP) in Myanmar, the two do not clash, but complement one another, because both work in different regions, with the same objective of fighting for the protection and well being of the Rohingya. This also includes increasing the role of two seats they currently hold in local (State) parliament, which was won by NDPD 2010 elections for the area that represents the region of Rakhine State. Political movements performed by the Rohingya group are a manifestation of the belief that the recognition of ethnic Rohingya as citizens can be achieved peacefully through dialogue, while jointly pushing to change the Constitution and laws that exclude the Rohingya as part of a recognized ethnicity in Myanmar (Further interview with Abu Tahay in Jakarta, 1<sup>st</sup> October 2014).

In regards to Aung San Suu Kyi’s role in Myanmar politics, Naeem believes that Suu Kyi does not explicitly support or reject the Rohingya struggle. However, the majority of the political elite in her party reject the presence of the Rohingya and believe that the Rohingya are not Myanmar citizens. Suu Kyi has expressed no opinion or statement on the issue. As a result, according to Naeem, NDPD and other Rohingya parties find it difficult to trust Suu Kyi and the NLD in general. On the other hand, the current environment makes it difficult for Suu Kyi to express a firm opinion on the Rohingya issue.

Suu Kyi’s silence has also led to doubts among the Rohingya parties of her position, particularly when it appears that she has not kept commitments when the Rohingya face violence or discrimination. According to Naeem, when she decided to become a leader Suu Kyi had to have the courage to speak the truth, rather than just speak of the *rule of law, democracy*, and so on, without speaking of the issues experienced by those who have been marginalized, such as the Rohingya. However,

the current climate in Myanmar does not allow for non-Rohingya parties to voice support for the Rohingya in the public and political realms, because these parties are concerned for their own existence, and as such the government is using the Rohingya issue as a sensitive religious issue in Myanmar (interview, 23/4/2014).

In addition, NDPD focuses its struggle on gaining recognition of the Rohingya as legal citizens, who have lived in Rakhine state since independence, and even since before British colonization. Based on the experiences of the Rohingya, including the Rohingya political leaders themselves, democracy in Myanmar has not brought any positive effects for the Rohingya, in fact, all consequences have been negative. Democracy has not been able to guarantee the protection of certain minorities in Myanmar, or recognition of all religious and ethnic minority groups such as the Rohingya, including more extensive guarantees of full human rights. Democracy in Myanmar has not accompanied increased protection of human rights for all, particularly the Rohingya. Rather, democracy in Myanmar, for the Rohingya and the political parties which represent their aspirations, can only be described as improving and heading towards positive consolidation when the Rohingya are recognised as citizens with full citizenship rights. If not, democracy in Myanmar cannot achieve its primary objective.

While continuing to fight politically and still planning to register his political party for the 2015 election after having the seats won by his MPs stolen by the government, Abu Tahay has also established an institute called the Rohingya Resource Network (RRN). The institute is aimed at mobilizing Rohingya resources, both within Myanmar and internationally, to help the Rohingya plight. Currently there (Abu Tahay, interview, 22/4/2014) is such pressure from the Myanmar government that many Rohingyas are forced to leave the country in order to work. As a result, many have become successful, occupying strategic positions in business institutes, government bodies or academic institutes outside the country. They provide much needed help to the RNN, which then helps the Rohingya who are still living in Myanmar under oppression. "Actually, we don't have an issue with funding because our network is expansive, with economic and various other networks too. The issue is that we are repressed and have no right to live in Myanmar," said Tahay. Through the institute, Tahay also campaigns for pluralism and multiculturalism to make the government and society aware of

the need to mutually appreciate and value all citizens as part of the nation. Various parties such as the embassies of developed countries in Myanmar have facilitated Rohingya leaders to meet and talk with moderate monks in other countries in order to exchange ideas and study respect of difference as a nation. “We have a number of moderate monks as friends, who wish to respect all religious and ethnic groups in Myanmar. Yet their voice is not often heard,” Tahay (22/4/2014).

Meanwhile, Myo Win, Director of the Smile Education and Development Foundation, who works in the area of education for children, has introduced the students about the Islamic perspective on respecting other people, ethnicities and religions. However, the Rohingya are still being repressed and discriminated against although they are Myanmar citizens, whom Myo says is all the more reason to teach children about the plurality and multiculturalism of Myanmar. At the same time, Myo continued, as Myanmar citizens, the Rohingya and Muslims in general have the same rights to be treated as citizens as any other citizen. “We teach them about their rights as citizens”, Myo said, however bitter the current conditions. “We still have the future to make improvements,” Myo Win said optimistically (interview, 23/4/2014).

## **Conclusion**

Democracy in Myanmar does not yet guarantee equal rights and treatment for all citizens, particularly for the Rohingya, and discrimination against minorities in general continues to occur. The still dominant role of the military in the transitional government makes it increasingly difficult for the Rohingya to fight for equal rights. The religious movement of the Theravada Buddhist majority further strengthens this; with some leaders or monks being deliberately involved in large scale anti-Rohingya campaigns through hate speeches, violence and eviction. After five years of reformation, discrimination towards the Rohingya has not decreased but has rather become more systematic, with a pilot project to remove all Rohingya from Myanmar, which is projected to become a national program throughout the country. Even the prominent opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been supported by Rohingya politicians since the beginning, has not spoken out in their defense or protection.

Nevertheless, the conviction of Rohingya leaders as to their status as native citizens and a legitimate part of the Myanmar nation is based on

historical evidence and facts, which helps them continue to fight for a future in Myanmar. Their close and deep relationship over a period of time with Aung San Suu Kyi, means that in general they still hold hope, though there is no guarantee as to her stance when she comes to power. It would seem that stronger international and ASEAN involvement is needed to change the Myanmar government policy of discrimination against minorities, particularly the Rohingya, which has been evident since it embraced democracy in 2008.

## Endnotes

1. During the census have been conducted by Myanmar Government, the Rohingya issue still debated there.
2. These reports include: Fortify Rights, *Policies of Persecution: Ending Abusive State Policies Against Rohingya Muslim in Myanmar*, (Fortify Rights, February 2014); International Crisis Group, *The Dark Side of Transition: Violence Against Muslim in Myanmar*, (Belgium: International Crisis Group, 2013); Amnesty International, *Myanmar: The Rohingya Minority, Fundamental Rights Denied*, (18 May 2014); Irish Center for Human Rights, *Crimes against Humanity in Western Burma: The Situation of the Rohingyas*, (Irish Center for Human Rights, 2010); The Arakan Project, *Issues to be Raised Concerning the Situation of Stateless Rohingya Children in Myanmar (Burma)*, (Bangkok: The Arakan Project, 2012).
3. Three of the four main informants in this research were political activists and one a social activists focusing on education.
4. The Myanmar government only included 7 ethnic groups in Rakhine, namely the Rakhine, Kamein, Kwe Myi, Daingnet, Maragyi, Mro and Thet ethnic groups. The Rohingya who lived in Rakhine were excluded from the 135 groups.
5. U Kyaw Min received 30,997 valid votes or 74 % in the 1990 elections. In the 1990 general election, Rohingya were allowed to vote and four Rohingya won constituencies in northern Arakan State such as Buthidaung and Maungdaw. In 2008, the Rohingya were allowed to vote in the referendum using the same type of temporary ID cards currently being issued.
6. Burma's new government released 615 of its most high profile political prisoners on January 13, 2012 including prominent student leaders from the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, such as Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi, Ko Mya Aye, Buddhist monk Ashin Gambiaya, Shan leader Khun Tun Oo, former Prime Minister Khin Nyunt and Rohingya MP U Kyaw Min.
7. The author only interviewed two political figures from NDPD and did not specifically interview any DHRP leaders, and as such this paper will only discuss NDPD.
8. For comparison, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (military party) won 836 seats (People's Assembly, 220 seats; National Assembly, 123 seats; Local Parliament, 493 seats). Meanwhile, the largest opposition party, the National League for Democracy, won 44 seats (People's Assembly, 37; National Assembly, 5; local parliament, 2).
9. This argument based on writer interview with one of NDPD member in Yangon, Myanmar.

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Ahmad Suaedy & Muhammad Hafiz, *Abdurrahman Wahid Centre - University of Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia*. Email: suaedy@gusdur.net.



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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

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2. Booth, Anne. 1988. "Living Standards and the Distribution of Income in Colonial Indonesia: A Review of the Evidence." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 19(2): 310–34.
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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 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

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تم اعتماد ستوديا اسلاميكا من قبل وزارة التعليم والثقافة بجمهورية اندونيسيا كدورية علمية بقرار المدير العام للتعليم العالي رقم: 56/DIKTI/Kep/2012.

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مجلة إندونيسيا للدراسات الإسلامية  
السنة الثانية والعشرون، العدد ١، ٢٠١٥

رئيس التحرير:

أزيماردي أزرا

مدير التحرير:

آيانج أوتريزا يقين

المحررون:

سيف المجاني

جمهاري

جاجات برهان الدين

عمان فتح الرحمن

فؤاد جبلي

علي منحنف

سيف الأمم

إسماتو رافي

دادي دارمادي

مجلس التحرير الدولي:

م. قريش شهاب (جامعة شريف هداية الله الإسلامية الحكومية جاكرتا)

توفيق عبد الله (المركز الإندونيسي للعلوم)

نور أ. فاضل لوييس (الجامعة الإسلامية الحكومية سومطرة الشمالية)

م. ش. ريكليف (جامعة أستراليا الحكومية كانبيرا)

مارتين فان برونيسين (جامعة أترينجة)

جوهن ر. بويين (جامعة واشنطن، سانتو لوييس)

م. كمال حسن (الجامعة الإسلامية العالمية كوالا لومبور)

فركتيا م. هوكير (جامعة أستراليا الحكومية كانبيرا)

إيلوين ف. ويرنجا (جامعة كولونيا، ألمانيا)

روبيرت و. هيفنير (جامعة بوستون)

ريمي مادنيير (المركز القومي للبحث العلمي بفرنسا)

ر. ميكائيل فينير (جامعة سينغافورا الحكومية)

ميكائيل ف. لفان (جامعة فرينشتون)

مساعد هيئة التحرير:

تسطينيونو

محمد نداء فضلان

مراجعة اللغة الإنجليزية:

شيرلي باكير

مراجعة اللغة العربية:

نورصمد

ت. ب. أدي أسناوي

تصميم الغلاف:

س. برنكا



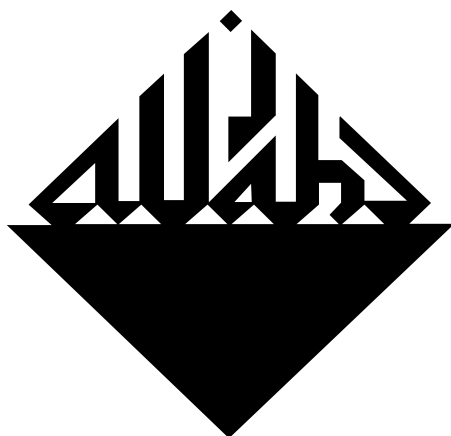


# ستوديا اسلاميا

# سثوديا اسراميا

مجة إنءونيسية للءراساء الإسلامية

السنة الثانية والعشرون، العدد ١، ٢٠١٥



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الشوكة السياسية للأفكار الدينية:  
الحركة التجديدية الإسلامية  
والطريق إلى نقطة التقاء الإسلام والدولة  
علي منحرف

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الإسلام والملايو والسيادة في المحيط:  
سلطنة بروناي والاستعمار الأوروبي في بورنيو  
ءاءى ءارمءى

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