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The Scapegoat of Myanmar

A Historical and Comparative Analysis of the Rohingya Issue

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Abstract

The Rohingya are considered one of the most oppressed ethnicities in the group, due to their losing their citizenship and being persecuted, and being victims of state-sponsored violence. This thesis aims to find the reasoning behind, why the Rohingya have been targeted and treated as a scapegoat within Myanmar. To do this, this research is conducting a historical analysis to find the historical reasons for the discourse the different Myanmar governments have used to discredit the Rohingya claims to their place in the Rakhine state. A comparative analysis with other historically oppressed ethnicities is also implemented to highlight the unique case of the Rohingya and to better understand the nature of how scapegoats form. In support of the academic material, the research is also utilizing a media analysis of state-sponsored newspapers to understand the discourse of the conflict. Finally, this variety of analytic methods is tied together with a theoretical framework consisting of the joint use of Post-colonialism, Social-Identity theory, and Scapegoat theory.

Keywords: Myanmar, Rohingya, Buddhist Nationalism, Scapegoat, Conflict, Ethnicity

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The Scapegoat of Myanmar

A Historical and Comparative Analysis of the Rohingya Issue

“Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities”

– Voltaire 1694-1778

1. Introduction

Ethnic and religious conflicts are major issues in the current world, they can range from general suspicion to outright violent actions against a certain group of people. These conflicts are present in most societies around the world to the extent that one could think that suspicion and conflict between different groups of people are just human nature. However, there are many societies around the world where people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds live together in peace, and can maintain a functioning society, yet in many others, it does not seem to be possible. It is often the case that the different ethnic or religious groups have lived together in relative peace and harmony, eventually for reasons often originating from foreign interference such as colonialism or the spread of globalization and modern ideas has contributed to the division and categorization of people, planting the seed of ethnic and religious conflicts. A perfect unfortunate case for such a place is Myanmar, which houses 135 officially recognized ethnic groups and several world religions with a large Buddhist majority and a significant Muslim minority.

The case of the Rakhine state in Myanmar and the Rohingya inhabiting that region is a tragic case of a social conflict that has often been called a religious conflict, but it can also be characterized as an ethnic conflict or a political struggle. There are established arguments both supporting and denying these statements. All the discussion on the topic shows that the case of the Rohingya in Myanmar is a very complex social issue that needs to be approached from different angles to be understood.

The situation of the Rohingya has continuously been characterized by oppression, hardship, and state-sponsored attacks since the independence of Myanmar in 1948. Therefore it is crucial to have a better understanding of their case in the Rakhine State, to be able to formulate effective solutions for the issue. The conflict has been brewing for almost a century now since

independence, and the claims for justifying the violence against the Rohingya have been studied to some extent. Yet there are still plenty of gaps in that research field that can be filled by new research done on a historical basis, having an overlook of Myanmar's political changes and development over the almost whole century since its independence. There are several points in time during that period on which this thesis will put more focus; the independence of Burma from British rule in 1948, the citizenship law of 1982, the democratic period between 2011 and 2021, and finally to a certain degree the post-2021 coup period and its effect on the Rohingya. Additionally, the thesis will also discuss scapegoat theory about the Buddhist nationalists and the Myanmar state, together with the military to gain a better understanding of the way actions were taken against the Rohingya, which eventually lead to the events of 2016 and 2017, which the UN categorized as genocide (UN OHCHR 2022).

This study aims to look at the ethnic policies and media discourse of the Myanmar state now and compare them with other cases of ethnic conflicts, especially of the Tutsi in Rwanda, and the Jews in Nazi Germany. Scapegoat tactics and state involvement are potentially present in the included cases. However, as stated, this thesis will only include these two other cases as reference points for the analysis and comparison, as the main focus and scope of the thesis are limited to the Rohingya and Myanmar, due to the limitation of the size and time of the study.

1.1. Research Question

How is the case of oppression of the Rohingya different from other ethnic conflicts?

What is the historical reasoning behind the selection of the Rohingya to be made a scapegoat within internal Myanmar politics and political discourse?

How does being treated as a scapegoat in a society for a prolonged period affect the Myanmar citizens' and the state's opinion of the Rohingya and the Muslims of Southeast Asia in general?

Is there any correlation between difficult times and the creation of scapegoats?

The study has formulated these research questions to guide the research process because they each touch upon a different aspect of the conflict in Myanmar. The first question creates the frame for the comparative discussion with the other cases, looking for aspects that are different/unique or similar to those of the Rohingya, so the study could identify potential patterns.

The second and the third sub-questions explore the historical and more hands-on causes of the widespread oppression of the Rohingya in Myanmar. The third question also brings forth a deeper theoretical analysis using and testing the relevance of both the Social-identity theory and Scapegoat theory regarding the case of the Rohingya. The last question aims to test the old scapegoat theory against the selected cases, focusing most on the Rohingya, to see how the theory holds up in these conflicts.

1.2. Previous Research

The topic of Myanmar and the Rohingya was briefly popular among scholars in 2017 and up until the coup in 2021, possibly due to the ongoing violent conflicts in the Rakhine state at the time. This means that substantial research has been done on violence itself and some of the general issues and causes of the conflict. However, overall, the topic itself is not the most popular among the ongoing conflicts around the world, and there is plenty of research space that can be and needs to be addressed to deepen our understanding of the conflict itself. For example, conflicts within the Buddhist world is often overshadowed with the world medias' and academia's focus on Islam, so this thesis to a certain degree aims to extend the academic work on Buddhist-Muslim conflicts in Myanmar.

The Rohingya genocide during 2016-2017 has brought more attention to the old phenomenon of Scapegoating. An article by Gerry van Klinken and Su Mon Thazin Aung, "The Contentious Politics of Anti-Muslim Scapegoating in Myanmar", has formulated the argument that the conflict could not have only been a spontaneous outburst of religious conflict but was the result of a political orchestration deployed by semi-organized social movements and the military elite. Actors from social movements, state and other elites have portrayed the violence in the Rakhine State as an existential threat for the unity of Myanmar and to the survival of Buddhism, creating a crisis where there was none of that sorts before (Klinken 2017). This thesis will further develop this idea by utilizing on the media analysis of the Global New Light of Myanmar a state owned news agency, which shows how the violence of 2016 and 2017 is portrayed by the state. Also on the basis of the argument of van Klinken, conducting a comparison of the case of the Rohingya with two other cases, Rwanda and Nazi Germany, where heavy state involvement in the creation of scapegoats was apparent, and thus based on the findings of the research could suggest that religion is not the cause but a tool for conflict, in a large scale political game.

The book *Buddhist-Muslim Relations in a Theravada World* edited by Iselin Frydenlund and Michael Jerryson, shows the Buddhist-Muslim relations in some of the countries in Southeast Asia, from a historical approach, in a similar way how this thesis is aiming to approach the conflict of Myanmar. This work is also one of the few extensive academic works on the Buddhist-Muslim relations, with a mixture of authors from both western and eastern backgrounds (Kyaw 2020), (Walton 2020).

Mark Juergensmeyer, in his book *Terror in the Mind of God*, included an interview he has done with the notorious Burmese monk Ashin Wirathu, discussing his views on Muslims in Myanmar and how he receives his negative international reputation. Juergensmeyer's descriptions and explanations of how he saw Wirathu and their discussion shows how a monk belonging to a peaceful religion as Wirathu often pointed out, justifies his anti-Muslim rhetoric and the violence against Muslims in Myanmar. Juergensmeyer in his book also argues that the military-backed USDP party has been a benefactor of the resignation of the Muslim-Buddhist conflict, during the democratization of Myanmar, arguing that the USDP was aiming to create the image of themselves as the defenders of Buddhism (Juergensmeyer 2003). The involvement of the military and the importance of Wirathu in the escalation of the conflict is also discussed in this thesis, the anti-Muslim discourse being an integral part of this research.

The research article *Traumatized victims and mutilated bodies: Human rights and the 'politics of immediation' in the Rohingya crisis of Burma/Myanmar*, by Lisa Brooten, Syed Irfan Ashraf, and Ngozi Agwaziam Akinro has done thorough research on the reaction of the media on the deadly violence between the Rakhine Buddhists and the stateless Rohingya. The article employs critical human rights theory and literature on the use of emotion in the media, and how the Rohingya situation has been presented by it. The study discusses the idea that the international media has largely influenced and perhaps reinforced the picture of a helpless Rohingya and that they are in dire need of external intervention (Brooten, et al. 2015). The influence of international media concerning the Rohingya crisis is outside the scope of this current research, however, nonetheless, it is important to note it here to show the degree of complexity of the whole conflict.

Another important work that is used to bring some insight into the current post-2021 military coup situation regarding the Rohingya in Myanmar, is the article written by Noel M. Morada: *Hate Speech and Incitement in Myanmar Before and after the February 2021 Coup*. His work is especially interesting due to the recentness of the military coup, there is only a limited

amount of academic research on the events and how they affected the Rohingya, and his work provides a look into the current situation of the state rhetoric and the status of the Buddhist nationalist movements regarding religious minorities in the post-2021 coup Myanmar. Morada's work provides an important basis for the media analysis the thesis is conducting (Morada 2023).

2. Theories and Methods

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The study's theoretical framework will be based on the combined use of Post-colonialism, Social-identity theory, and Scapegoat theory. The combination of these three theories will provide a good understanding of the political reasons behind the harsh continuous centuries-long oppression of the Rohingya in Myanmar.

2.1.1. Post-colonialism

Colonialism has greatly impacted the world and the social and political structure of the conquered nations. Modernity has sparked a linear change across all religions, unlike previous cyclical changes that were limited by societal structures. The transformation of the economy, politics, science, and education over the past two centuries has shattered these structures, resulting in unprecedented changes in the affected religions and societies. (Brekke 2012 p.18). Are Western-styled modernization and globalization bringing positive development to previously "primitive" civilizations or did they plant the seed of countless conflicts and room for exploitation everywhere it spread? Post-colonialism is a theory aiming to answer this question (Hedges 2021 p.164).

Post-colonialism is, in essence, a political theory that aims to discuss the long-lasting impacts of colonialism on current politics, religion, and society to reveal the extent of the impact Western colonialism had on nations and societies (Hedges 2021 p.170). However, using post-colonialism, the study has to keep in mind that this theory and approach is highly critical towards the "West" and thus could create a biased approach (Xie 2012). Post-colonialism is a useful tool in this research as Myanmar has been directly affected by colonialism as they were a subject of the British Empire as Burma. Burma gained independence in 1948, yet still, it is

strongly suggested by previous academic research regarding the internal conflicts of the nation that they have retained a lot of the categorical nature of the Western Empires (Gottschalk 2007 p.187). Adam Burke, for example, is suggesting that that level of categorization of people did not exist before the arrival of the colonialists, he argues that the racial categories applied by colonial authorities were later adopted by the now post-independence rulers of Myanmar to suit the political needs and create a national identity for the majority Burmese people and the recognized minorities (Burke 2016 p.262). As European ideas of modernity and civilization have spread to the conquered nations the before-unseen or at least not-so-prominent ideas of race and religion have started to infiltrate the local social structure (Hedges 2021 p.164). It can be argued, however, that a strict categorization of people has been present close to Myanmar since before colonialism, and it is the Indian caste system. Although Myanmar is a predominantly Buddhist nation, neighboring cultures could have influenced its social structures. Besides the obvious outside factors, Myanmar itself also had a strict hierarchical social structure existing before colonialism, and without the influence of the Indian caste system. With a clear distinction between the King who was believed to be semi-divine, the nobility, the warrior class, the state bureaucrats, the clergy or monasteries, and the peasants who held the majority of the Burmese people. Additionally to this, some minorities have employed their forms of social structures below the ethnically Burmese hierarchy level. (Aung-Thwin 1984) The presence of this strict pre-colonial hierarchy shows that social categorization is not a new phenomenon in Myanmar. The social-identity theory below will further explore the divided society and how it affects the stability of a nation as a whole. From a post-colonial view, however, a colonial approach towards certain “backward” minorities is that they are inferior, and need modernization to “lift them” into civilization. However, the process of “cultural uplifting” or in the case of the Myanmar/Rohingya: reintegration, does not seem to be the case for the Rohingya. The Myanmar government handles the Rohingya as being “undesirables” with seemingly no real attempts at integration into the general population. The fact that the different Myanmar governments over the years are excluding the Rohingya from being a recognized minority within the nation shows, that there is no motivation from the state, especially now with the current military junta to reintegrate the Rohingya into society. The anti-Muslim rhetoric the previous and current leadership practiced makes the Rohingya case even more difficult in terms of reintegration (Morada 2023). The appearance of the categorization of people together with the fact that Myanmar is a highly diverse nation with a lot of ethnicities and religions, but still fielding an overwhelming majority of one religion (Buddhism) among

the general population, makes it not surprising that Myanmar is facing severe ethnic and religious conflict within its borders.

Another important point from post-colonialism is its concept of the rulers and the ruled. In a recently independent nation such as Myanmar with a lot of ethnicities and a historic structure of the British colonial administration in Burma, a lot of administrative positions were taken by people migrating over from India (Myint 2018 p.4), it is not surprising that the ethnic majority now free from colonial rule has looked with suspicion on ethnic groups which are representing the old colonial past, such as Indian migrants from the Bengal region. This suspicion of people from India and the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic similarity the Rohingya share with Bangladesh sets the stage for discrimination, fear, and hate, and would explain the prosecutions they have to face originating from the state and the general population of Myanmar.

2.1.2. Social-Identity Theory

We, humans, are social animals, it is in our nature that we seek the company of others, however as a survival instinct we also prefer the company of those who are similar to us. At the beginning of human history, it was the tribe we formed to shelter each other from the elements, wild animals, and other potentially hostile tribes. These proto-communities later developed into villages, ethnic groups, religions, and nations. The point is that we humans are socially coded to trust those who are similar to us, and thus can identify with them easier and keep a distance from those who are different (Hedges 2021 p.142). This phenomenon brings this research to social identity theory.

Henri Tajfel (1919-1982) one of the fathers of social identity theory defined identity as here cited by Paul Hedges:

Part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership (Hedges 2021 p.142).

This quote shows the core concept of social identity theory which is the relation of an individual to a group and a group to the individual and the impact they have on each other's identity.

Social identity theory is a useful tool to help this research understand the social dynamic of a society. The research is utilizing this theory due to the type of case studies it uses; ethnic mi-

norities who are facing persecution on racial and/or religious basis, whereas an ethnic/religious majority is seeing a whole ethnic group as problematic for the stability of the nation. Social identity theory provides the most hands-on tools to understand this type of social conflict, as it has a good set of approaches both on individual and national levels to understand why the conflict between different groups occurs (Hedges 2021 p.142).

One of the main arguments in social identity theory is that people tend to associate themselves more with others who are similar to them, such as shared culture, ethnicity, nationality, and religion, and see others who are different in some ways as strangers or even as a threat to them. It is called the in-group, and out-group identities (Hedges 2021 p.147). When investigating a conflict within a society, this perspective focuses on the in-group and out-group identities that can help us understand the fundamental issues, which are present in a society, and has the potential to develop into competition among the groups, and also growing suspicion between the different groups. Within the scope of this study, this mechanism will focus on ethnic, cultural, and religious differences the investigated cases of minorities had with their host nation. This tool within social identity theory will also be used to better understand the phenomena of Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar and how it has risen to a significant influence in the government, by politically attacking minority groups and blaming the problems of the nation on them.

2.1.3. Scapegoat theory

Scapegoat theory is an old concept originating after World War 2 in an attempt to understand the Holocaust. A scapegoat is an individual or a group of people who are blamed by the majority for most if not all problems a community or country is facing. In more extreme cases a mindset is made that if the targeted group of people is removed (usually a minority group) the problems will disappear along with them. This was the Nazi mentality during and before World War 2 and could be a possible understanding for other cases as well around the world. Henri Tajfel argues that “*collective aggression is the result of shared ideologies adopted to explain large-scale social events*” (Glick 2002 p.114). In the case of Nazi Germany, the post-Great War difficult life conditions and overall political and social frustration were addressed by ideologies such as fascism. Desperate and frustrated people started to look for plausible causal explanations which were encouraged and steered by the National Socialists against the Jews and other minorities of Germany (Glick 2002 p.115).

The research is including scapegoat theory in its theoretical frame because it can supplement Social-identity theory with its old-fashioned but useful perspective on minority issues such as those included in the cases of the research.

Although the classical understanding of the Scapegoat theory has been severely criticized over the years as it cannot explain the choice of the scapegoat group, especially in the case of the Jews in Germany, it can still prove to have some unique insights into the cases of the research. The model for the theory is based on the Holocaust, where the German authorities targeted the Jews, who were a successful minority and generally well-integrated into German society. This could also apply to both the Tutsi and the Rohingya as both minority groups were well integrated into their respective societies and culture before they have been targeted and made into a scapegoat (Glick 2002 p.122). This means that many of the scapegoat theory's arguments, eg; the choice of the targeted group based on otherness, relative weakness/vulnerability, and catharsis, has been criticized for not working well in the case of the original case of the Holocaust. However, this thesis is attempting to use scapegoat theory nonetheless, as scapegoat theory not only focuses on the scapegoated group but looks at the society as a whole and considers the social-political environment in which the observed society lives. According to Scapegoat Theory a lot of reasons for targeting a specific group as a scapegoat are contributed to the social and political frustration the people in the society are facing (Glick 2002 p.123). This research assumes that contrary to some of the criticism towards scapegoat theory, the issues that strong and successful minorities can be targeted and not just weak ones, can be explained by the phenomenon that difficult times can make even strong minorities into targets of scapegoating, one could even argue that their successfulness can make them a more likely target. This idea is explored in the discussion of the cases.

The Scapegoat theory believes that stereotypes are important in the ability to make a group into a scapegoat. Anxieties and fear of a group, which could have been already projected by for example state agencies, could create convenient reasoning to point at an ethnic or religious group and blame them for all the issues a nation is facing. According to the Scapegoat theory, this will create a physical internal "enemy" responsible for most problems of the nation, who, due to their real existence can be punished, persecuted, or eliminated "for the greater good" (Glick 2002 p.136).

In the context of the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar, the scapegoat theory can help explain why the Rohingya people were targeted and persecuted by the Myanmar government and military.

2.2. Methods

The study will conduct a qualitative study rather than choosing quantitative methods because the social/political issue it aims to examine is a complex phenomenon with a lot of layers and angles which need to be explored in a more in-depth analysis of the individual cases, which later can be compared and discussed in the discussion section of the thesis.

The research will conduct a historical analysis and comparison of several case studies of minority groups, focusing on the Rohingya, but cases of the Jews in Nazi Germany, and the Tutsi in Rwanda will also be included to compare and contrast them with the case of the Rohingya. Additionally, a media analysis of one of Myanmar's state-sponsored media newspapers will also be conducted to provide empirical data, for the study.

2.2.1. Comparative case study and case selection

One of the main purposes of comparison according to Oliver Freiberger is its important role and use in description and classification. As he describes: "comparing and contrasting one particular item with other items helps to sharpen its profile" (Freiberger 2019 p.35). A comparison can help identify questions and problems relating to the investigated cases.

The thesis will conduct a case study analysis, creating an in-depth study on the selected cases, to enable a deep understanding of the complexity of the social and political issues, which have many causes of origin, both in present and past social structures. The research has chosen to focus on the Rohingya as the main subject of the study, because it is a still ongoing and somewhat lesser explored topic, and also chose to include other cases of minorities into the research to create an interesting discussion, which has not been explored much this far. A comparison of the case of the Rohingya with the other cases of minorities (Tutsi and Jews) could provide the research with a unique perspective on the issue of oppression of minorities across different settings, and how scapegoat policies work.

Conducting a comparative case study analysis, with only textual and previous academic materials to analyse, has a limit on how many cases can be fully explored within the time and size

limitation of the thesis. Only having one in-depth case analysis (Rohingya) supported by other cases (Jews, Tutsi) seems optimal for this research paper. Adding more cases for a qualitative study such as this would take away precious space from a more thorough analysis of all the other cases as well. The qualitative approach is important in this field as it provides a more in-depth analysis of the primary case, to better understand the complexity of oppression and their treatment as scapegoats in Myanmar.

2.2.2. Comparative Historical Analysis

A historical analysis to the two case studies and the main case of the Rohingya is relevant in this research as it can shed light on the development and change of the selected cases over time, and can also make the study better understand how the “Western” ideas and perspectives from colonialism have infiltrated the ideologies of the local people and governments which can be one of the main cause of the increased importance of religion and ethnicity within a nation. (Thörn 1999) This created a division among the people, which could cause many conflicts within a society. This approach pairs well with the post-colonialism theory mentioned before because they can supplement each other with the perspective needed to understand the potentially lasting impact of colonialism, and together with it, the necessary tools of historical data analysis provided by the historical analysis.

Continuing on the historical analysis, a historical comparison of the development of oppression of the Rohingya in Myanmar, with the two selected cases, could perhaps provide the research with a better understanding of the reasons for the continuous mistrust and suspicion towards the Rohingya from the state and general population of Myanmar.

- Important historical points for the cases are Myanmar’s independence in 1948, the first military coup in 1962, the Citizenship law of 1982, the Rohingya conflict of 2016 and 2017, and finally the coup in 2021.

The study intentionally puts more spotlight and focus on the Rohingya, because it aims to use the case of the Jews, and the Tutsi as reference points for the analysis and discussion.

2.2.3. Media Analysis

The research will also conduct a media analysis on and state-owned daily newspaper from Myanmar, to see the discourse the Myanmar government is using regarding the Rohingya or Muslims in general. This is done by taking samples of the Global New Light of Myanmar

(GNLM) newspaper from different dates of significance and interests and scanning the daily papers within those time frames. These are during the 2016-2017 large-scale violence against the Rohingya after the 2016 October 9 border attack incident, and finally the post-2021 military coup papers. The analysis is limited to the months of 2016; October, November, and December 2017; January, July, August, and September around specific incidents such as the 2016 October 9 attack on the Border Police, and the 2017 August 25 attacks against security forces in Northern Rakhine State which promoted more media coverage. This way the research will have an insight into the government discourse on the Rohingya and Muslim issue, which can further broaden our understanding on how and why the Rohingya is used as a scapegoat for the state. The importance of analysing the context of a media outlet is to better understand the reasoning why was it written in a specific way, and to whom is it projected to (Bryman 2012 p.289). In the case of Myanmar and the GNLM a media analysis can help us better understand the process of scapegoating the Rohingya and also to create a social and political environment which portrays the Rohingya as a larger threat to the unity of the nation and Buddhism as it truly is. One could understand the media analysis part of the research as it shows and analysis the climax of the almost century long conflict and oppression of the Rohingya in Myanmar, and how the state is utilising on this history by using the media as a tool to further undermine the legitimacy of the Rohingya in the Rakhine State.

To make this process possible within the scope of this research, for those papers, the editorial or opinion sections are analysed, and processed in search of government discourse on the Muslims and the Rohingya.

2.3. Material

To produce a factual background for the research it utilizes the 2022 UN Human Rights Council report: *Report of the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar*. This Mechanism is continuously monitoring Myanmar since 2011, collecting and analysing substantial information on serious international crimes against humanity committed there since. This report is especially important for the research with the knowledge collected from the UN's established information and monitoring network, within the region of Myanmar, which otherwise is a difficult-to-access place, with only a limited amount of information. The fact that the Myanmar government is not considering the Rohingya as an official minority of Myanmar

and are avoiding the use of the term “Rohingya” makes it difficult to gather locally produced data.

To better understand the point of view of the Myanmar state, this thesis is utilizing a state-owned news site called Global New Light of Myanmar. This media outlet can be described as a propaganda channel for the Tatmadaw (the Myanmar military) and the government. The majority of their domestic news articles are taken from the other state-run Myanmar News Agency, which is considered the main media channel for the Myanmar government but is exclusively using Burmese, hence the need to utilize Global New Light of Myanmar instead. It is written in English, thus the study can use it without the need for translation, thus avoiding potential translation errors. However, as this news platform is written in English one could assume that the target audience is not primarily the local Burmese population, but a more international audience, which could mean that the way it is written and edited, and also its message can potentially differ from other state-owned media outlets which are in Burmese. This news outlet is mainly used to gain insight into the discourse of the government on the conflict with the Rohingya and the violence of 2016-2017, but as previously stated, volumes from the post-2021 military coup will also be included in the media analysis.

Regarding the violence of 2016-2017 in the Rakhine State, 2016 Amnesty International’s Report: *We are at Breaking Point – Rohingya: Persecuted in Myanmar, Neglected in Bangladesh* will also be used together with Global New Light of Myanmar, to help to see the conflict from an international perspective as well as from a government perspective.

Large parts of the historical analysis of the thesis rest on the work of Imtiyaz Yusuf: *Three Faces of the Rohingya Crisis: Religious Nationalism, Asian Islamophobia, and Delegitimizing Citizenship*, as it provides a thorough view of the case of the Rohingya from a historical perspective. His Islam-Buddhism relation analysis is especially important for the topic of the research, as the conflict of the Rohingya is not fought only on an ethnic level, but religion is actively brought up and used in the conflict as well. Yusuf’s work provides factual detail that helps people understand the dynamics of the conflict.

2.4. Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that have to be acknowledged. The scope of the research has to be limited due to the time and resource limitations of the thesis, while still aiming to utilize the benefits of a qualitative research approach. The qualitative approach and the limitation of the study to the case of the Rakhine State hinder the generalizability of the study, because of this the result will not be able to represent other cases in the world. However, the fact that academic research in this research area is limited and the unfortunately numerous similar religious and ethnic conflicts in not just Southeast Asia, but in the world, this study and its result would still be able to generate data that could be used in a comparative sense, by providing insight from the case of the Rakhine State.

The issue of language is also an essential limitation of the study because many of the potential local sources are in Burmese etc., and would need to be translated or ignored by the research due to time and resource limitations. This means that most of the academic and empirical data the study relies on will be of “Western” origin, potentially creating Western bias through the research process. However, if this issue is kept in mind during the analysis and discussion of the data and the results, its negative effects can be limited. The study has to be critical of the sources it will be using (Bryman 2008 p.39).

3. Analysis

To be able, to have a better understanding of the problem of the Rohingya in Myanmar, one must understand the different aspects of the issue. History is often talked about in the discourse of both sides of the conflict.

3.1. Historical Background

3.1.1. The Rohingya

The Rohingya are a stateless people concentrated in the Rakhine state of Myanmar and refugee camps in Bangladesh. According to WHO data from 2018; 1 300 000 of them are living in Bangladesh and around 600 000 are still living in the Rakhine State in Myanmar (WHO 2018). They are generally Muslim in contrast to the Buddhist majority in Myanmar. For the

last century, they have faced persecution and violence from the Myanmar state and parts of the general population.

To better understand the complexity of the present conflict in Myanmar, one must first know the historical developments regarding the Rohingya in Myanmar. The thesis has to note the fact that the Rohingya conflict in Myanmar is a very complex conflict with a lot of different sides, layers, interest groups and a lot of regime changes has been also taken place during the last century of Burmese history. Today and to a certain extent before the 2021 military coup, the country was fragmented into many larger and smaller interest groups and armed groups controlling large portions of the Myanmar countryside, with the Government controlling the major cities and core provinces with largely Burmese ethnicities. The highly fragmented Myanmar has no unified stance against Muslims or the Rohingya in particular, however, this research is focusing on the discourse of the Government and the influence of Buddhist nationalism.

Several events of Myanmar's colonial legacy have directly affected the rhetoric the state and the Buddhist Nationalists are using against the Rohingya today. As with many other ethnic and religious conflicts today, the conflict in Myanmar is also rooted in the past.

It must be stated that historically the region which today is called the Rakhine State, has been the clashing point of different Indian empires and the Southeast Asian kingdoms. This means that the state itself has been changing hands between different cultures and empires throughout its history. The Bengal Sultanate, a Muslim kingdom, came into direct contact with the Arakan (Rakhine state) as the region became one of the Sultanate's prominent vassals. In the year 1430, the Bengal Sultanate successfully reinstated the Arakanese throne in Mrauk U, following the expulsion of Burmese invaders originating from Bagan. For a considerable period, estimated to be either a century or a few decades, the Kingdom of Mrauk U regularly paid tributes to the Sultan of Bengal. During this period, Arakanese rulers emulated the Sultan's governance methods, adopting the title of Shah and producing coins adorned with inscriptions in Arabic and Bengali. This fostered a strong cultural and economic bond between the two regions, facilitated by their proximity across the Bay of Bengal. Eventually, Arakan claimed its independence, transforming the Kingdom of Mrauk U into a formidable maritime power (Eaton 1992 p.64). This historical development of the Rakhine State means that the region had a somewhat different history than the other states of Myanmar, this could perhaps explain the reason why conflicts between the Myanmar government and the Rakhine State as a whole

and not just with the Rohingya are common. And the history of conflict between the old Burmese kingdom and the Muslim/Hindu Bengal Sultanate could have caused a historical wound on the population which contributes to the social separation and conflicts that are witnessed today.

3.1.2. Colonial Legacy

Myanmar was under British rule between the years 1824-1948 through the process of British expansion to the east of India, and was called Burma most likely due to the name of the dominant ethnic group in the region at the time, the Bamar people (Tong-Hyung 2021). Many Indian Muslims and Hindus migrated to the East following the conquest of the British and have been mainly employed in the colonial administration, bureaucracy, and police of the colonized Burma. During colonial rule, there have been some anti-Hindu and anti-Muslim outbreaks in Burma, killing hundreds as Burmese nationalists aimed to gain dominance over the country (Burke 2016 p.262). This claim that the people from India migrated to Burma because of the British colonial conquest is often used against the Rohingya to delegitimize their presence in Myanmar by the state and the Buddhist nationalist movement. However, enough evidence shows that the Rohingya people and Muslims were present in the region of the Rakhine state long before the British conquest (Joseph 2018 p.101). Islam is present in the Southeast Asian region since the 12th-15th century through Muslim traders somewhere around the end of the Muslim Golden Age (Yusuf 2018 p.510).

The Second World War also left its mark on the history of Myanmar and significantly contributed to the creation of the current conflict. Both the Muslim and the Hindu minorities of Myanmar sided with the British during the war to counter the Japanese advance, while the Buddhist ethnicities of Myanmar sympathized with the Japanese, organizing an independent army siding with the Japanese against their British overlords. The Second World War made the Arakan state (Rakhine state) a fiercely contested territory, which caused a lasting division of the different ethnicities long after the war even until today (Dutta 2019).

These two events are exploited by political parties or Buddhist nationalist movements against the Rohingya and other Muslim and Hindu minorities still present in Myanmar. As mentioned Muslims and Hindus were historically present in the colonial administration, many of which have also migrated to Burma from India during the colonial era, which makes them painted as the reminiscence of the old colonial oppression by foreigners. Because the Rohingya are associated with Bangladesh and by extension with India by the Burmese leadership, this creates

the same image of the Rohingya as well: foreigner and oppressor, which denies their half-a-millennium-long history with the region. Additionally, their support of the British forces during the Second World War can also present them as traitors to Myanmar, which was about to be “liberated” by the Buddhist Japanese forces (Edström 2009 p.11). This kind of mindset and political discourse can be observed throughout post-independence Myanmar and even today.

3.1.3. Post-independence

The formation of the new Union of Burma after its independence from the British has been received by feelings of insecurity among the Arakan Muslims, like many other ethnic and religious minorities of Burma they found themselves in a newly formed nation dominated by a Bamar/Burman ethnic majority and Buddhism (Yusuf 2018 p.520).

After the coup in 1962 led by General Ne Win, an isolationist government came into power, which pursued a more hostile racial policy against the ethnic minorities within the country. It is understood that this new Socialist totalitarian government, “The Burmese Way to Socialism”, is the foundation for the rise of the Buddhist Nationalism, Myanmar is having today, fueling the ethnic and religious conflicts within the nation. Through his rule, General Ne Win has strengthened the ethnically Burmese dominance in government and the military thus making all positions of power within the country dominated by the ethnic majority, while continuing to fuel xenophobia among the population (Yusuf 2018 p.521). Under the leadership of General Ne Win, the authorities have adopted the colonialist ideas of categorization the people into more pronounced ethnicities and cultures, and also creating an image of the ethnic majority as superior to the other ethnic groups, creating groups of tolerable and intolerable cultures within the borders of Myanmar (Yusuf 2018 p.521). As mentioned before, this can be argued against by stating that the Indian caste system was present close to the region, thus meaning that the idea of some social/ethnic classes being superior to others is not a new term brought in by the colonialist West. The Brahmin caste/the priest class within the caste system is around 4.3% of the Indian population and is the most influential caste. All other castes are seen as inferior to them (Kelete 2015). Although the concept of caste-based superiority is most likely not a new idea for the people of Myanmar, the concept of nationalism was introduced to them during British colonial rule. After the occupation and annexation of Burma by the British Empire, there were no nationalistic movements concerning the British presence and the disposal of the Burmese King. Nationalism only started to appear in the nation after the First World War, when the national political groups tried to obtain a larger voice in local

administration (Hobbs 1947 p.113). The struggle to gain more presence in Burmese national politics, by the Burmese people, could have created a power struggle between the predominantly Indian/Muslim colonial administration and the Burmese political leaders, which division later become reinforced by the previously mentioned social division created by the opposing interests within the nation during the Second World War and the occupying Japanese forces.

3.1.4. 1982 Citizenship Law

The Myanmar Citizenship Law was enacted in 1982 and sets out the criteria for obtaining citizenship in Myanmar. The law is controversial and has been criticized for its discriminatory nature.

Under the law, citizenship is granted to those considered "indigenous" to Myanmar and who can prove that they or their ancestors have lived in the country before 1823. The law also recognizes three categories of citizenship: full citizenship, associate citizenship, and naturalized citizenship (Mohajan 2018 p.6). The law has been criticized for discriminating against ethnic minorities, particularly the Rohingya, who are not recognized as citizens under the law. The government has been accused of using the citizenship law to deny Rohingya their rights and justify their exclusion from Myanmar society. By being deprived of their citizenship the Rohingya are not eligible for a national identity card, and can only obtain foreign identity cards, which as a result severely restricts their rights to study, work, travel, marry, practice their religion, possibility to vote, and access to healthcare services (Mohajan 2018 p.6). Since the Citizenship law has been the national and Buddhist Nationalist discourse and view on the Rohingya was that they were foreign invaders from Bangladesh (Klinken 2017).

3.1.5. The Events and Violence of 2016 in the Rakhine State

On 2016 October 9, armed attackers launched coordinated assaults on three police outposts in Maungdaw, a town in Rakhine State in western Myanmar, near the border with Bangladesh. The attackers, who were reported to be Rohingya Muslims, killed nine police officers and stole dozens of weapons and thousands of rounds of ammunition. In the following days, the Myanmar military launched a security operation in the area, which it said was aimed at rooting out the attackers and restoring order. According to Amnesty International's report (Amnesty International 2016a), there are videos from the attacks, where militants call for the Rohingya to join the fighting and the Jihad, however, the analysts from the International Crisis

Group (ICG), Amnesty refers to suggest that it was not a call for terrorism, but a struggle for human rights perhaps. ICG argues that it appears that the group's approach and goal do not align with transnational jihadist terrorism. Their attacks have been primarily directed at security forces and individuals perceived as threats within their community, rather than targeting religious establishments, Buddhist villagers, or innocent civilians and family members at the BGP bases they struck on 9 October. While they have advocated for jihad in certain videos, there is no evidence suggesting that this translates into acts of terrorism. Within those videos, there were overlays in Arabic reading: Harakah al-Yaqin, which has been identified as the Arabic name for the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) (International Crisis Group 2016). However, in 2017 Myanmar Central Committee for Counter Terrorism declared the ARSA which has been responsible for the attacks in 2016 October as a terrorist organization (Sakhawat 2017). It has to be noted that by 2022 the strength and support of the ARSA forces have dwindled according to international news reports as their foothold in the Rakhine state is shaken and it is reported that their association with criminal activities within the Bangladeshi Rohingya refugee camps distanced the Rohingya refugees from the organization (Dupont 2022).

On 2016 October 15, six days after the attack on the Border Guard Police, the state-owned newspaper Global New Light of Myanmar released an official report of the incident and the following investigation, which stated a connection between Muslim international terrorist organizations and the attacks and also stating that the terrorist organizations are recruiting from the local Muslim youth (Global New Light of Myanmar, 2016a). This report is one of the first official statements, which names the motivation for the attack as religious aiming to take over the Muslim-majority regions in the country. This statement can be used by Buddhist nationalist organizations to spread fear among the Buddhist population against Muslims, reinforcing the in-group and out-group mentality of the Buddhist majority population to support the oppressive actions of the state on Muslim minority groups, because they are a threat to the security and unity of the Buddhist nation. The Myanmar army (Tatmadaw) was quick to dispatch armed units on “clearing” operations sweeping across that state village by village, to find the people responsible for the attacks. These operations targeted mainly Muslim communities and many Muslims have been arrested on the accusation of being involved in terrorist activities (Global New Light of Myanmar 2016b). Later, that year in December international newspapers and NGOs started to release concerning reports on atrocities conducted by the Tatmadaw against the local Muslim population (Amnesty International 2016b).

3.1.6. The Myanmar State, the Military and Buddhist Nationalism

Ethnic identity is central to Myanmar's regional politics. Ethnic Burmese are the majority, who are mostly Buddhists. The country is divided into seven regions where the ethnic Burmese are the majority and also in seven states associated with an ethnic group which is the majority of that state. However, resistance against the government by different ethnicities has been waged for most of Myanmar's history since its independence (Burke 2016 p.262).

Buddhist nationalists might look at the statistical numbers of religious believers in Southeast Asia or the ASEAN countries (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) to specify the region that of about 667 million people 40% are Muslim and 25% are Buddhist, and argue that Islam is gradually forcing them out of the region (Yusuf 2018 p.510). Emphasized by the discourse and propaganda spread by the Buddhist nationalist monks and their followers, these numbers could create fear among the Buddhists and make them more protective of their own culture and suspicious and hateful of others, especially Islam, as the message from the propaganda is that Islam is a threat to Buddhism. The entire Muslim population of Myanmar is around 2.3% according to data from 2016, this number most likely changed after the genocide and mass emigrating of 2016-2017 (Kyaw 2020 p.199). Southeast Asia is also considered to be the home of Buddhism since it ended in India, housing the oldest schools of Buddhism; Theravada Buddhism.

One of the most powerful Buddhist nationalist groups the Ma Ba Tha and the 969 Movement, led by Ashin Wirathu. They have collaborated with the government to draft "race and religious protection" laws designed to restrict the rights of mainly Muslims, but also against the other religions other than Buddhism. Wirathu launched his radical '969 movement' in 2012 aimed at boycotting Muslim businesses and inciting hatred against the Rohingya people who have been deprived of citizenship since 1982 and against other recognized Muslim minority groups in the country (Morada 2023). For the support and appeasement of the Buddhist nationalist groups, the government gained its support against the political opposition, which helped the government secure its position in power until the coup d'état in 2021 (Hindstrom 2015). Giving in to the pressure of Buddhist nationalist groups such as the Ma Ba Tha by the government, by accepting their proposals such as the withdrawal of the White Cards (temporary household identification cards) from the Rohingya and the introduction of laws and regulations protecting the interests of "race and religion" further attacked the Rohingya community, normalizing negative discourse against the Rohingya and Muslims in general (Yusuf 2018 p.522). The fact that the post-2015 election government the NLD from the beginning

tried to appease the Buddhist nationalists by accepting their regulatory demands, shows that these movements had a large influence on the government and within the population of Burma. This seeming acceptance of anti-Muslim movements and their ideas may have contributed to the escalations of violence in 2016-2017 against the Rohingya (Russel 2015).

A more targeted political attack on the Rohingya comes from the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP). The RNDP is a political party in Myanmar that represents the interests of the Rakhine people, an ethnic group primarily residing in the Rakhine State of western Myanmar. The party was formed in 2010, ahead of the country's transition from military rule to a more democratic system. The RNDP emerged as a prominent political force advocating for the rights and welfare of the Rakhine people. It has focused on addressing the concerns and aspirations of the Rakhine community, including issues related to ethnic identity, cultural preservation, and regional development. The RNDP has been utilizing aggressive anti-Muslim rhetoric in the Rakhine State since 2012 to gather more support within the region to gain more influence against the ruling government Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). RNDP has quickly become one of the strongest parties in Myanmar, yet still nowhere close to the USDP, however, they were pushing to revoke the voting rights of the Rohingya for the 2015 election as according to them it put them at a disadvantage in the regional elections. As a response, the government failed to defuse the situation and even to a certain degree contributed to the hate, by blaming the “Bengali” for the violence (Klinken 2017 p.7-8).

The USDP was officially founded on June 18, 2010, following the country's transition from military rule to a nominally civilian government. The USDP is considered to have close ties to the military establishment, as it was initially formed by former members of the military junta. In the 2010 general elections, which were criticized internationally for being neither free nor fair, the USDP won the majority of seats in the national parliament and regional legislatures. This victory allowed the party to form the government, with Thein Sein, a former general and senior member of the junta, becoming the President of Myanmar.

After the elections in 2015, the National League for Democracy (NLD) came to power, with a landslide victory over the USDP. The NLD was founded and led by Aung San Suu Kyi, as a pro-democratization movement in 1988. Their election victory marked a historic moment as the NLD formed the first democratically elected civilian government in decades, with Aung San Suu Kyi serving as the State Counsellor, a position akin to the Prime Minister. However,

the NLD-led government faced numerous challenges during its tenure, including the Rohingya crisis and ongoing conflicts in ethnic minority areas. The party and Aung San Suu Kyi faced criticism for their handling of these issues, which affected the international perception of the NLD.

The NLD has introduced some regulatory measures against hate speech to ease the ethnic and religious tension in the country, however, their effects were underwhelming. The forefront against hate speech was originating from local civil society groups, human rights defenders, journalists, and moderate Buddhist monks calling out the Ma Ba Tha, which became banned by the Buddhist State Sangha, and charges have been raised against Wirathu. However, despite the ban the group remained active, and continued its aggressive rhetoric targeting minorities and the NLD government labeling them as traitors (Morada 2023).

3.1.7. Post-2021 Coup d'état

In the aftermath of the military takeover of the Myanmar government, as the crackdown against the protesters was ongoing, hate speech and incitement to violence encouraged by the military forces increased significantly. Several social media platforms including Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube have blocked their access and removed accounts used by the military, due to the threats of violence, bullying, harassment, and misinformation against activists, journalists, etc. However, dehumanization and the use of hate speech were present among the protesters as well as against the military and its personnel. The Myanmar armed forces have taken up using strong rhetoric, that their takeover is justified to support and protect Buddhism and Buddhist values, and monasteries, naming their leader General Min Aung Hlaing a “Buddhist warrior-king”. They also voice that Myanmar is vulnerable to a Muslim takeover, drawing connections between the ousted NLD government and anti-coup protesters to Islam. Many pro-military accounts on Telegram also promoted hate speech against the Rohingya and other minorities (Morada 2023). Based on this, one could argue that those minor processes which were made against hate speech and violence since the 2016 elections, were all destroyed, and more hate and violence have been reignited by the power struggle and by the fact that the military is aiming to create a religious crusade against the Muslims in aims to get the support of the likeminded people and enact fear in the others.

3.2. State Media Discourse Analysis on the Rohingya Issue (Global New Light of Myanmar)

For the analysis of the Global New Light of Myanmar (GNLM), the research has selected the articles used based on relevance to the issue of the study. The articles quoted below are chosen as they show less diplomatic rhetoric concerning the Rohingya, and could potentially reflect upon the kind of rhetoric the state and Buddhist nationalists are using to undermine the legitimacy of the Rohingya within the Rakhine state.

Through the analysis of the editorials of the daily issues of the state newspaper GNLM, a reluctance can be noted in the first month of the incident of the 2016 October 9 attacks on the Border Police. Denial of the presence of an ethnic conflict can be seen, however, that can be accounted to the fact that as of yet it was not confirmed who was responsible for the attacks and what the motive was. The increasing amount of reports of foreign Organisations and news agencies of human rights violations aimed at the Rohingya minority has been swept aside by the state accusing them of spreading lies and misinformation (GNLM 2016.10.30.). In November shift in the state-media discourse can be noted, finally calling the border incident an act of terrorism committed by a terrorist organization (in 2017 August identified as ARSA) with an extensive network. The burning of villages and killing of civilians were also accredited to them (GNLM 2016.11.04.). At this point, there is a clear collision of the international narrative and Myanmar's state-sponsored narrative, one claiming that the mass killings and village burnings are committed by the military and the other side claims that it was committed by the terrorists and their sympathizers going as far as calling Muslim villagers Islamists. In December this narrative of accusing international organizations such as a UNHCR official and other media platforms of lying about the alleged human rights violations committed by the military operation has continued, and using a discourse within their editorial that strongly suggests a specific ethnicity and religion as problematic without naming them:

The Rakhine incident probably has its roots with that imagined race those insurgents held out with the intention of imposing on the minds of Myanmar people and international public.

There had never been such a race among the indigenous races of Myanmar (GNLM 2016.12.16.).

The newspaper opinion this quote is taken from was written as a response to the international outrage and accusation that Myanmar is in breach of Human Rights violations, by delegitimizing the Rohingya claim for their many centuries-long history with the Rakhine State region.

Following the renewed attacks by ARSA on military and police targets in Northern Rakhine State in August, the state continued to accuse ARSA of killing civilians and kept denying the contrary accusations from the international public. The state claims that ARSA is demanding that the Rohingya be recognized as an ethnic nationality and by that using the words of the media: *carve out parts of the country, by claiming rights of national ethnic people which do not completely concern them* (GNLM 2017.09.14.). In the context of this quote from the opinion of the newspaper, the author also claims that the “Bengalis” are not forbidden to apply for citizenship rights if they fulfill the criteria of the citizenship law. As the purpose of GNLM is to project its internal media to a more international audience, it is not surprising that many of these opinion articles in the papers are aiming at the “misinformation” that is circulating in the international community about human rights violations in Myanmar, aiming to prove these accusations wrong, by delegitimizing the Rohingya’s historical background with the Rakhine region.

The state media commented on the fleeing of Rohingya into neighbouring countries once again in response to the international critique of the lack of humanitarianism in Myanmar. In the response the author of the opinion is using a concerning rhetoric: *It is typical of Myanmar, not to give any help to fake victims*. Followed soon in the article with:

They [the Bengali (Rohingya)] have a very good reason for fleeing under the name of refugees. In fact, they created this situation on purpose. They themselves know best why and how they created this current situation (GNLM 2017.09.19.).

This statement is questioning the Rohingya’s refugee status, going as far as blaming them and associating them with the armed ARSA insurgents. Through this discourse, the newspaper is aiming to attack the legitimacy of the refugee status of the fleeing Rohingya and base the lack of efforts made by the Myanmar government to aid the fleeing Rohingya. At the same the article states that those Bengalis that remain in their villages will be given protection according to the law and provided with supplies (GNLM 2017.09.19.). Projecting an image to the world that the state is not targeting the Rohingya or in their words the Bengali ethnicity unless they are collaborating with rebel/terrorist activities, “just like” the fleeing Rohingya. It is difficult

to assess the truthfulness of the state's claim that they put the remaining Rohingya or Bengalis as they call them under protection and that they have the same rights to apply for citizenship as other foreigners according to the law. However, based on the overwhelming number of reports conducted by the international community accusing the Myanmar government and military of human rights violations raises concerns about the truthfulness of the state discourse of equal opportunities for all ethnic and religious groups within the country.

Continuing on a similar discourse another concerning statement by the opinion section of the state newspaper is regarding the association of the general Rohingya population with the ARSA:

Many astute observers now believe that all these events [the attacks against the border police and the international uproar about the human rights violations] were carefully planned by a master-brain from somewhere to bring attention to the cause of the ARSA in particular and the Bengali Muslims who have crossed over to Bangladesh in general. In essence, the game plan was to gain a foothold in northern Rakhine for future terrorist activities while at the same time discredit the Myanmar Armed Forces and the civilian government led by the NLD... (GNLM 2017.09.30.).

This statement again suggests that the Rohingya refugees are collaborators with the ARSA a terrorist group according to the Myanmar state, thus creating suspicion in the Rakhine state against the general Rohingya population, building more on the already existing fear/hate they receive from some parts of the general population of Myanmar. The statement also points at a hidden enemy, an international organisation (possibly a Muslim terrorist organisation) that attacks Myanmar using the Rohingya and the region they inhabit as a foothold. This kind of discourse of accusing large parts of the Rohingya population of collaboration with the ARSA and thus contributing to the problems, violence, and instability of the Rakhine state can be observed in the newspaper throughout the analysed period.

Based on the investigated opinion articles from the GNLM, the research can understand that a lot of the attention the Myanmar English-speaking state media has spent was to undermine the Rohingya's legitimacy in the eyes of the international community and justify their actions as preventative measures against the spread of terrorism.

After the military coup of 2021, during the observed period (2021 February, May, September, and December) the study noticed a steep decrease in regarding the mentioning of Muslims or

the Rohingya in anyways, however in some instances strong xenophobic messages can be interpreted such as the following cut-out from the Global New Light of Myanmar suggests:

Thanks to ethnic national brethren including Rakhine ethnics in Rakhine State, Myanmar's western border can be safe for various penetrations. Those people in the Rakhine State also take preventive measures with their own culture and traditions against alien culture. Hence, it can be seen till today that fine arts, songs, traditions and culture of various national races including Rakhine ethnics residing in the Rakhine State are fresh, impressive and active for audiences (GNLM 2021.12.15.).

This statement indicates the dismissal of the Rohingya ethnicity and their culture from the Rakhine State and praises the ethnic Rakhine for taking “preventative” measures against “alien” cultures. Statements like these show how the current military government is not aiming to ease the ethnic conflict in the Rakhine state and is contented with the oppression of the Rohingya.

Also, there is a lack of editorial or reporting content on the ARSA attacks on border patrols reported on 2021 August 25, and 2021 December 5 (RSIS 2023), which indicates that the military government is choosing to ignore the issue on a media level, and focusing the media attention on other issues.

Although there is a lack of mention of Muslims and Bengalis (the Rohingya) in the state-sponsored media, the pardoning and release of Ashin Wirathu in 2021 September, and later in 2023, awarding him the honorary title “Thiri Pyanchi”, a first-degree title awarded in recognition of meritorious service to the nation handed to him by the military ruler General Min Aung Hlaing (Aljazeera 2023), suggests a close association of the Military Junta with the messages and teachings of the ant-Muslim monk, and his Buddhist nationalist movement.

The lack of mentioning the conflicts with the Muslim minorities could be also explained by the relative weakness of the ARSA and also by the distraction of the fighting against the National Unity Government (NUG): the reminiscence of the overthrown democratic government and its supporters and other armed military groups.

3.3. Case Analysis

The Rohingya in Myanmar are not the only ethnic group that faced persecution and have been treated as a scapegoat to hide the country's many issues. There are two very different, but at the same time similar cases, this essay brings up for comparison. The Jews of Nazi Germany and the Tutsi of Rwanda.

3.3.1. Short Introduction: Jews of Germany

The Holocaust and the treatment of the Jews in Nazi Germany is a thoroughly analyzed case, so it does not need a deep historical introduction. However, their case is important for the study to be brought up and included, to be a point of reference to the extremities of its case when discussing the Rohingya. Nonetheless, a short introduction has to be made to point out some of the similar paths in the growing social conflict and hate from the general German population against the Jews to the dire situation the Rohingya are facing today and in the near past. One could argue here that the Holocaust was religious because it aimed against the Jews, but the Nazi rhetoric has separated the Jews from a religious differentiation to a constructed racial categorization aimed primarily at the Jews as an ethnic group based on biology and not as a religiously defined minority (Berenbaum 2023). The Jews even before the rise of the Nazi party were viewed with suspicion after the loss of the First World War. The Nazi propaganda spread the idea that the Jewish population, around 0.77% of the German population, owned 20% of the nation's wealth, while the Germans suffered from the post-Great War economic recession (Ritschl 2019). This was seen with envy and frustration by many in Germany, this frustration was then directed to the ethnic group that has often been looked at with suspicion in Europe and had a few individuals in Germany who were successful during the interwar period (Aly 2014 p.40). This suspicion, frustration, and envy were further amplified by the Nazi party leading to open discrimination and hate toward all Jews, making them the internal enemy of the state, even blaming them for the loss of the Great War, making them into a scapegoat for the difficulties and frustration the nation was facing at the time. The tragic situation of Germany's Jewish population further escalated when the Nazi party introduced its racial policy, which dehumanized the entire ethnic group of Jews.

3.3.2. Short Introduction: Tutsi of Rwanda

The conflict between the Tutsi and the Hutu can be considered a classic case of how colonialism and colonial ideas can affect a multi-ethnic society. Before the rule of Germans (1894-1918) and Belgians (1922-1962), Rwanda was a centralized kingdom, with a ruling elite of

mainly Tutsi descendants, however, Hutus were not rare among the many Chiefs across the kingdom. With the German colonial administration beginning to establish itself in Rwanda came the Catholic missionaries not long after, around the year 1900, who sought to convert the people of Rwanda to Christianity and gain a Catholic foothold in the country (Nieder 2023). Their main target was to convert the elite (mainly Tutsi), which encouraged the conversion of the wider population. Although the German and Belgian colonial administrations exercised an indirect form of rule, meaning that the local elites and the King remained in power under colonial rule, and thus were less involved in the internal politics of the colony. The missionaries on the other hand were a key element in pacifying the population (Longman 2010 p.142). Belgian missionaries together with the Belgian colonial administration were contented with the established status quo, going as far as to fabricate a myth that claims on how the Tutsi are racially superior to the Hutu and that is why they are more suited to rule, the reason for the creation of the ethnic differentiation was to help the rule of the colonial administration (Longman 2010 p.145). Following the revolution in 1959 due to the growing inequalities between the Tutsi and the Hutu, Hutu leaders seized control of Rwanda, this also resulted in the shift of Catholic missionary support from the Tutsi to the Hutu, to secure their position in the new leadership (Longman 2010 p.147). In Rwanda, following its independence in 1962, the state and the Church became beneficiaries of each other and often cooperated. As economic difficulties and social unrest due to the emergence of democratic ideas in the late 1980s, tension grew rapidly between the ethnic groups as the different political sides aimed to gain more control, which led to the genocide of the Tutsi, during 1990-1993, in which Church agents actively or indirectly took parts such as pastors, priests, and other church employees, according to some estimates, more people were killed in church buildings than anywhere else (Longman 2010 p.154).

4. Discussion

4.1. Colonialism and Myanmar

Previously in the introduction of Post-colonialism in this thesis, the effect of globalization and modernization through colonial expansion was briefly brought up. However, this has to be discussed further here, because it brings forth ideas that have to be explained and discussed more extensively to bring its insight to the case of Myanmar. The British colonial expansion

through three wars between the British Empire and the Kingdom of Myanmar from 1824 to 1885. The introduction of colonial administration fundamentally disrupted the social and religious order in Myanmar, the disposal of the King of Myanmar and his Royal Court and replaced by colonial administration rapidly reformed the political, religious, and social structure of the nation. The British have also detached the monkhood from politics and governance, which they traditionally held and were a well-respected part of traditional governance, and worked in a symbiotic relationship with the Royal Court. The abolition of this cooperative rule caused social disintegration in Burma (Aung-Thwin 2023). On administrative levels those loyal to the British Empire gained ruler positions on most levels of the administration instead of the traditional leaders, who might oppose the colonial rule, this also resulted in the appointment of Muslims and Hindus from India to these positions. This reform of administration from traditional leaders to foreigners could greatly contribute to the suspicion and hard treatment of both Hindus and Muslims after Myanmar gained its independence once again, and this struggle can still be observed in the rhetoric of the new military government and the Buddhist nationalist monks and activists. The overthrown democratic government NLD has struggled to suppress the Buddhist nationalist movements due to the monks' historical ties with the governance, banning them would just "pour oil to the fire" as Buddhist nationalist movements such as the Ma Ba Tha could easily victimize themselves on a historical level, and gathering more sympathy from the Buddhist population, which would have the potency to give them more influence on the population, contrary to the aim of the ban (International Crisis Groups 2017).

Matthew J. Walton a Senior Research Fellow in Modern Burmese Studies at St Antony's College, University of Oxford, argues that the fact that the particular ethno-political label of Rohingya only coalesced in the middle of the twentieth century does not necessarily invalidate Rohingya claims to have resided in Arakan for generations. He further argues that the ethno-political identity "Rohingya", was consolidated around the middle of the 20th century, while the official "Myanmar" national identity was created in 1989 by the former military regime, which means that the Rohingya from a perspective is no less valid an identity (Walton 2020 p.71). This is an important factor for those who are aiming to delegitimize the Rohingya claim for being an indigenous ethnicity within the Rakhine state. However, different forms of the term "Rohingya" have also been used earlier. The word Rohingya would then mean "inhabitant of Rohang", which was the early Muslim name for Arakan (United States Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services 1999).

National and ethnic identities were not as prominent before colonization, however, religious tension was still present due to the clashing point of Kingdoms with different religions (Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist) in the Arakan/Rakhine state as explained in chapter 3.1.1. The idea of ethnic differentiation became more prominent in the politics of Myanmar, during the Second World War and after independence hence the creation of the term Rohingya to describe the existing Muslim population in the Rakhine state. This kind of argument is supported by post-colonial theory as it also argues that the importance of ethnicity and religion has become more pronounced through the colonial administration in various colonies around the world. This could be argued to be the case in Myanmar as well, where although there were tensions between the Muslim and Buddhist population before in the Rakhine state, it only escalated since more attention was placed on the importance of ethnicity and religion, which became more pronounced as the traditional ruling hierarchy was dismantled by the British colonialists (Burke 2016 p.262).

4.2. Comparative discussion

In all of these three cases, there are some fundamental similarities; the conflict against them has escalated from a time of uncertainty and frustration within those nations, they all faced genocide to a varying degree, and they all were strong and established minorities within their nation before their respective conflict. In addition, in the cases of the Jews and the Rohingya, one of the main basis for discriminative categorization was religious differences. In the case of Rwanda, both the Tutsi and the Hutu were Christian, however in that case the origins of the conflict were from a social difference between the two ethnic groups. Despite the social differences the Tutsi being cattle herders, soldiers, and administrators, while the Hutu being farmers mainly, the two ethnic groups lived in relative harmony. This, however, later escalated into a more pronounced conflict through the introduction of Western colonial ideas. The introduction of Identity Cards by the Belgian colonial administration in 1932, which distinguished between the three main ethnicities in Rwanda (Tutsi, Hutu, Twa) made it impossible for the people to move between the ethnic groups which were relatively fluid before colonization. This more pronounced ethnic distinction was reinforced by the identity card, which in turn elevated the different social tensions which were present in Rwanda on a racial-based conflict, giving more room for ethnic distinction/separation and violence (UN 2023). All three cases also share Western ideas of nationalism and struggles for cultural and ethnic superiority

which have been prominent ideas of the West during the Colonial era and in Nazi Germany, although as previously mentioned, the idea of societal superiority was not a new idea for the people of Myanmar through their exposure to the Indian caste system. The enhancement of these ideas in Rwanda through the missionaries and in Myanmar through the colonial administration has created more pronounced fragmentation within the colonized societies, where cultural and racial superiority thus became an important aspect. Another major similarity is that in all cases the targeted minority group was seen as an existential threat, to the majority, let it be the undermining of Germany, the threat of returning to Tutsi dominance, or the eradication of Buddhism and its replacement with Islam. These concepts are using the in-group/out-group social phenomenon, which can be manipulated against a fabricated threat by exaggerating crime statistics for example. In essence, judging a whole ethnicity by the actions of a few.

One major difference between Myanmar, Rwanda, and Nazi Germany is how the state was involved in persecuting minorities. While in the cases of Myanmar and Rwanda, a lot of violence was organized against minorities by the state, most violence was against either the Tutsi or the Rohingya was unorganized and consisted of sudden outbursts of hostilities, which are a result of decades-long fragmentation of multi-ethnic societies and only needed small ignition sparks by state agents to trigger the violence. Contrary to this, the state of Nazi Germany was fully involved in the organization of the systematic genocide of a whole ethnic minority from the persecution, the organization of the logistics, and the elimination. Although the oppressive actions against the Rohingya are not as organized and systematic as the case was in Nazi Germany, still it is important to monitor the Buddhist Nationalist discourse on the Rohingya, as some of its prominent leader figures are utilizing a discourse that aims to further dehumanize the Rohingya, and normalize violence against them (Morada 2023).

Dehumanization and difficult times seem to be key aspects of all three cases when it comes to the conflicts escalating into genocides. Difficult economic, social, and political situations are present in each case as both Rwanda and Myanmar were trying to stabilize their nation after their independence from colonial rule, while also trying to modernize economically and socially. Germany also faced an economic recession and the loss of the Great War, causing a lot of social and political frustration within the population. However, one major aspect sets the case of Germany apart from the other two, during the early stages of the Holocaust Germany was economically prospering and was generally in a strong position in Europe, yet still, they kept the Jewish population as the main public enemy. Perhaps the answer to this phenomenon

could be found in the dehumanization of the Jews. The Nazi ideology's view of the Jews was that they were an "alien race" that fed off the host nation, poisoned its culture, seized its economy, and enslaved its workers and farmers. They have also allegedly weakened the German "race" through mixed marriages (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2023). With the knowledge of this example, one could argue that the extreme dehumanization of an ethnic group can create a social condition, where the general populous will continue discriminating and treating the targeted ethnic group as inferior beings even though, their supposed "negative impacts" in accordance to the reasons they have become a scapegoat are not present in the nation anymore.

On the other hand in the case of the Tutsi-Hutu conflict in Rwanda, the majority Hutu ethnic group, which was in power after they overthrew the Tutsi leadership in 1962, were the ones who were seen and treated as the biologically inferior ethnicity. The Hutu were not dehumanized, yet still seen as a lesser ethnicity compared to the Tutsi. The Hutu administration encouraged the suppression of the Tutsi once they got into power showing that contrary to the case of the Jews of Nazi Germany, the assumed "inferior" majority ethnic group can also see the supposedly "superior" group as a threat to their power even after they overthrew them and established their government administration, actively encouraging the suppression of the Tutsi's ability to hold important positions, as a retaliation for the previous "oppression" of the Hutu, by the Tutsi. Seemingly in a simplified answer, if a group is treated as inferior to another, this can create a great social divide within the population which can eventually lead to violence even to the extent of committing genocide. As long as the majority group, let it either be considered "inferior or superior" compared to the targeted group, feels threatened in some way by the smaller, weaker, and more vulnerable group, the majority group could be influenced to act upon the feeling of being threatened to do something against the smaller group before it is "too late".

4.3. The Rohingya as a Scapegoat

The Rohingya is being a minority within a minority state. The Rakhine state is among the poorest states in Myanmar and its inhabitants were prominent in the fight against colonial authorities and also continued to challenge the leadership of the independent Myanmar. The continued conflict within the state and in the state-versus-government struggle has put political and societal instability in the region, creating frustration and desperation within the state.

All these regional issues in turn made the Rohingya population even more vulnerable to ethnic or religious prosecution and attacks within the state as more frustrated attention shifted to focus on the Muslims of the state (Burke 2016 p.264). This vulnerability of the Rohingya within the Rakhine state can be explained by the in-group/out-group phenomena of social-identity theory, as the ethnic Rakhine Buddhists are targeting the minority group which is the most different from themselves; following a different religion, have cultural differences, and having a different language (Burke 2016 p.264).

The scapegoat theory suggests that the Myanmar government, political groups, and the military have targeted the Rohingya as a way to distract from larger societal problems, such as political instability and economic insecurity, or to just acquire support for the regional power struggle in the Rakhine State (Klinken 2017 p.8). By blaming the Rohingya for these problems, the political groups and the military were able to shift blame away from themselves and onto a vulnerable and marginalized group. The propaganda communication from both the government, and military through state-sponsored media such as the Global New Light of Myanmar as analyzed above, and the regional Rakhine state officials created the mentality and widespread belief that immigration and higher birth rates are rapidly increasing the Muslim population, which created and fed the phenomenon known as a “siege mentality”. Siege mentality can be explained as the majority (ethnic Rakhine) fears becoming a minority in their state (Burke 2016 p.264). For example, Thein Nyun, the chairman of the NDP, publicly supported the 1982 citizenship law by stating that it serves to enhance national security and safeguard the well-being of the country's Buddhist population on a racial level: “is intended to protect the Burmese Buddhist race; by not allowing those with mixed blood from making political decisions for the country, so the law is very important for the preservation of our country” (Nai, 2013). The notorious Buddhist nationalist monk leader Wirathu has compared Muslims to the African carp; “*They breed quickly and they are very violent. They eat their own kind.*” (Winn 2013). However, these claims of a rapidly increasing Muslim population in Myanmar can be criticized as Census data from 1983 and 2016 shows that the number of Muslims in the Myanmar population has decreased from 3.9 to 2.3 (Burma Population Census 1983, Myanmar Population Census 2016). These data sets however are leaving the Rohingya out of the statistics, even showing that the estimated non-enumerated population of the Rakhine State is around 1 090 000 people, which is about equal to the Rohingya population in the country in 2016 (Myanmar Population Census 2016). It can be assumed that due to the continuous conflict, many Muslims have fled the country, which could have severely halted

the growth rate of the Muslim population in the country. Accurate data on the population growth of the different ethnicities are scarce especially because the Rohingya is not counted as an official minority.

Furthermore, the scapegoat theory can also help explain why the persecution of the Rohingya has been so brutal and extreme. When a society or group assigns blame to a scapegoat, they may also dehumanize and demonize that group, making it easier to justify violence and persecution against them. This dehumanization of the Rohingya may have played a role in the extreme violence and atrocities committed against them, including mass killings, rape, and forced displacement.

Since the violence of 2012, the Rohingya have become the rallying tool for both the ethnic Rakhine (Buddhist) and the national political parties in the Rakhine state to “defend” Buddhism against an Islamic threat (Hindstrom 2015). The Rohingya fell victim to the political battle between the Burmese state and the Rakhine Buddhist (RNBP) in their struggle to gain power in the Rakhine state. One could even say that using the Rohingya was the most convenient way to boost the ranks of the supporters of both opposing sides.

It is important to take note of the Buddhist nationalist movements and what they are preaching, because throughout Myanmar’s recent history, including the pre-independence time in the early 1900s, there were continuous outbursts of violence between the Buddhists and the Muslims and the Hindus, and there always were a trigger of some sort; news about Muslims raping Buddhist women, and forced conversion to Islam, etc. (Kyaw 2020 p.200). Similar discourse can still be heard in national news, religious preaching, and other media platforms, which can all trigger more and more violence against Muslim minorities (Kyaw 2020 p.214). However, this time the government and other political and social groups are active perpetrators of the spread of this kind of aggressive rhetoric, encouraging outrage and violence against the Rohingya.

5. Conclusion

The Rohingya’s faith has a strong tie with the region they inhabit, namely the Rakhine State. The turbulent history of the state has largely contributed to the way the Rohingya are treated in Myanmar today. Being situated at the clashing point of India and Southeast Asia has caused the region to have a multi-ethnic and multi-religious demographic, but that is not the real cause of the Rohingya conflict, numerous ethnically/religiously diverse nations around

the world do not face internal conflicts to the same extent as Myanmar. However, the fact that Myanmar had a warring history with the Muslim Bengal Sultanate before, how the British have broken up the traditional ruling hierarchy of Myanmar during colonialism, and gave the colonial administration into the hands of loyal Indian Hindu and Muslim bureaucrats, and the fact that during the Second World War, the Muslim minorities including the Rohingya have sided with the British against the Buddhist Japanese forces are used by a significant number of government officials and loud Buddhist nationalist groups in Myanmar, to prove their argument that Muslims cannot be trusted and they actively want to destroy Buddhism. This kind of rhetoric and conflict within the Rakhine State was reignited after democratization as, suddenly a more or less democratic power struggle emerged, both in the state and in the whole of Myanmar, which has redefined the ethnic and religious differences, especially against the Rohingya, who has already lost their citizenship in previous political struggles. All in all the historical power struggle between the Muslims and the Buddhist ethnicities in the present Myanmar region, together with the recent conflict since the 2011 election, and the widespread belief that the Rohingya are Bangladeshi immigrants arriving from India during the British colonial rule, created a political and social environment that made it relatively simple for Buddhist nationalist groups and military officials to make the Rohingya into a scapegoat.

The Rohingya conflict seems to be rather different from the other two cases it is compared with. Although in each case the targeted minority is treated as a scapegoat, some factors place them apart from the other two. The Rohingya were not a powerful elite at least in recent history in the region, unlike the Tutsi, which as mentioned were the ruling class in Rwanda, yet still they have been targeted on ethnic and religious basis, similar to the case of the Jews in Nazi Germany. Yet the Myanmar state discourse made the Rohingya and the Muslims, in general, a threat to all of Buddhism in Southeast Asia, and are aiming to repress their historical background with the region. In that sense, the case of the Rohingya as a target of scapegoating is resembling the case of the Jews of Germany more than those of the Tutsi, just on a more regional level. As Buddhist nationalists are fabricating claims of the Muslims' hidden agenda to conquer not just Myanmar but the whole of Southeast Asia. Claims such as the Muslims trying to corrupt Buddhism by intermarriage, sound similar to the Nazi Argument about how the Jews were "corrupting" the Arian German population by intermarriage. This is also similar to the Hindu nationalist idea of "love jihad", according to which it is believed that Muslim men are actively deceiving Hindu women and tricking them into marriage, before "forcing" them

to convert to Islam. Through the process of intermarriage and conversion, it is further believed by the Hindu nationalists that Islam aims to conquer their Hindu lands. (Sian 2021) This narrative is also present in Myanmar within the Buddhist nationalist discourse as well. This fear tactic emphasizes the cultural and religious differences of the Rohingya from the recognized national ethnic groups and thus makes them into an out-group that needs to be repressed for the survival of the in-group of national ethnicities. However, the way the different political agents are nurturing the conflict shows a closer resemblance to the case of Rwanda, by the involvement of religious monks/priests, to trigger violence.

However, there is one major similarity between the three cases, which is the overall difficult situation each nation was in when the suspicion escalated into violence against the scapegoat group. Germany was in an economically and politically unstable state after the First World War, Rwanda was struggling with establishing their country after their independence and was left with deep social/ethnic division which needed to be addressed, and finally, Myanmar has also been trying to establish their newly independent country, torn by the Second World War and the colonial influence and the growing nationalism they have inherited. To cope with the struggle, each of the three countries' governments had to point at some group as the cause of the difficult times, and thus created scapegoats to take the blame.

The case of Myanmar and the Rohingya shows a continuity based on the three theories the research utilized; there needs to be a historical and cultural reason for the differentiation among the people of Myanmar, such as the British colonial administration dismantling the traditional hierarchy and replacing it with Muslim/Hindu loyalists, this eventually have contributed to the division between the people of Myanmar and the colonial administration, which created mistrust and suspicion against those who looked different and had a different cultural background, from the "native" Burmese cultures. This created the in-group against the out-group phenomenon described by the Social-Identity theory, which has been gradually reinforced by government media and Buddhist nationalist movements, resulting in the creation of an ethnic group that fits perfectly to be targeted as a scapegoat. Scapegoat theory takes the arguments from the previous two theories and combines them by looking at the political and social environment of Myanmar, to create an understanding of why the Rohingya became a scapegoat for the affairs of Myanmar concerning the Rakhine State. There are the previously explained historical reasons and the cultural difference, on top of it comes the turbulent political environment of Myanmar with the ever-changing governments and the relative weakness of the

Rohingya compared to the ethnic Rakhine majority, it only makes sense to make the Rohingya into a scapegoat within the Rakhine state and not any other ethnic minorities.

As for now, the end of the conflict cannot be seen, as the Rohingya are continued to be prosecuted and treated as invaders in their homelands and the current military junta seems to follow the anti-Muslim rhetoric of the Buddhist nationalist to establish their position in power, by portraying themselves as the champions of Buddhism. As long as there are no significant changes toward a milder rhetoric and minority policy from the Myanmar government, the conflict with the Rohingya and other ethnic and religious minorities will continue to exist within the country.

There is another important issue that is not discussed a lot in these kinds of elongated conflicts, which is the conflicts' effect on the people involved. Now that the Rohingya conflict is brewing for almost a century, several generations have grown up in conflict, either being hated by their homeland and living in constant despair, or grown-up being told whom to hate, and their mind filled with propaganda encouraging them for more hatred. Violence leads to more violence (Minow 2002 p.3). Additionally, the mental health toll on the people living in the conflict will have a lasting effect on the stability of society in the future as well (Shoib 2021).

As the thesis stated previously, the conflict in Myanmar is a highly complex issue, and this research only targeted a small section of the overall theme. Further research is needed to deepen the knowledge and the understanding of the other layers of the conflict, such as the overall power distribution among the national ethnicities and the government, and by this a deeper understanding of the Rohingya versus ethnic Rakhine situation as well, especially during the current politically turbulent environment in the post-2021 coup era, as over time more information becomes accessible.

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