

IPRI Commentary



Photo Source: Amnesty International

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The Other Conflict in Rakhine State

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The attack by the Arakan Army (AA) on police outposts in the northern Rakhine in January 2019 highlights the other major issue/conflict in this geographic region. The AA has been prominent since mid-2018; however, its January attacks and the subsequent ban by the government as a 'terrorist' organisation highlight a new problem in the Rakhine province.

What has caused the tensions between the Rakhine and the majority Barmans in this province, where there is already violence against the minority Rohingya community? How to explain the rise of the Arakan Army?

Explaining the Rakhine-Barman Faultline

The first reason is historical. Since the fall of the Arakan kingdom in the 17th Century, there has always been an ethnic tension between the Rakhine and the majority Barmans. The Rohingya violence in the state has temporarily shifted the focus, thereby uniting the two otherwise fractured ethnic groups within the province.

The second reason is economic and underdevelopment. Rakhine state has remained impoverished and underdeveloped, thereby exacerbating the situation. Lack of jobs and development has resulted in creating anger against the Barman dominated Centre. The Rakhines assume that the underdevelopment of their province is intentional.

Third, the 2015 elections further exacerbated the difference between the two. The Arakan National Party gained the majority in the state; the National League of Democracy (NLD) could not perform better in the elections, primarily due to its association to the Barman ethnicity. The situation became worse with NLD deciding to make their candidate the Chief Minister rather than the candidate from the Arakan National Party. This made the Rakhine more cynical towards the government and government officials, not only those in the Centre but also those representing the State.

The Arakan Army seems to be making use of the above faultline. Many in the province believe that the AA stands for the Rakhine cause, voicing the lack of economic and political development of the Rakhine state.

The Arakan Dream 2020

The Arakan Army seems to be aware of the above divide and making full use of it, which is evident in their propaganda and their speeches. Its Chief - Tun Myat Naing, in interviews and in social media has always emphasised on the ethnic divide, instigating the Rakhine youth to fight for their 'fatherland' in order to achieve a separate land by 2020. He refers to the state as 'Arakan' and people of the state as 'Arakanese'

The 'Arakan dream 2020' has been extensively used in social media propaganda. Arakan is the kingdom's name of which present Rakhine state was part of; the AA refers to the historical kingdom while talking about the 'Arakan dream'. Tun Myat Naing also emphasized: "Arakan Kingdom was rich, now we are very poor, we want to get it back." He is addressing both the generations with the clever use of Arakan and Rakhine. By mentioning 'Arakan' he is addressing the previous generation who are more familiar with in this word. In contrast, when he talks about the fight with Tatmadaw, he refers to the state as Rakhine. For example, he said, "They fired because it is Rakhine state. But if it were a Barmar State, they would be worried about killing a [Barmar] civilian in a Barmar village." This way he was addressing the youth who recognise the state as Rakhine and not Arakan.

The January 2019 attack and its larger implications

The immediate context, 2018 January police opened fire on the group in Mrauk-U that was protesting against the township administrator for cancelling the plan to mark the anniversary of the fall of Rakhine Kingdom and killed seven. Two days later, the State's leading politician, Dr Aye Muang, and Wai Hin Aung – a

popular writer and civil society activist, were arrested. These two triggered the anger among the Rakhine. The AA seems to have mobilized the above anger to justify their attack against the police. Now the AA is seen as the 'Messiah' who is fighting for the Rakhine land.

So, what are the larger implications of the above?

First, the biggest impact of this attack will be on the existing ethnic divide. The extensive use of social media by AA to propagate the idea of the Rakhine land has deepened the rift between the Rakhine and Barmar. Even those Rakhine living outside the state, especially in Yangon who are considered the elites have started openly talking about the issue and also justifying the AA actions.

Second, the rift is also visible among the Buddhist Sangha. For example, when the Upper Burma Ma-Ba Tha expressed their sorrow given the AA killing on 4 January, the Rakhine branch of the same immediately retaliated by questioning why the same was not expressed when the seven people were killed last year in Mrauk-U.

Third, the peace process that is already going slow will take a back seat even further. The 21st Century Panglong Union Peace Conference (started in 2016), was supposed to be held every six months; however, there were only three meetings till date. The conference which was originally scheduled in February is postponed due to the AA January attack. Additionally, by the end of 2018, the two key signatories of Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), Karen National Liberation Army and Shan State Army-South have suspended with the demand that all the EAOs should be part of NCA. This is significant as AA along with two other EAOs has been barred from the peace process.

The increasing support for AA may lead to the continuation of the violence.