Decolonizing History in 'Myanmar':
Bringing Rohingya Back into their own History

Michael W. Charney

Abstract

This article makes two main arguments. First, it argues that due to the imperial roots of Area Studies the views of many contemporary states and many scholars on the Rohingya, Rakhine, and Myanmar have been shaped by colonial perspectives. Second, it argues that the Rohingya were erased historically from Rakhine by the British colonial state and this erasure has been reinforced by the country focus of US Area Studies during the Cold War and after. It concludes that societies in the global south may also have to decolonize how they construct and organize knowledge, and what their governments do with it in terms of policy, so they can escape the continual problems caused originally by the colonial administrative convenience.

စာတမ်းအကျဉ်း

ဤ၍ဆောင်းပါးတွင် အဓိကသုတေသနတွေ့ရှိချက်နှစ်ခုကိုဖော်ပြထား ပါသည်။ ပထမအချက်မှာ ကိုလိုနီပြုခြင်းမှမြစ်ဖွားခံလာခဲ့သော အရှေ့တောင်အာရှဒေသလေ့လာရေးနယ်ပယ်သည်ခေတ်ပြိုင်နိုင်ငံများ နှင့် သုတေသီများ၏ ရှိဟင်ဂျာ၊ ရခိုင်နှင့် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံဆိုင်ရာ လေ့လာမှုများချဉ်းကပ်ပုံကိုလွှမ်းမိုးထားခြင်းဖြစ်သည်။ ဒုတိယအချက် မှာ ရှိဟင်ဂျာများကို ဗြိတိသျှကိုလိုနီခေတ်က ရခိုင်သမိုင်းမှ သမိုင်း ကြောင်းအရ ဖျောက်ဖျက်ခံခဲ့ရပြီး ယင်းဖျောက်ဖျက်ခံခဲ့ရမှုသည် စစ်အေးကာလအတွင်းနှင့် စစ်အေးတိုက်ပွဲအပြီးတွင် အမေရိကန် ပညာရပ်အဝန်းအပိုင်းအဝိုင်းမှဦးဆောင်သောအရှေ့တောင်အာရှဒေသလေ့

လာရေးနယ်ပယ်၏အားဖြည့်ပေးမှုဖြင့် ဆက်လက်တည်ရှိနေခဲ့ခြင် ဖြစ်သည်။ ကမ္ဘာ့တောင်ဘက်ရှိ နိုင်ငံများသည် ကိုလိုနည်းနည်း ကျတည်ဆောက်ခဲ့သည့် အသိပညာအဆောက်အအုံကိုကိုစနစ်တကျဖြို ဖျက်ရမည်ဖြစ်ပြီးယင်းနိုင်ငံများ၏အစိုးရများသည်လဲ ကိုလိုနီခေတ် အုပ်ချုပ်ရေးအဆင်ပြေစေရန်ဖန်တီးတည်ဆောက်ခဲ့သည့်မူဝါဒဖယ်ရှား နိုင်မှသာ၏ကဲ့သို့သောပြဿနာများမှလွတ်မြောက်နိုင်မည်ဖြစ်သည်။

Introduction

This article begins with two suggestions. First, if everyone who reads this article agrees with its conclusions or does not disagree with them, it will have failed. This article mainly wishes to raise questions in the reader's mind about things that will be difficult for anyone who has grown up and been educated in the contemporary world to accept right away or ever, at least completely. The systems of knowledge in which histories are produced are systems we all live in and so they are reinforced every day by concepts and images everywhere we go.

Second, the author would also like to begin by suggesting, or admitting rather, that he is pretty clear about who the Rohingya are. Nevertheless, there are many people in Myanmar (and in the West) who say they have doubts about who they are and who they claim to have been. These views are held by many to be legitimate. But, would it seem legitimate to say that the author has doubts about terms like 'Myanmar', 'Rakhine', 'Bamar Buddhism'? What if it were posed that these were hazy, poorly defined terms that raise more questions than they answer and create a huge spectrum of burdens of proof for their authenticity? Anyone in the field of 'Myanmar Studies' or 'Burma Studies' knows that these suggestions would be shocking and raise protest. This is curious, for the things that make 'the Rohingya' the Rohingya are no less established than those that make 'the Rakhine' the Rakhine (at least so far as we are not talking about people merely living in Rakhine State).

Is there, after all, *a* Myanmar, a word which has only existed in the English lexicon for twenty or so years; is there evidence that there was a Myanmar, the same as the country that claims the name today, in the historical past? There were political entities in the past that used that name, but it is not clear what their relationship with the military junta of the 1990s actually was, if there was a relationship at all. Rather, we know that the Myanmar military identifies the state they ruled from the mid-1990s (and partially even today) as 'Myanmar', but it is unclear what connection there is of any sort with the Myanmar (the kingdom or *naingngan*) that existed in the historical past. Moreover, we do not have any evidence that 'Rakhine' as the name of a district and the name applied by the contemporary state to one group of residents within that state is connected in any way to any population in the distant past. We assume a connection or are told there is a connection, but really that connection where it has been proffered is an artificial construction, the work of historians and politicians who seek to achieve gain from supporting a contemporary political identity.

This article's approach to the present topic comes in the form of a confession or, rather, an admission that at one time the errors and misunderstandings to which the author is going to hold the field and scholars within it to account were at one time shared by the author. This is the result of the fact that the structure of the Western academy and, in particular, the emergence of Area Studies in the United States, conditions students to view the world of the present and, applying the same cookie cutter view retroactively, view the world of the past through the essentialized physical, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural contours of how the United States views the world; if these students become professional academics, these perspectives are then institutionalized.

I

When the author wrote his dissertation[1] on Rakhine in 1999 in the United States at the University of Michigan, the research and final product focused on the emergence of religious communalism in early modern Rakhine, up to the nineteenth century. While overtly emphasizing the historical emergence of Theravada Buddhist identity in Rakhine, to deal with one identity in its historical context required also dealing with the spread of Islam in Rakhine, and so a good part of the dissertation is cited today as much if not more for what it says on the history of Muslims in Rakhine than it does on Theravada Buddhists. The national approach to the problem shaped the limits of the study; this study was very much in line with how one learns to study about a *part* of *Myanmar.* After a literature review that mainly focused on studies of Myanmar, the author read all the *pesa* (Bamar palm-leaf manuscripts) he could find, went through the royal orders of Myanmar, examined traveler accounts and inscriptions, attempting to identify and use everything that referred to Rakhine. New chronicles no one seems to have touched since the 1910s were (re)discovered in the process.[2] And the author began publishing articles on Rakhine history, the Portuguese in Rakhine, and the Mrauk-U in Rakhine, but always with an eye to how these stories fit into Myanmar history, as part of the periphery of Myanmar, rather than as a borderland sharing space with any other country. The author viewed Rakhine as part of Myanmar, treated Rakhine as part of Myanmar, and wrote about Rakhine as part of Myanmar.[3] Any other view would be difficult (and discouraged or at least not encouraged), the author can say confidently in retrospect, from the perspectives

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[1] Charney, 1999.

[2] A good example is the Rakhine Mìn-ra-za-grì Areì-daw sa-dàn (1775 [1784]) palm-leaf manuscript. This had been used first under the assumed title of *Old Yakhaing Chronicle* by Pe Maung Tin for his translation with G. H. Luce of the Pagan-era parts of *The Glass Palace Chronicles of the Kings of Burma* (1923), known in Bamar as the *Hmannan Yazawindawgyi*, and then not used again in major historiography until the present author's dissertation (Charney, 1999).

[3] Charney, 1998; Charney, 2002.

that were shaped by the existing historiography in Southeast Asian Studies at the time. Even the emergence of borderlands research in the decades after encouraged in an indirect way an emphasis on the importance of particular states in shaping life and history.[4] Even then, it did not until recently begin questioning the validity of Area Studies regionalities.

In line with the kind of topic the author was looking at, religion, he opted not to focus on the emergence of ethnicity, but rather on the question of how religion spread and then how that became the Rakhine Buddhist communalism we see later. To avoid complications in phenomenon examined, rather than a political choice as might today be supposed from looking at the dissertation, he dealt with Islam's spread in Rakhine rather than with the ethnic term Rohingya, aside from a few introductory references, so Muslims in early modern Rakhine were referred to as Muslims. Unconsciously, this dissertation was framed by paradigms that themselves were informed by colonial constructions of Rakhine and Myanmar. Unintentionally, this dissertation, like most literature produced on Rakhine during the period, has reinforced the constructions of knowledge of Rohingya used against them by the Myanmar state and ethno-communalists.

This brings the author to his first point: contemporary states are in alliance with earlier generations of scholarship and present scholarship that has been shaped by earlier Area Studies paradigms. Knowledge and its use has changed a lot in the hands of academics in the last thirty or so years, but not in the hands of *most* academics and not so much in the use of certain kinds of knowledge by states. This alliance is so strong because of the foundations of Area Studies in colonialism. Britain provided the template for many, many states that have emerged around what is now known as 'the Global South'. The colonial administrators who went out to the colonies were charged with identifying what was and keeping an eye out for what something might be-

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[4] Baud & van Schendel, 1997.

come and either encouraging or discouraging one or another development. Colonies, unless sequentially lined up with other colonies of the same power, were supposed to maintain very close relations with the motherland and eye with suspicion forces from the outside and often times from other kindred colonies when politics became portable and transferable to related contexts. Indian laborers were welcome in British Burma, for example, but Indian sedition was not.

We might view the state role in encouraging, sponsoring, and writing historical narratives as a form of turning a particular kind of non-state space into a particular kind of state space.[5] Eradicating local traditions of the past in favor of the royal chronicle or the colonial history (or the nationalist history in the post-independence period) was one tool for helping to level local obstructions for central administration, and anything that supported centrifugal rather than centripetal tendencies was one of the worst kinds of obstructions from the view of the royal court or the colonial secretariat. Successive states taught their constituents pasts that were embedded locally within political borders; the natural flows of people and ideas and culture that makes up the natural historical flow of human intercourse was broken and disengaged in these histories in a process Sujit Sivasundaram has called, in the case of Sri Lanka, 'being islanded'.[6] Some people were indigenous or sons of the soil and some were not. Some minorities were naturally kin with the majority populations, like the Scots and Welsh were for the British, and others were indigenous to other lands, and these ideas became etched in mental stone. Historians, ethnographers, epigraphists, archaeologists, linguists and a great many other scholars were put to work for a variety of reasons and by different employers, but generally scholarship replicated in their mental imaginaries the political contours of colonial rule.

Just as colonial paradigms reflected the interests of metropolitan Europe, Postcolonial Area Studies emerged and was funded through the National Defense Education Act of 1958

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[5] On state space, see Scott, 2009.
[6] Sivasundaram, 2013.

(continued under Title VI of the US Code), to pursue the strategic interests of the United States during the Cold War and after.[7] A taxonomy of the world was provided that identified regions and then slotted into these 'areas' individual countries. The slotting in was done in a scientific (i.e. Linnean) manner. This organization of regional and national knowledge about the world allowed scholars and others to quickly 'know' a country that might be a potential ally or a potential friend.[8] The schema had a profound impact on how the foundational scholars of postcolonial non-western histories and anthropologies (and politics, etc.) would identify their case studies, frame or limit the spaces of analysis, apply for and receive grants to undertake research, and set up and teach their classes, so this way of approaching the world became self-producing.

As a Southeast Asianist, the author is conscious that he may be offering a historical narrative of the emergence of Area Studies that only explains how the area of 'Southeast Asia' evolved. There is evidence that different regions within Area Studies have had unique experiences and that each looks at the phenomenon of Area Studies differently.[9] It may be that the artificiality of Area Studies is clearer in Southeast Asia than elsewhere because 'Southeast Asia' only emerged as a concept in World War II. Hence, unlike critiques of Area Studies in other areas, within Southeast Asian Studies, the Area Studies critique emphasizes the artificiality of the region as Cynthia Chou has argued.[10] It might also be that because the final political boundaries of Southeast Asian colonial or colonial-era states and what are said to have become today nation-states were so arbitrary and late,[11] that emphasizing national characteristics as meaningful seems especially misleading.

The United States' approach to Area Studies as it was applied to Southeast Asia caught hold everywhere in what at the

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[7] Morton, 1963.
[8] Ben-Ari, 2001.
[9] Mielke & Hornidge, 2017.
[10] Chou, 2006.
[11] Winichakul, 1994.

time as called the 'Free World'. Europe was in retreat in the early post-war decades, modern university education systems were recovering and still underfunded in post-war Asia, and, outside of the communist bloc(s), the wealth of the United States meant that at this critical point as the world was shifting from colonialism to the postcolonial world, the analytical template built on the interests of the United States dominated academic research through and about the world. The world had become, research-wise, how the United States viewed the world and this perspective, shaped by then current ideas about the American 'melting pot', a neglect of the contributions of ethnic minorities (which lagged behind the civil rights movement), an emphasis on a single 'national' language (English in practice), a single national identity (American), a single historical narrative about the emergence of the modern nation, and at a general level the commitment to the idea that there was a single national religion (however many subdivisions there might be, America was a Christian country, and anyone else was a tolerated minority).

II

This brings us to the author's second point: the Rohingya were erased historically from Rakhine by the British colonial state for political reasons. British scholarship on the non-western world has had political utility for British power as long as there have been British scholars in the non-western world. But they served different projects in different periods. All of the grand accounts of Myanmar produced by British visitors between 1757 and 1857 were in fact the records of embassies sent by the East India Company to secure concessions or acquire intelligence that would be useful to the Company in its trade or for its security.

At one time, Rakhine was and might have remained a part of Bengal. The British East India Company had acquired Rakhine as a result of the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826, but they had done their research mainly on Myanmar. Rakhine had only been ruled for about ten years or so when Francis Buchanan visited Myanmar in 1795 (and Southeastern Bengal several years later) and

began thinking about Rakhine and other territories on Myanmar's periphery as areas that the East India Company might move into and exploit, to use as potential allies against what they viewed as warlike Myanmar or to annex and rely upon as indirectly ruled buffer states.[12] And Buchanan ran into Rohingya, recorded their ethnonym, and took down words from their language, and later published this information. Naturally, as the ONLY informant who wrote a substantial account of his visit to this area for the next few decades,[13] general texts relied upon his authority and repeated this information. For all the British knew, they might eventually need to ally up with the Rohingya as well as with others in a future war with Myanmar. British approaches to the area changed again because of the activities of Thomas Campbell Robertson in the 1820s and Sir Arthur Phayre in the 1840s.

Since the 1790s, large numbers of Rakhine, many of them Buddhists, had fled Bamar rule and had taken refuge in Cox's Bazaar and other places. Robertson recognized that they would be a useful pool of manpower for impending war with the kingdom of Myanmar and organized them into the Mug Battalion.[14] It is not necessary to go into details here, but in brief, the British won the war in 1826, annexed Rakhine under the terms of the Treaty of Yandabo (1826), and the Mug Battalion veterans and their families, many of whom had lived elsewhere in Bengal for decades, came to live in Rakhine and became the new indigenous elite in the colony beneath the small numbers of British officers. Incidentally, Robertson's intelligence gathering on the Rakhine refugees when they still remained in British Bengal would include English précis made with the help of a Bengali interpreter of a manuscript history of the Buddhist Rakhine, given to him by a Rakhine Buddhist priest.[15] This précis would then be enlarged and republished by Charles Paton in 1828. This included

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[12] Buchanan makes this clear (n.d.).
[13] Buchanan, 1799.
[14] Collis, 1923c.
[15] Robertson, 1853.

many Islamic titles for the kings of the Mrauk-U Dynasty.[16] What did not dawn upon Robertson or Paton was, first, why a Buddhist Rakhine monk would be motivated to share with the British his own historical view of Rakhine (and thus whose historical narrative he was competing with), and second, why a Buddhist monastic history of Rakhine of the time would not yet have found it desirable to expunge Islamic royal titles. These references would still be prominent in the précis made by his own Rakhine Buddhist interlocutor, discussed below, in later decades, but would not be relevant to the larger British agenda for constructing a history of Rakhine as part of the Myanmar they would gradually and incrementally annex.

In view of the possibility of future wars with Myanmar, the local Rakhine claim that the Rakhine were the forefathers of the Bamars and civilizationally superior to them inspired one of Rakhine's administrators, Phayre, to ask a local Buddhist, Nga Mi, to provide him with a historical narrative on the basis of which Phayre could write a racial history of Rakhine and later of Myanmar.[17] This kind of collaboration between Buddhist Rakhine scholars and British scholars on writing Rakhine history became somewhat of a pattern. Maurice Collis and G.E. Harvey, would do the same thing, turning to another Buddhist Rakhine, San Shwe Bu, to instead provide a précis of Rakhine historical sources in Harvey's case,[18] or to collaborate on numerous projects, providing English summaries of sources, in the case of Collis.[19] As a result, the British got what they needed, "a" history of Rakhine, but always through the intermediary screening of a Rakhine Buddhist scholar. Although we know that Muslims were recorded at many junctures in the pre-British past to have been the majority of the population of Rakhine, they thus begin under the British to be erased from the historical record and identified solely as immigrants into the region.

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[16] Paton, 1828.
[17] Phayre, 1841; 1844. See also his extension of such views to Myanmar's history generally in: Phayre, 1869; 1882; 1883.
[18] Harvey, 1925.
[19] Collis, 1923a; Collis, 1923b; Collis & San Shwe Bu, 1925.

In the early 1850s, the British annexed Lower Myanmar (called by the British Pegu) and had grown increasingly confident that it would be more convenient to put Rakhine south of the Naf River together with Tenasserim and Lower Myanmar into a new province, the Province of British Burma in 1862. They did so on the basis of predominant Buddhism and Bamar language usage, on the one hand, and to leave northern Rakhine, north of the Naf River, which was predominantly Muslim and Bengali speaking within Eastern Bengal. Buddhist, Bamar-speakers north of that line were viewed as historical migrants beyond their homeland in the south. Muslims south of that line were viewed similarly as migrants out of their homeland north of the Naf River. Of course, British and later Bamar data-gatherers often noted that Muslims in certain areas of Rakhine had been there since the sixteenth century and that Rohingya was their local name.

Nevertheless, colonial data-gatherers were instructed not to bother with local detail and to follow the Indian register of ethnic names for people identified as non-indigenous. And as Indians had already been assigned to the subcontinent, they too could not also be indigenous to Myanmar. Through the colonial census, Muslim identities were fixed in stone as one of the language groups that made up the British racial imaginary of "Indians" and as belonging to the subcontinent. The Rohingya became Bengali and their dialect an offshoot of Bengali. They were then de-indigenized through the abusive violence of British officials and state documentation, in particular the colonial census. The results for the Rohingya have gradually gone from unfortunate to inconvenient to catastrophic (to the extent of possibly being existentially significant) under Bamar governance since 1948, but especially after 1962.

III

This brings the author to his third point: Myanmar's tatmadaw-led governments since 1962 have ensured the continuity of the use of colonial forms of knowledge by the state to continue to

de-indigenize the Rohingya. For a brief period of about a decade from 1954, when the government was in the midst of a civil war and needed allies, it relaxed its stance on official British ethnic paradigms and began to recognize local populations for how they saw themselves. Government documents and speeches recognized that the Rohingya were in fact Rohingya. But things took a dramatically negative turn with the establishment of the Revolutionary Council government of General Ne Win from 1962, followed by a series of other military governments under various names and guises, whether the Burma Socialist Programme Party Government, the State Law and Order Restoration Council, the State Peace and Development Council, the Thein Sein government, or the nominally civilian government under the NLD and de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

The Rohingya once again became non-indigenous and foreign, they lost state recognition and citizenship. Military raids of the border in 1978 forced many into Bangladesh and the citizenship laws of 1982 formally announced that Indians like other groups who were considered to be foreign to Myanmar by the British in 1824, were considered to be so by the state under the Myanmar military as well. A population group had to be present in Myanmar by 1823 to be considered a native race. This is why it is so important for anti-Rohingya campaigners to deny certain interpretations of pre-1823 references to the Rohingyas or even simply to Muslims per se in Rakhine. The Rohingya became the subject of a campaign of genocide and after military attacks last autumn, most live without documents in refugee camps in Bangladesh.[20]

Contemporary scholarship has sometimes confused the Taingyintha paradigm as Bamar inspired.[21] Certainly, Bamar literati had nominal ideas about population groups formed on the basis of vicinity, political loyalty, religion, kith and kin, and other modes of group assignment.[22] What scholarship has missed, however, is the essentially colonial roots of the

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[20] The author visited the largest of these camps at Cox's Bazaar in July 2018.
[21] Cheesman, 2017.
[22] Charney, 2006.

Taingyintha paradigm and its emergence not from the flexible and fluid identities of the early modern era, but from the racialism and essentialism of the post-Enlightenment British colonial state. Ne Win's "Burma" or "Myanmar," like other "Burmas" or "Myanmars" since, poses itself as anti-colonial but in fact is a departure in its dependence on colonial governmentality from the intermediary Nu government.

Although anecdotally interesting to point out the great affinity that Myanmar's post-Nu leaders have had for the British way of life and British friends, especially Ne Win and Aung San Suu Kyi, it is more sanguine to point to the continued use of colonial publications, laws, and gazetteers for everyday governance in Myanmar, even into the twenty-first century. Bamar governance, its patterns of rule, its attitudes, ethnic paradigms, and ways of viewing history have since 1962 represented a continuation rather than a discontinuation of the British colonial model. The closest that Myanmar has ever come to departing from that model was under Nu's rule and his attempts to make Buddhism the state religion.

One solution may be to reconsider the 'decolonize' agenda and direct it at places like Myanmar where the state still uses colonial paradigms against the people within their borders. The merits of the decolonizing agenda cannot be overstated; it intends to undo the colonial biases that have worked against Black and Middle Eastern populations not only in employment and the authors that students read, but also to undo the very disciplines that organize our thinking at the university level. The great problem of this approach, however, is its limited perspective regarding the continuity of colonial perspectives. It is arguably the case that more people have been killed and more people have suffered globally from the implementation of Western methods of organizing people and identifying indigeneity and belongingness by non-western states, states that had inherited these tools from the colonial past than at the hands of the original European colonial motherlands. And it is the use of ideas organized around colonial-era thinking by these second-generation "colonial" states that is in desperate need of fundamental change. We need

to ask big questions—How, for example, do societies in the global south decolonize themselves and how they construct and organize knowledge, and what their governments do with it in terms of policy?

Until Myanmar finds an answer to these questions and a change in the way Bamars look at people within their society, problems similar to those we see today will continue. Regardless of what solution is found to the present crisis, Rakhine will continue to be subject to genocidal conditions and there will be further episodes of murder and flight. This goes beyond the need to abandon the citizenship laws and the Taingyintha paradigm; Myanmar needs to radically reinvent itself on a new basis, if it is to end its continued problems not just with the Rohingya, but with all of its ethnic minorities.

Conclusion

The next chapter of the state history of Rakhine is being written right now. There will not be a new history of Rakhine per se, however, one that changes the narrative and the antagonist only if Myanmar and its study can finally be decolonized. Rakhine history from start to present will have to be re-written from scratch, giving as equal a voice to the Rohingya as that given to Rakhine Buddhists. This should not result in a collage-like ethnic narrative but rather an account of how a religiously and diverse ethnic kingdom that did not view the Muslim aspects of the early modern Mrauk-U Court as artificial only. It should also be a history that directs more attention to what Muslim settlements were doing along the Kaladan River between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries where the Buddhist annals have ignored them. Moreover, this new start to Rakhine history needs to come to grips with the three-fold colonization of Rakhine by the Bamars, the British, and Tatmadaw-led governments since 1962. The more important chapters should be focused on the disastrous endpoint of the present and explain to current generations how divisive governing paradigms were applied to Rakhine history, society, and identities that ultimately

turned Rohingya and Rakhine against each other. It should explain how this application made the Rohingya invisible to state registers. Further—and this will require rewriting some of the general histories of Myanmar—we need to better understand the phenomenon in which colonial governmentality passed through the first decade of independence and then resurged under military leadership and subjected the Rakhine and Rohingya to forms of subjectivity in the case of the Rakhine and exclusion in the case of the Rohingya. This will certainly counter the argument made by historian of Myanmar Michael Aung-Thwin that 1962, *not* 1948, marks the true end of colonial rule.[23] In a sense, the colonial manner of ruling has not ended, it has restrengthened after the hiatus of 1948-1962.

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