

What is the psyche of the Tatmadaw regarding Rohingya repatriation

Professor Michael W. Charney (SOAS) comments Rohingya seminar Dhaka, 2023 May 20

Thanks to the organisers for inviting me to make a few comments. The Tatmadaw's psyche regarding what it did to the Rohingya in 2017 and what it would do with them now has changed. There are two guiding beliefs that shaped Tatmadaw thinking relevant to the Rohingya.

(1) The first is something that developed under Ne Win (1958-1960, 1962-1988) and has been engrained in the broader Burmese mindset and certainly amongst the Tatmadaw's officers. This is the Taingyintha myth (Cheeseman) that holds that certain population groups are native to Myanmar and some are foreign groups that were imported into the country, after 1823, by the British (from 1824) and are thus not naturally part of the Burmese nation. The Rakhine Buddhists, the Kachin, the Karen, the Burmans etc are all native, BUT the Indians, Chinese, and the Rohingya living in Myanmar are not. In this Tatmadaw view, in a just, de-colonised world, the Rohingya should be living in Bangladesh, NOT in Myanmar. This paradigm forms the basis for the 1982 citizenship laws [indicated in the opening video that was shown today]. Being viewed as foreign, non-indigenous, the Rohingya were now stripped of citizenship. This thinking has not gone away. So, although the international community might pressure Myanmar to take some Rohingya back, the Myanmar government will at best really do it only in the short-term, but unwillingly for the longterm, regardless of what they say out loud. I believe their willingness to take some Rohingya back now is as a means from them to counter the Arakan Army's expanding and deepening control within Rakhine by sowing the seeds for future local divisions they can instrumentalise. Normally, the Tatmadaw has applied this approach in ethnic areas, trying to divide local populations against themselves.

(2) Secondly, in the Tatmadaw mind it is THE protector of the nation and its definition around Buddhism. They interpret as keeping the country united and under tight Tatmadaw oversight, which was a role enshrined in the 2008 Nargis constitution (implemented in 2010/2011) ushering in the so-called transitional government. No matter what the actual motives were for the August 2017 attacks by the Tatmadaw on Rohingya communities, whether it was (a) to remove the Rohingya because of its belief that they do not belong in the country or (b) because some military and government cronies wanted to free up land for development, the military will have reshaped the event and remembered it as (c) a necessary and effective move against Islamic terrorism that was threatening the country and its Buddhist identity initiated as an immediate response to claimed attacks by ARSA on a remote police post. As the Tatmadaw rank and file will believe the latter and the leadership quite possibly convinced themselves of (c) before, during, or after the attacks, its certainly possible that all three reasons have coalesced in the Tatmadaw mind in a mutually-reinforcing and self-affirming way.

So, repatriation will never be complete so long as the Tatmadaw or a recommencement of the dyarchy remain in power in Myanmar—repatriation will only fully take place in a way in which the Tatmadaw can screen the Rohingya for elements that it claims are there, ARSA for example. The tatmadaw will want to keep the Rohingya in secure areas, so that they will be an easily containable population if a threat re-emerges against its own control or it needs to instrumentally provoke Rakhine Buddhists to feel that the Tatmadaw presence is necessary in the region to cooperate in fending off Muslims. After all, the Rohingya communities attacked in August 2017 were already subjected to considerable Tatmadaw security constraints (and

posed no palpable threat to anyone) when the Tatmadaw instrumentalised them as a threat to Rakhine Buddhists and the Burmese nation at that time. The Tatmadaw is not known for changing its playbook, so having done this successfully before, they most certainly, under the right conditions, do it again.

This will have an important impact on the desire of all Rohingya to return to life in Myanmar and make this process incredibly slow, staggered, and never complete. Myanmar will take back relatively low numbers of Rohingya, again, enough to irritate the Arakan Army and hopefully enough to meet the demands of some of the more modest international demands, but not so many as to threaten the country or so large a group that they cannot be easily controlled by the Tatmadaw. If Min Aung Hlaing succeeds in quelling the current revolution within Myanmar, then I expect that after the return to normalcy, the Tatmadaw may after a time create a similar problem with the Rohingya as it believes that this was an effective way at pumping up national support for the military in 2017 and 2018, giving it a degree of popular support it had enjoyed at no point since the 1962 military coup, albeit this would fade very quickly due to domestic electoral politics in its competition with the NLD.

But would a change in power in the country significantly change Myanmar policy regarding the Rohingya? This raises the question though what if we had regime change? No, a change in power would not bring change. If we go back to the status quo before 1 February 2021 (a dyarchy but this time minus the NLD), the revolution came to an end in the country, and many Rohingya were let back into Myanmar, I suspect we would again see within ten years another crisis that would force the Rohingya out of Myanmar and back into Bangladesh.

The likelihood of such a development has been made more likely by the alienation of Russia after its invasion of the Ukraine in 2022. The Tatmadaw now likely believe that they will be protected by the emerging Eurasian bloc between Russia and the PRC which provides a space the Tatmadaw hopes will in the longterm keep it immune from Western and INGO pressure by making available diplomatic and other support and alternative access of those targeted with sanctions to international banks. It is for this reason that the Tatmadaw bowed to Chinese soft power in 2022-2023 to recommence negotiations to repatriate the Rohingya after Bangladesh requested China's help in the matter. Despite a promising start, this effort really will not work because China is only concerned in its own practical concerns in ensuring regional stability for trade corridors connected to the BRI and thus would like to end the impasse between Myanmar and Bangladesh and the development of a potentially lucrative trade corridor through Rakhine to Bangladesh (this is where Myanmar crony capitalism was interested when the 2017 attacks on the Rohingya occurred).

China is not primarily concerned about the situation of the Rohingya once they return to Myanmar which is unsatisfactory for Bangladesh, the UNCHR, and of course for the Rohingya themselves. And if these conditions are not addressed first, we will find the Rohingya fleeing again back to Bangladesh very quickly.

The important thing to remember is that the whole country was re-educated according to the Taingyinthya myth, the majority of Burman Buddhists and even ethnic minorities bought into the idea that Muslims are a security threat and that the Rohingya were foreigners, a group of Bangladeshis who had created a fake ethnicity, and when the military attack the Rohingya in August 2017, they rejoiced. Even Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD supported the move and refused to condemn it—she personally went to defend the attacks at the ICJ. Members of the NUG include some who were vocal against the Rohingya and it is believed that they still do not accept the Rohingya as Burmese.

We have seen many videos from the country during the CDM, indicating that young people in the country accepted the error of their ways. But this was a small number. Many other Burmese are also willing to look the other way and forget about the Rohingya while most Burmese are resisting the military right now. I think permanently however, the country will slip back into a position in which anti-Rohingya vitriol reemerges.

But what would happen if the revolution actually succeeded, the military lost power, and someone else took control. This is the only situation that would bring a change in policy - if military rule is brought to an end. The military has a bunker mentality. The more it is threatened the harder it entrenches its position and feels challenged to hold out. A civilian government, however, such as Myanmar has not had since 1962 (because the 2010-2021 period was actually a dyarchy), would be more sensitive to international pressure. Not only would a civilian government be more responsive to international pressure but they would be more likely to be committed to the principles and obligations of civil liberties and to abide by international norms on citizenship and ethno-religious inclusivity. This which would make it harder for civilian leaders, than it has been for the Tatmadaw, despite their deeper sentiments, to deal with the Rohingya very harshly and possibly they would feel obliged to normalise their presence in the country.

Thanks for your attention.

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