Title: The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peace Building-The Context of Rakhine State in Myanmar

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Abstract

The role of religion in conflict and peace building has mostly been depicted in binary terms: either as a source of violence or of reconciliation. The Government of Myanmar facing serious challenges to resolve between the conflicting demands and aspirations of the Rakhine Buddhist and the Muslim communities. The Government of Myanmar trying to show Rohingya community as a whole as violent extremists – ignoring the historical fact that the Rohingya themselves are one of the most-oppressed minority group in the world. The problems faced by Rohingya are implanted in decades of authoritarian rule, violence and mistrust among different religious groups. Pre-empting deep-seated violence could be eliminated by showing a credible process that can demonstrate to the Buddhist and Muslim communities that political avenues exist and multi-religious dialogue could facilitate peaceful co-existence. This study will employ critical discourse analysis and doctrinal analysis on the existing literature, news reports and reports of the local bodies and international organizations followed by a case study to analyze how religion played a role for unrest and violence in Rakhine State in Myanmar and how multi-faith dialogue and cooperation could contribute towards reconciliation process for peaceful co-existence of Rohingya and other religious and ethnic groups. The case study is to be conducted using semi-structured interviews among persons fleeing from violence and took shelter in Bangladesh and also participants residing in conflict zone including individuals from majority and minority religious and ethnic groups and other relevant stakeholders. While identifying potential solutions or way outs for the Rakhine State, this study will also show how religion played either positive or negative roles and lessons need to be learnt for long-term peace-building.
1. **Background and Context:**

Religion has been part and parcel of human experience either for good or for worse. Religion emerged in different forms in different times to eradicate hatred and to promote love, peace and to enlightened people to live a fruitful life. From the early human civilization religion played a very strong role in shaping up the society. Over the time the world has witnessed how the focus of religion shifted from peace building to destruction of peace. Although the role of religion in conflict and peace building has mostly been depicted in binary terms: either as a source of violence or of reconciliation, it is quite complex to define the role of religion as there might have wide array of other factors that might have relevance for a particular conflict.¹

Politically motivated religious violence has very ancient root and has got far reaching consequence. The idea of secular state that is keeping religion out of state and political activity is not practiced in many parts of the world. Although religiously motivated conflicts has deep roots even before the nationalist approach, religion based blind nationalism has become cause of both violent conflicts among different groups and oppression by the state authorities or state sponsored groups in many parts of the world. The Rohingya in Myanmar considered world's most persecuted ethnic minority in the world due to having distinct cultural and religious identity and their flight is termed as "The Rohingya: Unwanted at Home, Unwelcome Abroad".²

The historical geneses of Rohingya in Rakhine State are as scrambled and multifarious as the history of Myanmar itself. While Rohingyas are arguably relate themselves to be the descendants of the pre-colonial Muslim community of Rakhine State, the word "Rohingya" could be traced back in 1799 in an article on the comparative vocabulary in the then British Burma Empire to indicate the unique dialects of the indigenous people of Rakhine State.³

The problems faced by Rohingya has also been implanted in decades of authoritarian rule since independence from colonial government in Myanmar followed by violence and mistrust among

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different religious groups in the absence of potential justice mechanism to resolve conflicts and maintain rule of law.

Rift between Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhist community is nothing new and related the country’s colonial past. Myanmar has experienced chain of complicated historical proceedings which makes the history of that country distinctive from other countries of the world. Rakhine state formerly known as Arakan was fairly independent state from rest of the Burmese empire until for brief period prior to the conquest of Myanmar by British. Rakhine state had less interaction with rest of the Myanmar in pre-colonial and post colonial era due to the unfavorable geographical setting rather it shared close ties with the costal territories from bay of Bengal to India. The British take-over Burma (now Myanmar) in 1826 and their open immigration policy in region cemented way for settlers to Rakhine state including Muslims from India for the purpose of business and workers for agricultural fields and other local small industries.

One of the reported racial conflict that triggered violent conflicts between the majority Buddhist group and minority groups particularly immigrants having Indian roots including Muslims in Burma (now Myanmar) was during the 1930s, which was the upshot of the nationalist Doh Bama (We Burma) pressure group that later triggered anti-Muslim movement. The understanding among the majority Burmese Buddhist group was foreigners increasingly taking control of much of Burma’s trade that was considered as a serious concern for them. Anti-immigrant sentiments targeting Indian and Muslim further deteriorated as Muslims in British Burma decided not to support the Burmese Independence Movement and protested against the Japanese occupation of Burma (1942–1945) and supported the colonial British regime. The

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5 Ibid.
6 In this essay, I used both names, Myanmar and Burma interchangeably without indicating any special differences. Burma was old British colonial name, gained independence in 1948. Since 1989, Myanmar has become the official name of the country but internationally and especially among Rohingya and other Burmese exile group 'Burma' is commonly used.
7 Ibid.
situation further aggravated after the failed secessionist drive of the some Rohingya to join Pakistan during partition of British India in 1947.\(^8\)

The misery of the Rohingya went to the peak, after the enactment of the Burmese Citizenship Law in 1982, which excluded the Rohingya as an ethnic group of Myanmar.\(^9\) The law declared that any ethnic group that settled in Myanmar after 1823 could not assert citizenship, which eventually clogged the door of citizenship for the Rohingya Muslims and thereby legitimized discrimination against the Rohingya as it has become impossible for them to trace their settlement and relevant documents prior to 1823.\(^10\)

There are two main narratives that instigate violent conflicts between Rohingya Muslims and Buddhists. The first narrative is based on a fear of Islamic intrusion into Myanmar and demographic besiegement by Muslims—an idea that runs deep in Burmese Buddhist society. As one study stated-“A segment of Burman Buddhist monks represented by Ashin Wirathu is re-igniting sentiments of intolerance and flaming lingering resentment toward Rohingya, preaching hateful rhetoric and sowing fear in the local Buddhist population in an attempt to change the ethnic demographics of Rakhine State”. \(^11\) Ashin Wirathu, initiated “969” economic-centric nationalist crusade, which encourage Buddhists to stay away from businesses run by Muslims.\(^12\)

The 969 movement has engrossed followers by demonstrating themselves as a “protector” of Buddhism from foreigners particularly Rohingya. As monks have the highest level of moral authority in Myanmar and thus could pursue an ethno-nationalist discriminatory schema without any impediment. Even though there is no tangible evidence Myanmar is facing any threat by Islamist or religious group, the narrative has gained foothold amongst many Buddhists fearing that Islam could dismay Myanmar’s Buddhist uniqueness and potentially could exterminate Buddhism in Myanmar altogether.

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\(^8\) Ibid.


\(^10\) Ibid.


\(^12\) Ibid; “The term 969 is a numerological reference to the Buddha, his teachings, and his religious community. Ashin Wirathu as the initiator of the 969 made a call for Buddhists to display 969 stickers, posters, flags and other items at their home and businesses, which unfortunately making religious divisions and discrimination within Burmese community".
That is why; State authorities unofficially prohibited or restricted inter-faith marriages in an attempt to prevent Buddhist women from marrying followers of other religion particularly targeting Rohingya.\textsuperscript{13} Rohingya are debarred from many areas of employment, including government jobs and could not marry or cross border of township without official authorization.\textsuperscript{14} The Inquiry Commission into sectarian violence in Rakhine State released in 2013\textsuperscript{15} without any indication as to barriers and hindrances for education and employment rather blamed Rohingya living in rural areas “could not speak any indigenous languages of Myanmar well . . . [nor] could [they] write or read the official Burmese language used in government communications.”\textsuperscript{16} There is also accusation by the Buddhist that increasingly Rohingya youths are leaning towards violence and Islamic radical groups.\textsuperscript{17}

The second narrative is of the Muslim Rohingyas as they (Rohingya) receive the treatment of an open prison by the state authorities having only two options either to bear the torture by the Buddhist majority community and state authorities on regular basis or migrate from there due to their religious beliefs and practices. Despite majority of the Rohingyas has rarely involved in any kind of violence, they are targeted as the aftermath of any kind of violence committed by any individual member. Therefore, law enforcing agency and the majority Buddhist never try to identify criminals who might have committed the crime rather they always target whole community for torture and burn their houses and properties.

Due to prolong isolation and distrust between local Buddhist and Muslim communities, any kind of crime or unusual incident is targeted as racial issue rather than proper identification of accused or victim and follow up thorough legal procedure and hence Rohingya Muslim civilians have to undergo continuous torture and even leading their life under several restrictions. Due to decades of profound bowdlerization, Myanmar continues to have a flustered account of incident

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Eliane Coates (2014)
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
by fellow community members—be it online or face-to-face are considered more trustworthy and hence in some cases, even spread of false news contributed towards a complete breakdown of law and order.\textsuperscript{18}

During 2013 conflict, Buddhist group argued that Rohingya boy raped a Buddhist girl and during 2015 conflict, state authorities and Buddhist community claimed Rohingya attacked police and killed nine officers\textsuperscript{19} whereas Rohingya claimed kidnapping and killing of several Rohingya by the Buddhist community and aggressive attitude of the state forces as the prime cause of violence.\textsuperscript{20} State authorities rarely investigate the wrong doing of police and never take any measures to prevent police forces from using excessive power, torture and harassment towards Rohingya.

Indeed, the Inquiry Commission in 2013 found that the authorities have been “inconsistent” in applying and following the rule of law.\textsuperscript{21} The same happened in August 2017 as well when based on an allegation of attack by the Rohingya terrorist group towards law enforcing agencies, Myanmar Army and Buddhist community started to burn houses of thousands of Rohingya and killing of civilian Rohingyas, which has already created a grave situation of trauma and torture compelling more than 4,00000 Rohingya for fleeing to Bangladesh within one month as of September 20, 2017.\textsuperscript{22}

Many Rohingya fleeing from conflict zone in Myanmar after conflicts erupts in August 2017 described horrific experiences of physical abuse, torture, rape, destruction and burning of property and unlawful killings carried out by both Rakhine Buddhists and security forces and

\textsuperscript{18} Human Rights Watch found that "rather than protecting civilians at risk, Burmese police either stood by or actively engaged in and contributed to the unfolding violence". "During the riots in Meiktila in March 2013, Burmese police did not attempt to contain the situation". See for details, Human Rights Watch, “All You Can Do is Pray: Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Burma’s Arakan State” (2013), available at http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/burma0413webcover_0.pdf, accessed on 22 April, 2017.

\textsuperscript{19} This was reported in Myanmar state media and claimed by members of Buddhist community during interviews.

\textsuperscript{20} Many Rohingya have reported cases of abuse, rape, destruction of property and unlawful killings carried out by both Rakhine Buddhists and security forces during interviews.


Amnesty International\textsuperscript{23} and Human Rights watch\textsuperscript{24} has already verified and confirmed some incidents of harassment, abuse and destruction.

Despite prolong mistrust and conflict, peace building is possible in Rakhine State, but many challenges need to be addressed for achieving sustainable peace and stability in the region. In this respect this study tried to utilized the idea of \textit{desacralisation} as mentioned by Isak Svensson as a viable means for settling religious conflicts.\textsuperscript{25} Desacralisation broadly means the process of decreasing the importance of religious factors decrease in the context of an armed conflict for achieving harmony and peace among the conflicting groups.\textsuperscript{26} The term \textit{desacralisation} is also considered as a political or societal process of removing the religious status in so called religiously motivated arm conflict.\textsuperscript{27} As the stated two narratives demonstrated two conflicting perspectives, one tried to show religious beliefs of the Rohingya considered as a long term threat by the Majority Buddhist and whereas Rohingya themselves considered that they have been targeted for continuous torture by the Buddhist and state authorities due to their religious identity. Therefore, it could be assumed that two narratives have different orientations and the connecting point between two narratives is the ‘role of religion’. To understand the role of religion in the context of conflict in Rakhine State, it might be relevant to see how existing literature have reflected on the issues.

2. \textbf{Review of existing literature and research questions}

The conflict in Rakhine state is continuing since independence of Myanmar back in 1948 and to some extent roots of the conflict could be traced back to British rule in Myanmar back in 1826. Despite being one of the long lasting conflicts in the world and Rohingya are being considered as one of the most persecuting community in the world, the numbers of literatures are quite limited and not having wide ranging discussions. On the basis of existing literatures, it could be reflected that most of the existing study and literature tried to depict the issue either from the context of


\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
religion as a driver for conflict or religion contribute to institutional and or state failure and discriminatory approach by the law enforcing agency triggering more conflicts and violating rule of law in the region.

2.1. **Religion as a driver for conflict and non-integration**

From the early human civilization politics and religion are interconnected. In the history of human civilization religion always played an important part in determining the society and political life of the people. Religion's significance may differ in the perspective of different country or society but its influence and appeal in social and political sphere is general around the globe. The world has observed in last few decades number of incidents how religious ambition turned social movement into violent conflict, political rights give rise to religiously aggravated armed conflict, how blind nationalism transformed into religious based ideology therefore inspires violence and intolerance and more importantly utilization of religion as an instrument to fulfill political dream. Much conflict having religion as 'centrality' also encompasses strong political dynamics. There are many incidents and situation in the history when religion is used as a weapon to implement political desire or social dominance. Use of religion is always been the most powerful weapon to oppress others to gain political dominance or societal control. Most heinous crimes like mass killing, rape, executions or in other words ethnic cleansing were and still approved under the name of religion to retain political control or due to the fear that minority community must be subjected to prejudice otherwise supremacy will be compromised.

In the history of Holocaust we find that a learned man Gerhard Kittel Professor New Testament theology and many of his followers supported Hitler and Holocaust owing to their fear of losing anti modern values and social prominence to urbanization and modernization. "Kittel shared with many of his fellow German Protestants a dislike for these offspring of the French and the Industrial Revolutions, an anti-modern stance which made them politically vulnerable."\(^{28}\) Kittel nullified the idea of equality and tolerance, feared of losing respect for church and social elites so he found Hitler as a savior against Jews. Though it was mostly Kittel who supported anti modern view of losing societal dominance and German nationalism fantasy and tends to legalize his

\(^{28}\) Robert P. Ericksen, "Genocide, Religion, and Gerhard Kittel Protestant Theologians Face The Third Reich", in: *In God's name-Genocide and Religion in the Twentieth Century*, Omer Bartov and Phyllis Mack (Eds.), p.64
discriminatory idea against Jews under religions clothing as he viewed Jews as 'thread' to Christianity and prescribed to held them 'behind ghetto walls', it could not be perceived as dominant views.\textsuperscript{29}

'Al-Qaeda’-a radical group in middle east emerged to realize its political wish to confront Arab leaders from Middle Eastern region and replace them with more creditable and obedient religious governments tried to justify also their radical views under cover of so called religious purity.\textsuperscript{30} In the absence of desired political success 'Al -Qaeda' took more ambitious project from region now focus shifted to global aiming to cut the western influence from Muslims and Arab world and launched attack against west specially US hence attempts to justify terrorism on innocent western civilians as targeting 'enemy of Islam'. In both cases we see religion is taken as a resort to validate the monstrous crimes where the ultimate aim was not religious rather political.

Religion and politics are very closely associated with each other since time immemorial. Priest, monks, Imams and other religious leaders were and in some cases still possess greater political role than religious one. Today, the situation is not changed but modified. In many states persons holding religious position are interfering with state politics and influencing violence against minorities. Though the original goal is retaining some sort of political authority over policy making and society but they tend to give their political views a religious shade. If we look at conflicts in Sri Lanka, particularly disagreement between Tamil (minority) and Singhalese (majority) were based on the politicization of monks or movement of 'Sangha'. Promulgator of sangha Walpole Rahula was not ready to accept the idea of monks non-participation in politics and society, so he initiated 'political monk' model in association with Mahindra Rajapaksa government hence paved way for monks representation in parliament and against any kind of peace agreement with minorities.\textsuperscript{31} In some cases we see transformation of controversial religious norm into state law to encourage hatred and reinforce political power. Even in secular countries majority populations religious norms is utilized to achieve ulterior motive. For example, India is a secular country having Hindu religiously motivated government in power (BJP) which in order to strengthen political power employ religiously motivated rules against

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid, p.68.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, p.10.
minorities for example current BJP government to retain support of its fundamental Hindu organization RSS banned cow slaughter and eating beef in several states and even promoted violence against beef eating communities like Muslims and Christians. Incidentally, series of violence including death were recorded after the declaration of state ban against beef.\textsuperscript{32}

Though cow slaughter, eating and selling beef were allowed earlier and not illegal under India's secular state constitution but as per Hindu's religious norms 'cow' is a holy animal and consuming beef and kettle business is prohibited. Government in this case took the 'religious' sentiment of majority Hindu to satisfy its political ally and maintained silence against such atrocities.

Shia and Sunni both sects of Islam are product of internal Muslim politics. Sectarian conflict between these two sects is more political than religious spins around high political ambition, power, authority, territorial control and economic benefit resulted in long-lasting civil war. Both sect vowed to deploy religion against each other and continue the legacy of their predecessors in terms of criminal actions and hatred towards each other.

From various incidents which I mentioned we can see religion could become a tool of political game and could end up in justifying atrocities, mass murder and killing of civilians. Similar kind of situation is somehow prevailing in Myanmar.

Due to complex physical location and belonging to acute poor financial zone of the world, Rakhine state remained a place of oppression, discrimination and violence and failed to receive adequate attention of international community and human rights groups. Therefore, there are very few and well researched literature that clearly identified causes of violence and role of religion for such conflict in Rakhine state in Myanmar. Azeem Ibrahim (2016)\textsuperscript{33} tried to show that Muslim identity of Rohingya and their linguistic identity played a role for oppression and violence against them whereas some other study\textsuperscript{34} indicated that it is due to discrimination and

\textsuperscript{32} See http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/10/13/448182574/indias-ban-on-beef-leads-to-murder-and-hindu-muslim-friction
discriminatory citizenship law that contributing towards segregation and violence rather than religion itself.

Most of the reports produced by The Rakhine Commission of Inquiry in 2013\textsuperscript{35} indicated linguistic and religious segregation of the Rohingya and rather indicated non-integration of the Rohingya is the prime cause of non-cooperation and violence between the Buddhist and Rohingya Muslims. Rohingya community speaks different language which is similar to ‘Chittagong Dialect’ as spoken in parts of Bangladesh.\textsuperscript{36} Most of the Rohingya people cannot read and write Burmese official language instead some of them can read and write urdu. Government and most of the Burmese population agreed on that position that Rohingya Muslims are illegal migrants. Apart from that Rohingya failed to coup with Burmese culture and way of living life. Another important perspective is that Rohingya was always considered as outsiders and serving the interest of sovereign Myanmar. This idea is based on the colonial part of Myanmar when Rohingya minorities preferred to stay within British regime negating Burmese independent movement. This sentiment gave rise to the ethno-Burman nationalism that Rohingya are unwanted migrants from neighboring countries and should be expelled from Burman lands.

Furthermore, religion is often seen as a key cause of conflict, both in many individual incidents and on the several international conflicts. Samuel Huntington is considered one of the most prominent voice claiming that religious and cultural identities would be the main driver of international conflict in the new world order following the end of the Cold War.\textsuperscript{37} However, the notion of Huntington is not fully true as we see major conflicts around the world more or less has also linked with the political agenda of the governments and/or economic interest of groups or the state itself. Most of the existing literature on the situation in Rakhine conflict both literature sympathizing with Rohingya\textsuperscript{38} or justifying actions by the Myanmar authority or Buddhist


\textsuperscript{36} Ahmed Imtiaz (2010), The Plight of the Stateless Rohingyas (Bangladesh: The University Press Limited).

\textsuperscript{37} He argued that “although the nation state would remain the most powerful actor in the international arena, the ‘clash of civilizations’ would become the new force fuelling conflict. His categorisation of the world into nine different civilisations is based mostly along religious lines.” See, Sara Silvestri and James Mayall (2015).

community admitted that religion as a driver of conflict. It is again interesting that Kyaw San Wai stated that "there appears to be a distinct line drawn between other Muslims in Myanmar and the Rohingya in the Burmese perspective – the ‘sentiment’ has been anti-Rohingya rather than anti-Muslim". Further, Siegfried O. Wolf argued that "Rakhine state is one of the country's poorest areas, despite being rich in natural resources. The Rohingya are thus considered an additional economic burden on the state, as they compete for the few available jobs and opportunities to do business. The jobs and businesses in the state are mostly occupied by the Burmese elite. As a result, we can say that Buddhist resentment against the Rohingya is not only religious; it is also political and economically driven". This statement perhaps not baseless as it is not only Muslims but also Hindus are forced to leave Myanmar in a report is has been identified "amid an increase in violence in Myanmar, not only Rohingya Muslims but many Hindus too are leaving the Buddhist majority country and are seeking refuge in Bangladesh".

Further, Sakia Sassen analyzed and questioned whether Rohingya persecution guided by 'business interest rather than religion' as in her study she stated Myanmar government is in need to more land for allowing foreign investments hence expelling them (Rohingya) from their land is a way of freeing up land and water. Burning their (Rohingyas) homes makes this irreversible: the Rohingya are forced to flee and leave their lands behind. Hence, religion has captured the attention of observers and commentators around the world as the motivation behind this conflict, in the meantime, almost whole Rakhine will become empty as most of the Rohingya would be compelled to flee to neighboring countries particularly bordering Bangladesh and the Myanmar government could allocate million of hectares of abandoned house and lands in Rakhine state to foreign investors for extraction of natural resources and further development. That is why,

40 Ibid
44 Ibid.
Sassen considers that the conflict is the design of military-economic interests, rather than by mostly religious. She offered no detail evidence for this proposition although indicated that the Myanmar government had already designated 1.27m hectares of land in Rakhine for agricultural development.\textsuperscript{45} If we consider that religion is not main factor behind conflict than simply addressing religious freedom could not solve problem rather need to assess role play of institutions particularly law enforcing agencies, judiciary and social services such as education and health sector and over all rule of law and non-discriminatory equal treatment could become part of the solution.

### 2.2. State and institutional failure/collapse contribute to religious conflicts

There appears to be a strong correlation between the emergence of religious conflict and situations of state failure or collapse.\textsuperscript{46} In case of conflicts in Rakhine state, it is admitted by international human rights groups and several state inquiry reports institutional failure contributing towards religious conflicts and state agencies need to maintain rule of law and non-discriminatory action.\textsuperscript{47}

Susan Hayward and Mathew Walton rightly remarked "Religious minority communities and actors, on the whole, are more vulnerable to intimidation, arbitrary arrest, and social bias... the judiciary and other rule of law institutions [in Myanmar] fail to protect religious minorities and sometimes enable discrimination, a legacy of their historical abuse by previous military regimes".\textsuperscript{48}

While commenting on the killing of one imminent Muslim human rights advocates in Myanmar Scot Marciel (US Ambassador to Myanmar in 2016-2017) remarked "one of the key challenges for Myanmar is building...—the rule of law, and part of the rule of law is justice, which means...,

\textsuperscript{45}\textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{47}\textit{See Human Rights Watch report and report of Amnesty International on situation in Rakhine state in 2013 and 2015, also see Myanmar Inquiry Commission report 2013 and Annan Commission interim report 2017.}
completing a credible and transparent investigation to make the people of the country feel that justice has been done". Even back in 2012 former Us Ambassador to Myanmar also mentioned his dissatisfaction and shock to see deep seated intolerance in the Myanmar society and non-discriminatory treatment and clear absence of rule of law to address atrocities and injustices against the Rohingya including stripping them from the right of citizenship.

There are several studies that tried to show that lack of legal recognition or citizenship of the Rohingya community contributes to institutional failure as "the Rohingya are the single largest “stateless” community in the world. Their “statelessness” or lack of citizenship increases their vulnerability because they are not entitled to any legal protection from the government". Those who break the law risk imprisonment and the government blacklist their children. Without legal status, their children cannot go to school; they cannot travel or buy property. Even the police can arrest and imprison them without any reason.

### 2.3. Research Questions

As the existing literature has no definite answer to solve the conflict and potential role play of religion, it deserve further analysis to see whether religion is the main driver of conflict or there are other political and/or economic drivers that are instigating the conflicts between the Buddhist and the Rohingya and greater role of non-discriminatory state institutions and rule of law to maintain equality and justice for all in the Rakhine state. It is vital to explore further whether Rohingyas are particularly discriminated due to having particular religious identity or not and whether majority Buddhist justify this discriminatory attitude as a tool to contain Muslim Rohingyas or not. Considering existing research gap, this study intended to explore following two research questions-

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52 Ibid.  
53 Ibid.
**Research Question-1 (RQ-1)** - Does the religion play a major role for conflict in Rakhine state? And

**Research Question-2 (RQ-2)** - What can be the potential solution to the conflict in Rakhine State, Myanmar for promotion of peace?

To examine the selected research questions, this study employed critical discourse analysis and qualitative case study using interviews of relevant stakeholders.

**3. Methodology: Critical Discourse Analysis and Qualitative Case Study**

Considering the complex nature of the study, which revolves around religion, peace and conflict a qualitative and interpretive method will be deployed. This study used critical discourse analysis for critical review of the available news reports to understand what are happening on the ground and nature of the conflict from neutral perspectives. In order to review news paper report and to understand role of politics and religion behind the conflicts in Myanmar critical discourse analysis (CDA) has been applied for better understanding of the subject matter. CDA is a vital instrument to explore political, social and ideological connotation inside or outside the text.

The study further adopted case study using semi-structured interviews\(^{54}\) among persons fleeing from violence and took shelter in Bangladesh and also participants residing in conflict zone including individuals from majority and minority religious and ethnic groups and other relevant stakeholders. Due to privacy issues, lack of proper security measures and potential threat for the participants, this study maintained anonymity and confidentiality of the participants and names as used in this study not real name rather fictitious to hide the identity of the real participants. While selecting qualitative method using semi-structured interviews, the researcher considered weakness of using single method and in this regard the use of CDA for analyzing news reports could strengthen research result to avoid potential weakness, if any.

\(^{54}\) Due to shortage of time and complexities in identifying participants for survey in Rakhine state prompted author to avoid temptation of using quantitative method, see for details, White, H. (2002), Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches in Poverty Analysis, 30(3) World Development: 511-522.
3.1 Report/Document analysis using CDA

Fairclough (1997) rightly stated that “ideologies reside in texts” and ideology originates from the manner of thinking that forms an economic and social policy. Hence languages are always influenced by ideologies that govern our lives and thus political language discourses also reflects in daily activities, news and reports. Machin and Mayr (2012) noticed “in both texts and in speech it is extremely revealing if we look closely at the words chosen to represent how someone has spoken” and the authors prescribed some tools within CDA namely, quoting verbs, representational strategies in language, personalization and impersonalisation, which might be used for analyzing various literature and text analysis in my area of research. For example, selection of quoting verbs could help to understand various notions involved in a text. It can be surrounding situations beyond the incidents mentioned in any text, how the author tried to characterize the situation to influence the reader, it can be utilized to rationalize power and status of the people and to illustrate neutrality. Therefore, diverse media-based news reports and text that address news, views or the political development in Rakhine state could be interpreted pragmatically by using discourse analysis approach.

This study selected three news reports to understand political, social and religious nature of the conflict using CDA considering it as “a tool for deconstructing the ideologies of the mass media and other elite groups and for identifying and defining social, economic, and historical power relations between dominant and subordinate groups”. While analyzing the selected news report, this study applied some tools within CDA such as quoting verbs, representational strategies in language, personalization and impersonalisation for deconstructing the nature of conflict.

First news report titled "Who will help Myanmar's Rohingya?" appeared in BBC on 10 January, 2017 (hereinafter BBC) mentioned Rohingya “as the world's most persecuted people”. The report mentioned "horrifying stories of rapes, killings and house burnings" as stated by the

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59 Ibid.
fleeing Rohingya and also wrote about statement of the government of Myanmar - claiming all these reports are "false" and "distorted". The report further indicated that "the BBC cannot visit the locked-down area to verify the claims [of the Rohingya] and the Myanmar government". It also mentioned that "Myanmar's government denies citizenship and sees them [Rohingya] as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh - a common attitude among many Burmese".

Second news report titled "Myanmar-promises-to-investigate-allegations-of-atrocities-against-rohingya" published in Euro news (hereinafter Euro News) rather than highlighting claims of Rohingya tried to indicate some positive action taken by the international community, Myanmar Government and also aspirations of the Rohingya. As the report mentioned "many Rohingya were reportedly hoping that Suu Kyi, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, would work to restore their rights". It also quoted statement of Myanmar Presidential spokesperson Zaw Htay as: “These are extremely serious allegations and we are deeply concerned. We will be immediately investigating these allegations through the investigation commission, led by Vice-President U Myint Swe.”

It also mentioned about the establishment of communication between the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights -Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein and the Myanmar Government quoting the statement of Zeid- “I did speak to Aung San Suu Kyi about an hour and a half ago, I am not going to go now into the extent to which she should have done more or less, there should be some responsibility.”

Third news report titled "Rohingya strength and resilience captured in photo exhibition" published in The Burma Times (hereinafter Burma times) highlighted post-conflict life and resilience of Rohingya based on the report of photo journalist Ali MC, who visited Rohingya

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60 Ibid.  
61 Ibid.  
62 Ibid.  
refugee and internally displaced peoples’ camps in Myanmar and Bangladesh. He intended to photograph Rohingya people, document their living conditions and better understand the events that forced them into this situation.

If we analyze further selected news reports using CDA, we could understand that BBC report tried to maintain neutrality and show objectivity while quoting "stories of violence, burning and rape" by the Rohingya and also stating claims by Myanmar Government terming them as "false and fabricated", whereas second report tried to give more emphasis on practical action and establishment of communication between Myanmar authority and UN High Commissioner of Human Rights and mentioned that there someone should take responsibility. Second report tried to use positive tone of action whereas first report indicated inaction by the international community and Myanmar state authorities. On the other hand, third report tried to see situation from different angle and it rather highlighted Rohingyas strength and resilience to cope with the situation without indicating issues of violence and conflict between two communities.

Although three selected reports mentioned that Rohingya Muslims are targets of ongoing violence in Rakhine state, none of the report clarified whether religious belief is the main reason of attack or there are some other reasons behind the conflict. That is why, it might be important to see how some more reports and documents depicted issues of the Rohingya in Rakhine state, Myanmar and possible role of religion behind the conflict and other factors and also potential role of religion towards peace building. Therefore, it seems selected three news reports above is not enough to address the selected research questions.

That is why, this study need to examine further reports and documents and accordingly further search has been completed to identify some reports particularly paying attention to the issues from the perspectives of the selected research questions for this study, which could lends some help to see how religion played a role to the conflict or not and potential role of religion, if any to achieve long-term peace building in Rakhine state.

On the other hand, new violence, including reported rape, murder, and arson in Rakhine state during the periods of August-September 2017, triggered a massive exodus of Rohingya necessitates examination of new reports on the given issues. So this study selected three more
reports- reports of The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) from United States of America, Malaysiakini from Malaysia (which has border with Myanmar and has a active voice to settle the conflict) and also a report by the Guardian (one of the leading British newspaper) respectively.

CFR is an independent, nonpartisan membership organization reported on the Rohingya crisis as they claimed from neutral perspectives. This report analyses identity of Rohingya with historical background and their miseries in terms of the law of Myanmar and viewpoints of the majority Buddhist religious group and cited report of the International Crisis Group “Country-wide anti-Muslim sentiment makes it politically difficult for the government to take steps seen as supportive of Muslim rights” . It has also stated that “Widespread poverty, poor infrastructure, and a lack of employment opportunities in Rakhine have exacerbated the cleavage between Buddhists and Muslim Rohingya. This tension is deepened by religious differences that have at times erupted into conflict”.66

This report mentioned that religion has become major issue behind the anti-Rohingya attitude although there are several other socio-economic issues those are also responsible for the continuation of the conflict. Apart from religious and socio-economic perspectives, this report also mentioned how global and regional players tried to term the conflict. For example, the report referred statement of the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley as she said “Myanmar authorities have carried out "brutal, sustained campaign to cleanse the country of an ethnic minority," and called on members to suspend weapons provisions to the military” while countries like Russia and China, have opposed increasing pressure on Myanmar’s government because they claimed Myanmar government is trying to restore stability.68

The report concluded that elected civil government of Myanmar is “reluctant to advocate for Rohingya and other Muslims for fear of alienating from Buddhist nationalists and …the military (having power-sharing agreement with the civilian government) ” and further stated that unless “Rohingya are treated as human beings, the situation in Rakhine State is unlikely to improve”.69

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66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
Therefore, in one way the report stated that unless there is a change of attitude of the nationalist Buddhist groups and pressure and influence of the military over the elected civilian government and on the other way restoration of human rights and rule of law, there is no hope for peace and stability in Rakhine state and hence it would be difficult to solve Rohingya crisis.

Malaysiakini reported on the Ronhingya crisis from the perspectives of Buddhist organization, under a title “Do not frame Rohingya situation as a religious conflict”.  

Although it is argued that civilian government in Myanmar could not adopt policies supportive to Rohingya due to pressure from nationalist Buddhist, this report tried to reflect Buddhist religious perspectives on the conflict. Referring to the statement of The Malaysian Buddhist Consultative Council and the Malaysian Buddhist Association, which tried to ease the tension between Muslims and Buddhist in the region due to ongoing conflict in Rakhine state, Myanmar and particularly addressed the Buddhist not to be involved in the killing and conflict any way and reminded the religious teaching of the Buddha about killing fellow human being irrespective of religious faith, color or caste.

Referring to the Buddhist group the report stated that “although the parties involved happened to be of the Islamic and Buddhist faiths, all parties should be careful and not to portray it as a religious conflict. We would like to also emphasize that the teachings of the Buddha have always stressed that one should avoid the path of violence, especially the killing of other human beings. This is one of the most important precepts for a Buddhist- ‘I undertake the precept to abstain from killing living beings (Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi)’”.

Therefore, this report tried to show that Buddhist teachings do not support violence and killing in Rakhine state or elsewhere and terming the Rohingya crisis as part of historical context it requested not to refer it as religious conflict, which might aggravate the issue rather than finding ways for solution. In this context, next report of the Guardian might lend some help.

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71 Ibid.
The Guardian report titled “Is Rohingya persecution caused by business interest rather than religion?”72 tried to debunk whether religion is ultimate driver of conflict or not and to what extent business interest has also motivated to persecute the Rohingyas from their lands under the shadow of a religious conflict.

This report stated that “The world’s coverage of these events (violence in rakhine state) has focused entirely on the religious/ethnic aspect, characterizing them as religious persecution” and hence displacement and fleeing of the Rohingyas mostly termed under religious conflicts. But this report claimed that “religion and ethnicity might be only part of what explains this forced displacement”.73

This report further argued that “We must ask whether the sharpened persecution of the Rohingya (and other minority groups) might be partly generated by military-economic interests, rather than by mostly religious/ethnic issues. Expelling Rohingya from their land might well be good for future business. In fact, quite recently (December, 2016) the government allocated 1,268,077 hectares (3,100,000 acres) in the Rohingya’s area of Myanmar for corporate rural development”.74

The report termed that under the heading of religious conflicts “the land grabs have been silently ignored” and therefore violence continued and Military backed government fueling Buddhist nationalism and in a way encouraging more displacement and hence open up more free lands and water for foreign investments and land garbing and encroachment of the lands continued without any opposition under the veil of ‘religious conflict’.

As the debate continued on the religious conflicts, the report concluded that “in the meantime, a third of Myanmar’s vast forests are gone, and the government has allocated million of hectares, including a significant allotment in Rakhine state, for further development”.75 Therefore, religion

73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
might have role play in the conflict, but the crisis is not more simply religious and pursuing religious approach perhaps might not be useful to end the conflict as well.

In terms of the selected two research questions, the findings of the CDA analyzed in table 1 as follows-

**Table 1: Research Questions and Findings from CDA**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selected report/document</th>
<th>Findings in terms of the RQ-1: Does the religion play a major role?</th>
<th>Findings in terms of RQ-2: Potential solutions to the conflict</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BBC</td>
<td>It indicates Muslim Rohingyas are systematically persecuted and victims of ongoing violence, but has made no indication whether religion is the main cause of such persecution or not.</td>
<td>A common attitude among majority Buddhist as the report mentioned terming ‘Rohingyas as illegal immigrants and hence no citizenship for them’. Therefore, establishing legal rights including citizenship might be part of the solution.</td>
<td>Not clear whether religion has a major role play or not, providing citizenship and establishing legal rights might become potential solution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euro news</td>
<td>Indicated series of violence, torture and atrocities against the Rohingyas, but made no direct link to religion.</td>
<td>It reflected that someone need to take responsibility and maintaining rule of law and justice for the victims will pave the way for solving the conflict.</td>
<td>Here Rohingya group mentioned about atrocity and violence against them and Myanmar authority said they will take action (which they never did) and UN tried to pursue Myanmar government to take responsibility for maintaining law and order (but that remained a nightmare).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Burma Times</td>
<td>It demonstrated Rohingya as victims, but no indication as religion played a role behind the conflict.</td>
<td>No clear solution suggested, but analysis shows that freedom of religion, movement and legal rights to the Rohingyas might help them to adjust their lives after the displacements and conflicts and could lead to ultimate peace.</td>
<td>Human being has the resilient capacity to adjust amid tension and conflicts, therefore steps need to be taken to end human sufferings leaving aside religion based discrimination and ending conflicts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFR</td>
<td>It mentioned that religion has become major issue behind the anti-Rohingya attitude, although there are several other socio-economic issues such as poverty, unemployment, low rate of</td>
<td>Unless civil government could not ease pressure from nationalist Buddhist and military, it would be difficult for them to adopt any supportive approach for the</td>
<td>Agreed that religion played a role and pragmatic approach by the Buddhist and Military might be vital to help the civil government to solve the problem.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

24
education are also responsible for the continuation of the conflict. Rohingya. Hence establishing legal rights for the Rohingya and developing inter-communal relations might be a key to solve the problem.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malaysiakini</td>
<td>It referred the conflict as due to historical context and cautioned not to term it as a religious conflict and reminded Buddhist teaching of killing human beings as against the fundamental philosophy of the teaching of Buddha.</td>
<td>It emphasized more cooperation and inter-community relations and upholding the teachings of Buddha among the Buddhist followers terming violent behaviors as a serious crime might end the human sufferings in the Rakhine state.</td>
<td>Agreed that there is a communal tension due to historical context and rather than terming it as religious conflicts, further enhancement of religious teachings and cooperation could become a key to solve the problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Guardian</td>
<td>Demonstrated that religion is used as a veil to hide economic interests and ensure more displacement of Rohingyas and free up land and water for foreign investment and development projects. Therefore, it indicates religion has a role play but business interest are perhaps playing major role.</td>
<td>No clear indication as to solution but stopping displacement of the Rohingyas due to conflicts and land grabbing attitude of the government seems to stop major exodus of the Rohingyas from the Rakhine state.</td>
<td>Therefore. Not only religious issues, socio-economic and business issues need to be addressed for long-term solution.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the findings of the CDA, it is reflected that Rohingyas are major victims due to conflict in the region and majority Buddhists and state agencies in Myanmar maintained either silence or in a way supported the violence and even civilian government failed to take proper actions for maintaining rule of law and took no steps as of October 2017 to change discriminatory citizenship law and to accord legal rights to the Muslim Rohingyas.

Several reports under analysis also indicated that unless there is a change of attitude from nationalist Buddhist group and military, civil government will have difficulties to adopt supportive measures for the Muslim Rohingyas. Hence it could be assumed that religious faith of the Rohingyas has a major role play behind the conflicts and violence in Rakhine state, although economic interests and low level of socio-economic conditions are also responsible that helping the government to cover up allocating lands to foreign investors and forcing Rohingyas displacements from their houses and agricultural lands under the veil of religious conflicts.
If we try to analyse the findings of the CDA in the light of the two narratives of this study: Buddhist narrative (terming Rohingyas as the potential terrorist) and Rohingya narrative (living under continued threat of torture and displacement) respectively, then it is easier to understand that distrust and attitude of non-cooperation between the majority Buddhist and Muslim Rohingya is one of the major cause behind the conflict and hence religion played a major role. But simply religion could not solve the problem as in the mean time economic issues and business interests have also been enjoined with the conflicts. In this respect, a case study of the relevant stakeholders using qualitative interviews might guide some lights to understand the realities on the ground in Rakhine state, Myanmar and also perceptions of the Buddhists and the Rohingyas.

3.2. Case Study using qualitative interviews

To understand the scenario on the ground in the Rakhine State in particular and Myanmar, in general regarding the role of religion for peace and conflict in the Rakhine state, I conducted interviews with some stakeholders particularly addressing the concern of Rohingyas who are fleeing from conflict and also majority Buddhist who are supporting Myanmar government actions. Due to limitation of time and security issues, it was not possible to visit Rakhine state or to take interviews from the fields, rather I took interviews using online tools such as skype, email and messenger. Online interview was conducted to inquire the real life experience of the violence. Access to social media is restricted and controlled by government in Myanmar. Considering ongoing conflicts in Rakhine state during August-September, 2017 and so called security threats, very few participants agreed to provide interviews and even if they agreed it was very brief directly supporting only self-guided perspectives either blaming governmental actions or Rohingya community.

I selected ten participants considering their understanding of the issues and also having options to contact with them via email and skype. Unfortunately it is difficult to establish contact with major stakeholders in Myanmar and particularly in the Rakhine state due to limited or no access for internet by the Rohingyas and restrictions by the government on the government officials and self-censorship of the majority Buddhist not to make any comments or simply support
governmental views on the Rohingya conflict. Among the ten participants, I received no feedback from six participants and four participants provided feedbacks.

As the feedbacks from the initial interviews are not sufficient, I decided to conduct further interviews and have sent emails and messages using social media to another ten participants, once again five participants provided no response and five other participants provides delayed feedback after the elapse of a considerably long time.

Considering the selected research questions, two narratives and findings of the CDA, I tried to limit the interview questions addressing only whether religion played a role to the conflict or not, what are other potential cause of conflicts, if religion is the main cause; what are the potential solutions to solve the conflicts, how can inter-communal relations be improved and rule of law and justice be ensured for all for building long term peace in the Rakhine state and so on. As there are potential threats of violence and security issues, I maintained confidentiality of the participants and used fictitious name of the participants.

Among the nine participants, who have provided feedbacks, most of them agreed that the conflicts in Myanmar continuing for long time and need to have a solution for long-term peace building in the region. Among them, participants having Rohingya roots supported the second narratives of continuous torture by the majority Buddhist and state agencies due to having Muslim identity whereas participants having Buddhist background tried to show Rohingyas as a potential threat to Myanmar and termed the Rohingyas allegations of torture and violence as fabricated with false claims. However, there are some participants who argued that the roots of the conflicts neither due to the role of Buddhist group nor beliefs of Muslim Rohingya rather systematic negative attitude of the military to maintain rule of law and functional state institutions.

Considering limitation of study and time, the findings of the interviews has been limited to analyze only in the light of the two research questions as follows-
RQ-1 and Perceptions of the interviewees: Does the religion played a major role?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Profile</th>
<th>Comments on RQ-1</th>
<th>Further comments on the issue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H. Ali</td>
<td>Rohingya and claimed that due to series of torture and violence forced to leave rakhine state at the age of 14 and took shelter in Bangladesh in 1991. Later under the UNHCR resettlement programme settled in UK.</td>
<td>He claimed that they had a good life in Rakhine state, but due to killing of his father and continuous atrocities he forced to leave Myanmar and claimed that religion is the main cause behind conflict and even provided some evidence that many mosques and houses used by them were destroyed by the Buddhist and police simply due to religious cause.</td>
<td>He claimed that they were restricted to movement from village to village and also restriction on doing business. The military authorities started forced labour, extortion and arbitrary harassment including rape against Rohingya Muslim women. His father was killed by the military as he refused to go for force labour to the military Camps and finally his mother and elder sister decided to flee to Bangladesh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RO Zia Haque</td>
<td>Another Rohingya Muslim took shelter in Indonesia after conflict broke out in Myanmar.</td>
<td>He told that the main cause of violence is religious he agreed but strongly mentioned that rise of ethno-nationalism among the Buddhist is one of the biggest issue.</td>
<td>He denied the allegation of being illegal migrants from Bangladesh and claimed that Rohingyas are ethnic minority belonged to Myanmar but all the relevant documents were confiscated by the Military regime of Myanmar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanthai Mo</td>
<td>a young man belonged to Buddhists community of Rakhine state</td>
<td>He denied any kind of role play of the religion behind conflict rather considered it as a conflict between Burmese</td>
<td>He claimed that Rohingyas are illegal immigrants. They are Bengalis and do not...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>Additional Information</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kham</td>
<td>A middle aged Buddhist man works in a governmental office and lives in Yangon, Myanmar.</td>
<td>He argues that government of Myanmar trying its best to restore peace in Rakhine state and there is no existence of communal violence. Therefore, he denied any kind of role play of religion behind the conflict.</td>
<td>Kham told that so far print and electronic media in Myanmar is concerned they report the conflict as government versus ARSA a rebel group of Rohingyas in Rakhine state.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saber</td>
<td>A Rohingya Muslim living in conflict zone of the northern Rakhine state.</td>
<td>He claimed that the ultimate reason behind the conflicts in the region due to religious beliefs of the Rohingyas. He considers there are no other reason behind the conflict and majority Buddhist supporting this as they could grab properties and houses of Rohingyas.</td>
<td>He said he and some other Rohingyas are now fleeing from their homes and living in deep forest due to having no security and continuous threat by the neighboring Buddhist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myo</td>
<td>A Buddhist woman running small business Rakhine state.</td>
<td>She said religion has a role play in the conflict in the context that Bengalis (he said there is nothing as Rohingya) are considered potential threat as they are Muslims and might lean to terrorist means to unstable the region.</td>
<td>She acknowledged that Buddhist Monks are against any kind of dealing with the Muslim settlers and appreciate to have special mark for the businesses run by the Buddhist and mark areas having no ‘Muslims’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maung</td>
<td>One expert on the Myanmar issues now resides in abroad, born and raised in Buddhist family in Myanmar and now mostly maintains secular beliefs.</td>
<td>He considered systematic state sponsored torture has been inflicted on the Rohingyas considering them as Muslims and hence not suitable to be integrated with the dominant religious belief system run by Monks and exploited by the Military. Hence religion has a major role play to the conflict and Monks and military using</td>
<td>He claimed that now business interests are also there to compel the Rohingyas migration to Bangladesh and secret policies are there not to allow majority of them to back to Myanmar at all.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Occupation and Background</td>
<td>Opinions</td>
<td>Additional Details</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thaung</td>
<td>A journalist working as reporter for international media in Myanmar and not disclosed religious identity.</td>
<td>He considered historically there was tensions between the Burmese and settlers mostly migrated as the aftermath of the extension of British rule in Myanmar. He considered religion is used as a vehicle to meet political agenda of the Monks and Military rulers. He considers religion therefore little to do with the conflicts and debarring Rohingyas to claim citizenships and hence stripping their legal rights is the root cause of all violence.</td>
<td>He claimed it is difficult to collect authentic information from state agencies in Myanmar and journalists are systematically harassed and need to work under several restrictions and even not allowed to visit Rakhine state without permissions and strict surveillance of the police and local authorities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aung</td>
<td>One Buddhist NGO worker based in Yangon, Myanmar.</td>
<td>He agreed that mistrust between the Buddhist and Muslim Rohingyas as one of the main cause of conflict in Rakhine state and hence accepted that religion as the main driver behind conflict.</td>
<td>He agreed that Buddhist Monks are mostly against the Rohingyas and acknowledged that there are self censorships and restrictions on using the term ‘Rohingya’ rather they are termed as ‘Bengalis’.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RQ-2 and perceptions of the interview participants: potential means for solution**

The interview participants have diver opinions regarding potential solutions to the conflict. H. Ali argued that Rohingya religious leader or Rohingya community leader can do nothing because if a person raises a voice in favor of Rohingyas, he will be killed by the military with false allegation. However, he thought that Buddhist Monks could raise voice against violence and could facilitate for inter-community relations as they hold apex position in the society. He further argued that most of the Rohingyas would like to stay in Rakhine rather than flee to any
other country provided that they will have citizenships and peaceful co-existence with other communities.

RO Zia Haque argued it is difficult to use religion as part of the peace process in the present context. Considering ongoing nature of conflict and hatred, atrocity and state sponsored violence, only maintaining rule of law and impartial law enforcing agencies and justice institutions could resolve conflict and could facilitate long term peace process. However, it is vital to analyze the mistrust and perceptions of the majority Buddhist and need to find out possible means and ways to neutralize or at least to convince them to have due respect for rule of law and judicial institutions.

Wanthai Mo and Kham argued that Rohingyas should make promise that they will not recourse to violent means and should follow laws and regulations of Myanmar and should try to understand and integrate to culture and language in Myanmar. They claimed that there is no short term solution to the conflict and it will take some time to solve it particularly considering ongoing rifts and violence between the two communities in several occasions in last few years. However, Wanthai Mo claimed that not everyone in the Buddhist community is against the settlers (Rohingyas) but acknowledged that due to fear of the government action or attack by the nationalist group no one can show support or any kind of sympathy for them.

Saber claimed they need to security of their lives and properties and state agencies should act according to law and protect them from violence and only then conflicts in the region could be stopped and long term peace could be ensured. He blamed that state agencies itself involved in violence and torture against the Rohingyas. Whereas Myo blamed Rohingyas as potential terrorist and more active role of the law enforcing agencies could ensure peace in the region and claim that settlers should leave Rakhine state.

Maung, Thaung and Aung while considering religion has a role play in the conflict reflected that the Rohingya crisis has become a complex issue as it has now become a tool at the hands of the nationalist Buddhist Monks and military. However, they acknowledged that simply considering religious perspectives could not solve the problem as it needs to have wider perspectives of the issues. Maung considers stopping the systematic torture and violence in Rakhine state requires
proper institutions and transparency of state actions rather than allowing actions under dictation by the higher authorities particularly need to demilitarize the civil administration and establishment of rule of law and democratic norms is the key for long term peace building in the region.

Thaung considers allowing freedom of religion and citizenship to the Rohingyas might encourage the Rohingyas not to flee from Rakhine state and impartial civil and military administration might ensure long term peace building in the region. On the other hand, Aung consider free flow of information and allowing more print and electronic media to have access to Rakhine state might act as a deterrent for the parties to avoid conflicts and not to recourse to violence. He considered restricting free flow of information and journalists rather allowing more violence and as that providing shield to the persons involved in the conflicts and inactions by the state agencies to cover up violence and atrocities.

Therefore, case study using interviews reflected that mainstream society and Rohingyas are culturally and religiously living in two different world and each of them supporting only their version of story with few exceptions and have no or rare application of mind and sound judgment. Although more or less it could be assumed from the interviews that religion has a role play but it is not everything behind the conflict. Ultimately both religion and rule of law has to regenerate trust and confidence among the communities and impartial application of law and communal harmony could pave the way for long term peace building. This leads to the identification of the limitations for this study and recommendations for long term peace building in Rakhine state.

4. Limitations of this study and Recommendations

The analysis of news reports and existing literature and perceptions of different stakeholders on Myanmar triggered the assumption that the situation of Rohingya could not be solved simply using religious route nor religion could be targeted as a prime cause of conflict. But due to limited access to documents on Myanmar and lack of opportunity within limited time, fund constraint and security reasons, it was not possible to collect more information on the realities on the grounds or field visit in Rakhine state. Therefore this study has limited empirical perspectives
on the issues hence further study need to address this limitation particularly better to have field studies in Rakhine state, adjacent places in Bangladesh and also face to face interviews in Myanmar to understand the perceptions of the relevant stakeholders and situations on the ground more precisely.

However, based on the CDA and interviews it could be assumed that religion definitely has a role play in the conflict as that helps the Buddhist monks to wage protest against the Muslim Rohingya (even Hindu Rohingyas are also victim of such protest) and receive wider support for the atrocities and torture by the law enforcing agencies and Buddhist groups against the Rohingya Muslims and validate discriminatory treatment and injustice. On the other hand, this atrocity and injustice increasingly could also influence Muslim youths in Rakhine state to take recourse to violent means to protest against the Buddhist and the law enforcing agencies showing religion as the main cause for violence against them. Therefore, neutralize the religious forces and promoting transformative forces of religion could be useful in this regard to solve the conflict in Rakhine state.

4.1. Ways to promote "desacralisation"

Analysis of the CDA and findings of the interviews reflect that religion has a role play to the conflict, but how religion could be used to solve the problem has not been reflected either in the selected documents for conducting CDA or feedbacks from the interview participants. As religion has more or less some role play in the conflict in Rakhine state, peaceful disposal of conflicts having religious sentiment could be achieved by using a process of "desacralisation". Isak Svensson in his Book "Ending Holy Wars: religion and conflict resolution in civil wars" proposes several methods which can be utilized to achieve peaceful negotiation of religion based armed conflict using desacralisation process. The author intended to focus on a phenomenon called 'desacralisation' "de-escalation of religious related tensions" to reach peaceful solution against religious armed conflicts.

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Svensson defines 'desacralisation' as “the process through which religious factors decrease in importance in the context of an armed conflict”.

The theory of 'desacralisation' has four aspects: first, it can be continuous or sudden deduction of religious aspiration to an armed conflict. Second, it links the matters at risk not the identity phase of the concerned parties. Third, it can be "driven by political leaders and actors, or it can be a larger societal shift." Fourth, elimination of religion from armed conflict considering "religious incompatability" for the political arena.

Svensson further observed that 'desacralisation' can be either political or societal. In former case, religion can be less issue of concern, the religious actors can reformulate the significance of religion or religious topic can be moved to political area whereas in latter case it can be delegitimisation, fractionalisation or reconvergence.

In order to initiate peace in Rakhine state in Myanmar Isak Svensson’s “theory of desacralisation” can be taken into consideration engaging political and religious actors from concerning communities. Svensson argues that if dynamic of desacralisation used to resolve religious conflicts then as religion ‘can become less of a tool for war, and instead more of a tool for peace’.

In this regard, role of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine state and report of the commission might be a guide towards a reconciliation process and long term peace-building.

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4.2. Role of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State and importance of greater multi-religion dialogue and cooperation

The Advisory Commission on Rakhine State – chaired by Mr Kofi Annan – was established on 5 September 2016 at the behest of Myanmar’s State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.\(^2\)

According to the Commission’s Terms of Reference – Commission will consider humanitarian issues, living conditions, access to health, education and livelihoods, the question of citizenship and freedom of movement, and the assurance of basic rights. In accordance with established international standards, the Commission was instructed to develop recommendations within five thematic areas: conflict prevention, humanitarian assistance, reconciliation, institution building and development. The Commission submitted final report in August 2017 recommending among others following issues for the settlement of conflicts and peace building in the Rakhine state:

Citizenship and entitlement to other legal rights- The report stated "Myanmar harbours the largest community of stateless people in the world, and the Commission was specifically mandated to explore this issue and provide recommendations related to citizenship and documentation and propose actions to clarify questions of citizenship".\(^3\)

The report warned if this issue is not addressed it will continue to cause significant human suffering and insecurity. The report particularly indicated that 1982 citizenship law needs to revised based on international norms and standards. Most of the participants in the interviews more or less reflected that addressing the citizenship issue of the Rohingyas might be a big step forward to end the conflict and might encourage Rohingyas not to flee from Rakhine state.

Apart from addressing citizenship issue freedom of movement and removal of restrictions could pave the way for long term peace building. The report recommended that "the Government should ensure freedom of movement for all people in Rakhine State, irrespective of religion, ethnicity, or citizenship status. The freedoms of movement and access to services are deeply interlinked, and therefore should be addressed in parallel. All communities should have access to

\(^2\)The Commission is composed of six national members (U Win Mra, U Aye Lwin, Dr. Tha Hla Shwe, Dr. Mya Thida, Daw Saw Khin Tint and U Khin Maung Lay) and three international members (Mr Ghassan Salamé, Ms Laetitia van den Assum and Mr Kofi Annan)-hereinafter to be referred as Annan Commission and Annan Commission report respectively.

\(^3\)Annan Commission Final report, August, 2017.
education, health, livelihood opportunities and basic services". The report also indicated that "the Government should introduce measures to prohibit informal restrictions that include, among others, unofficial payments, arbitrary roadblocks, and requirements for the Muslim community to pay for security escorts. Perpetrators should be prosecuted in accordance with the law".

However, interview findings and analysis of CDA also indicates that role of law enforcing agencies and improvement of inter-communal relations are vital for ending the conflict in the region and most potential means for solving the conflict. Role of law enforcing agency and inter-communal relations: the Annan report identified role of law enforcing agency is vital for maintaining rule of law and prevent future conflicts. It stated "The police should uphold the rule-of-law and ensure that anyone who obstructs movement – for instance by using violence or threats of violence as a means of preventing movement – is held accountable in accordance with the law". Rohingyas during interviews claimed that law enforcing agencies rarely lend support to end the violence and rather whole Rohingya community is targeted after any incident and become target of violence and receive indiscriminate torture and harassments by the law enforcing agencies. Therefore, rule of law and impartial application of law could pave the way for justice and peace.

Further the report identified "both Rakhine and Muslim communities are anxious about the possibility of renewed inter-communal violence, and mutual distrust runs deep". It mentioned “If Buddhist-Muslim tension is allowed to increase across Myanmar, this will serve to further undermine the potential for reconciliation in Rakhine”.

The report recommended “The Government of Myanmar should ensure that inter-communal dialogue is held at all levels of society – including township, state and union levels – and conducted in a systematic manner with a clearly stated purpose. The dialogue process should ensure grassroots participation, and include women, youth, minorities and civil society. Dialogue within communities should also be facilitated".

84 Ibid.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
Although during interviews Rohingyas showed Muslim religious leaders have nothing to do to solve the conflict, both Buddhist and Muslim Rohingyas acknowledged that Buddhist Monks possess a highest authority and influence and hence could play a major role to end the conflict. Annan commission report in this respect emphasized that "Religious leaders – Buddhist, Muslim, Christian and others – should actively support the Government’s agenda to combat hate speech and racial/religious discrimination. When acts of violence are committed by members of one ethnic/religious group, their religious leaders should promptly and publicly denounce such actions." 88

5. Concluding Remarks

With sensible leadership and the articulation of a culturally and democratically smart vision allowing diversity of religion, culture, ethnic identity along with freedom of expression, education and rule of law, Myanmar could become a beacon of religious and ethnic inclusion and could become prosperous nation considering huge amount of natural resources. It can draw on its past histories of co-existence and plurality and could make a tradition to diversity in its languages, cultures and religions. Myanmar could become a vivid example far beyond its own borders. The changes required to defend against even more violent outbreaks will not come quickly or easily.

The sustainability of Myanmar’s transformation to a more democratic system of government will only be possible where capacity is built at every level and democratic norms and rule of law are well accepted by all religious groups. To sustain peace and to avoid religiously motivated conflicts political leaders and law enforcing agencies of the Myanmar need to ensure rule of law and justice for all without any discrimination and need protect human rights of the oppressed and marginalized section in the society. While settling conflicts political leaders should try to ensure elimination of religious importance from armed conflict due to incompatability of the religion for the political arena. Rakhine state has low level of socio-economic development, poverty and resource scarcity, which has also to some extent might have influenced some sections in the

88 Ibid.
society to use religious card to take benefits depriving others. Governmental rules and decision making in Myanmar should not only consider business interests but also interest of the communities while allowing industry and foreign investment for utilising local land, water and other vital natural resources. Public participation and transparency in governmental actions and accountability of relevant stakeholders including law enforcing agencies and even religious leaders need to be ensured to make a sustainable peace in Rakhine State, Myanmar and to avoid religious conflicts between the majority groups and the Rohingyas. The role of the United Nations, humanitarian groups and international community should be more robust and need to have a strong signal not to allow any kind of discriminatory and violent practices by the Government of Myanmar and to end the atrocities and saga of violence against the Rohingyas-"the most persecuted people on earth".
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