

Book Review/ Kitap Tanıtımı

Azeem Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Genocide*, London: Hurst & Company, 2018

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The United States of America Department of State press statement of 2022 by Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken¹ reads: *'Five years ago, Burma's military launched a brutal campaign against Rohingya – razing villages, raping, torturing, and perpetrating large-scale violence that killed thousands of Rohingya men, women, and children. More than 740,000 Rohingya were forced to flee their homes and seek refuge in Bangladesh.'* In explaining how the Rohingya living in Arakan/Rakhine (a state within modern-day Burma/Myanmar), the Burmese elites, and the international community got here, Azeem Ibrahim's book, *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Genocide*, is an important work. The ongoing ethnic cleansing and genocide of the Rohingya people by

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¹ Antony J. Blinken, 'Marking Five Years Since the Genocide in Burma', 24th August 2022, *United States Government*, <https://www.state.gov/marking-five-years-since-the-genocide-in-burma/> (accessed 28th Sept 2022).

Myanmar elite, military and fundamentalist Theravada Buddhist monks requires a book that clarifies how and why events have come about within a post-colonial and political context. Ibrahim's study might be a little dated; after all, it was first published in 2016 (and revised in 2018). Nonetheless, the author's research and argument foresee the mass displacement and ethnic cleansing of 2017 (and Bliken's statement five years later). Ibrahim is an established research professor and the author of highly acclaimed academic studies.

The book's inside cover says that Myanmar's Muslims (who make up about 3 to 5 per cent of Myanmar's population) '*are one of the most persecuted minorities in the world*' and, following decolonisation in 1947-49, were denied official recognition as one of Myanmar's 135 'national races'. The book explains how this problem came about in recent history and how the Burmese elite and military have constructed ongoing racist stereotyping and Islamophobic attitudes for ideological and economic purposes. Ibrahim reports, '*The first edition of this book argued that Myanmar was on the edge of a genocide aimed at the Rohingya. By 2015, they had been marginalised within the country of their birth and denied all normal human and civic rights. I argued then that the "situation is now so bad that the only outcomes are to ease the level of persecution or for it to slip into outright genocide"*' (p. 150). The author continues by saying that the '*ethnic cleansing of an entire community*' will result in wider regional problems for Myanmar's neighbours, including a refugee crisis and perhaps armed resistance in the form of the Arakan Rohingya Resistance Army (ARSA) (p. 148).

The book *The Rohingyas* has seven chronological chapters, a conclusion and an epilogue (dated November 2017). Investigated are events from 1948 to 2015. Also, one chapter looks at genocide and international law, while another examines the steps required to stop further aggression and violence by the Myanmar regime, elites and extremist Buddhist monks. In the book, two key themes stand out; one is historical, and the other is political. Both contain discussions that inform the reader and provide a solid counterargument to generally lazy thinking about the Rohingya people, Myanmar's 'democratisation', and the policies of the Burmese military government and elites.

First, the Myanmar regime and leaders have rewritten the history of Burma and the Rakhine state to exclude and marginalise the Rohingya. Discussed is the legitimate claim of this Indo-Aryan ethnic group to their ancestral lands in Arakan (Rakhine). The myth propagated by the Burmese regime is that the '*Rohingyas are really Bengali migrants*' (p. 4) who arrived under the period of British rule starting in Arakan in 1826 AD and wider Burma circa 1886 AD. Significantly, the author highlights that Arakan had '*been part of the Burmese Kingdom for a total of forty years out of the previous 500*' from 1784 AD to 1826 AD (p. 5). So, '*until 1784, the histories of Arakan (now called Rakhine) and Burma were largely separate*' (p. 5).

Ibrahim says historical research poses a severe problem for Myanmar's identity construction; '*there is substantial evidence that an ethnic group, now known as the Rohingyas, lived in Arakan before the Burmese invasion of 1784*' (p. 6). The first settled kingdoms consisted of Indo-Aryan groups from the Ganges Valley, arriving circa 3,000 BC. Many people were Hindu, but numbers became Muslim during the seventh century AD. The Rohingya are said to descend from these peoples. Overall, the Arakan was multi-confessional. While the Rakhine people, a Southeast Asian people, arrived from central Burma in about 1000 AD (pp. 21-23).

However, the newly independent Burmese government (of 1948) chose 1824 to 1826 AD – the era of the British conquest – as the defining moment for modern-day citizenship entitlement in Burma. The Myanmar regime and extremists argue about who lived in Arakan circa 1826 and discounted the Rohingya born and bred there as '*migrants*' of British colonial rule, not natives (p. 29). The regime's deliberate misinterpretation of history and manipulation of the criterion for Burmese citizenship saw the Rohingya – with ancient roots in Arakan – become stateless (p. 5). The act of the state making a people stateless, though born in the state's territory, goes against the United Nations Charter (p. 33).

The political themes explore false narratives about Myanmar. For instance, it is not a closed society; instead, it seeks to sell natural resources to purchase foreign armaments and technology. Ibrahim remarks that the regime is sensitive to international criticism—though

when questioned by the West about its human rights abuses, it threatens to turn to China for support. The West's 'hero' and 'villain' image of the military government vis-a-vis Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy Party is problematic because both sideline Rohingyas as non-indigenous and support an exclusive Buddhist society (p. 2). Furthermore, some Theravada Buddhist monks support a cultural-nationalist ideology; co-religionists have participated in inter-communal tensions in Thailand and Sri Lanka. In Myanmar, monks incite the Buddhist masses with hate speech against Muslim Rohingyas (p. 3).

Ever since the military seized power in 1962, the Rohingya have increasingly been marginalised—leading to today's demonisation by the authorities. It has resulted in the Buddhist masses being subjected to regular anti-Rohingya propaganda. This disrespectful attitude is common in Myanmar, except for open-minded individuals and civil society groups (p. 135). The author explains that genocide is a long-term development, an orchestrated campaign involving cultural and institutional factors (p. 103). Unless the international community act immediately, he fears a 'trigger' – like an environmental catastrophe – might lead to the genocide of Myanmar's remaining approximately 600,000 Rohingyas.

Ibrahim's book is thought-provoking and connects with other historical ethnic cleansing and genocide cases. The study is recommended for students, scholars, journalists and the general reader to analyse the Rohingyas, Burma and Myanmar history and identity, mass displacement and refugees, and Theravada Buddhism extremists.