

Myanmar's Ethno-Sectarian Clashes: Containing China?

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The sectarian violence in Myanmar's western state of Arakan began in June 2012, and the plight of the persecuted Rohingya ethnic group has since created an international uproar. Displays of solidarity with the predominantly Muslim Rohingya people have been most potent throughout the Islamic world, with a broad spectrum of support ranging from moderate political leaders to extremist groups.

While rights advocacy groups robustly condemn Myanmar's government for its role in the conflict, evidence suggests that the overwhelming majority of violence was attributed to rioting civilians from both the ethnic Rakhine Buddhist community and the ethnic Rohingya Muslim community. The initial violence broke out on May 28th after reports circulated that a Buddhist Rakhine woman was raped and killed by three Muslim men in the town of Ramri. Buddhist communities throughout the state responded by circulating an incendiary pamphlet containing details of the crime. This only served to enflame the already tense situation in Arakan, precipitating a series of events that would draw the attention and condemnation of much of the world.

On June 3rd, a large group of Rakhine villagers in Toungop stopped a bus and brutally killed 10 Muslims on board. In response to this contemptible act of brutality, several thousand Rohingya rioted in the town of Maungdaw on June 8th, destroying Rakhine property and killing an unknown number of predominately Buddhist villagers. These events prompted large-scale, sectarian violence that quickly swept through the Arakan State capital of Sittwe and surrounding localities. Mobs from both communities stormed unsuspecting villages, killing residents and destroying homes, businesses, and places of worship. Given the extreme poverty and sparse government security presence in the region, residents armed themselves with machetes, sticks, sharpened bamboo spears and other basic weapons in order to defend themselves. Vast stretches of homes, businesses, and property from both communities were completely destroyed, leaving thousands of residents displaced.

These events elicited an international outcry, with much of the world showing sympathy for the Rohingya communities who have long suffered systematic discrimination under Myanmar's military junta that continues today under the newly elected civilian government. During the British colonial occupation, the lack of political borders between Arakan and Bengal (presently referred to as Bangladesh) caused the Muslim population to surge prior to Myanmar's independence. It is precisely this migration that Burmans interpret to be evidence of the community's illegal status. [1] Since 1982, a citizenship law passed by the former military government has excluded the Rohingya from citizenship, effectively rendering them stateless. Although records of Rohingya settlements in Arakan date back to

the late 7th century, successive governments have asserted that the Rohingya are foreigners with no right to live in Myanmar, a view shared by much of the Arakan population and much of the dominant Burman ethnic group throughout the country.

The communal violence in Arakan has created a refugee crisis for neighboring Bangladesh – a nation of extreme poverty and high rates of population growth – which is not well prepared to cope with an influx of refugees. According to the United Nations Human Rights Agency (UNHCR), Bangladesh is currently host to some 29,000 recognized refugees who are housed in camps and receive international aid, as well as several thousand undocumented Rohingya living in makeshift communities. [2] Additionally, rights advocacy group *Human Rights Watch (HRW)* issued a report on the violence in Arakan state titled, “[The Government Could Have Stopped This](#),” which alleges that Myanmar’s security forces initially stood by without intervening during the early stages of the unrest, before joining in with Rakhine mobs to target Rohingya communities. While it must be noted that the credibility of *HRW*’s reports have come under scrutiny even from founder Robert Bernstein, who accuses the organization of using poor research methods and politicizing their testimony, the content published by *HRW* examining the violence in Arakan gives a general indication of what occurred. [3]

HRW’s report acknowledges the difficulty of verifying credible information and is based on 57 interviews with eyewitnesses and affected individuals, all of whom remain anonymous. Contrary to the popular perception of Rohingyas being victimized by unprovoked violence, the report concedes that members of the Muslim community indeed used brutal tactics of violence:

A 31-year-old Arakan mother of five told Human Rights Watch how a large group of Rohingya entered her village outside Sittwe around June 12 and killed her husband. She said the government had provided no security. “They killed him right there in the village,” she said. “His arm was cut off and his head was nearly cut off. He was 35 years old.” A 40-year-old Arakan man in Sittwe said, “The government didn’t help us. We had no food, no shelter, and no security [when we fled], but we protected ourselves using sticks and knives.” [4]

The report further details how local law enforcement, military personnel, and border patrol officers targeted Rohingya groups in the ensuing riots; a quite plausible scenario. This is followed in the report by hysterical accusations of systematic rape against Rohingyas carried out by security forces, a likely exaggerated claim. In the Libyan conflict 2011, *HRW* played a vital role in publishing accusations that Muammar Gaddafi’s forces took part in campaigns of mass rape. [5] Advocacy groups later questioned these allegations, leading some to accuse NGOs of knowingly publishing false claims. [6] The dominant theme throughout the report of unrest in Myanmar is the absence of security forces and their general inactivity. *HRW* also reports the prevalence of anti-Muslim sentiment being disseminated by Myanmar’s Buddhist monks:

Some Rohingya in displacement camps told Human Rights Watch that some Burmese soldiers had shown great compassion and gone to the market on their behalf to purchase rice and other necessities, but that their willingness to do so has since stopped. The soldiers’ refusal to informally help Rohingya buy food correlates with a local campaign by Arakan Buddhist monks—the most revered members of local Arakan society—who have distributed pamphlets advocating for separation of the communities and imploring the Arakan people to exclude

Muslims in every way. “They are eating our rice and staying near our houses,” the author of one pamphlet told Human Rights Watch. “So we will separate. We need to protect the Arakan people.... We don’t want any connection to the Muslim people at all.” [7]

Myanmar’s President Thein Sein, whose administration instituted the most substantial economic and social reforms in decades, shocked many by telling the United Nations refugee agency that the Rohingya were not welcome, stating, “We will take responsibility for our ethnic people but it is impossible to accept the illegally entered Rohingyas, who are not our ethnicity. We will send them away if any third country would accept them, this is what we are thinking is the solution to the issue.” [8] Democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, whose movement has long received diplomatic and financial support from Britain and the United States, has disenchanted many international sympathizers by remaining willfully silent on the issue. It is essential to understand that the immigration policies of the Burman-dominated national political system remain consistent within both the ruling national government and Suu Kyi’s opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), especially when dealing with the issue of the Rohingya:

“The Rohingya are not our citizens.” - **Nyan Win**, National League for Democracy Spokesperson

“There is no ethnic group named Rohingya in our country.” - **Khin Yi**, Immigration Minister [9]

Popular Ethno-Sectarian Nationalism & Democracy Promotion

Decades of international isolation under the rule of a paranoid and superstitious military elite have perpetuated the chauvinistic and xenophobic traits of the Theravada Buddhist culture practiced in Myanmar. In attempts to prevent political fragmentation, official mythology has long encouraged a sense of racial and moral superiority among the majority Burman Buddhists - who comprise 60 percent of the population - to the detriment of the nation’s many diverse ethnic and religious minority groups. Built on the foundations of Myanmar’s contemporary culture of national pride and militarism, the former regime perpetuated propaganda warning against multiculturalism, alleging that the health and purity of a uniquely Burman form of Buddhism were at risk from external contamination. Dr. Maung Zarni, an exiled dissident and research fellow at the London School of Economics, writes:

Burmese society as a whole remains illiberal and potently ethno-nationalist. The dominant Burmese worldview continues to rest on an enervating combination of pre-colonial feudalism, religious mysticism, belief in racial purity and statist militarism. This is a potent and poisonous combination. [10]

Zarni also highlights how the politics of Buddhist nationalism greatly restrict Suu Kyi’s options as she pursues reform, especially when dealing with the issue of Rohingya persecution. Zarni writes, “Politically, Aung San Suu Kyi has absolutely nothing to gain from opening her mouth on this, she is no longer a political dissident trying to stick to her principles. She’s a politician and her eyes are fixed on the prize, which is the 2015 majority Buddhist vote.” [11] Since being elected to parliament, Suu Kyi’s focus has been in the realm encouraging foreign investment; it is unlikely that she will use her platform to

encourage racial tolerance. As she writes in her 1985 book [Burma and India](#), for the Burman “racial psyche,” Buddhism “represents the perfected philosophy. It therefore follows that there [is] no need to either to develop it further or to consider other philosophies.” [12] Despite the liberal reforms undertaken by the civilian government, popular ethno-nationalist sentiment is pervasive, especially among communities of Buddhist monks.

In Myanmar, the revered status of monks prompted religious leaders to trigger a failed uprising against the former military junta during the 2007 Saffron Revolution, a policy directive funded and supported by the United States and British governments. A report issued in 2006 by *Burma Campaign UK* entitled “[Failing the People of Burma?](#)” offers valuable insight into the “democracy promotion” efforts of Western governments. The report cites a statement issued by the US Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs on October 30, 2003:

“The restoration of democracy in Burma is a priority U.S. policy objective in Southeast Asia. To achieve this objective, the United States has consistently supported democracy activists and their efforts both inside and outside Burma...Addressing these needs requires flexibility and creativity. Despite the challenges that have arisen, United States Embassies Rangoon and Bangkok as well as Consulate General Chiang Mai are fully engaged in pro-democracy efforts. The United States also supports organizations, such as the National Endowment for Democracy, the Open Society Institute and Internews, working inside and outside the region on a broad range of democracy promotion activities. U.S.-based broadcasters supply news and information to the Burmese people, who lack a free press. U.S. programs also fund scholarships for Burmese who represent the future of Burma. The United States is committed to working for a democratic Burma and will continue to employ a variety of tools to assist democracy activists.” [13]

The US State Department, through the National Endowment for Democracy and the Open Society Institute, have financially supported dissident media both within and outside of Myanmar, including the *New Era Journal*, the *Irrawaddy*, the *Democratic Voice of Burma*, *Radio Free Asia*, the *Voice of America*, in addition to supporting organizations affiliated with Aung San Suu Kyi. [14] The popularity enjoyed by Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy party within Myanmar is largely attributable to her affiliation with networks of Buddhist monks that have championed her cause. In a September 2012 article titled, “[Monks stage anti-Rohingya march in Myanmar](#),” *AFP* reported that many of the same monks who took part in 2007’s Saffron Revolution in support of Suu Kyi had now rallied behind President Thein Sein and his position on expelling the Rohingya. [15] Reports describe Wirathu, referred to in popular media as an “activist monk,” who rallied against Rohingyas and long advocated the release of political prisoners.

Ironically, *Human Rights Watch* reports that Wirathu was arrested in 2003 and sentenced to 25 years in prison along with other monks for their role in inciting violent clashes between Buddhists and Muslims. [16] Though he was later granted amnesty and released, his conduct hardly describes that of a “political prisoner.” *HRW* reports that organizations such as the Young Monks Association received support from Aung San Suu Kyi’s political movement – the same organization now inciting violence, calling for the expulsion of the Rohingya community. [17] In an article entitled, “[Burma’s monks call for Muslim community to be shunned](#),” the *Independent* mentions the Young Monks Association as one of the groups involved in distributing anti-Rohingya propaganda flyers and attempting to block humanitarian aid from reaching Rohingya camps. [18] Ashin Htawara, another prominent

exiled dissident and Buddhist monk encouraged Myanmar's government to send Rohingya people "back to their native land" at an event in London hosted by the anti-Rohingya Burma Democratic Concern. [19] After fleeing Myanmar in 2007 following the Saffron Revolution, he continued to enthusiastically support the NLD, stating, "Aung San Suu Kyi is my special leader."

In response to his comments toward the Rohingya community, Mark Farmaner, director of *Burma Campaign UK*, stated: "We were shocked to have [Ashin Htawara] propose to us that there should be what amounts to concentration camps for the Rohingya." [20] Additionally, prominent democracy activists within the country such as Ko Ko Gyi, a former political prisoner, maintain that "the Rohingya are not a Burmese ethnic group. The root cause of the violence... comes from across the border." [21] Myanmar's nascent media freedom has developed in surprising ways, with social media users calling for ethnic cleansing of the *kalar*, a pejorative term used to demean people with Indian features. *Foreign Policy* reports of a popular backlash against foreign media outlets such as the *BBC*, while the Norway-based *Democratic Voice of Burma* recently fell victim to cyber attacks for their position on the Rohingya issue. [22]

The Role of Saudi-linked Terror Networks in Arakan

Appalling poverty, state-sponsored discrimination, and an absence of basic education are only some of the attributes that make Arakan state fertile ground for ideological extremism, especially as Rohingya feel pressured to preserve their cultural and religious identity. In his book, "[The Talibanization of Southeast Asia](#)" author Bilveer Singh describes how many of the predominantly Sunni Rohingya population have opted for jihad in resentment following the destruction of their holy sites and removal of citizenship rights in 1982. Singh acknowledges that few Muslims in Myanmar have advocated armed struggle, but notes that groups such as the Bangladesh-based Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), as well as Myanmar's most prominent political Islamic organization, the Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO), have historically maintained links with foreign organizations such as al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban. [23]

ARNO originated from the Arakan-based Mujahid Party, formed in 1947 with the aim of creating an autonomous Muslim state within the then-Federal Union of Burma. The group changed its name several times before shifting its objective to forming an autonomous state specifically for Rohingya. ARNO, in its contemporary form, is the result of a merger between three groups long marred by disunity and infighting: the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front, the Rohingya Solidarity Organization, and the Rohingya National Alliance. The UNHCR's official chronology of Rohingya civilization in Myanmar cites the insurgent activity of Islamic groups from 1991 onwards:

At a secret camp deep in the jungle, run by the RSO [Rohingya Solidarity Organization], young Muslims are training to make war on the Buddhist military government of Burma. The goal of the rebels, calling themselves Mujahideen, is to restore the once independent Muslim homeland of Arakan on Burma's west coast. It was an independent Muslim kingdom from 1430 to 1784 and now is the only Muslim majority province in Burma. [24]

Upon merging into ARNO, a new Central Committee was formed with Nurul Islam as President. Singh writes of Islam that he "has become a symbol of hope and confidence for

the entire Rohingya people.” [25] Confidential diplomatic cables from the American Embassy in Yangon released by Wikileaks in July 2012 cite Myanmar intelligence documents highlighting ARNO’s connections with al-Qaeda and other insurgent groups, and reveal that ARNO President Nurul Islam had departed to Saudi Arabia and onward to the United States:

ARNO group had an estimated strength of about 200 insurgents, of whom about 170 are equipped with a variety of arms. According to Fayos Ahmed, ARNO Military-in-Charge, Salem Ulah, had contacts with Al-Qaeda and some members of ARNO forces were arrested when they were sent to join the Taliban in Afghanistan and attacked the Americans. These ARNO forces were sent to Afghanistan along with Rohingya groups in Karachi, Pakistan. Rohingya groups are in many countries like Pakistan, India, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, UAE, Palestine and Australia. Chairman Nurul Islam has received an American visa and departed for Saudi Arabia from Bangladesh, with an intent to reside in Saudi Arabia for a short period and then depart for the United States. [26]

If the Myanmar intelligence reports cited by the US Embassy in Yangon were indeed accurate, then it would open the possibility of a foreign component fuelling the recent unrest in Arakan. This assertion makes sense considering the global rise of Saudi-sponsored Salafist movements aligned with US strategic objectives. Existing reports describe how communal violence was carried out with basic weapons, the role of ARNO operatives may have ranged from simply encouraging and inciting an armed response, to using small brigades of fighters to destroy property and commit violence, causing larger mobs to follow suit. Although the lack of technology, media penetration, and general instability in the region at the height of the violence make these accusations very difficult to prove, it is entirely plausible given that Myanmar’s state media has reported the presence of al-Qaeda in Arakan during the unrest. [27] Reports issued by the *Associated Press* assert that security officials detained and charged three aid workers with “inciting religious hatred and participating in arson attacks,” including 73-year old Kyaw Hla Aung from Netherlands-based AZG, accused of having terrorist links and arrested under Article 505 of Myanmar’s penal code:

“An hour or two before I was arrested, my home was raided. I don’t know by whom. All my papers and documents were scattered outside my house,” he said. “They said I had links to Al Qaeda.” [28]

These reports suggest that Myanmar’s government strongly believes that foreign terror networks have influenced the unrest in Arakan. While many would argue that Myanmar’s government could use the pretext of Islamic extremism to maintain its campaign of political repression, the ongoing persecution of Rohingya, as well as sectarian clashes, open a new strategic risk that could be exploited by foreign and domestic Islamist groups in order to further justify a violent response that would only cause the situation to deteriorate. In Indonesia, several hundred “hard-liners” from organizations such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and Jemaah Anshorut Tauhid (JAT) threatened to storm the Myanmar embassy in Jakarta at the height of the unrest, but were prevented by security forces. [29] Ehsanullah Ehsan, a spokesman for Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan also expressed willingness to wage jihad against Myanmar:

“We warn [the] Pakistani government to halt all relations with [the] Burmese

government and close down their embassy in Islamabad otherwise we will not only attack the Burmese interests anywhere but will also attack the Pakistani fellows of Burma one by one... We want to remind our Muslims in Burma that we haven't forgotten you, we will take revenge of your blood." Ehsan added: "We appeal to [the] media especially who call themselves representative of Muslims to broadcast the real situation in Burma and what's happening to Burmese Muslims... Taliban are with the Burmese Muslim brethren." [30]

The Geopolitical Component: Thwarting Chinese Economic Development

The situation in Myanmar is not merely to be understood on an emotional and ethical level. Rather, it is shaped by significant geopolitical and economic realities. Enormous natural gas deposits valued at several billion dollars have been found in the Bay of Bengal off the coast of Arakan State, where predominantly Chinese companies are mining in partnership with the state-owned Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise. [31] Construction has begun on oil and gas transport pipelines from Arakan State to Yunnan Province in China. [32] Sittwe, capital of the Arakan State, is effectively the epicenter of one of China's most crucial international investments, indispensable for Beijing in its effort to meet the increasing energy demands of its densely populated southwestern provinces. Additionally, ongoing ethnic conflicts in Myanmar correspond directly with large-scale Chinese development projects. Similar to other joint US-Saudi sponsored forms of destabilization; the *modus operandi* of these external networks has been to exacerbate long-standing ethnic and religious tensions to bring about far-reaching unrest. Political analyst Eric Draitser writes:

This project, a twin oil and gas pipeline, which would traverse Myanmar to link China's southwestern Yunnan province with the Indian Ocean would, consequently, provide the Chinese land-based access to energy imports from Africa and the Middle East. Because of US naval dominance, not being completely reliant on commercial shipping is an integral aspect of the overall Chinese strategy. The pipeline itself is not the only issue for the Chinese. Sittwe is the site of the major Chinese-funded port, which, aside from being the starting point of the pipeline, is a vital access point to Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent. Imports such as minerals and other raw materials from Africa as well as oil from the Middle East would be shipped through this port (along with the Pakistani port of Gwadar) for sale on the Chinese market. It is for this reason that Sittwe is of crucial significance to Chinese economic development. Naturally, as Sittwe and the rest of the Rakhine state descends into chaos and the international community clamors for some form of intervention, the port, pipeline and other projects cannot continue as planned. [33]

The development of China's economy has been accompanied by a dependence upon offshore resources, primarily from reserves in Iran, Saudi Arabia and Angola. For Beijing, energy security is essential to the continued growth of its economy, which, in turn, ensures domestic political stability. 80 percent of China's oil imports currently pass through the Strait of Malacca, a narrow waterway located between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, linking the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea and Pacific Ocean. [34] The importance of the Myanmar-China Oil and Gas Pipeline, consisting of two parallel oil and gas pipelines, is its function as an alternative transport route for crude oil imports from the Middle East to potentially bypass the Strait of Malacca, thus deterring the ability of hostile naval powers to disrupt a vital energy corridor to China. The United States has announced its plans to reposition 60 percent of its navy to the Asia Pacific region by 2020, as cited in the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance report entitled, "[Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for](#)

[21st Century Defense](#).” This crucial document highlights Washington’s growing emphasis on containing China’s military buildup in a move to enhance American presence in one of the most economically dynamic parts of the world. [35]

Washington’s endorsement of a strategy designed to contain China is attributable to US foreign policy theoreticians such as Robert Kagan of the *Brookings Institution*, co-founder of the neoconservative political organization, Project for the New American Century. Kagan’s 1997 article, “[What China Knows That We Don’t: The Case for a New Strategy of Containment](#),” argues that the most effective means of preserving the present international order that “serves the needs of the United States and its allies, which constructed it,” is not to accommodate the peaceful rise of China, but to strengthen American military capabilities in the region and to work towards political change in Beijing:

The changes in the external and internal behavior of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s resulted at least in part from an American strategy that might be called “integration through containment and pressure for change.” Such a strategy needs to be applied to China today. As long as China maintains its present form of government, it cannot be peacefully integrated into the international order. [36]

Kagan describes how China’s leadership interprets Washington’s interests in the Asia-Pacific as a move to “severely limit their own ability to become the region’s hegemon,” namely by countering Chinese influence in Southeast Asia. Reports issued by the United States Army War College’s Strategic Studies Institute reflect the adoption of Kagan’s containment methodology. “[String of Pearls: Meeting the Challenge of China’s Rising Power Across the Asian Littoral](#),” authored by Lieutenant Colonel Christopher J Pehrson, highlights China’s geopolitical interests and economic presence in several regions, which include a container shipping facility in Chittagong, Bangladesh, the construction of a deep water port in Sittwe, Myanmar, in addition to the construction of a navy base in Gwadar, Pakistan, among other locations. Reports issued by the *Washington Times* confirm that Pehrson’s containment strategy has been employed as policy, reissued in a paper entitled “Energy Futures in Asia,” produced by defense contractor Booz Allen Hamilton. [37]

It appears that the sectarian violence in Arakan State beginning in June 2012 is the likely result of covert intelligence operations aiming to destabilize western Myanmar to counter China’s vital economic investment in the region. This is in line with Washington’s policy objectives of curbing Beijing’s influence in Southeast Asia. Reforms introduced by President Thein Sein have opened the door to mass foreign investment, the political ascension of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, and the presence of American NGOs associated with and financially supported by US State Department, including *Freedom House*, *Human Rights Watch*, *Open Society Foundations*, *U.S. Campaign for Burma*, and others. [38] While the United States has placed its support behind the National League for Democracy in the person of Suu Kyi, she has in turn exercised her influence to execute political and economic objectives that adhere to US foreign policy.

Suu Kyi and a stable of Western-funded NGOs have successfully used their influence to block the construction of a joint energy project between the Myanmar Ministry of Electric Power, Asia World Company, and the China Power Investment Corporation. The Myitsone Dam project in the northern Myanmar state of Kachin would have been the world’s 15th largest dam, set to be located on the Irrawaddy River in the northern Myanmar state of

Kachin. The dam is intended to export a large percentage of its power to China's Yunnan province, which would be taxed to provide revenue for Myanmar's government and future development before being turned over fully to Myanmar after a 50-year contract. [39] While groups such as *Human Rights Watch* use their influence to oppose the construction the Myanmar-China Oil and Gas Pipeline and other projects under the guise of defending human rights, a remarkable lack of criticism is attributed toward Western oil firms operating in the country. [40]

In 2005, a group of villagers in Myanmar filed a lawsuit against Unocal, an oil firm that merged with the American-owned Chevron, and was later obliged to compensate the victims by court order. [41] Western corporations at the time exploited a legal loophole that allowed them to operate in Myanmar in defiance of US-led sanctions because their investments were agreed upon prior to the sanctions being issued. [42] Alongside the French-owned Total, Chevron was accused of collaborating with Myanmar's military junta, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), by hiring military personnel to illegally confiscate land. Reports claim that soldiers used tactics of torture and intimidation to force villagers into unpaid labor during the construction of the Yadana Gas Project, a pipeline project that was established to transport natural gas from Myanmar's Andaman Sea into Thailand. [43] While Beijing's economic investment projects are sharply criticized by Aung San Suu Kyi, she has invited the very same Western corporations into Myanmar, despite the highly documented misconduct of these companies:

"I have to say that I find that Total is a responsible investor in the country, even though there was a time when we did not think they should be encouraging the military regime by investing in Burma. They were sensitive to human rights and environmental issues and now that we've come to a point in time when we would like investors who are sensitive to such issues, I am certainly not going to persuade Chevron or Total to pull out." [44]

It would appear that the clear preference toward Western companies held by Myanmar's opposition is maintained in exchange for the continued rhetorical support they receive from the United States and Europe - despite those companies presiding over the very same human rights abuses that Chinese firms are accused of. The political undercurrents of Western support are laid bare as American corporations begin to fully engage in investment opportunities throughout the country. Political analyst F. William Engdahl writes:

The US corporations approaching Burma are handpicked by Washington to introduce the most destructive "free market" reforms that will open Myanmar to instability. The United States will not allow investment in entities owned by Myanmar's armed forces or its Ministry of Defense. It also is able to place sanctions on "those who undermine the reform process, engage in human rights abuses, contribute to ethnic conflict or participate in military trade with North Korea." The United States will block businesses or individuals from making transactions with any "specially designated nationals" or businesses that they control - allowing Washington, for example, to stop money from flowing to groups "disrupting the reform process." It's the classic "carrot and stick" approach, dangling the carrot of untold riches if Burma opens its economy to US corporations and punishing those who try to resist the takeover of the country's prize assets. Oil and gas, vital to China, will be a special target of US intervention. [45]

Conclusion

Myanmar faces innumerable challenges in its pursuit of development. They range from combating forms of racism and violence that target Myanmar's ethnic minorities to the lack of basic infrastructure and civic educational initiatives to maintaining national sovereignty while introducing liberalizing economic reforms. Although Myanmar's civilian government led by Thein Sein has issued meaningful reforms, many exiles and activists perceive this administration to be a new face on an old and belligerent regime – despite being praised domestically for its position on expelling Rohingyas. As the country approaches its highly anticipated national elections in 2015, a victory for either side will likely not sit well with the other. Given the Western support allotted to Aung San Suu Kyi and her political party, it can be expected that the ruling government – should it win the 2015 elections – would be categorically condemned. Myanmar's diverse mosaic of politically oppressed ethnic groups put the national government in a sensitive position; continued Western support for their autonomy or independence could give rise to the formation of break-away states, too small to assert their sovereignty at the foot of multinational corporations.

It remains very unlikely that Myanmar will repeal the 1982 Citizenship Law that removed basic rights from the Rohingya and other minorities. However, President Thein Sein has pledged to open schools for Rohingya, insinuating that they would be allowed to remain in the country. [46] Myanmar's government would benefit by appeasing advocacy groups and lifting restrictions on humanitarian agencies to ensure they can freely move to remote villages in order to deliver necessary medical assistance, with governmental oversight.– Additionally, such agencies could investigate credible allegations of human rights violations and provide legal counsel to those detained in northern Arakan State. Greater focus should be placed on reconciliation talks between ethnic minority groups, although very little likelihood exists that such suggestions would be meaningfully applied given the tense climate of racial prejudice in Myanmar. In his 1934 novel, *Burmese Days*, author George Orwell writes:

“To talk, simply to talk! It sounds so little, and how much it is! When you have existed to the brink of middle age in bitter loneliness, among people to whom your true opinion on every subject on earth is blasphemy, the need to talk is the greatest of all needs.”

Notes

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[4] [The Government Could Have Stopped This](#), Human Rights Watch, August 2012

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