

State Sanctioned Aggression towards Ethnic Groups in Myanmar

Carly O'Neill

Abstract

Myanmar has a population of 54 million people, where there reside 135 different ethnic groups. These ethnic groups have been involved in one of the world's longest on-going civil wars. Since 1942, Myanmar has been in an inter-communal violence between the Muslims and the Buddhists. The Burmese view the Rohingya people as foreigners who illegally settled in the Arakan province from Bangladesh, and the Burmese want the Rohingya gone. The 2020 World Report document claims Myanmar security forces are committing human rights violations towards several of its minority groups, including the Rohingya Muslims. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) opened a court case on November 11, 2019 as Gambia, along with 57 members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, claimed Myanmar's military was violating the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, according to the Human Rights Watch. This case will legally determine if Myanmar is responsible for committing genocide ("Myanmar: Hearings Begin," 2019). This study examines if Myanmar is applying state sanctioned bias towards non-indigenous ethnic groups by answering the question of how a group's indigenous or non-indigenous status to Myanmar affects whether they are targeted by state sanctioned aggression. I use the Mill's Method to analyze four ethnic groups in Myanmar, by determining if each group is indigenous to Myanmar and if they are experiencing high or low state sanctioned aggression. The importance of this study is to bring awareness to the human rights violations that are taking place within Myanmar and show how China is enabling the government's actions.

In this study I argue that Myanmar is applying state sanctioned bias towards non-indigenous ethnic groups by asking the question, "Does a group's indigenous or non-indigenous status to Myanmar affect whether they are targeted by state sanctioned aggression?" I will answer this research question by examining several works of literature and using the Mill's Method, isolating a cause from a complex event sequence, to determine whether this

statement is correct. This primary research lead me to two sub questions: first, "How are indigenous people treated by the state in Myanmar?" and second, "How are non-indigenous people treated by the state in Myanmar?" By analyzing the four cases I have selected for this research project, I will be able to better answer these questions.

Study

The cases selected for this study were based on their indigenous status to Myanmar and if their status to the country affected whether ethnic groups in Myanmar are targeted by state sanctioned aggression. The data used to determine these four cases for this study comes from a multitude of sources, including the Human Rights Watch, International Criminal Court (ICC), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), BBC, and ICJ. I also examined the 2020 World Report, which claims Myanmar security forces are committing human rights violations towards ethnic minorities in the Shan, Kachin, Karen, and Rakhine states (World Report, 2020). In addition, I included Aye Chan's *The Development of a Muslim Enclave in Arakan (Rakhine) State of Burma (Myanmar)* (2005) to portray a native of Myanmar's Rakhine Province perspective on the Rohingya Muslims. In his work, Chan states that the Rohingya are non-natives to Myanmar who illegally settled in the Rakhine Province. I included the Burmese-Chinese as one of my four cases in this study due to China's imperative role in Myanmar's economy, military, and natural resources. China fully supports the Myanmar government and voted against the U.N. Human Rights Council to look into the possible genocide taking place in Myanmar's Rakhine State. China has backed Myanmar officials who are calling this crisis "a legitimate counter-insurgency operation in Rakhine" (Reuters Staff, 2018, p. 6). Wang Yi, China's State Councilor commented that the Rakhine State issue is one between Myanmar and Bangladesh and should not be internationalized (Reuters Staff, 2018).

Case Selection

I selected four specific cases to analyze within various regions of Myanmar identifying ethnic groups with either

indigenous or non-indigenous status and if this status, in turn, determines high or low state sanctioned aggression. The four cases I selected for my research are Karen, Rakhine, Burmar, and Burmese-Chinese. The Karen will represent a group with both indigenous status to Myanmar as well as experiencing high levels of state sanctioned aggression. The Rakhine will serve as a non-indigenous group to Myanmar with high levels of state sanctioned aggression. The Burmar, more commonly known as the Burmese are the dominant ethnic group in Myanmar, making them both indigenous and with little to no aggression towards them. My final case will look at the Burmese-Chinese, a non-indigenous ethnic group to Myanmar that also have little to no aggression towards them.

Analysis

Through analyzing my research on the four cases I have selected for this paper and reviewing my research question, I have found that a group's indigenous or non-indigenous status to Myanmar does not affect whether they are targeted by state sanctioned aggression. Thus, my hypothesis from the beginning of my research was wrong and Myanmar does not have a bias against their non-indigenous ethnic groups. At the same time, Myanmar does exhibit discrimination against particular ethnic groups within its country, but the group's indigenous status to Myanmar is not the underlying cause. I have come to this conclusion through using the Mill's Method to compare four indigenous and non-indigenous ethnic groups in Myanmar. The non-indigenous Rohingya are considered nonexistent to the Burmese and are refused citizenship because they are seen as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. However, the non-indigenous Burmese-Chinese are seen as vital to Myanmar's economy and political presence, with China being Myanmar's primary trading partner

and root of foreign investment. The indigenous Karen have been in an ongoing civil war with the Burmese military for 71 years now. While most ethnic groups were able to sign ceasefires between the late 1980's and early 1990's, it took until 2012 for Myanmar's new civilian government to initiate nation-wide ceasefires with representatives from its most impactful ethnic groups (Weatherby, 2014). The indigenous Burmese are the dominant culture in Myanmar and, because of this, the government will use "Burmanization" on minority cultures to convert them to the country's dominant majority. Theravada Buddhism also plays a role in Myanmar's favoritism towards this ethnic majority, since it is seen as the country's primary religion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Myanmar is a diverse country with a multitude of ethnic groups, some more preferable to Myanmar than others due to their cultural practices. The Rohingya want to be acknowledged as one of the country's official ethnic groups since it accounted for one third of the country's

population prior to 2017 in the Rakhine State. The military, on the other hand, along with Buddhist extremists, refuse to see this ethnic group as citizens and have pushed 700,000 of its population to flee to Bangladesh (Albert, 2020). A stepping stone in the right direction for peace among the country's ethnic groups would be for the government to continue resolution talks with Bangladesh and ceasefire agreements with the Karen to end their longest ongoing civil war. If the Myanmar military focused its agenda on inciting unity amongst citizens, rather than fear and division, the longstanding inter-communal violence between the country's Buddhists and Muslims would have a chance towards repair.

Author Note

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose. Thank you to Dr. David Owen for all your support during this project. This article is part of a larger research paper. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Carly B. O'Neill at carlyoneill5179@gmail.com.

References

- Albert, E., & Maizland, L. (2020, January 23). *The Rohingya crisis*. Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved <https://www.cfr.org/background/rohingya-crisis>
- Chan, A. (2005). *The development of a muslim enclave in Arakan (Rakhine) State of Burma (Myanmar)1*. SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research. Retrieved <https://www.soas.ac.uk/sbbr/editions/file64388.pdf>
- Myanmar: Hearings begin in genocide case*. (2019, December 10). Human Rights Watch. Retrieved <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/12/10/myanmar-hearings-begin-genocide-case>
- Reuters Staff. (2018, September 27). *China says Rohingya issue should not be 'internationalized.'* Reuters. Retrieved <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-china/china-says-rohingya-issue-should-not-be-internationalized-idUSKC N1M8062>
- Weatherby C. (2014, October 27). *The Karen conflict: Divisions challenge Myanmar's peace process*. Stimson. Retrieved <https://www.stimson.org/2014/the-karen-conflict-divisions-challenge-myanmars-peace-process/>
- World Report 2020 (2020). *Myanmar events of 2019*. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/myanmar-burma>.

Recommended Citation

O'Neill, C. (2021). State sanctioned aggression towards ethnic groups in Myanmar. *Made in Millersville Journal*, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.mimjournal.com/paper-27>