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When Buddhist Monks Wield Kalashnikovs

In Burma, an ultranationalist Buddhist militia is training to "defend the fatherland" against Rohingya Muslims.

By David Brenner, July 2, 2014

Arakan Army soldier. Source: David Brenner

"I was a monk. Most of us used to be," says a heavily armed soldier in the rugged mountains of northern Burma's Kachin state. "When I heard about this army, I really wanted to join. You know, in Rakhine state, we need to defend Buddhism."

The soldier fights for the little-known militia of Buddhist nationalists referred to as the Arakan Army. In his khaki uniform, a Kalashnikov slung over his shoulder, he is far from the peaceful Buddhist monk of the Western imagination. Yet some officials of the Burmese government, which faces challenges from countless ethnic armies, see the Arakan Army as a potentially useful ally in their efforts to consolidate one Burma.

Anyone familiar with the recent sectarian conflict in Burma will shiver at the militiaman's words. Since the country embarked on its rapid liberal reform process in

2011, communal violence between Buddhists and Muslims has swept the country. The bloodshed began in 2012 in the Arakan Army's home state of Rakhine, where ultranationalist Buddhists targeted the Muslim Rohingya population — whom they dismiss as "illegal Bengali immigrants" — in severe pogroms.

The uptick in violence against the Muslim minority follows classic conflict patterns. When power relations are shifting — as they have been during Burma's transition to democracy — those who are in a position to lose power seek to maintain it by mobilizing against minorities. The Muslim minority's historic strength in the business sector, its reputation for being wealthy and powerful, and its well-established transnational connections have fueled resentment from some among the Buddhist majority. Muslims in Rakhine, where the wave of religious violence began in 2012, are the targets of particular acrimony. Many Buddhist Burmese dismiss the Muslims, commonly called "Rohingyas," as "illegal Bengali immigrants" who came to take jobs and land in the overpopulated province. Though their ancestors hailed from Bangladesh, these Muslim families have lived in Burma for generations. But that hasn't stopped the authorities from denying them basic civil rights, such as freedom of movement, for many years. The United Nations lists them among the most persecuted minorities in the world.

Economic grievances have contributed to similar conflicts throughout history. Perhaps most infamously, rapid political and economic liberalization coincided with economic marginalization in the runup to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. The violence against Rohingyas and the reported complicity by local security forces has similar characteristics. With religious and nationalistic rhetoric serving as a tool for mobilization, the reordering of political power and economic assets is a primary cause of recent violence in Rakhine.

Yet, as is so often the case, the roots of the conflict date back to colonial history. Rakhine state was the independent Kingdom of Arakan until the Burmese conquest in 1784. Brutal occupation sent more than 35,000 Arakanese fleeing to British-administered Bangladesh. After the British annexed Rakhine at the end of the First Anglo-Burmese War, the fertile plains of Arakan were deserted. This caused the British East India Company to encourage migration from Chittagong, Bangladesh, to Rakhine state. Most of these migrants settled down as farmers, only to find themselves on the receiving end of hostility from the original inhabitants, who viewed them as occupants of their ancestral land. That the British often favored Bangladeshi immigrants for jobs in the colonial administration added to local resentments.

Communal violence in Rakhine first broke out during the Second World War. With the Japanese conquest of Burma in 1942, Rakhine nationalists attacked migrants in an attempt to drive them back to Bangladesh. During their reconquest of Burma, the Allies relied heavily on armed ethnic minority units to stage guerrilla attacks on Japanese troops all over the country. In Rakhine state, these units were recruited from Bangladeshi migrants. Instead of fighting the Japanese, they mostly targeted Buddhist Arakanese as revenge for the bloodshed against their own community just months earlier. This history, plus the more recent competition for scarce land and resources amid economic liberalization, explains much of the Buddhist violence against Rohingya Muslims.

In 2008, Tun Mra Naing and 300 recruits traveled across Burma to Kachin state to receive basic training in guerilla warfare from the armed wing of the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), one of Burma's oldest and strongest ethnic armed groups. Together with other armed groups, it is in de facto control of territorial pockets along the Chinese border. These mountains have given birth to several armed groups that are not necessarily linked to Kachin soil, including the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), a faction of Burmese students who militarized after the army's brutal crackdown on pro-democracy protests in 1988.

On the face of things, the Arakan Army's ethnic nationalism, and its claims to original ownership of land, seem to dovetail with the objectives of the Kachin rebels. Yet the two organizations are inherently different. The KIO, whose armed wing boasts over 10,000 active soldiers, has a sophisticated bureaucracy, administering Kachin civilians through managing taxes, operating hospitals and schools, building roads, and providing electricity from its own hydropower plants. Its decision-making apparatus includes military officers as well as a civilian administration resembling a one-party state that enjoys wide popular support. In contrast, the Arakan Army claims no governmental ambitions. As Tun Mra Naing, the militia's commander-in-chief, explains: "Our Arakanese politicians already do a good job. But in our situation we cannot only rely on soft power. We need hard power, too. In Buddhism, we say that you have to create your destiny with your own hands."

Over the past six years, since the Arakan Army moved to Kachin state, its ranks have swollen to more than a thousand heavily armed fighters. "You know, we first wanted this to be a secret mission. But our growing numbers became hard to hide," the commander-in-chief notes over milk tea.

To the chagrin of the Kachin army, however, Arakan fighters seem unwilling to turn their "hard power" against the Burmese military. Although Rakhine soldiers have engaged in some skirmishes with advancing government troops since the cease-fire between the KIO and Burma's government collapsed in 2011, fighting the state was never their intention. The Arakan Army is simply trapped in a tricky situation: "We cannot move back home through the front line at the moment," Tun Mra Naing explains. "Also, we need to stand by our allies and help them fight the government. Right now we are, let's say, stranded here."

While stranded, the Arakan Army has largely refrained from heavy clashes with Burma's military. In fact, KIO soldiers even assert that the Arakan soldiers have, more often than not, handed over their front-line posts to the military without much resistance. According to one KIO officer, this is a problematic reality for the KIO: "We now realize that [the Arakan Army] never came to fight the Burmese armed forces. This wasn't obvious to us in 2008. We thought that they were similar to us and the other ethnic, armed resistance movements." The officer explain that the KIO originally agreed to train the Arakan soldiers at a time when they felt mounting pressure from the Burmese government, foreshadowing the upcoming war. "But all they want to fight for is religion," the KIO officer concludes.

Make no mistake, religion is important to the Kachin, too. (Most of them are Christian.) But they are much more inclined to support religious diversity and tolerance in Burma than their brothers-in-arms. Moreover, they oppose and decry military dictator Ne Win's 1962 declaration of Buddhism as the only religion recognized by the state, a measure that has aggravated extant political and economic discrimination. Yet religion was never at the forefront of the KIO's armed struggle. For decades, they have been struggling for political autonomy and minority rights side by side with predominantly Buddhist ethnic minorities, such as the Shan and Palaung.

Indeed, the Arakan Army's leader makes quite clear that he never intended to join Burma's various ethnic armed organizations in their battle against the Burmese state. "We want self-determination, too," Tun Mra Naing said, before quickly adding: "But for us it's a matter of survival. If we don't stand up today we will disappear forever." He then continued to speak emotionally about the exploding Rohingya population, its growing wealth and political influence, and its evil plans to seize the ancient homeland of Rakhine's Buddhists. Finally, he declared that this "invasion" is funded by Saudi oil money and masterminded by al Qaeda.

Despite its fiercely independent rhetoric, the militia does not have a bad relationship with the Burmese government. "At one point we will return and defend our fatherland," Tun Mra Naing explains. "We already asked to assist the Burmese army as an auxiliary border force protecting our land and sea borders from illegal migrants." Last year, the Arakan Army put forward a joint proposal with parliamentary members of the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP), an ultranationalist party whose members are reported to have instigated and participated in sectarian violence.

The government has so far declined their request, but the militia leaders remain optimistic that their political allies in the RNDP will eventually convince the central government. The RNDP has indeed become a powerful force in Rakhine state, propagating an uncompromising line against Rohingyas, a platform that includes forced relocation to fenced-off camps and eventual deportation. One senior United Nations official who recently visited the camps expressed her horror at conditions in the camps, which she referred to as "appalling."

Most recently, the RNDP succeeded in lobbying the central government to exclude the Rohingya as a recognized minority group in the upcoming nation-wide census. Officials have done little to end the sectarian violence or even to alleviate humanitarian suffering. On the contrary, the government has increasingly restricted the work of humanitarian agencies in Rakhine state, at one point even banning local operations of the outspoken medical NGO Médecins Sans Frontièrs (MSF) for allegedly favoring Rohingya. According to Brad Adams of Human Rights Watch, a recently proposed marriage law that discriminates against non-Buddhists demonstrates how "government leaders are playing with fire by even considering proposals that would further divide the country by restricting marriage on religious lines."

The apparent agreement on religious questions between the Burmese government and RNDP ultranationalists explains why relations between them are warm. Given the alliance between the RNDP and the Arakan Army, as well as the government's long-standing practice of using ethnic militias to police its restive borderlands, the prospect that Burma's leaders may eventually allow the Arakan Army to return to Rakhine state does not seem out of the question.

While the underlying drivers of sectarian violence in Rakhine are complex, one thing is very clear: An alliance between ultranationalist politicians and a well-armed militia is certain to end in catastrophe. One KIO officer puts it this way: "We cannot let them return with weapons in their hands and massacre innocent civilians." That, of course, is far easier said than done, considering that the KIO is currently preoccupied with fighting the Burmese army. Yet the responsibility for solving this problem cannot be attributed to the KIO alone. So far, the Burmese government has focused on brokering cease-fires in its wars with restive ethnic groups. A more permanent solution will have to involve demobilization, reintegration, and a plan to address the socioeconomic causes of sectarian violence.