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Rakhine State: Dangers and Opportunities

Discussion Paper Prepared for
Proximity Designs | Myanmar

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This policy note was written by David Dapice (David_Dapice@harvard.edu) following several trips to the region in 2016, as well as participation in three policy dialogues around key issues in nation building convened in Indonesia and attended by representatives of diverse stakeholder groups. *The views expressed herein are the author's alone and do not necessarily reflect those of Proximity, the Government of the Union of Myanmar, or Harvard University. Issues discussed in this paper are aimed to facilitate dialogue among the citizens of Myanmar, who are ultimately responsible for making decisions regarding the country's policy choices.* This piece, along with other recent Ash-Proximity reports on Myanmar, is posted at <http://ash.harvard.edu/journal-articles> and www.ash.harvard.edu/myanmar-program

Background

The long-running tension in Rakhine state flared when Islamic militants attacked and killed nine local police in October and security forces moved in to pursue the attackers. In the conflict, it is believed that many civilians were either killed or effectively forced to flee. Thousands of former residents have recently fled to Bangladesh in spite of attempts by Bangladesh to deter them and miserable conditions in makeshift camps in Bangladesh. They join several hundred thousand refugees from Rakhine state living a precarious and illegal life in Bangladesh but who find Bangladesh preferable to Rakhine. International attention is growing and, at the very least, this will set back efforts to improve the economy and reduce tensions – not only in Rakhine but in all of Myanmar. Reports of large amphetamine smuggling into Bangladesh also complicate this volatile situation.

Proximity Designs, working with Harvard University's Myanmar Program, has taken two groups from Myanmar to Indonesia to see how they successfully handled similar problems. The first, in the summer of 2015, focused on military matters and the ending of "dual function" in Indonesia – the Army removing itself from running the government. The second, in the first quarter of 2016, went to Aceh to see how a long running ethnic war had been negotiated to an end. The third, in January 2017, took a group of Buddhists, Muslims, government, military and civil society leaders to Ambon, capital of the Maluku islands, to see how that island ended bloody religious strife in 1999-2003 that killed thousands and displaced hundreds of thousands. This paper summarizes some of the lessons of that trip and adds other observations.

What Was Learned

Counter-terrorism experts and police in Indonesia emphasized the problem that both returning extremists who have gotten training in the Mideast and of home-grown extremists have created. They indicated that Rakhine state was becoming a focus area for these groups. In other words, if the Rakhine conflict continues as it has, it is likely that the situation will get worse.

The group learned that in Kashmir, India, the Indian government has stationed 700,000 security personnel in a population of 13 million but failed to create stability in spite of decades of efforts. One reason is that Pakistan actively supports the Kashmiri militants. While Bangladesh is currently quite firm in arresting and killing extremists, there is no certainty that the political opposition would be as firm. Continued conflict in Rakhine would tend to undermine moderate policies towards Myanmar in both Bangladesh and Indonesia. Rakhine could become Myanmar's Kashmir – not that it would be lost, but it could absorb vast resources and still continue as a source of conflict.

The prospect of a war with the Northern Alliance and an expanded security problem in Rakhine state would lead, effectively, to a two front war. This is not a prospect to relish. The Northern League has considerable wealth from jade and drugs; has support from China; has advanced weaponry (the Wa have

shoulder fired anti-aircraft missiles); and many of the militants enjoy local support. Negotiating with at least the Kachin and Northern Shan would reduce the size of that problem. But what could be done in Rakhine state?

The Ambon trip showed us that in order to have peace, you need peace makers from both the central and the local levels. Continuing conflict will weaken and endanger these moderate leaders. Some Muslims from Maungdaw expressed concern for their safety when their names were publicized. Buddhists in Maungdaw report that friendly Muslim neighbors are telling them that it may not be safe for them to stay where they have lived for years. Extreme Buddhists are also a potential threat. There is real fear of assassination from each side. In summary, there has been violence and there is potential for a great deal more.

So if there are real dangers in Rakhine state, can they be defused? The group thought they could if the following steps were taken:

1. Make a deal on citizenship, residency and mobility. Muslims who can prove they are citizens under current law should get papers and be free to move about. Those who cannot but have lived in Rakhine for many years should be given residence papers, allowing them to live in Myanmar and move about but not giving them the right to vote. Parliament can debate if there is a path for residents to gain citizenship – such as learning Burmese, saluting the flag and agreeing to be patriotic. This agreement would let Muslim labor work outside of its own township where work opportunities are limited to a few months a year.
2. Restrict foreign fishing, especially illegal fishing, off the coast of Rakhine. When this was done in Ambon, the fish catch grew and local processing prospered. A similar effect is likely in Rakhine state, helping both fishermen and those working in fish processing plants.
3. Find foreign aid to invest in roads, power and irrigation. Give contracts to local contractors and have them employ Buddhist workers (if available; many young Rakhine have left the state) and Muslims.
4. Extend health and education throughout the province to all residents.

Indonesia was able to take its time settling the Aceh and even the Maluku conflicts. Being an island nation (no borders with powerful neighbors), with 30 years of development under Suharto and with an ideology that transcended religious or ethnic differences (it is called Pancasila), it had that luxury. Myanmar will have to move more quickly. It is still poor, has had a narrow conception of “real” citizens and is bordered by China. Fortunately, the ANP and Rakhine state Muslims agreed to elect representative leaders to start a dialogue, so progress is possible. But time is of the essence.

A New Idea of Citizenship is Needed

Indeed, the point about citizenship is crucial. One reason the “Rohingya” problem is so intractable is that the Arakan National Party insists that group does not exist (many in Myanmar agree) while many Rakhine Muslims insist that group does exist and they are part of it. More generally, the Panglong 21 conference

continues to deal with the ethnic states as ethnic rather than geographic entities. How can Kachin state be viewed as only a Kachin entity, when over half of the population is not Kachin? How can Shan state be run by Shan people alone when other ethnic groups (Pa'O) have autonomous townships within that state? States need to be geographic entities in which all citizens are able to participate in politics. Identity cards should not even have ethnic groups on them – name, address and photo are needed. Perhaps religion should be there if there is fear that an accident would occur far from home and proper rituals need be observed.

If Rakhine state, as other states, were a geographic entity, it would not be possible to demand a “Rohingya” ethnic state, since no such ethnic states would exist. Townships might get a degree of autonomy in, for example, determining which languages in addition to Burmese would be taught. If ethnic group was not on the identity card, people could call themselves anything they want, though others might have other names for them – there would be no official status of the ethnic designation. Indeed, the group supported the idea of removing ethnic and racial information from the national ID cards.

Rethinking Panglong 2 I

The peace process thus far has been more of a negotiated surrender of weaker ethnic groups lacking military options or finance. It involves little real negotiation on things like land law and ownership, hydroelectric or mineral resources, or functions of lower-level government at the state or township levels. It also maintains a focus on ethnic states. Continuing this approach may allow a continuation of domination by the majority ethnic group but will not create unity. A more inclusive approach that negotiates about critical issues, includes all ethnic groups and religions as citizens, and allows some degree of local autonomy is more promising. This would require a rethinking of the peace process by government, military and ethnic leaders. It would emphasize a broader conception of citizenship and allow for differences in an effective and not just a cosmetic manner.

Indonesia decided in its first constitution and its Pancasila preamble in the 1940's that there would be no single state religion – that all minorities could be full citizens, so long as they believed in a god. There would be no attempt to eliminate local languages but all would learn Indonesian. Indonesian was not the language of the majority, which was Javanese, but a trading language known by many and acceptable to all. Ironically, the 1947 Constitution of Burma had a similar impulse with regards to citizenship. It said in Chapter 11(iv) which specified conditions for citizenship¹:

Every person who was born in any of the territories which at the time of his birth was included within His Britannic Majesty's dominions and who has resided in any of the territories included within the [Burma] Union for a period of not less than eight years in the last ten years immediately preceding the date of

¹ This article is one of four articles describing how one qualifies for citizenship. Others include those born to parents who are of indigenous races of Burma or one whose grandparents belonged to such races or one born in the Union whose parents would be citizens of the Union at the commencement of the Constitution.

commencement of this Constitution...and who signifies his election of citizenship of the Union in the manner and within the time prescribed by law shall be a citizen.

In other words, Burma began, as did Indonesia, with a broad and inclusive idea of who could be a citizen. Anyone from the United Kingdom or its colonies who had lived in Burma for eight years and wanted to be a citizen could become a citizen. It was a club one could join, not just a family that required certain genetics. This broad conception was dismantled by Ne Win who narrowed the conception of legitimate citizenship. Returning to the original and more generous idea would not be popular given decades of indoctrination, but would follow Indonesia’s successful example, and also follow Myanmar’s own founding fathers.

Even if there is no change in the 1982 Citizenship Act, a comprehensive, rapid and impartial implementation of it would help settle things in Rakhine state. Many Muslims in Rakhine state are citizens under the current law but have not gotten citizenship cards. Or, if they have them, are still not free to travel freely within Myanmar. Applying existing law should not be controversial. A new law dealing with long-resident non-citizens who cannot prove their grandparents were born in Myanmar, should allow residence to continue and give a path to citizenship for them and their children. This approach would be supported by many within Rakhine state.

China

China views nearby countries in a different way than as purely independent states – they are part of its “backyard” and they are expected to grant China a special status. Some states try to limit this kind of status (Vietnam) and others accommodate it (Cambodia, even Thailand). This graphic shows how various states have adjusted to pressure from China.

Geopolitics of Asian Countries

Functionally Independent States (Aligned with US or Neutral)	Functionally Independent States (Alignment Unclear or with China)	Weak States (Non-Aligned)	Weak States (Alignment with China)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Japan 2. South Korea 3. Taiwan 4. Indonesia 5. Vietnam 6. India 7. Singapore 8. Malaysia 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Thailand 2. Pakistan 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Myanmar 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cambodia 2. Laos 3. North Korea?

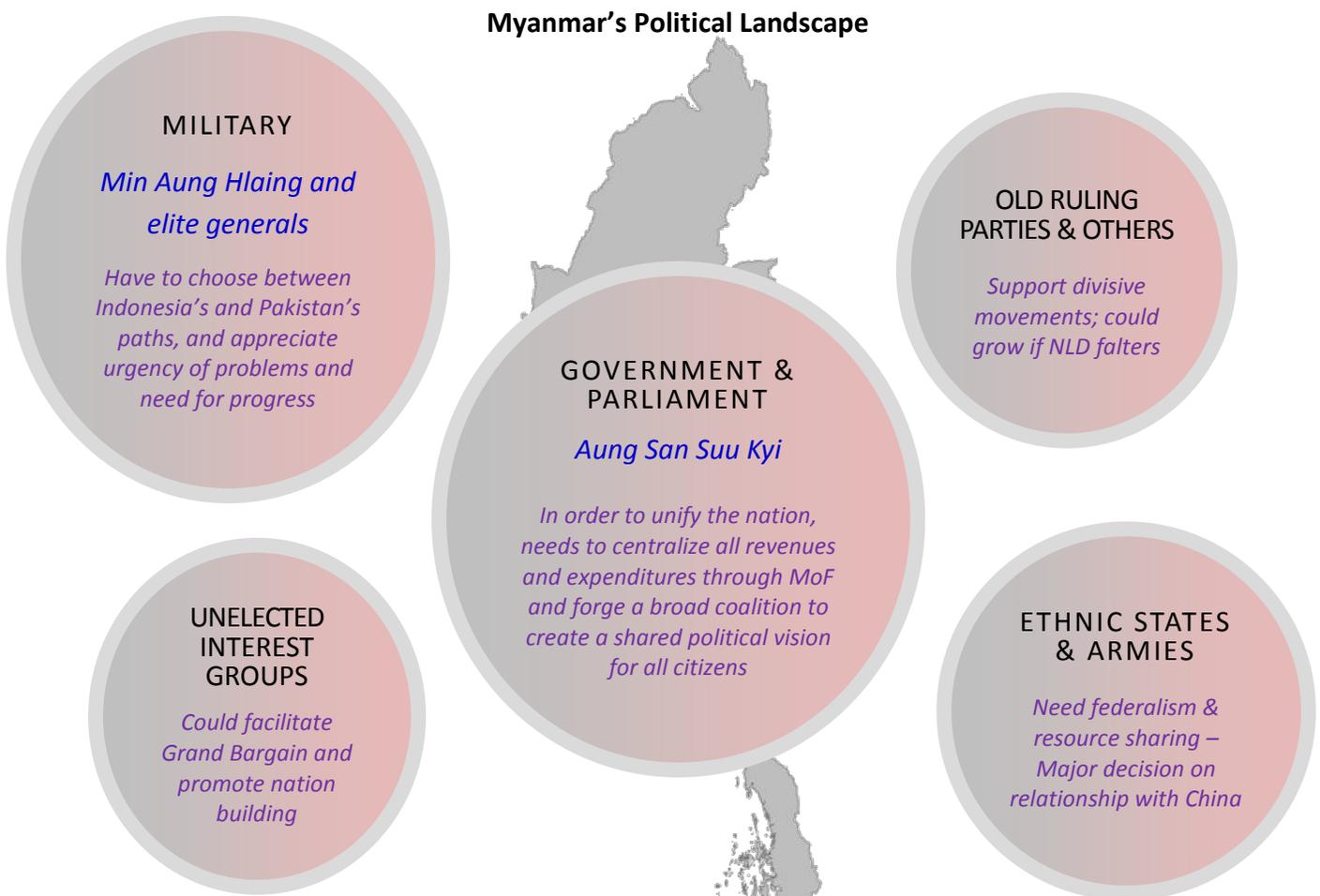
Myanmar is at a critical juncture. If it stays weak and divided, it will likely have little choice but to move from a non-aligned to a dependent “weak state” status similar to Cambodia. If it can make peace, it has

a chance to remain functionally independent. This would not mean isolation from China but a business like relationship for mutual benefit, not a neocolonial relationship in which it had to bend to most demands from China. These thoughts are spelled out in separate Harvard-Proximity papers.²

Conclusion

The Rakhine state conflict is a danger to all of Myanmar. It could lead to a long term conflict which the nation would not “lose” in terms of territory, but would lose in terms of cost in lives, international reputation, depressed FDI, ongoing violence and sectarian conflict. The nation would be so weak that foreign domination by foreign neighbors would be hard to avoid. (China’s interest in dominating hydroelectric resources, land, jade and even Kyaukphyu would be successful, with Myanmar little more than a dependency.) A better way than mere repression of domestic ethnic/religious violence is needed to avoid this.

In order to avoid being dominated, various interest groups need to come together. The graphic below suggests the major ones.



² The “Grand Bargain” paper suggests an approach to negotiating peace with the Kachin and northern Shan, thus splintering the Northern Alliance and increasing state power in the north. The “Internal and External Challenges” paper links domestic and foreign issues, especially with regard to China.

The outlines of a solution are to make the future of the Muslims good enough, with the approval of the ANP and others in Myanmar, that it is better to cooperate and suppress or identify militants than support them. The four points concerning citizenship/residence/mobility, fisheries development, better infrastructure and social services cover the main variables that need to be addressed. It is likely that aid could be found to fund Rakhine investments from traditional donors and also some Islamic states. Bangladesh is a potential ally and would cooperate if it could communicate and share intelligence on groups that both they and Myanmar are concerned with. Finding representatives of the Muslim community in Rakhine state should be possible, even though there are probably a few thousand local militants who would pose a threat to those who would bargain. Support from other Islamic-majority states for the peace process would help ease this problem. Having real and rapid improvements in the lives of Muslim inhabitants would weaken the militants and strengthen the moderates who would gain more authority.

The delegation noted that past committees had not gotten very far and that active military support was needed. This means high level backing to maintain momentum and improve communications with all relevant groups.

In other words, while security is needed it is not enough. It has to be combined with a broader strategy to prevent more of the 1.2 million Muslims living in Rakhine from becoming tacit supporters of the extremists or even active partisans. Unless the people help the security forces, it will be a long, grinding and messy conflict, not unlike Kashmir. Unless the alternative of killing or expelling a million people is considered realistic, this more complex strategy is the only one that offers a real possibility of success at a political and economic level. Even if an exclusive narrow security focus allows the military to smash any challenge, it is likely to face a long period of low-level violence while international militants may search for ways to bomb areas outside of Rakhine. This would distract and weaken a new government and probably lead to foreign domination.

Myanmar is fortunate that it currently has friendly governments in both Bangladesh and Indonesia. Indonesia, in particular, has defended Myanmar in ASEAN and the OIC. Grasping the potential to work with friendly parts of the international community would make the difficult path ahead easier. Such cooperation also makes it less likely that extremists will have safe havens nearby or that policies of these two countries towards Myanmar will become less favorable.

Settling the Rakhine issue is possible and the different sides can negotiate, but they need central and international support. This would require a broader strategy, including more diplomatic outreach, than at present. Finding friends and negotiating with adversaries is the essence of politics. An integrated political, economic and military approach is needed to settle this conflict. The stakes are really quite high – not only for Myanmar, but for the region.