

Countering Violent Extremism in Myanmar

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Abstract

Two attacks on the security forces within a span of 10 months by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) has led to a massive operation by the Myanmar armed forces in the Rakhine State. Over 100 ARSA cadres and civilians have been killed and thousands of Rohingyas have been displaced. While such high-handed counter-extremism approach may weaken the ARSA for the time being, the socio-political context within which such extremism has risen, will keep it alive.

“The military and police members are fighting back together against extremist Bengali terrorists.”

- Min Aung Hlaing, commander in chief on Myanmar’s armed forces.

“People are hiding, especially old people and women. The military tried to enter our village at 3.30pm and were shooting us with guns.”

-Hla Tun, a Rohingya man from a village close to the fighting.



(Myanmar Armed Forces patrolling the Bangladesh-Myanmar border in Rakhine state, Photo: VoA)

‘Terrorism has arrived in Myanmar’s Rakhine state’, [declared Aung San Suu Kyi](#), Myanmar’s State Counsellor on 25 August 2017. Her statement is not a matter of dispute after two coordinated attacks within a span of ten months on the security forces by armed men who claim to be protecting the interests of the Rohingya Muslims. The recent attack on the wee hour of 25 August involved coordinated ambushes on 30 security posts and an army base in Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung townships. 10 policemen, a soldier and an immigration officer were killed. The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) claimed responsibility and linked the attacks to the Myanmar military’s attempts to starve out Rohingyas interned in refugee camps, by blocking the delivery of rice and other aid. Earlier in October 2016, the same group, then known as the Harkat-al Yaqin, had carried out similar attacks on three Border Guard Police (BGP) bases in Rakhine state killing nine army personnel.

Extremism is Real

There isn't much doubt that the ARSA is real, has cadres, some access to sophisticated arms, and relies on occasional violence against the Myanmar state to articulate its demands. [Reports](#) quoting Myanmar's official sources have described ARSA as a potent terror organisation that has "a leadership council based in Saudi Arabia and local leaders with backgrounds in Pakistan". Ata Ullah has been identified as ARSA's leader. He apparently was born in Pakistan and raised in Saudi Arabia and thereby, is the main point of contact between ARSA cadres who probably have never been out of Myanmar and Bangladesh and the Arab world. Rohingya clerics based in Saudi Arabia apparently have generated and transferred funds for the ARSA through Malaysia, where about 130,000 Rohingya refugees and labourers are based. Myanmar-Malaysia relations have soured over the years and Malaysia's Muslim-friendly visa regime has turned it into a transit point for militant movement. Thai border town of Mae Sot, through which land based movements of refugees from Myanmar to northern Malaysia occur, has emerged as the main conduit for couriers and militants. The Tatmadaw has attempted to boost its intelligence and on ground cooperation with the Thai authorities. But its actual effect on ground remains unknown.

It is also possible that the ARSA has been receiving some of its weapons through Bangladesh. During the October 2016 attack, the cadres reportedly had only access to knives and home-made sling shots, but had **managed to loot** 50 guns and thousands of bullets from the BGP posts. Worsening of Bangladesh-Myanmar relations after trouble in Rakhine sent thousands of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh from Myanmar, could be benefiting the ARSA to procure weapons from and train its cadres in Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, and Bandarban districts. In sum the ARSA appears to have everything to operate as an insurgent outfit: a cause to espouse, cadres, funds, weapons, and training facilities. They may not be withstand a brutal Tatmadaw's campaign, but insurgency movements have never been required to raise their levels to that of the conventional armies.

Rohingya miseries are real too

The two attacks, especially the recent one suggest that Myanmar has indeed come to face a radicalized militancy. However, unceasing violence against the Rohingyas with the state either playing a mute spectator and/or a perpetrator provides a context to such radicalization. Since the outbreak of anti-Muslim violence in 2012 and several phases of ethnic clashes thereafter, more than 100,000 Rohingyas have either been forced to leave the country or have been pushed into unlivable refugee camps. The state, in response, has not only abdicated its primary duty to provide relief to these marginalised people, but even scuttled attempts by international organisations, who highlighted their plight, to make food and medicines available to them. The emergence of unverifiable videos of a beheading of a Buddhist man and another killing with a wooden shaft where the attackers and onlookers speak Bengali, and that of children being marched with sticks speaks of a successful effort in garnering support of the victims of violence. ARSA has unmistakably risen in a context of absolute despair and is possibly being exploited by external sponsors appear who are too eager to exploit their vulnerabilities. And with the rise of ARSA, the moderates and pacifists within the Rohingyas have been marginalized.

State Response

On 25 August, the Myanmar government declared the ARSA a terrorist group and has [subsequently declared](#) that ARSA aims at establishing an Islamic State in Myanmar. ARSA denies such a claim. The designation is a clear pretext for the state to use all instruments under its disposal against the group. Operations thereafter, allegedly involving firing of bullets and mortars and use of helicopters, have led to the death of over 100 people including over 80 militants. Sources quoting the Rohingya groups allege much higher fatalities. Pictures and videos of Rohingya villages [being burnt](#) allegedly by the military continue to emerge. The October 2016 attack too had led to the launch of a massive clearing operation by the armed forces forcing about 87,000 Rohingya to flee into neighbouring Bangladesh, crossing the Teknaf river. These refugees spoke of mass gang rape and murder of civilians by the army personnel. A clear pattern is, hence, discernible in Myanmar's response which uses military repression to attack dissent, whether by ethnic insurgencies led by the Kachins or the impoverished Rohingyas. Little has changed with the arrival of a quasi-democracy in the country because the military still runs the key ministries like defence, home, and border affairs.

While the military's actions are straight from a coercion playbook, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi's past actions of refusing to allow the [Kofi Annan-led United Nations Advisory Commission's](#) access the Rohingyas and her recent [facebook posts](#) have attracted negative publicity. Human rights activists and western commentators have attacked her utter absence of sympathy for the Rohingyas, although her earlier portrayal by the same group as a human rights defender could have been a mistake too. The fact remains, however, Suu Kyi seeks to play a neutral role, by neither pandering to the Rohingyas, nor to the Muslims. This allows the military, with a pro-majority Bamar outlook, a free hand to pursue its anti-Muslim drives.

The military response to the conflict, however, has the potential of contributing to the legitimacy of the ARSA and helping it grow bigger. 'Propaganda by the deed'- which allows seemingly ordinary outfits to use counter-violence of the state to generate sympathy and support has been a powerful weapon in the hands of armed ethnic movements. For stakeholders who have been appalled by the state of the refugees and their unending miseries for past four years, it is hard not to justify the rise of the ARSA and categorize its violence as the first sign of

resistance by the marginalised. Such sympathy has probably translated into flow of finance and arms for the outfit and can only grow bigger over time. The violence has affected the Buddhists, albeit marginally. But the military using its wherewithal to target only the ARSA and the Rohingyas make them appear to be unworthy beneficiaries of state complicity.

ARSA's tenure as an Islamist extremist group may not last long. It is new and could well be decimated by a joint Myanmar-Bangladesh operation. However, its use of religion to pose as an agent of change and empowerment could have set a precedent, firming up ordinary Rohingyas's belief in the utility of counter violence vis-a-vis a state for which military operation is the only option for establishing peace. It is this which makes the current phase of violence is qualitatively different from anything in recent decades. It seriously threatens the prospects of stability and development in the state and can have serious implications for Myanmar.

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