Pseudo Neutrality in Intra-State Conflict

Myanmar's Official Discourse on Rakhine

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Although the most recent manifestation of conflict in Rakhine can be traced to the coordinated attack on Myanmar security forces in August 2017 by Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (hereafter ARSA), it goes without saying that the problem has a longer history. For this paper a corpus of official Myanmar government sources was examined qualitatively using the critical discourse analysis (CDA) method. Within the official pronouncements of the Myanmar state since August 2017 we can discern the discursive strategies deployed to balance the competing pressures of national and international legitimation of the Myanmar government. In name and through action, Myanmar has marginalized the Rohingyas. However, beyond this obvious imperative additional and more subtle strategies have been deployed in Myanmar's official discourse, which attempts to position the Myanmar state as a neutral arbiter in a subnational dispute and one that seeks to distance itself from previous political arrangements. The paper focuses on these other discursive strategies which evince conformity to undercurrents of socio-cultural pressures from grassroots extremist Buddhist actors within Myanmar. Ultimately, there is no escaping Official Myanmar's responsibility for the status and plight of the Rohingya. The prognosis for external pressure to exert any normative influence on Myanmar will be limited. The official discourse betrays the

ongoing attempts by the new government to balance these competing pressures at the expense of genuine neutrality and its responsibilities.

It has already been announced that there is no race termed Rohingya in Myanmar. The Bengalis in Rakhine State are not Myanmar nationals but immigrants.

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing
Armed Forces Day Speech, 2017 (Appendix 1: 24)

Myanmar's transformation from closed and autocratic society to transitional state to international pariah status relative to its treatment of the Rohingya minority has been swift.[1] This article focuses on how Myanmar presents itself both domestically and internationally in relation to the political situation in Rakhine state.[2] The problem in that context is reflective of wider issues with respect to the political legitimacy of the post-colonial order in Myanmar (formerly Burma).[3] The Rohingya, as a minority category in Myanmar, have suffered structural marginalization from the outset of independence. Recently they have become the targets of specific aggression by Myanmar's security forces. Since August 2017 in particular there has been a dramatic deterioration in the plight of the Rohingya resulting in significant displacement of the population within Rakhine, both internally and beyond Myanmar. Just shy of one million Rohingya are now refugees inside Bangladesh.[4] Estimates of the death toll among Rohingya alone since August 2017 range from seven to just under ten thousand and upward, including hundreds of children.[5] International condemnation has been loud but has proven thus far to be ineffectual in mitigating the plight of the Rohingya. This is not surprising given the history of failure on the part of international opinion to change Myanmar's politics.[6] International pressure has only barely managed to improve acute difficulties the Rohingya refugees are experiencing with respect to displacement to Bangladesh.[7] A necessary component of any international response is that of determining the perspective of the Myanmar state apparatus

as a decisional unit. While it is inevitable that any nation state actor is composed of factions and discreet interests, we also need to examine what the constructed consensus worldview is of the incumbent state actor, in this case the Myanmar government, with respect to this political issue.

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This empirical analysis draws on a corpus of official pronouncements and statements produced by various organs of the Myanmar state from August 2017. These organs include the executive branch of government, specifically the office of the state counsellor, the foreign ministry and various representatives of the Myanmar state abroad, such as its diplomatic presence at the UN Security Council, General Assembly and Human Rights Council. Also included are statements by the Chief of Staff of Myanmar's military (the Tadmadaw). As Crouch notes, the infusion of the military into all branches of government supports the contention that it be included within the ambit of Myanmar's political authority while remaining autonomous to act unilaterally.[8] We refer to this aggregation of specific components of government as 'official' Myanmar (hereafter Official Myanmar), insofar as it represents the considered and formal institutions and perspectives of the government of Myanmar as publicly declared by its internationally recognised and domestically legitimised leadership. It is distinguished, therefore, from domestic non-state voices within Myanmar. This data consists of statements and declarations in the international arena from the period mid-2017 to mid-2018 and also includes Aung San Suu Kyi's recent statement to the International Criminal Court in December of 2019.

The article examines how Official Myanmar views the Rakhine crisis and focuses on the conscious message conveyed and the tensions, contradictions, and obfuscations evident within the data. The core argument presented is that Official Myanmar attempts to adopt an unsustainable position of state neutrality with respect to the ethno-religious divides in Myanmar generally, and with respect to the treatment of its Rohingya minority specifically. Ultimately, its efforts to do so are unsuccessful given the ethno-religious make-up of Myanmar and the predominance of one ethno-religious category on the machinery of government.[9] This ethno-confessionalist national identity is inevitably exclusivist and xenophobic towards minorities within the state jurisdiction, but the most acute and obvious dimension to this is the Rohingya crisis. The current government of Myanmar must navigate

between international criticism and scrutiny on the one hand and the predominant confessional-nationalist constituency within Myanmar on the other. These require distinctive and ultimately incompatible discursive strategies, as evinced through the public statements examined. Myanmar's 'pseudo-neutrality', with its efforts to construct itself as an arbiter in inter-confessional tensions, is evidence that it is unable to come to terms with its own ethnocentrism.

This article also endeavours to elucidate the self-understanding of the Myanmar state relative to the Rohingya issue and the crisis in Rakhine state. How the Myanmar state has articulated its position internationally is an important dimension for understanding the situation in Rakhine, Official Myanmar's response to it, and also to gauge Naypidaw's willingness and capacity to resolve it in a way that is aligned with international norms. Essentially, we ask the question: how does the official state apparatus of Myanmar represent the crisis in Rakhine state to world opinion, and (supplementary to that) what are the implications of this for how the world should engage with Myanmar?

Methodology

The article utilizes a broadly qualitative-interpretive methodology to unpack the implicit and taken-for-granted assumptions at the core of Official Myanmar's self-understanding.[10] Very often, while consciously conveying information and ideology to the outside world, organizational or institutional discourse often reveals more of the worldview of an actor than the statements intend. The analytical focus on Official Myanmar's overt political statements draws on the work of Burton and Carlen in their study of 'official discourse'.[11] According to Burton and Carlen, official discourse is 'a system of intellectual collusion', which performs a number of key functions and embodies several specific characteristics.

1. Assumes the existence of a collective and coherent 'self' – a decisional unit, an actor (in this case a state actor composed of discrete institutions)
2. Assumes the existence of a knowing 'other'
3. Attempts to undergird the political legitimacy of the collective self as state actor
4. Addresses silent accusations of a legitimacy crisis
5. Assumes a public nature to discourse (in that the statements are consciously conveyed to multiple audiences simultaneously and usually available in a public mode)

Official discourse endeavours to pursue several synchronic objectives. First, it actively 'incorporates' the elements of the state apparatus into a singularity, bringing the body politic together in the eyes of internal and external observers. Such discourse, in a real sense, 'creates' or incorporates the state as an actor. Second (and closely related), it establishes (and constantly re-establishes and reinforces) the political and social *legitimacy* of the state in the eyes of both its domestic constituency and international actors. Third, official discourse, through its public nature specifically, establishes (and constantly re-establishes) confidence in the political system and the ruling leadership.[12] Implicitly, what is distinctive about official discourse is its analytical difference from what Weldes refers to as 'low data'.[13] 'Low' data refers to the beliefs and assumptions as conceivably expressed through *non*-official sources within the wider Myanmar population, such as popular discourse and media and entertainment sources reflective of general attitudes in the population.[14] Official statements, pronouncements, speeches and other publicly released documents constitute (in Weldes terminology) 'high data'.[15] These data are a rich source for the analysis of a state's rationale and intentions because it brings to the surface how its officials and politicians have agreed to organize 'facts' into a narrative. The story that Myanmar's leadership tells to itself and (simultaneously) the external world – publicly – is a crucial dimension in how the rest of the world understands its own capacity to influence the situation on the ground.

The data used has been drawn from publicly available documents released by official role holders and organs of the Myanmar state or from remarks or speeches delivered by key role holders within the Myanmar government (see Appendix 1). In particular, the data corpus consists of relevant statements/documents released by Myanmar's representatives to the United Nations and its ancillary bodies, as well as speeches by the state counsellor (Aung San Suu Kyi), along with statements released by key ministries. In total, twenty-five documents have been subject to analysis for this study. The public availability of these documents is a crucial component of their official nature. By preparing and releasing these documents for public and international consumption, following agreed intra-political consensus around a narrative within the state leadership, we can glean important insights into the structures of thinking of 'Myanmar' as a political actor. It is not merely that these documents set out to persuade the reader, whether domestic or

international, of their efficacy and truth. It is also the case that they set out to articulate, determine the parameters of 'truth', and affirm and convince the various components of the state apparatus itself of this truth. What they also do is give us as observers crucial insight into their underlying rationale, their taken-for-granted assumptions and their worldview.

Within this broader interpretive approach, we need a methodological augmentation to this critical appraisal of how the political apparatus within the Myanmar state articulates and presents its position to itself, its people and the wider political community (regionally and internationally). As our focus is on the discursive representation of reality vis-à-vis the vantage point of the Myanmar government relative to a minority population, our analytical approach needs to systemize the research of the data corpus, therefore grounding it more firmly in a particular method. Beyond the broad interpretive approach and within the focus on official discourse, we also need to set out how we examine this data by applying a critical strategy orientated towards the study of power, ideology and identity.

Augmenting this broader approach, Critical Discourse Analysis (hereafter CDA) concerns the utility of language as a method of exerting social power and, by extension, social control.[16] In this case, we are examining the efforts by the organs of the Myanmar government to achieve discursive hegemony over the interpretation of, and Official Myanmar's response to, the crisis in Rakhine. CDA allows analysts to examine a range of strategy options and concentrates on the following:

1. The creation and shaping of meaning through the deployment of language
2. Lexical choices, foregrounding and backgrounding of information
3. The creation of dichotomies and structural oppositions
4. The representation of people and constructions of identity
5. The representation of agency and action
6. The representation of processes
7. The use of rhetoric and metaphor
8. The articulation of commitment or evasion[17]

In the present study the focus on Myanmar's official discourse allows us to concentrate on how the political leadership conceives the problems in Rakhine and what their situated reasoning permits them to accept and reject in terms of possible solutions.

CDA is a particularly useful analytical tool in uncovering the sedimented meaning making strategies of consequential actors in socio-political analysis and exploring the strategies that those actors use to shape and influence how 'reality' is interpreted. CDA incorporates within it the broad insight of interpretive methodology that language is not reflective of reality. Facts are shaped and constituted through the language used to articulate them. Given that the analysis here is specifically concerned with the state's meaning making strategies relative to a vulnerable minority category, the question of power and emancipation from oppression become important critical concerns. CDA is explicitly concerned with such asymmetric relations. In what follows, we categorize the analytical findings of the textual analysis undertaken into several key categories.

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Official Myanmar's discursive strategy - alterity

Analysis of the data points to a multi-faceted and interlocking strategy of alterity, or 'othering', with three main objectives uppermost in the imperatives of Official Myanmar. First, there is the pursuit of political legitimacy and an explicit distancing by Official Myanmar from the political arrangements prior to the transition to democracy (i.e., from military rule), which we consider underway from 2011.[18] For Official Myanmar, as a result of the Rakhine crisis, the legitimacy objective is split into two fundamental – and partly incompatible – sub-objectives along the lines of Putnam's 'two-level games'[19] (see Figure 1 below), which offers a useful guide. One sub objective is the imperative to pursue political credibility and legitimacy in the international arena insofar as Myanmar, as a state actor (and one in a transitional phase in receipt of both international support and international scrutiny), must be seen to embody minimally accepted international norms with respect to its domestic behaviour. Myanmar is subject to external scrutiny by not only the 'international community' as embodied by the UN and its ancillary organs, but also by the combined normative scrutiny of both human rights and development NGOs more broadly but also by the international media (see Figure 1).

A second sub objective is orientated towards the satisfaction of domestic level demands and revolves around the need for Official Myanmar, as a democratically elected government, to conform to and be reflective of domestic expectations and ideologies, as well as embodying and representing the aggregate preferences of the majority of

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its political constituency. This includes not only Myanmar's various internal factions, which are mobilizations of specific ideological positions vis-à-vis Muslims (such as the 969 movement and MaBaTa, etc)[20] but also the wider electorate as political elites understand these. In the context of Myanmar, the military (Tadmadaw) occupies a singular position within the political apparatus. It is simultaneously outside the confines of the executive branch but retains a portion of parliamentary seats and (as Crouch 2018 points out) has infused many layers of formal political power. In addition, it has extensive corporate interests which allow it to sustain military operations outside of conventional democratic oversight.[21] As it is the formally constituted military force of the Myanmar state it is included within the ambit of Official Myanmar. The figurative representation below, however, is intended to demonstrate that it remains relatively autonomous as an entity within the Myanmar state.

Figure 1. Official Myanmar's Two-Level Game
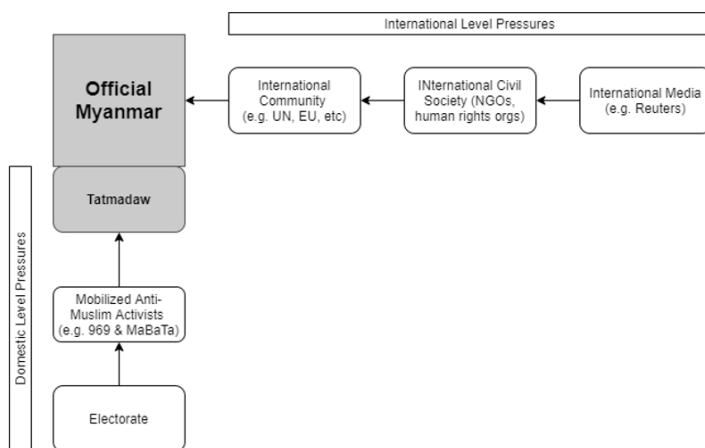
A second major objective, one closely related to the bifurcated legitimacy question, is the need for Official Myanmar to distance itself explicitly from implication or culpability in actions or processes that are specific to the spatially distinct and politically problematic 'Rakhine issue'. Through a range of discursive tactics Official Myanmar must demonstrate, or at least assert with plausibility, the veracity of its own version of reality and (simultaneously) discredit contrary accounts. This, as Burton and Carlen note, is a core function of official discourse.

As the State Counsellor points out:

> I understand that many of our friends throughout the world are concerned by reports of villages being burnt and of hordes of refugees fleeing [...] We too are concerned. We want to find out what the real problems are. There have been allegations and counter-allegations and we have to listen to all of them. And we have to make sure that these allegations are based on solid evidence before we take action (Appendix 1:8; see also Appendix 1:13).

Myanmar's representative to the Human Rights Council asserts:

> The government has been making every possible effort to promote development and communal harmony between all communities in Rakhine state (Appendix 1:11).

Rakhine must be 'othered', created and constructed as a distal (as opposed to proximal) space and political issue. It must be portrayed as an aberration, one that is out of sync with the rest of the progressively transitional state, its circumstances and acute problems being peculiar and abnormal. A third and final major objective, one with specific regard to the core issue within Rakhine, is that the state must demonstrate its status as a neutral arbiter between competing sub-state entities and actors, particularly in regard to confessional or ethno-religious distinctions within the population. It is cultivating inter faith dialogue.[22] It is pursuing a peace process to bring about an end to factional conflict.[23] The construction and cultivation of Official Myanmar's externalized and superordinate position above the fray of ethno-confessional cleavages is an essential underpinning of any claim to a republican system of government.

This broad strategy is reflected in the official discourse of Myanmar and its attempts to realize these strategic goals through more specific tactics. These include the cultivation of vagueness (for example, 'the situation in the country is so complex that it is beyond the apprehension of of many outsiders', Appendix 1:23), the elision of state culpability and agency through nominalization, deflection, backgrounding or omission of key facts, details or actors and (conversely) the foregrounding of other elements that support the government's narrative. In addition, there is also the dilution or mitigation of information or accounts with regard to Rakhine through aggregation of problems in Rakhine with problems throughout the whole of Myanmar. We shall examine each of these strategic objectives in turn below and examine

how Official Myanmar sought to realize these in more detail. Unsurprisingly, Official Myanmar's strategy of alterity, its efforts to distance itself in terms of responsibility for key facets of the Rohingya issue, result in a range of unsustainable contradictions.

Legitimacy & credibility

Despite its repeated mention throughout its public pronouncements regarding its willingness to facilitate day trips for external observers to affected areas (Appendix 1:8), it is clear that the incumbent Myanmar government is in a decidedly uncomfortable position. Official Myanmar needs to retain credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of two distinct entities that place different – and incompatible – normative demands on the state actor. On the one hand there is the international community, the United Nations and its ancillary agencies, along with international civil society such as humanitarian and human rights NGOs and media organizations who are demanding that Official Myanmar, with a mandate for democratic reform, uphold international standards with respect to the treatment of minorities generally and the Rohingya in particular. Myanmar is in receipt of significant international support, not least in terms of practical and financial aid, being currently the seventh highest recipient of international aid.[24] On the other hand, there is the perceived domestic demand that the government of Myanmar defends what is considered the authentic identity of the Myanmar state, with its majority confessional adherents (to Buddhism) notwithstanding its overt commitment to pluralism.[25] Mobilised around such sentiments, grassroots organizations such as the 969 Movement and the MaBaTa are powerful domestic forces that the new National League for Democracy (NLD) government cannot ignore. That said, while there is a compelling argument for Official Myanmar's defiance of both of these forces given the significant popular mandate NLD received in the most recent election, there is considerable anti-Muslim sentiment within the broader population that – despite Official Myanmar's protests to the contrary – appear not to be confined to Rohingya.[26]

One of the most persistent themes running through the data gathered has been Official Myanmar's discursive utility of the country's transitional status and the proximity of recent dramatic political change as a mitigating factor in offsetting its direct responsibility for the magnitude of the crisis in Rakhine state. Official Myanmar, in a range of communicative statements and contexts, frequently points

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out that it is in government for less than eighteen months (Appendix 1:8; Appendix 1:10), or two years (Appendix 1:21), depending on when the statement is released. As such it cannot possibly be expected to resolve the Rakhine issue in such a short timeframe. There is no way that a 'young and fragile' (Appendix 1:9) democracy can undertake a quick fix solution. It is a problem that it 'inherited' (Appendix 1:8) from the previous regime. It also consistently characterizes the Rakhine issue as 'complex' (Appendix 1:9; Appendix 1:25), sometimes to the point of defying the understanding of external observers (specifically international human rights NGOs and international governmental organizations [IGOs], such as UN representatives and, doubtless, international media) (see Appendix 1:21: Appendix 1:18). The 'complexity' theme is augmented through Official Myanmar's invocation of wider problems within Myanmar. The international community is urged to examine Myanmar 'as a whole' (Appendix 1:8; Appendix 1:10) and not merely focus on one group (Appendix 1:18).

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By far the most high-profile tactic is the persistent invocation of the issue of chronic underdevelopment in Rakhine and, by extension, throughout Myanmar. Development, investment in infrastructure, the creation of jobs, education and service provision, all of these are foregrounded and collocated with the pursuit of 'peace, security and development' in the various statements (Appendices 1:8, 1:9, 1:10, 1:18, 1:21, 1:25). These are portrayed as being decisive variables in terms of explaining current problems. By extension the resolution of these issues requires nothing more or less than substantial economic investment – implicitly from external sources (Appendix 1:13). For Official Myanmar, this represents the best strategy for resolving the tension in Rakhine state. The problems in Rakhine, in short, are less structural and cultural issues, rather they are material and economic. It's not Myanmar's fault, and certainly not the fault of the new incumbent government. It is the result of years of economic isolation. Of note, previous military rule, while mentioned occasionally, is never targeted for overt criticism. Instead, Rakhine's problems are deliberately linked to underdevelopment throughout Myanmar generally, diluting and mitigating the specific issues in Rakhine with respect to the Rohingya. It is highlighted on several occasions, however, that while similar structural conditions exist elsewhere within Myanmar, only Rakhine appears to have a security issue and only Rakhine has undergone an exodus of population. Herein lies a contradiction: if it were purely a material and

economic issue, then the rest of Myanmar should suffer the same fate as Rakhine. But Official Myanmar is at pains to point out the success it is having in resolving conflicts elsewhere within the Union.

Another component of Official Myanmar's strategy is the theme of 'restoring' or 'restoration' (Appendix 1: 9; Appendix 1:10), implicitly meaning the resolution of the Rakhine issue to a point that represents the *status quo ante*. Official Myanmar now wishes to return the situation in Rakhine to one of 'normalcy' (Appendix 1:8) and 'peace and harmony' (Appendix 1:2; Appendix 1:6), following the 'disruption' to life there as a result of unrest (Appendix 1:15). Nowhere is it admitted that this previous situation was characterized by significant structural discrimination against Rohingya. The *status quo ante* and the ideal future state of Rakhine are depicted as a condition of 'peace and stability' and contrasted sharply with the nominalized 'turmoil' (Appendix 1:8; 1:10) of the present. Returning things to normal, and restoring 'tranquillity' (Appendix 1:15), is the primary consequence of action by the new government in pursuit of resolution. This state-led objective is in explicit and direct contrast to the actions of ARSA, which is ascribed sole responsibility for 'igniting' or 'triggering' the crisis (Appendices 1:6, 1:18). This strategy is a contradictory one given that the official discourse elsewhere also highlights the deep historical roots of differences between communities, which is a clear recognition of problems that antedate the August attacks.

Threading through the statements of Official Myanmar is the fundamental tension between recognizing the importance of international credibility on the one hand and the defence of national sovereignty on the other. On several occasions, Official Myanmar consciously asserts itself as the primary actor with respect to the crisis, asserts the principle of non-interference (Appendix 1:10) and implicitly demands that those interested in helping must render assistance to the government, 'help[ing] Myanmar by joining hands', 'join[ing] us in finding a lasting solution' (Appendix 1:8, 1:10, 1:18). China and Russia are thanked explicitly for recognizing and defending Myanmar's sovereignty and the principle of non-interference (Appendix 1:14). The international community's engagement with Myanmar (and the Rakhine issue) must be 'constructive', 'sustainable', 'meaningful' and 'lasting' (Appendices 1:8, 1:18, 1:22), which is implicitly contrasted with destructive (or unhelpful), superficial, tokenistic and short-term respectively.

The remoteness of Rakhine

The common thread that runs through the commentaries is the allusion that 'something is rotten in the state of Rakhine' (Appendix 1:10).

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Statement by H.E. U Thaung Tun
United Nations Security Council

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Closely connected to Official Myanmar's assertion of state hegemony, international credibility and domestic political legitimacy is the necessity of constructing the Rakhine crisis as a remote aberration from the wider stability of the remainder of Myanmar. The addition of two more signatory groups to the national peace conference, the minimization of tensions between Burmese and other ethno-religious groups (including non-Rohingya Muslims) along with the reference to press statements released by Muslim associations supporting the government and condemning terrorism, all serve to construct a socio-political landscape wherein Rakhine is an outlier, ignominiously distinguished by its security issues for which Official Myanmar bears no responsibility (Appendix 1:8, 1:25). As Official Myanmar makes clear to international interlocutors: 'the new government in Myanmar inherited a challenging situation in Rakhine' (Appendix 1:10). This statement captures the essence of the government's discursive strategy: the state's abrogation of responsibility as an agent by virtue of the fact that the roots of the crisis pre-dated the government's formation. The situation commanding the attention of the new government was the imperative to 'resolve the longstanding problems of *that* State' (Appendix 1:8, emphasis added). The spatial distance of Rakhine from the political centre of Myanmar is stressed. The situation is challenging insofar as it is a problem to be resolved through benevolent state intervention as a neutral third (and distant) party and not, by implication, one that requires structural reform and cultural adjustment across the body politic of Myanmar in the sense of admitting the Rohingya – *qua* Rohingya – into a national conversation as equal citizens.

In fact, the securitization of the Rakhine crisis forms an overriding imperative with Official Myanmar's statements and these are a core element of the wider strategy of alterity. Six months after the August attacks by ARSA, and while admitting that no attacks had been report-

ed since September 5th, Official Myanmar continued to play up the threat of terrorism and security issues (Appendix 1:22). While recognizing (or perhaps conceding) the historical dimension to the Rakhine issue, Official Myanmar is also at pains to undertake a process of de-historicization, which amounts to focusing on recent events and suppressing or ignoring the historical conditions that gave rise to these (Appendix 1:23). This is particularly true of the securitization discourse strategy. Terrorism constitutes a major threat to international security (Appendix 1:23). Official Myanmar, for example, asserts a direct causal link between the displacement of (mostly) Rohingya refugees and the 'recent' attacks (or 'recent violence') by ARSA in August 2017. The latest escalation of violence, Official Myanmar asserts, was 'ignited by the acts of terrorism committed by the extremist group, ARSA' (Appendix 1:7). The coordinated attacks that coincided with the work of the Advisory Commission are foregrounded as being profoundly consequential with respect to the status and plight of the Rohingya while, conversely, the historical and structural conditions endured by the Rohingya are ignored and backgrounded, the actions of the Tatmadaw and the consequences of its 'clearance operations' are reduced to 'collateral damage' (Appendix 1:9).

The alterity strategy is further reinforced by Official Myanmar through its profession of ignorance with regard to the motivations and imperatives of the Rohingya in leaving Rakhine for Bangladesh. As Official Myanmar notes: 'we are concerned by reports that the numbers of Muslims crossing into Bangladesh remain unabated. We would need to find out the reason for this exodus' (Appendix 1:9). The armed attacks (by ARSA), asserts Official Myanmar, 'completely changed' the scenario in Rakhine state. State agency – and therefore responsibility – is underplayed when, for example, Official Myanmar claims that: 'attacks ignited fresh violence in the region, *resulting in significant loss of life*' (Appendix 1:9, emphasis added). 'Security forces have no choice by to suppress terrorism and to restore law and order and protect the innocents' (Appendix 1:23). Whose lives are lost and who took those lives is left undefined. The fact that the majority of lives lost appear to be overwhelmingly Rohingya begs the question as to who is responsible for that.

'Turmoil [...] has recently befallen Myanmar's Rakhine', but externally derived reports and accounts of this 'turmoil' are discredited as 'emotional' and amounts to 'malicious and unsubstantiated chatter'

(Appendix 1:10). Such information is contrasted with the more credible 'on the ground' – and by implication - *correct* perspective of the Myanmar government. This despite contradictory contentions elsewhere that the Myanmar authorities are unclear about (and very keen to understand) the imperatives behind the recent exodus of Rohingya to Bangladesh. These discursive tactics within Official Myanmar's wider strategy evince a deliberate cultivation of vagueness and unknowability about the Rakhine crisis.

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> We cannot ignore the fact that there are different narratives on what transpired in northern Rakhine state. We must winnow the wheat from the chaff (Appendix 1:13).

The effort by Official Myanmar to control the narrative is telling, given that – by its own admission – it is not in a position to determine the veracity of accounts from 'on the ground'. Combined with persistent deflections with respect to other aspects of Myanmar's transition, such as either problems or positive developments elsewhere, this tactic of unknowability serves to neutralize international criticism. We might refer to this as cultivated ambiguity. Similarly, there is a clear difference in how Official Myanmar represents the reality of the crisis in terms of numbers. The security personnel who lost their lives during the ARSA attacks are numbered and categorized specifically and the loss to their families mentioned (Appendix 1:3). The repatriation of refugees from Bangladesh had, by February 2018, advanced to the point where the government of Myanmar had provided a list of 1,200 people verified for return. By contrast, the multiple casualties among the wider population during the Tatmadaw's efforts to quell unrest and undertake clearance operations is, like the descriptions of these operations, left wholly undefined. Agency and responsibility are nominalized through the use of metonymy, as for example when: 'counter insurgency operations killed hundreds of people'. It is not troops of the Tatmadaw or specific units of the security forces, but the *process* of counter insurgency (COIN) operations. By late September, when already hundreds of thousands of Rohingya had fled to Bangladesh, Official Myanmar alluded vaguely to the fact that 'thousands of people' (Appendix 1:10) had fled.

Rakhine is simultaneously compartmentalized and claimed as part of the wider transitional Myanmar, depending on the specific tactical objective within the wider discourse strategy. It is both exceptional and typical. It suffers from similar conditions to other parts of the nation

and yet there are differences, 'deep rooted' divides (Appendix 1:8, Appendix 1:25) – and yet it is still a question of underdevelopment. It is a part of Myanmar open to day trips but still complex, unknowable and remote – but Official Myanmar knows that international accounts are inaccurate.

The neutral state?

At the core of the Rakhine issue is the failure of the Myanmar state, historically, to render equality and protection to all of its people.[27] In the case of the Rakhine state, this relates specifically to the status of the Rohingya, which in light of the denial of their citizenship amounts to imposed statelessness. In spite of this, Official Myanmar presents itself as the guarantor of the state's political neutrality to ethnic and religious (or ethno-religious) differences within its border. It seeks, in its own words 'the well-being of all communities in Rakhine' (Appendix 1:11). Its task, enunciated throughout multiple statements, is to resolve issues 'between the two communities' in Rakhine, to 'promote religious harmony', to 'build trust between the two communities', to 'change mindsets' (Appendices 1:6, 1:8, 1:10, 1:18, 1:22). Official Myanmar articulates a revisionist process, discursively extricating itself from the internecine tensions in Rakhine and positioning itself not as a causal factor in the perpetuation of persecution against Rohingya but as a distant and benevolent third party pursuing a mediating role in a localized (and remote) dispute. Statements from Official Myanmar throughout this time bracket are replete with this construction of the government as peacemaker, dialogue facilitator and arbiter (Appendix 1:8). Humanitarian aid is being delivered to all displaced people 'without discrimination' (Appendix 1:8, 1:10) and 'peace, security and development' or 'peace and harmony' or 'peace and stability' are all consistently collocated and envisaged as a dividend for 'all communities in Rakhine state' (Appendices 1:6, 1:8, 1:9, 1:10, 1:11). Official Myanmar wishes to foster the 'peaceful coexistence of the communities' (Appendix 1:21). The government is at pains to stress that Myanmar is home to 135 distinct officially recognized ethnic groups and much is made of their diversity, their unique distinctiveness and the fact that they have been 'living in harmony throughout history' (Appendix 1:25).

Despite several repeated claims that the issue in Rakhine is not a case of religious discrimination or conflict between two different faiths, Official Myanmar has been 'engaging interfaith groups' and promoting 'religious harmony' with respect to 'communal tensions in

Rakhine state' (Appendices 1:8, 1:10, 1:13). Reconciliation is invoked in numerous statements, but not between the state and minority groups, but rather between already divided communities in northern Rakhine. This incongruity of denying the ethno-religious/confessional basis of conflict in Rakhine and simultaneously acknowledging the need to engage in interfaith dialogue as a precursor to reconciliation, in addition to the acknowledgment of the ethno-religious roots of the crisis, is comparable with other instances of contradictory discourse. It is very overtly pursuing an ethno-religious reconciliation at ameliorating 'deep mistrust' (Appendix 1:9). But as Myanmar's representative to the Human Rights Council is keen to point out:

> Despite many daunting challenges in ethnic discord and conflicts of the country, the world is focusing most on the situation in Rakhine. One of the reasons is due to the incessant media campaign portraying it as a religious issue. *In fact, the Rakhine issue is not a religious one but a political and economic challenge involving migration, competition over limited resources, poverty and rule of law* (Appendix 1:23, emphasis added).

In essence, the 'problem' of Rakhine, as Official Myanmar frequently characterizes it, is that of a discordant inter-communal conflict, a portrayal that serves to minimize (or even absolve) Official Myanmar of direct responsibility for the state of ethno-religious relations. As the State Counsellor made clear in her statement to the International Court of Justice in December 2019:

> Even before the events of 2016-2017, Muslim, Buddhist and other communities in Rakhine faced what the Kofi Annan advisory Commission described as complex challenges of low development and poverty *rooted in enduring social conflict between the communities* (Appendix 1:25, emphasis added)

Even though pushed to acknowledge the ethno-confessional basis of Rakhine's divisions, alterity is again emphasized, this time between the putatively neutral central government and its ethno-confessionally blind state apparatus on one side in contrast to the more distal and arguably primordial ethno-religious 'communities' of Rakhine. The violence is constructed as an aberration within an otherwise harmonious and functional (if underdeveloped) nation state, despite the need for a peace process. There is much that is positive about Myanmar, and the international community should not focus on this (Appendices 1:8, 1:9, 1:10). Official Myanmar is constructing and positioning itself as

a restorative agent in pursuit of an idealized *status quo ante*, while also seeking to engage in overseeing relationship-building with communal entities that were already divided. It is a contradictory self-refuting discourse, claiming that it is trying to resolve what it does not accept exists and claiming a distance and remoteness that does not accord with its persistent claims of national territorial sovereignty.

What is also significant about this rendering of the Rakhine issue is not so much about what is communicated overtly, but what is marginalized, downplayed or even absent from the version of the Rakhine crisis articulated by Official Myanmar. The most overt instance of this, obviously, is the absence of the term Rohingya from any of the statements issued by Official Myanmar examined here. There is one telling exception: General Hlaing's specific reference to the term 'Rohingya' wherein he asserts that there is no such thing, only Bengali migrants (Appendix 1:24). This singular denial of the term, and the overt assertion by the head of the Tatmadaw, is never defied by the civilian government. There is, in short, a Rohingya shaped hole at the centre of Official Myanmar's public statements. It is a policy of omission that even commanded the compliance of the Advisory Commission led by the late Kofi Annan.[28] But the lacuna and outright suppression of elements of reality in this official discourse goes far beyond the policy around the term 'Rohingya' and the refusal to use it. Official Myanmar alludes to previous arrangements with Bangladesh regarding repatriation (Appendix 1:9). This implicitly acknowledges that, despite the overt efforts at de-historicization by implicating the ARSA attacks of August 2017, there are in fact considerable historical dimensions to this.

When Official Myanmar alluded to the fact that, in Rakhine, 'deep mistrust developed over decades' (Appendix 1:9) the assertion elides over the fact that this 'mistrust' was fostered not only by the military but by the dominant ethnic group within the Myanmar state. Other groups, those also affected by the upheaval in Rakhine, are explicitly mentioned on several occasions (Appendices 1:6, 1:8, 1:9, 1:10). These groups are foregrounded as victims of a comparable magnitude on a par with the unnamed Rohingya and the international community (and international media) is subtly berated for its failure to equivocate the two. The numbers of those killed by ARSA attacks are enumerated, the ethno-religious victims identified. The number of victims of Tatmadaw clearance operations is never given, still less the half to one million Rohingya displaced.

Conclusion

Fundamentally, Myanmar is a transitional state with a profoundly fragile hold on political legitimacy, and one that is ultimately unable to establish genuine distance from the previous military regime. This is not least because the Tatmadaw has effectively set the tone and parameters for what the NLD can say and do. Given electoral and popular sentiment towards the Rohingya it is highly unlikely that the NLD (or any incumbent government) will defy the military. Official Myanmar's strategy of alterity from the past fails because ultimately the past, in the form of the military, continues to intrude on the present. This legitimacy crisis is true of both its international credibility and its domestic constituency legitimacy. From within the traditionally enfranchised population there may well be a sentiment about the loss of established privilege and access to political decision-making. Beyond that category there are others who do not yet see the realization of promised enfranchisement or indeed other strains of self-determination not aligned with the concept of 'Myanmar'. The evident absence of the Rohingya as an explicitly mentioned category within the ambit of the Rakhine issue demonstrates a continued repressive tendency by the transitional government. This defiance of external categorization practices indicates an unwillingness to concede ground on the fundamental nature of the problem in Rakhine and Myanmar as a whole. Official Myanmar faces several key dilemmas simultaneously. First, there is it's need to garner international support, to demonstrate its credentials with respect to transitional progress to the outside world and its conformity to international norms. It is faced with mounting calls to alter the political status quo in relation to a specific minority category, which may be resisted by other centres of power within Myanmar beyond the body politic. But the body politic has admitted these domestic elements into the centre of the nation's political calculus. The efforts to frame the issue in Rakhine as simultaneously a security and development issue – as distinct from a constitutional and cultural one – belies efforts to mould the narrative into a more superficial form. The compartmentalization of Rakhine state, the construction of remoteness from the political centre and the efforts to present the state as an honest broker and neutral arbiter reveal an attempt to distance the state actor from responsibility for the crisis.

It is fair to conclude, therefore, that efforts by the international community to persuade Myanmar to undertake necessary structural

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reform to alleviate the plight of the Rohingya has been unsuccessful. In the absence of a frank admission by political leaders in Myanmar of the true nature of the problem, this influence will continue to be compromised. There is no evidence in the data of any recognition that the Rohingya should be accorded the full protection of the Myanmar state and included as citizens with a legitimate political franchise. The fleeting reference to the citizenship issue by the State Counsellor (Appendix I:8), a minimalist response given the attention it receives in the report of the Advisory Commission, is not replicated elsewhere in the available official statements examined here. Citizenship for the Rohingya has been firmly backgrounded by Official Myanmar. The Rakhine 'problem', as narratively constructed by Official Myanmar, is one of 'extremist terrorists' running amok, inter-communal conflict and lack of development in a remote corner of the union. There is no acceptance of the historical or contemporaneous role of Myanmar's political elites in allowing political disenfranchisement to persist, underpinning popular anti-Rohingya sentiment, creating the conditions of possibility for ARSA, or of justifying wider popular malcontent towards their non-Buddhist minorities.

Through the failure to undertake historic state building that was civic and therefore inclusive of Myanmar's diverse population, early and subsequent statecraft conceded a central pillar of modern democratic government: political legitimacy. The absence of a core civic republican concept and the entrenchment of hegemonic primordial ethno-confessional national identity laid the ground for chauvinistic nationalism and the persecution of Rohingya and other groups. The flawed separation of powers, the absence of civilian control of the military, constitute the Achilles heel of the transitional government. The result is discursive acrobatics on the part of Official Myanmar to balance competing and divergent imperatives of credibility and legitimacy. The consequences for Myanmar's development and its status globally have been significant. The declining political capital of the democracy movement, and that of its figure head in Aung San Suu Kyi, reflects the limited scope within domestic Myanmar politics to orientate the transitional state towards a fully republican reform process. The basis of intra-state conflict with non-Burmese and the deterioration in the treatment of Rohingya are co-extensive with this ethno-confessional dominance. The prognosis for the future, in the absence of an emerging civic understanding of Myanmarese identity, is bleak. It is

necessary for the international community, the UN organization and its ancillary bodies, along with international NGO's and human rights groups to keep the pressure on Official Myanmar. But it must be recognised too that popular and cultural attitudes, along with the residual power of the military, may well ensure that the transformation of Myanmar to a fully inclusive society where its citizens are protected equally will be a lengthy one.

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Appendix 1 – Primary Data

Nº	Date	Source
1	Aug 11 2017	Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Ministry of the Office of the State Counsellor, 'Press Release on the Situation in Maungdaw' http://www.informationcommittee.gov.mm/en/information-committee-news/government-republic-union-myanmar-ministry-office-state-counsellor-press
2	Aug 25 2017	The Republic of the Union of Myanmar Anti-terrorism Central Committee, Order No 1/2017, Declaring as Terrorist Group https://www.statecounsellor.gov.mm/en/node/968
3	Aug 25 2017	Statement by the State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi on today' s attacks in Rakhine State https://www.mmtimes.com/news/statement-state-counsellor-daw-aung-san-suu-kyi-todays-attacks-rakhine-state.html

4	Aug 26 2017	State leaders take charge after violent attacks in Rakhine State, The Global New Light of Myanmar https://www.globalnewlightofmyanmar.com/state-leaders-take-charge-after-violent-attacks-in-rakhine-state/ https://www.myanmargeneva.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/SC-take-charge.pdf
5	Sept 6 2017	Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Presidential Palace, Statement on Peace, Stability and Rule of Law https://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=briefing-room/statements-and-releases/2017/09/07/id-7662
6	Sept 11 2017	The Situation in Rakhine State https://www.myanmargeneva.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/mofa-PR-11-sep-2017.pdf
7	Sept 12 2017	Statement by Ambassador H.E. Mr Htin Lynn, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Myanmar During the General Debate of the oral update of the High Commission of Human Rights at the 36th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, Geneva http://www.myanmarembassydhaka.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/statement-by-UHL-at-36-HRC-12-9-2017-oral-version_3.pdf
8	Sept 19 2017	Speech delivered by her Excellency Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, State Counsellor of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar on Government's efforts with regard to National Reconciliation and Peace, NayPyiDaw https://www.statecounsellor.gov.mm/en/node/1028

9	Sept 20 2017	Statement by H.E. U Henry Van Thio, Vice President of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar at the General Debate of the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly https://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=briefing-room/news/2017/09/21/id-7713
10	Sept 28 2017	Statement by H.E. Thaung Tun, National Security Advisor to the Union Government of Myanmar at the meeting on the situation in Myanmar in the United Nations Security Council https://www.moi.gov.mm/moi:eng/?q=news/14/11/2018/id-11648
11	Sept 29 2017	Statement by Mr Hau Khan Sum, Ambassador / Charge d'affaires a.i. of the Permanent Mission of Myanmar at the 36th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, Geneva https://www.myanmargeneva.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Statment-DPR-29-sep-2017.pdf
12	Oct 9 2017	USDP: Rakhine needs support, Myanmar Times https://www.mmtimes.com/news/usdp-rakhine-needs-support.html
13	Oct 13 2017	Statement by H.E. U Thaung Tun, National Security Advisor to the Union Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar at the ARRIA Formula Meeting of the Security Council on the Situation in Myanmar (Co-hosted by France and the United Kingdom) https://www.statecounsellor.gov.mm/en/node/1091

14	Oct 18 2017	Senior General thanks China for Rakhine Support, Myanmar Times https://www.mmtimes.com/news/senior-general-thanks-china-rakhine-support.html
15	Oct 27 2017	Peace, stability restored in northern Rakhine, some troops withdrawn, Myanmar Times https://www.mmtimes.com/news/peace-stability-restored-northern-rakhine-some-troops-withdrawn.html
16	Nov 6 2017	Press Statement by the Ministry of the Office of the State Counsellor on UN Security Council Presidential Statement https://www.statecounsellor.gov.mm/en/node/1241
17	Nov 23 2017	The Republic of the Union of Myanmar and the People's Republic of Bangladesh signed the Arrangement on Return of Displaced Persons from Rakhine State. https://www.statecounsellor.gov.mm/en/node/1371
18	Dec 5 2017	Statement by Ambassador H.E. Mr Htin Lynn, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Myanmar at the 27th Special Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, Consideration and Action on A/HRC/S-27/L.1, Geneva https://www.statecounsellor.gov.mm/en/node/1439
19	Jan 25 2018	Statement by H.E. U Htin Lynn, Permanent Representative of Myanmar to the United Nations Office in Geneva at the 70th Anniversary of Independence Day https://www.myanmargeneva.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/STATEMENT-BY-PR-for-Independence-Day-25-january-2018.pdf

20	Feb 13 2018	Myanmar Permanent Representative to the United Nations delivered a statement at Security Council on Governments Efforts in Rakhine State https://www.mofa.gov.mm/myanmar-permanent-representative-to-the-united-nations-delivered-a-statement-at-security-council-on-governments-efforts-in-rakhine-state/
21	Feb 27 2018	Statement by H.E. U Kyaw Tin, Union Minister for International Cooperation of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar at the High Level Segment of the 37th Session of Human Rights Council, Geneva https://www.myanmargeneva.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Statement-UKT-27-Feb-HRC.pdf See also: https://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=issues/rakhine-state-affairs/id-8530
22	Mar 12 2018	Statement by H.E. Htin Lynn, Permanent Representative of Myanmar at the Interactive Dialogue on the Human Rights Situation in Myanmar https://www.myanmargeneva.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Statement-by-PR-at-ID-with-SR-and-FFM-12-March-2018.pdf
23	Mar 23 2018	Statement by H.E. Mr Htin Lynn, Permanent Representative of Myanmar at the consideration of the draft resolution on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar https://www.myanmargeneva.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/PR-Statement-EOV-before-Vote-23-March-2018.pdf

24	Mar 26 2018	Snr Gen Min Aung Hlaing's Armed Forces Day Speeches, Reuters https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/snr-gen-min-aung-hlaings-armed-forces-day-speeches.html
25	Dec 11 2019	Statement by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, State Counsellor and Union Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar as Agent before the International Court of Justice The Hague https://www.mofa.gov.mm/statement-by-h-e-daw-aung-san-suu-kyi-state-counsellor-and-union-minister-for-foreign-affairs-of-the-republic-of-the-union-of-myanmar-as-agent-before-the-international-court-of-justice-the-hague-1/

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