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Refocussing Rakhine Nationalism

Arakan Army operations in Rakhine State

Many observers have characterised the recent events in Rakhine State in which the Arakan Army attacked Myanmar Police Posts as a further extension of ongoing ethnic armed conflicts in Myanmar. However, the underlying objectives of the Arakan Army do not correlate with the objectives of most other armed ethnic organisations that have been fighting for equality over the last sixty years. Rather, the Arakan Army's creation and its later political position does not just seek equality and federalism but rather an autonomous Rakhine State.¹ This is in itself should also be seen in the context of connections between Rakhine nationalism and the possible involvement of the Arakan Army/United League of Arakan (AA/ULA) in furthering that nationalist agenda.

As AA/ULA Commander-in-Chief Major General Twan Mrat Naing notes,

We prefer [a confederation of states] like Wa State, which has a larger share of power in line with the Constitution,

adding that,

. . . a confederation is “better” than federalism. . . And we think it [a confederation] is more appropriate to the history of Rakhine State and the hopes of the Arakanese people,²

He also continued,

In a confederation, we have the authority to make decisions on our own. But there would be a common defence system. And there would be cooperation on market regulation and foreign affairs. To have control

over our own destiny—self-determination—is the aspiration of every ethnic group. We can try,³

It remains unlikely the AA will ever see its objectives realised, seventy years of ethnic conflict suggests that the Myanmar Army, is unlikely to allow it to achieve any form of confederation. Instead the conflict is likely to continue and put further burden on an already overburdened populace. An issue the AA is acutely aware of the AA's deputy chief, Brigadier General Dr. Nyo Twan Aung in a video message told ordinary Arakanese that if the current fighting in northern Rakhine State continues to worsen, it could spread to other places in the state.⁴ In the same address he gave advice to residents in relation to an authorisation by the Rakhine State government giving permission to state police and military to carry out household checks in seven townships of northern Rakhine State, in an attempt to find



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members of the Arakan Army (AA) who may be hiding in villages.

He suggested,

Women and the elderly should not stay alone at home. They should practice living all together with their relatives.⁵

He also added,

My message to those who are away from their homes is please return to protect your own family. Nothing is worth more than life. You can earn [money] as long as you are alive. Money can't buy life.

According to media reports, he reiterated that the ultimate goal of the United League of Arakan is that the AA must be the only army in Rakhine State and the AA will drive out the Myanmar Military from Arakanese lands and that the AA designates the armed resistance period in 2019 and 2020 as a “transitional period.”

Rakhine political leaders have also become more vocal in calling for Rakhine independence, an action that resulted in the death, at the hands of security forces, of 9 protestors in Mrauk U on 16 January last year. The protests occurred after thousands of people took to the streets to protest the government's decision to cancel an event planned to commemorate the 233rd anniversary of the fall of the Rakhine kingdom, which had its capital at Mrauk U.

The protestors it would appear had reacted after hearing of the arrest of Rakhine nationalist writer Wai Hun Aung Sittwe. Who was charged under section 17/1 of the Unlawful Association Act, for a speech held at Rathedaung, northern Rakhine State, alongside former Arakan National Party (ANP) chairman Dr Aye Maung, the speech

was highly critical of the government and called for armed resistance in the name of Rakhine nationalism. Dr Aye Maung was also charged with “high treason” and incitement. According to one source, Aye Maung had told a crowd that Myanmar's Bamar majority regarded Rakhine people as slaves and did not grant them equal rights. He is alleged to have made a call for greater sovereignty for the Rakhine community and discussed the need for armed struggle to this end, an apparent reference to the Arakan Army.⁶



ACCORDING TO MEDIA REPORTS, HE REITERATED THAT THE ULTIMATE GOAL OF THE UNITED LEAGUE FOR ARAKAN IS THAT THE AA MUST BE THE ONLY ARMY IN RAKHINE STATE AND THE AA WILL DRIVE OUT THE MYANMAR MILITARY FROM ARAKANESE LANDS AND THAT THE AA DESIGNATES THE ARMED RESISTANCE PERIOD IN 2019 AND 2020 AS A “TRANSITIONAL PERIOD,”

The two men were facing charges for high treason, defamation of the State and unlawful association, however, in September 2018, Sittwe District Court dismissed the unlawful association charges. The two face death sentences or life imprisonment for high treason, while the defamation of the State

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charge carries a maximum of two years in prison and/or a fine.⁷ Aye Maung and writer Wai Hin Aung were eventually sentenced to 20 years each... for the charge of high treason and the two years each for defamation of the state.⁸

Daw Aye Nu Sein, the vice chairperson of the Arakan National Party, declined to comment on the political objective of the AA. But has been quoted as saying that,

. . . the ANP submitted a paper detailing the demands and aspirations of the Arakanese people to the 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference, it was criticized as having exceeded the boundaries of federalism.⁹

Both the Government and the Myanmar military have characterised the Arakan Army thus,

The AA is just an insurgent group. Therefore, the State Counsellor gave instructions for a strong and effective attack on the AA,¹⁰

And added,

. . . the AA's demands deviate from the government and Burma Army's political path.¹¹

The latter being a reference to the current peace process and the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) which ostensibly seeks to create a federal union and is currently stalled while participants address a number of issues that remain contested.


The Myanmar military has said it would allow the AA, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) to join formal peace talks only after they disarm.

Despite this and amid intensifying conflict in Rakhine State, Arakan Army representatives met with Government negotiators on 21 March. At the meeting Colonel Kyaw Han, Commander of the AA's Eastern Military Region, was quoted in media as saying,

. . . the AA's primary military goal is to establish a base in Rakhine State, despite the opposition of the Myanmar military (or Tatmadaw). The Tatmadaw must accept this if it wants peace.¹²

He continued,

We are doing our duty, because only the Arakan Army can assume responsibility for the security, peace and development of the Arakanese people. And we are taking responsibility in Rakhine State,¹³



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Colonel Kyaw Han, Commander of the AA's Eastern Military Region

While it unlikely the Government will accede to AA demands, both sides need to realise that some form of compromise must be reached. The Arakan Army despite statements to the contrary are unlikely to

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join the peace process without major concessions from the Government and military, and until that happens the conflict in Rakhine State will continue to further destabilise the area creating further hardship for local communities.

While many armed ethnic organisations have constantly signalled they seek to create a Federal Union based on equality of all races, thus far there remains little evidence that such an objective is shared by the Arakan Army.

The AA's Escalation of Conflict in Arakan State

The Arakan Army to further its political legitimacy, most likely at the behest of the KIO, joined the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC). Although it was hoped that as a UNFC member the group would be included in the peace process, the government barred its inclusion.

As a result, on 29 March 2015, fighting broke out between the Arakan Army's (AA) Tactical Unit No. 5 and Myanmar Army Infantry Battalion No. 289 in one of the first major attacks for the AA outside of Kachin State. The attack, on the ethnic Chin village of Pyin So, Paletwa Township, Chin State, forced hundreds of villagers to flee. According to one villager, speaking to the Chin Human Rights Organisation, the fighting had occurred because Government soldiers stationed in the village had captured an Arakan Army soldier, three days before the clash.¹⁴

Brigadier General Dr. Nyo Twan Aung, AA deputy commander-in-chief, said in a Narinjara interview that two bodies - a captain and a private, both from the Myanmar Army - were recovered, and that they arrested two Myanmar Army soldiers.¹⁵ He also noted that because the government has been increasing the number of Myanmar

Army soldiers in the area there is likely to be further fighting.

Prior to the fighting, the Arakan Army has largely confined its military operations to Kachin State and the presence of the Arakan Army in Rakhine State close to the border with Chin State was a major concern not only for the Myanmar Army but also for the Chin National Front (CNF).

Clashes between the Myanmar Army and the AA continued and it was reported that the Myanmar Army detained U Zaw Win Maung, an executive committee member of the Rakhine National Party for Kyauktaw Township. The Rakhine politician was arrested in Ywar thit village, while two days later on 1 May, it was reported that more than 30 civilians had been arrested in Rakhine State by the Myanmar Army for alleged links to the Arakan Army. Brigadier General Dr. Nyo Twan Aung, said they were being arrested because they were depicted in images on phones found on AA soldiers captured by the Tatmadaw.¹⁶

There were numerous reports of Myanmar army seizures of weapons in Rakhine State,¹⁷ in one incident, on 7 May 2015, the military recovered around 40 firearms from Cil Hali in Maungdaw North believed to be used by the Arakan Army.¹⁸ It had been suggested that Rakhine sympathisers of the Arakan Army were considering smuggling operations into Bangladesh to help finance the group's operations in Rakhine State.¹⁹

There continued sporadic clashes in 2016 and 2017, especially in Chin State's Paletwa. AA troops continued to infiltrate areas of Rakhine and Paletwa and by the end of 2018 they began to operate in four townships—Buthidaung, Rathedaung, Ponnagyun and Kyauktaw.

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Background

The Arakan Army (AA) was founded on 10 April 2009, most likely in response to the failure of the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP) and its Armed wing the Arakan Liberation Army (ALA) to fully secure Rakhine interests. It remains based at its temporary headquarters in Kachin State but set up operational bases around Paletwa on the border with Chin and Rakhine States. It was estimated to have approximately 2,500 troops and claims to have 10,000 supporters in 2015.²⁰

Its main aims were:

1. Self-determination for the people of Arakan.
2. Safeguard national identity and cultural heritage.
3. Promote national dignity and Arakanese national interests.²¹

The group, after training, had originally planned to return to Arakan State and fight for self-determination; however, with the outbreak of fighting in Kachin State in June 2011, they were unable to return. As a result, they took up arms against the Myanmar Army in support of the KIA.

The Arakan Army in Kachin State is not affiliated with the ALP. The Kachin based AA is much stronger and more battle conditioned. It originally had no political leadership as Dr. Nyo Twan Aung notes,

Arakan Army is only an armed group, not a political party, fighting against the government for freedom of Arakanese people.²²

Consequently, the Arakan Liberation Party, in what appeared to be an attempt to have the Arakan Army join it and thus strengthen

its bargaining position with the Government had, in a 4 June 2013 statement, said,

... the Arakanese people today need a strong modern Army to protect the indigenous people, the land and our natural resources. Without a stronger force we cannot achieve our goal.²³

Such a force is needed due to the fact that:

The land of Arakan is today witnessing the conflict of interest under the deadlock of Myanmarization and Islamization which has finally threatened the existence of the Arakanese people.²⁴

The statement was made despite the fact that the ALP signed a State-level agreement with the Government in April 2012, which also includes a non-cessation clause.

The Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNNDP) was also courting the Arakan Army. In a 5 May 2013 meeting with President U Thein Sein, Arakan Army (AA) leaders welcomed a request made by the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNNDP) to have the AA permanently reside in Rakhine State., Major General Twan Mrat Naing,

This is a demand made by the Rakhine people and the RNNDP is merely trying to follow through; it needs for the AA to settle down. This is part of the agreement the RNNDP made with the government after discussing the political issue. The AA is ready to protect the Rakhine people,²⁵

He continued,

We are receptive to the RNNDP's demand and will have to live in Kachin State according to the

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stipulations. With permission from the government, the AA will settle down in Rakhine State only.²⁶

In January 2014, the two main Rakhine parties, the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP) and the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD) formed the Arakan National Party (ANP) and the Arakan Army has suggested that it supports the ANP despite a number of conflicts within the Party. Major General Twan Mrat Naing has stated that,

We support our Arakan National Party, but I see it is not doing well. I don't want to criticize the internal affairs of the party, but, it would be better if the organizational structure were stronger. No matter who would [enter the race] from [elsewhere in] Myanmar, Arakanese people will win the election in our Arakan State.²⁷

Rakhine Nationalism Post-Independence

During the Second World War Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists were on opposing sides. Most of the former remained pro-British, while the latter supported the Japanese and the Myanmar Independence Army (BIA) led by Aung San.²⁸ After Aung San abandoned the Japanese and allied with the British, Rakhine was retaken. Both Muslim and Rakhine Buddhist communities formed armed units and attacked each other, massacres of local communities were reported on both sides in 1942-1943. Muslims fled to the north, where they were the majority, and Rakhine Buddhists moved south.

On 1 January 1945, The Arakan Defence Army (ADA, part of the Burma Independence Army (BIA)) assisted the allied authorities in quashing the remnants of the Japanese in

Rakhine State. But much to their irritation were disarmed by the British. Several top leaders, including the ADA army chief, were arrested. Consequently, one of those arrested, the monk U Seinda went underground with a number of troops.²⁹

In April 1948, a mujahidin rebellion erupted not long after January independence. Many Muslims even began to nurture hopes of separating the Maungdaw region from Burma altogether and of creating an independent Muslim state between the rivers Kaladan and Mayu, or of annexing the area to Pakistan. Similar ideas had first been expounded in May, 1946, when Arakanese Muslims addressed themselves to Ali Jinnah and asked his assistance in the annexing of the region to Pakistan that was about to be formed. Jinnah himself apparently assured General Aung San that he was not a supporter of the plan.³⁰ They then sought the right of the population to live as full citizens in an autonomous Muslim area in the north of the state and an end to what they saw as discrimination by Rakhine Buddhist officials who replaced the colonial administrators. The immigration authorities placed restrictions on the movement of Muslims from northern Rakhine to Sittwe, the state capital. Some 13,000 Muslims who fled during the war and were living in refugee camps in India and East Pakistan were not permitted to return; those who did were considered illegal immigrants.

The Mujahids targeted Rakhine Buddhist interests as well as the government, quickly seizing control of large parts of the north and expelling many Buddhist villagers. Law and order almost completely broke down, with two communist insurgencies (Red Flag and White Flag) in addition to the mujahidin, as well as Rakhine nationalist groups, including the (Marxist) Arakan People's Liberation Party, in the south of the state. An embattled Burmese army, facing ethnic insurgencies

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across the country, controlled little of Rakhine other than Sittwe. In the violence and chaos, relations between Buddhist and Muslim communities deteriorated further. Many moderate Rakhine Muslim leaders rejected the mujahidin insurgency, even vainly asking the government for arms to fight back, a request that was refused.

In the years from 1951 through 1954, government forces annually conducted large-scale campaigns against the Mujahids. In the second half of 1954 the Mujahids again renewed their action and reinstated their superiority over Maungdaw, Buthidaung, and most of Rathedaung. Arakanese Buddhist monks proclaimed protest fasts in Rangoon against the Mujahids. As a result of this pressure, the government launched an extensive campaign in November called Operation Monsoon. The major centers of the Mujahids were captured and several of their

important leaders were killed. Their ranks broke up into small units which continued to loot and terrorize Muslims and Buddhist alike, especially in remote regions difficult to access.³¹

The rebellion was eventually ended through ceasefires in 1961 and the defeat of remaining groups, leaving only small-scale armed resistance and banditry. Partly in response to mujahidin demands, partly for electoral reasons, in 1961 the government established a Mayu Frontier Administration in northern Rakhine, administered by army officers rather than Rakhine officials. But the 1962 military coup led to a more hard-line stance toward minorities, and the Mayu Frontier Administration was dissolved. This prompted attempts to re-form the mujahidin movement that failed to gain significant local support.

Notes

¹ <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/confederation-option-arakanese-people-aa-chief-says.html>, accessed 23 January 2019

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/aa-deputy-leader-says-fighting-spread-beyond-n-rakhine.html>, accessed 8 February 2019

⁵ Ibid

⁶ <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/rakhine-political-leader-dr-aye-maung-arrested-in-sittwe-after-mrauk-u-violence> accessed 20 February 2018

⁷ <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/rakhine-politician-loses-appeal-to-drop-defamation-high-treason-charges.html> accessed 23 January 2019

⁸ 'Myanmar court jails Rakhine leader for 20 years for treason', AFP, 19 March 2019

⁹ <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/confederation-option-arakanese-people-aa-chief-says.html>, accessed 23 January 2019

¹⁰ <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/tatmadaw-state-counsellor-presidents-office-gave-order-attack-aa>, accessed 24 January 2019

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/aa-denies-issuing-online-call-arakanese-statehood.html>, accessed 25 March 2019

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ 'Villagers flee clash between Arakan and Myanmar armies in Chin State', Chinland Guardian, 1 April 2015

¹⁵ 'Arakan Army and Myanmar Army clash in Arakan State', Narinjara, 29 April 2015

¹⁶ 'Rakhine chief minister hits out at army over fighting', Myanmar Times, 1 May 2015

¹⁷ <http://www.rathedaung.net/2015/05/weapons-seized-in-series-of-raids-in-rakhine-villages-and-monasteries.html>

¹⁸ <http://Myanmartimes.net/arrests-made-in-connection-with-arakan-army/>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ 'I Want to Stress That We Are Not the Enemy', Nan Lwin Hnin Pwint, The Irrawaddy, 12 June 2015

²¹ See <http://thearakanarmy.com/>

²² 'Arakan Army Basic Military Training Concludes in KIO Controlled Area', Narinjara, 8 April, 2013

²³ 'ALP urges for a stronger National Army for Arakanese', Narinjara, 7 June, 2013

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ <https://democracyforMyanmar.wordpress.com/2013/06/03/the-arakan-army-is-ready-to-stand-in-the-motherland/>

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ 'I Want to Stress That We Are Not the Enemy', Nan Lwin Hnin Pwint, The Irrawaddy, 12 June 2015

²⁸ 'Myanmar: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity' Martin Smith, Zed Books, 1993, 64

²⁹ Ibid, 64

³⁰ 'Muslims of Burma - A Study of a Minority Group', Moshe Yagher, 96

³¹ Ibid, 99