

law, burnt land becomes government-managed land" (Minister for Social Development, Relief and Resettlement Win Myat Aye, at a meeting in the Rakhine state capital of Sittwe as reported by the *Global New Light of Myanmar*).

In my reading, this also contributes to explain the extraordinary (literally) effort the military deployed to eliminate traces of Rohingya villages and reduce it all to "burnt land." No returning Rohingya can easily make a claim that it was their land: now it is just burnt land.

And indeed, the national government announced a few days ago that it was taking over the "development of the Rakhine state", and specifically the burnt land in Rohingya land. That seals the deal.

But there is more to the current situation.

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### China's projects in rakhine state

There is a parallel history developing in the Rakhine state that has not been mentioned—except most recently. It is the fact that China has entered contractual agreements with the government of Myanmar to develop a massive port in the Rakhine state and a large industrial zone. These are not in the area where the current burning of villages happened. But clearly such massive developments will have an enormous shadow effect over a very large part of Rakhine, going well beyond the area of the port and the industrial zone.

China's Beijing based CITIC investment group will be building a deep-sea port and economic zone in Kyaukpyu worth USD 7.3 billion. A three billion dollar economic development zone is also in the works.

China has already invested significantly in the Rakhine state with a USD 2.45 billion pipeline from Rakhine to China's Yunnan province. The

planned port will give China access to the Indian Ocean and to the Middle East—and to Middle Eastern crude oil. Most of China's investments in Myanmar have been outside the Rakhine state—thus the current investments are new. China had invested USD 15 billion mostly in mining, dams, and timber in other parts of Myanmar—in fact, one third of the vast forest in Myanmar is now barren land due to the timber extraction.

A question I have been pursuing is how this might impact the Rakhine state area where the Rohingya villages were burnt down. I have a hard time not thinking that religion was used by the military to make burnt land and thereby take possession.

### What does religion have to do with it?

It is worth noting that the international media has almost exclusively focused on the religion aspect. Human Rights Watch described the anti-Rohingya violence as amounting to [crimes against humanity] carried out as part of a campaign of ethnic cleansing. Malaysia's foreign minister described the Myanmar government's actions as ethnic cleansing and called on them to stop the practice, leading in turn to a strong response from Myanmar's government. John McKissick, head of the UN refugee agency, said the Myanmar government was carrying out ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya people.

All of this is true, and a horrible part of the story.

But my research leads me to argue that religion and ethnicity might be only part of what explains this forced displacement, larger than many earlier expulsions of the Rohingya. The past two decades have seen a massive worldwide rise of corporate acquisitions of land for mining, timber, agriculture, and water.

In the case of Myanmar, the military have been grabbing vast stretches of land from small holders since the 1990s—without compensation, but with threats if they should fight back. This land grabbing has continued across the decades. At the time of the 2012 attacks, the land allocated to large projects had increased by 170 percent between 2010 and 2013. By 2012 the law governing land was changed to favour large corporate acquisitions.

The escalating displacement of millions of smallholders (mostly Buddhists) from the land was a major change as to who was to manage the land. Smallholders became refugees of a new economic ordering. Myanmar is not unique in this. Similar brutal expulsions of smallholders have been happening across the world as large

corporations take over because they "establish" that the smallholders have no contracts showing the land is theirs, no matter how long they and their ancestors worked that land. What is different in Myanmar is the almost absolute control the military have long had over much of the country's land, and hence their key role in the expulsion of smallholders (pdf).

Today there are whole new economies—mining, timber, geothermal projects—where before there were smallholders.

an initial period of 30 years. The extent of land grabs is such that Myanmar is losing more than a million acres of forest a year (pdf).

These facts are never invoked in the discussion about the persecution of the Rohingyas. And Aung San Suu Kyi has been similarly silent on the matter.

(Generally, see my earlier piece in the *Guardian* on these developments: "Is Rohingya persecution caused by business interests rather than religion?" published on January 4, 2017).



Burmese small holders protesting land grabbing.

PHOTO: AFP

Economic development may require this: but it should also work for the millions of displaced and never compensated smallholders. Foreign direct investment is now concentrated in extractive sectors and power generation. Not much of the new investment has gone to sectors such as manufacturing that can generate a strong working class and a modest middle class. For example, Myanmar's Yadana pipeline project, "required investment of over \$1bn (£0.8bn), yet employs only 800 workers".

Furthermore, the 2012 law empowered foreign investors. It offered government loans—but no help for the smallholders who lost their land. Land properties can range from 2,000 hectares up to 20,000 hectares (5,000 acres to 50,000 acres) for

In short, expelling Rohingyas from their land might well be good for future business. Indeed, quite recently the government allocated millions of hectares in Rakhine for corporate development. To some extent the international focus on the religion of the Rohingya has overshadowed the vast land grabs that have affected millions, including the Rohingya.



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