

A better political economy of the Rohingya crisis

LEE JONES

In the last few weeks, over 400,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled a bloody pogrom in Myanmar's Rakhine state, crossing into Bangladesh. Among the horrified and largely moralistic reactions in the West, some have pointed to economic factors supposedly behind these events. They are right to highlight the importance of political economy drivers of conflict, but their analysis is disappointingly superficial and crude. This post critiques their approaches and briefly outlines a better one.

Vulgar Marxism 101: land grabs and the Rohingya crisis

The most prominent commentator suggesting economic drivers behind the Rohingya crisis is the renowned geographer Saskia Sassen—whose published work I generally admire greatly. Sassen penned an extremely speculative piece for *The Guardian* in January 2017, and another for the *Huffington Post* in September 2017, linking the conflict to land grabs. In her lengthy January essay, Sassen suggests that the conflict is “generated by military-economic interests, rather than by mostly religious/ethnic issues”.

However, she offered no evidence for this proposition except that the government had designated 1.27m hectares of land in Rakhine for agricultural development. “Expelling them from their land is a way of freeing up land and water”, she asserted. Many Myanmar scholars reacted with some scorn on social media.

Undeterred, she rehearses these claims in her latest article, again with precious little evidence supplied—though now she also cites the Chinese port and special economic zone (SEZ) being constructed at Kyaukphyu. She speculates: “the land freed by the radical expulsion of the Rohingya might have become of interest to the military... Religion may be functioning as a veil that military leaders can use to minimize attention on the land-grabbing aspect of this

economic development part of their agenda.” Some other scholars penned a similar piece for *The Conversation*, again offering little concrete evidence but pointing to the oil and gas pipeline connecting Kyaukphyu (though they mistakenly suggest it runs from Sittwe) to western China, and an Indian port development in Sittwe. They conclude: “The government of Myanmar therefore has vested interests in clearing land to prepare for further development”.

One does not need to be a particularly brilliant political economist to recognise that these claims are extraordinarily sloppy. One can simply look at a few maps. Firstly, note the map of Rakhine (Map 1), showing the Rohingya population concentrated heavily in a few townships bordering Bangladesh. Then note the second map,

showing the latest forced displacement and burning of Rohingya villages, which have been concentrated entirely in these townships. Almost all of the far north of Rakhine has been depopulated of Rohingya, but the centre and south have been relatively unaffected this time around.

Now consider the location of the developments that are supposedly driving this forced displacement. Kyaukphyu is in central Rakhine state, about 120 km south of the present crisis. How can a desire to clear land in Kyaukphyu possibly explain the ethnic cleansing of townships located so far away? Sittwe is also about 40km from the nearest violence.

It would be far more plausible to link the present crisis to the shocking announcement, just



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