days into the pogrom, of the state's intention to establish an SEZ in Maungdaw, at the centre of the recent violence. This certainly deserves investigation, though it is missed entirely in these recent commentaries.

However, this is not just a question of shifting the explanatory weight from one land grab to another. Ultimately, the vulgar Marxism of these accounts does a disservice to political economy analysis more broadly. Attributing complex events like this to "business interests" is crude and reductionist, and can actually explain relatively little. Yes, land grabs have happened across Myanmar to facilitate megaprojects like mines, dams, SEZs, ports and agribusiness plantations, and this has certainly fuelled ethnic conflict. This is well documented by the indefatigable Kevin Woods, whose years of painstaking fieldwork and brilliant scholarship nonetheless goes unacknowledged by these authors. And land grabs, including for the projects cited in these articles, have undoubtedly produced forced displacement in Rakhine state, causing resentment among both Rohingyas and the Buddhist Rakhine, the state's dominant ethnic group.

But development-induced land grabs simply do not require vast ethnic cleansing displacing 40 percent of a given population. Nor, crucially, can "business interests" explain why this ethnic cleansing is greeted with indifference or even enthusiasm by the vast majority of Myanmar's population—even by groups, like the Rakhine, that have themselves been victims of previous land grabs. Nor, crucially, can it explain very similar pogroms in 1977 and 1992, both of which occurred decades before any megaprojects and their associated land grabs.

Towards a better political economy analysis

The only benefit of such crude accounts is that they do prompt us to think about the relationship of socio-political conflict to economic factors. This is better than simplistically attributing conflict to "communalism" or "religious intolerance", as if the problem were solely ideological, lacking any material underpinning—which is never true in

reality. But rather than suggesting that the "real" cause is land-grabbing and religion is only a "veil", it is important to situate socio-political conflict within a historically evolving political economy context, in a way that takes social and ideological formations seriously. I can only gesture here at the main lines of analysis one might undertake, but this is still an improvement over the commentary just described.

Buddhist–Muslim conflict over land and resources in what is now Rakhine state is not new. From the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries there were struggles between Muslim empires

Map 1

expanding from the west and the Buddhist Arakan kingdom of Mrauk U, ending only when the area was conquered by the kingdom of Burma in 1785. However, it was British colonialism (1824–1948) that arguably sowed the most important seeds for the contemporary crisis.

Burma was ruled as part of the British Raj, enabling vast inward migration from the Indian subcontinent. The British particularly encouraged Bengalis to migrate to address labour shortages on agricultural plantations. In Akyab district, for instance (present-day Sittwe), from 1871–1911, the Muslim population more than tripled, while the Rakhine population grew by barely a fifth. Understandably, then, the Rakhine have long cultural memories of being "swamped" by "Muslim immigrants". More broadly, immigration

to Burma peaked at 480,000 in 1927, out of a total population of 13 million. By then, ethnic Indians had acquired prominent positions across the Burmese economy, not just as agrarian coolies but also as skilled professionals, merchants and financiers. In the 1930s economic crisis, many farmers indebted to Indian moneylenders defaulted, leading Indians also to become major landlords.

The reaction to this rapid influx was a racially inflected form of economic nationalism which still persists today. This is not entirely dissimilar to the

It is important to situate socio-political conflict within a historically evolving political economy context.

xenophobic nationalism that has sometimes accompanied mass immigration in straitened economic circumstances in many Western countries. There were anti-Indian riots in 1930–31 and specifically anti-Muslim riots in 1926 and 1938. These were led by the majority ethnic Bamar and did not spread into Rakhine itself. It was not until Britain's defeat by invading Japanese forces in 1942 that communal violence erupted there, with Rakhine militias exploiting the war to wreak bloody vengeance on their Muslim rivals, prompting tens of thousands to flee into India.

To make matters worse, the British then armed Rohingya volunteer forces, ostensibly to attack the occupying Japanese, but instead these groups often raided Rakhine settlements and Buddhist

monasteries and pagodas. These forces also accompanied Britain's reconquest of Rakhine, after which armed Rakhine groups were forcibly suppressed. Understandably, some of the returning Muslims feared being incorporated into the postcolonial Burmese state, launching a "Mujahit" rebellion to press for the incorporation of northern Rakhine into East Pakistan, prompting counterinsurgency operations by the Burmese army through the 1950s.

An important legacy of this WWII-induced displacement, and the subsequent unrest, is that

Muslims gradually returning to Rakhine were thereafter often depicted as "illegal Bengali immigrants". This complex, unhappy history is what lies behind the subsequent rejection of the Rohingyas—a term used commonly only after Burma's independence—as one of Myanmar's 135 official "national races", and their designation instead as "Bengalis".

Given the experiences under British colonialism, it is not surprising that, from the outset, popular Burmese nationalism has had a strongly racist flavour, directed in part against those branded *kalar*—dark-skinned "interlopers" from the Indian subcontinent. The central objective of Burma's post-independence government was the Burmanisation of the foreign-

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