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From victims to villains: The changing discourse on Rohingyas

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Yet another attempt to send Rohingyas back to Myanmar ended up in an embarrassing debacle last week: Not a single Rohingya showed up for the arranged repatriation. Humiliated by their brazen act of defiance, an angry foreign minister vowed to rein in their apparent "comfort" in Bangladesh.

Coincidence or not, since then, a series of blatantly disparaging and incendiary articles, "reports" and opinion pieces about Rohingyas have appeared in mainstream media outlets—so much so that it could almost be called a coordinated campaign.

For instance, a front-page story of a well-circulated Bengali newspaper read: "The Rohingya showdown: conspiracy to destabilise the country." The article dealt

with a massive rally Rohingyas held on August 25 to commemorate "Rohingya Genocide Day." Rohingyas around the world observed the day previous year, too. But this year, on the heels of the failed repatriation bid, the rally has suddenly become a subject of controversy.

Luckily, a journalist friend sent me a video clip of the rally. Far from engaging in a "conspiracy" against Bangladesh, the speakers expressed their gratitude towards the government for hosting them, as they lamented their tragedy and demanded justice for atrocities perpetrated against them.

Mohib Ullah, a prominent Rohingya leader, was also targeted by some in the media for his principal role in organising the rally. Ullah is among the few Rohingya

leaders preaching a non-violent political solution to the crisis, and has mainstream public appeal. Since the rally, he has been accused of receiving funds from Pakistan, but no reliable evidence has yet been cited to support these allegations. Even the now-forgotten White House meeting on religious persecution, which had become controversial for the Priya Saha episode, resurfaced with a new twist. Since Ullah attended the meeting as a Rohingya representative, he is now being branded as anti-Bangladesh, although he made one single appeal to President Donald Trump: help us get back our home.

The role of NGOs in the aftermath of the crisis has clearly not been perfect. But their contributions to educating the Rohingya children, ensuring that refugees receive sufficient food and health aids and creating awareness worldwide have been critical. But in the local media, NGOs have been subjected to crude vilification, accused of working to sustain the crisis for self-interest.

Some even saw a conspiracy by NGOs and humanitarian organisations to convince the Rohingyas to not go back, when they protested using English posters and placards. Such an assertion is not only unfair but also offensive. The same goes for the notion that Rohingyas are refusing to go back because they are living comfortably in refugee camps.

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