

ROHINGYA GENOCIDE REMEMBRANCE DAY

Rohingya refugees need sustainable solutions

Dr Sk Tawfique M Haque and Dr Ishrat Zakia Sultana are professor and assistant professor, respectively, in the Department of Political Science and Sociology at North South University. SM Mashur Arafin Ayon is a research associate at the South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance (SIPG), North South University.

SK TAWFIQUE M HAQUE, ISHRAT ZAKIA SULTANA and SM MASHUR ARAFIN AYON

In 2017, the genocide in Myanmar drove Rashid and many other Rohingya into Bangladesh to escape ceaseless persecution by the military. In Bangladesh, he had wanted to pursue his education but learned about government restrictions on Rohingya's access to education. Then he desperately looked for a job but failed to get one. Finally, he became a member of a criminal syndicate and got arrested.

Rashid is just one example of many such tragic stories among the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Being deprived of education and employment opportunities, many youngsters from that community have adopted a dark path where they get engaged in various kinds of illegal activities, including drug trafficking, smuggling, and the likes.

Unlike Rashid, Nadia, a young Rohingya woman, had a graduate degree from her home country Myanmar, but failed to get a job or study further in Bangladesh. Passing months with no work and earning, she finally became involved in the illegal sex work in Cox's Bazar.

When Bangladesh opened its borders to the Rohingya in 2017, the world applauded its humanitarian gesture. But over time, the burden of hosting 971,904 Rohingya, according to a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) report, has come to weigh upon the resources and patience of the host country. What started as a temporary refuge turned into a prolonged stay with no end in sight. As a result, the initial hospitality of the local people, eventually switched to hostility toward the Rohingya. According to a 2023 report by Human Rights Watch (HRW), there are emerging signs of growing anti-Rohingya sentiment. One of the key reasons is the increase in the unemployment rate and decrease in wages in the area. Manual labourers in Cox's Bazar typically earn a meagre Tk 100-150 per day (around \$3), but illegal Rohingya workers, who accept wages as low as Tk 60-80, further drive down the already depressed market rates. This is a major concern and a potential marker for instability in the local labour market in Cox's Bazar.

Research shows that most Rohingya

are willing to return home, but only under conditions of safety, through voluntary repatriation, and with dignity. These conditions are, however, yet to be met in their home country. The situation in Myanmar is so grim that the Arakan Army (AA) is still fighting with the beleaguered junta to ensure its own cut of the spoils in Rakhine State. Recent events, including

been weakened by internal dissent and the withdrawal of support by the Bamar majority. It now faces increased challenges from the Three Brotherhood Alliance, including AA, that controls much of Rakhine State, once the home of the Rohingya before their displacement. Besides, the ethnic armed organisations have also been emboldened recently through the support of the National

Now that there is no sign of repatriation, it is crystal clear that keeping the Rohingya idle is not sustainable and also unfair toward this unfortunate community. Many youths like Rashid and Nadia pay a huge price for this.

Given this impasse, three possible ways of proceeding emerge, each fraught with its own set of difficulties. The first is accepting the existing situation. If the present status

should be tapped for vocational training and job prospects. BRAC has already initiated some steps in the agricultural sectors through NGOs. Institutionalisation of these efforts through special economic zones is expected to create sustainable livelihoods and also contribute toward the country's economy. In this regard, experiences from the German economy on successful inclusion of Syrian refugees are particularly recommended. Most Syrian refugees were provided with temporary protection that enabled them to access health services, education, and work permits within certain regions. Bangladesh can look at this approach and consider providing skill development training to Rohingya men and women. Kay Kraft, a Bangladeshi fashion house, has already started such an initiative at Bhasan Char. Although small in scale, such projects can be replicated in creating job opportunities in Cox's Bazar.

But the third option remains fraught with risks, too. On the one hand, economic integration might expose the Rohingya to Bangladeshi society to a great extent and may pose a serious challenge to social harmony and our national identity. In this view, strong safety measures can be applied. On the other, the world community, especially Myanmar, may get the wrong signal that, in response to genocide committed by Myanmar, Bangladesh has decided to assimilate the Rohingya with the Bangladeshi people forever.

Engaging with Rohingya researchers and the diaspora is important so that the devised strategies do not backfire. Given these complexities, there might not currently exist a solution to the crisis. Bangladesh has never agreed to grant citizenship to the Rohingya, and third-country resettlement is a very uncertain and highly limited option. Any durable solution could only result from careful planning, international collaboration, and adapting solutions according to the way circumstances keep changing.

So, let's remember—on this Rohingya Genocide Remembrance Day—Rohingya youth like Rashid and Nadia, who became victims of exploitation and despair because of the unavailability of options to study and work and make a decent living.

On this day, let us reflect on the possible ways in which we can stand by the Rohingya, demonstrate humanity again, and thus save Cox's Bazar economy too.

Names of the individuals mentioned in the article have been changed for privacy reasons.



PHOTO: REUTERS

Deprived of education and formal jobs, the new generation of Rohingya is at risk of becoming enmeshed in criminal activities.

an August 2024 attack allegedly carried out by the AA against Rohingya civilians trying to flee across the Naf River, illustrate the risks still awaiting returnees. In the recent heinous attack, over 200 Rohingya, including women, children, and the elderly, were mowed down in a single day.

Efforts to resolve the crisis through repatriation have repeatedly failed. One example is the 2017 accord between Myanmar and Bangladesh, which would have seen the repatriation of the first group of Rohingya refugees by November 2018, but never took off. Subsequent efforts met the same fate, including an attempt backed by China in 2019. The unresolved issue of citizenship—a basic right that the Rohingya have been denied for generations—was a reason. Efforts to resolve the issue took another step back when, at the beginning of 2021, the military in Myanmar carried out a coup, turning hopes of an amicable and early solution all the more distant for the Rohingya.

The political landscape in Myanmar remains volatile. The junta has already

Unity Government. The complexities of negotiating with a fragmented and conflict-ridden state raise serious doubts about the feasibility of repatriation in the near future.

While the latter fact complicates many education plans and means to sustain lives already traumatised by experiences in Myanmar, 52 percent of the Rohingya population in Bangladesh are children aged between 0 to 17 years and 44 percent are between the ages of 18 to 59 years, according to a 2024 joint report by UNHCR and Bangladesh. Deprived of education and formal jobs, this new generation is practically on the fast track to becoming enmeshed in criminal activities—therefore perpetuating a poverty and violence cycle.

Migration experts very often observe that the average length of time it takes for a refugee community to find a permanent solution is 17 years. It has already been seven long years since 2017 and another decade is in the offing for the Rohingya in Bangladesh. For the first wave of the 1978 displaced Rohingya, however, the wait has been agonisingly long.

quo is maintained, that would only mean that Bangladesh will remain dependent on the foreign aid that have already started drying up. One of the key reasons for the decrease in foreign funding is the shift of international attention to the crises in Ukraine and Israel-Palestine. Such alternation of donors' attention may lead to a worse scenario in the camp management because Bangladesh is fully dependent on the foreign aid to run the Rohingya programme. The second can be drawing support from the international community. Until now, Bangladesh has failed to demonstrate its diplomatic strength on the Rohingya issue. As a result, the permanent members of the UN Security Council and regional powers like India, and other countries have remained quiet on the issue of Rohingya repatriation. Earlier initiatives have demonstrated the inadequacies of Bangladeshi diplomatic strategies. So, it is unlikely that this option will be useful in resolving the crisis. The last option can be the economic integration of the Rohingya refugees, albeit without granting them citizenship. They

CREATION OF THE NEW POLITICAL ORDER

Rebuilding ship in an open and turbulent sea



Dr Mirza Hassan is based at Brac Institute of Governance and Development, Brac University. He can be reached at mirzahass@gmail.com

MIRZA HASSAN

not do the same?

To address this question, we need to reimagine and reconstitute the state-society relations in two domains: i) representative democracy; and ii) state-society accountability relations. First, we need to re-conceptualise and broaden our definition of democracy. Democracy in Bangladesh has meant representative democracy with a de facto emphasis on its

non-majoritarian. These forms of direct, deliberative, and substantive democracy will prevent the formation of monopolistic "party-archies" (whereby political parties dominate the political process and civil society), the syndrome of winner-take-all politics, and the resurgence of a dominant party-state (in which, one party calls the shot).

There have been discussions of reforms

the legislative, executive, and judiciary branches are prone to capture by ruling political elites. The news media, another potential check, can also be captured or subdued. To prevent capture, we need multi-level checks and balances involving multiple stakeholders.

Fundamental institutions and policies should be protected with complex checks and balances mechanisms whereby

Such mechanisms would constitute the basis for a dual power and permanent revolution, whereby citizens can maintain a continuous check on state institutions. Our dual power has to be based on a liberal constitutional framework since our context for such innovation is a liberal democratic revolution. These societal based checks and balances with multiple stakeholders and veto points must be endorsed by the constitution—whether a new or highly modified one. Constitutional experts can help with the design.

Such mechanisms, we can call these "Citizens' Committees," may be domain-specific (for example, for education and health sector and police administration) as well as on the basis of administrative tiers (district, upazila, and union parishad). We must understand that, to contain a potential counter revolution, street-based countervailing power, akin to a Maoist cultural revolution, has its limits. We observed, recently, how such power prevented the possibility of a "judicial coup." But over time, these types of pressure tactics will alienate people and there is a potential danger that the revolutionary student leadership might exhaust its current popular legitimacy. There is also a risk that multiple accountability mechanisms might contribute to institutional and policy sclerosis but, I believe, we will learn to remedy such problems with trials and errors.

Given our long history of dictatorship and illiberalism, and political elites' strong incentives to govern through a de facto structure of authoritarian dominant party-state and their loathing for uncertainty inherent in electoral democracy, the utmost necessity is to keep political elites in a narrow corridor by balancing the powers of both state and society. For all these, time is of the essence. The title of this piece—rebuilding the ship in the open and turbulent sea—alludes to a high-risk period for reforming state-society relations, whereby actors, who have lot to lose from these, will be eager to sabotage the process. The ship must not sink.

Reimagining and reconstituting electoral democracy and establishing and sustaining dual power thus keeping the political elites in a narrow corridor—deserve our greatest attention. The rare opportunity that the democratic revolution has presented to us must not be missed.

The *chatra-janata* led mass insurrection has provided us with a historic opportunity to reimagine and reconstitute existing relations between the state and society. The students are now demanding state reform, which is very timely and necessary. But, I believe, we ought to demand more than that. The people, I would argue, need to demand reform of the existing state-society relations as well. The desires and dreams of the youth will never be realised unless we substantively reform existing institutions and create one to govern and mediate relations between the state and society. In place of the hollowed out and purely procedural forms of representative democracy that were practiced by past regimes, we require a more substantive, direct, and deliberative democracy.

The past Awami League regime completely undermined the forms of accountability and checks and balances that characterise a liberal and representative democracy. Since 2014, elections have totally lost effectiveness as a form of direct accountability. Further, the past 15 years of progressively quasi-totalitarian rule by the AL has completely undermined intermediary institutions through which citizens indirectly hold the state accountable—such as parliamentary accountability committees, the judiciary, and the press.

My fundamental concern is about how to make reforms irreversible. This concern stems from the bitter lesson that we learned from the experiences of reforms implemented by the 2007-8 caretaker regime. The caretaker government passed close to 100 acts, ordinances, and laws, and created new institutions which were wiped out within a few weeks by the newly-elected AL government in 2009. The ones retained were captured by party members or hollowed out from within. How do we guarantee that the future ruling party will



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

procedures, known as the procedural form of democracy. This form of democracy is in danger of being reduced to pure procedure, without any substance—for example, the rigged elections held by the previous regime. Instead of a hollow procedural democracy, we require a more substantive democracy that emphasises democratic inclusivity and equality and through which we can claim real ownership over the republic, as is proclaimed in the constitution.

We need to imagine more direct forms of citizen engagement, such as periodic referendums and deliberative forums that are discussion-based and

in the electoral system, such as bi-cameral parliament, proportional representation, and elimination of Article 70 (that deters floor crossing by the parliament members). To these proposals, I would add another more direct democratic option for citizens—the power of constituents to recall their representatives if they are not happy with their performances.

To me, the most critical concern is to guard the guardian, that is to prevent political party elites from capturing accountability institutions. As our past experience shows, the conventional checks and balances imposed by a division of

citizens can exercise veto power at multiple points. Examples of such mechanisms currently under discussion include citizens' commissions for police, banking, education etc., composed of a combination of citizens and state officials.

Beyond such commissions, we need purely societal-based regulatory mechanisms (consisting of citizen members only), for which we have no precedents in Bangladesh. But this is exactly what we need to build to safeguard the achievements of the student movement and to ensure that the reforms remain irreversible in the future.