

Are the Rohingya facing an 'endgame'?



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Myanmar's leaders evicted the Rohingya from Rakhine in 2017, but when the Arakan Army (AA) attacked them in Maungdaw last month, even repatriating them suffered. Combined, both explosive dynamics trigger other alarm bells.

Adversities may create strange bedfellows, but in the Rohingya game, the strangest may be amalgamating AA rebels with rival rebel groups, Ta'ang National Liberation Army and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, to form the Three Brotherhood Alliance. Their plot, so to speak, further thickened when the Kachin Independence Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army banded into the Northern Alliance. Both new groups became the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee. The Rohingya were excluded in both. Rohingya property is allegedly being taken by the government of China, and rebel groups. Intra-group collaboration faces discordance, which sow seeds of rivalry, not democracy.

Can democracy be institutionalised amid entrenched ethnic discrimination? In this context, Myanmar's most democratic post-World War II election sheds light: 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung Sang Suu Kyi won the elections in 2015, then evicted the Rohingya from a frying pan and into the fire in August 2017.

Nonetheless, Myanmar's external puzzle was resolved. China, the winner, secured a Bay of Bengal foothold. Building the Kyaukpyu Port in Rakhine completed the 1,700km China-Myanmar Economic Corridor from Kunming, with Kyaukpyu Port Special Economic Zone as capstone.

India also completed the Sittwe Port in Rakhine. Designed to connect its neglected northeastern Seven Sisters states with the prosperous Indian heartland, across the Bay through Chennai or Kolkata, India teams up with Japan's Matarbari Port in Bangladesh, to plant another QUAD foot in the Bay. Former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has alleged that the US wants St Martin's Island, off the country's southern tip. If so, a third QUAD member would arrive. Add Payra Port, allocated to China, and Mongla Port to India, and an obvious question arises: did Bangladesh over-stir its pot?

Pushing realpolitik aside, across the shore from St Martin's Island, 970,000 displaced Rohingya people live, as registered in December 2023. For seven crammed years in Kutupalong and Teknaf camps, they have seen the 750,000 that crossed over in August 2017 climb to 1.1 million in 2018. Falling below the million mark today shouldn't widen smiles, since over 70,000 were relocated in

Bhassan Char island, farther from the border. Only China has attempted repatriating them—fruitlessly at that. Without getting Myanmar citizenship, the Rohingya people refuse to go. A few who did go to Maungdaw (the very border-town attacked by AA rebels) returned rapidly. Recent AA attacks signalled the reception awaiting repatriates, and it is far from a condition conducive for the Rohingya's own safety.

spark. Anecdotal evidence from several field trips already points to camp walls loosening up. Rohingya males have served us in Cox's Bazar restaurants. They spoke of females being forced or seduced into engaging in prostitution, or going by choice. Organised outside groups await them. Our university colleagues in Chattogram even mention well-to-do Rohingya students enrolling.

Humanitarian organisations have welcomed these pitifully pitiful Rohingya since 2017. Their selfless humanitarian provisions slowly stirred locals in the area negatively. A very deprived lot themselves, the locals initially embraced the Rohingya openheartedly. They resent the Rohingya deeply today. Any Teknaf visitor can see two reasons why: relief materials supersede what the locals typically consume/possess, and, worse, street sales of relief goods by supposedly deprived recipients.

Created in 1950, the UNHCR catered to East Europeans escaping Soviet Union communism. Its four principles—humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence—were universalised. Reflecting European lifestyles, those principles pose adjustment problems for many African, Asian, and Latin American countries. Many only recently got independence to amend principles so quickly, few are not even free yet, and many have authoritarian governments for whom the blending proves problematic. No one wants to fully convert.

Rooted in individualism in this modern age, European lifestyles often collide with the collective cultures in those other continents, creating unnecessary frictions over fundamental issues, like human rights being interpreted differently. Since families have extended, not nuclear families, associated sentiments ripple far wider in actions,

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Relatives mourn near the bodies of deceased Rohingya refugees who drowned in the Naf River in Teknaf, Cox's Bazar, on August 6, 2024.

FILE PHOTO: AFP

A scattered few thousands have been horrendously smuggled from Bangladesh to Southeast Asian countries. Still, Rohingya diasporas grow in countries in the Middle East and Asia: there are 550,000 people in Saudi Arabia, 160,000 in Malaysia, 100,000 in India, 80,000 in Thailand, 50,000 in the UAE, and 2,000 in Indonesia. Bangladesh faces a hornet's nest: diaspora could finance "local" groups to resist, push resistance into terrorism, and disguise both intentions and actions through religious appeals.

Whatever the tone, they offer the hapless, helpless Rohingya in cramped camps a

The UN Refugee Agency's (UNHCR) responses in the area now include locals in annual funding appeals. This year, it listed 1.35 million recipients, clearly a quarter-million or more in excess of the registered displaced persons. In 2018, it sought \$950,000, but received commitments of only three-quarters of that. In 2023, it received just two-thirds of the \$876,000 sought, and so far in 2024, of the \$850,000 requested for, barely one-third has arrived.

UNHCR sources confirm that developed countries have themselves taken just over 102,000 Rohingya people for resettlement.

behaviours, and cultural interpretations.

Roughly 1.2-1.3 million refugees were originally absorbed from East Europe, similar to the many displaced Rohingya who have been absorbed by Bangladesh since 2017. Yet, the nature of displacement has changed over 70 years. Europe is no longer as open as in the 1950s; welcoming arms have yielded to patrols, diverting asylum seekers to a third country, like Former UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's three-year deal to send African asylum-seekers to Rwanda.

Educating kids also exemplifies a fundamental European right, but not

necessarily so elsewhere. Poverty gets in the way, but too much trauma among camp-dwellers defeats its goals. Besides, education involves a long-term commitment, which no jam-packed country like Bangladesh can accept. It prefers the "displaced person" status over "refugee," which opens the road to citizenship. Should Bangladesh relent, eight key years lost to education invites instability.

Besides, particularly ethnic minorities have a tendency to interpret public education as discriminatory. Europe's 1950s clashes were over Cold War global ideologies, not domestic ethnic chasms as today. Noble as their efforts have been, relief workers today continue to impart a "follow our model" approach, which again pits the local against international or humanitarian benchmarks. Locals can only universalise by choice, not by imposition.

As a top-heavy state, Myanmar may be in its final lap as a coherent state, while Bangladesh doesn't really have a choice but to bite the bullet and absorb all camp Rohingya people. Suu Kyi has been detained, her supporters joined rebel groups against the military, and with Tatmadaw retreating, a final whistle can be sensed. Rebels could then turn upon themselves.

China now has less to fear of Malacca Strait pirates, more to gain from African and Middle Eastern accesses, and better preparation to face India, Japan or the US in the Bay area. India has a more uphill climb. Prime Minister Narendra Modi robustly converted his predecessor's innovative "Look East" into "Act East," but India's influence in neighbouring Sri Lanka, Nepal, and now Bangladesh has successively diminished.

As local resentment grows, national burdens spike, international interests fade, and Myanmar's malaise multiplies proportionately faster than any of the aforementioned dynamics. Bangladesh's thickening obligations means managing China, India and Japan, awaiting any US advances, and also, increasingly alone, overseeing displaced persons and thwarting cross-border civilian threats. Its overfilled boat hinders coherent outcomes, but inviting or facing too many adversities and strange bedfellows could overturn that boat.

Reviving SAARC can help South Asia overcome its current crisis



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To promote intra-regional cooperation and accelerate the economic and social development of its member countries, former Bangladesh President Ziaur Rahman first introduced the idea of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) by sending letters to the other governments in 1980. The first summit meeting of the heads of South Asian governments was held in Dhaka, on December 7-8, 1985, where the creation of SAARC was formally declared. Among its member-states, the regional entity aimed to foster mutual understanding and trust. But unfortunately, SAARC's progress has frequently been impeded by protracted regional tensions.

It has been 10 years since SAARC held its last summit in Kathmandu, Nepal. Many policy experts have long considered SAARC to be ineffective and irrelevant. Despite the

region, stands out among the many reasons contributing to SAARC's slow progress. According to experts, India is viewed with scepticism by its neighbours despite being the most powerful and populous country in South Asia.

Discussions among experts reveal that India is well-positioned to assume a more significant role in maintaining regional integrity and spearheading collaboration among South and Central Asian nations, owing to its unwavering commitment to promoting multipolarity and its captivating cultural influence. However, some also believe that India is now serving as the primary obstacle to regional cooperation in South Asia, rather than being its driving force.

The main reason for the geopolitical conflicts in the region is that India's vision and support of regional governments

collaboration and South Asia's visibility in international fora.

Unfortunately, the SAARC countries have a severe lack of economic complementarity; instead, they are highly competitive markets where each country exports goods that are largely comparable, such as cotton, jute, spices, and so forth. Additionally, there is less intra-regional trade in the area, which hinders the subcontinent's ability to combine

resolving all of the integrating difficulties, such as availability, people-to-people contact, and efficient commerce in the area. Open borders or constant availability throughout the entire territory are, in fact, necessary. It comprises everything, from telecommunications to railroads to highways to maritime infrastructure. Cross border cooperation is unavoidable if reducing conflicts, combating the threat of terrorism,

Asian countries will largely determine if SAARC can be revived, and Bangladesh's foreign affairs adviser deserves praise for his forward-thinking approach in expressing Bangladesh's eagerness to revive SAARC.

Given the regional dynamics, South Asian countries would benefit from functionalism, which would include delaying resolution of contentious issues in order to fortify SAARC cooperation. India should enter the region with an open mind, and play a significant role in fostering unfettered growth among its neighbouring countries.

In spite of its many shortcomings, SAARC has not been entirely inert. Of course, it has not served its purpose, but that does not mean it still cannot. It is therefore crucial to guarantee that any advancement or improvement within SAARC does not impede the strategic activities conducted in the region. As a result, much work still has to be done. Nevertheless, if conversations move forward in a logical and useful way, they might turn into possibilities. Notwithstanding the hostility between India and Pakistan, disagreements between any two members shouldn't prevent other members in other SAARC sub-regions from working together more effectively.

Regional cooperation makes sense from a geographic, social, economic, cultural, and political standpoint, as seen in the EU and ASEAN, and during SAARC's functional period, such as when it launched the South Asian Free Trade Area in 2006. Increasing the frequency of gatherings to engage and collaborate, while leaving past failures behind, will benefit the entire South Asian region.

South Asia is at a critical juncture, with tensions between key players continuing to persist, while the economies of other countries are in dire straits. Hostility is unproductive; reviving SAARC through mutual cooperation can at least restore hope for the region. The interim government of Bangladesh must initiate efforts to bring together the SAARC platform, evolving it to contribute to the region's progress, peace, and stability.



FILE PHOTO: AFP

It has been 10 years since SAARC held its last summit in Kathmandu, Nepal.

economically. The entire concept of SAARC is a shared market, just like that of the EU, but unlike the European nations, South Asian nations have not been able to move towards establishing proactive cooperation between member states, such as the free movement of citizens across member-states in the region or market integration.

At this particularly critical time for South Asia—as nations have either seen governments toppled or persisting economic turmoil—SAARC should be empowered again, so that its benefits can play a role in

and promoting seamless communication are the goals of South Asian leaders, as suggested by the region's close proximity.

Despite some disappointments, the interim government of Bangladesh, led by Nobel laureate Prof. Muhammad Yunus, still sees potential in SAARC for promoting regional integration. Bangladesh values SAARC and desires its flourishing as a regional organisation. The country is committed to upholding the goals and tenets of the SAARC charter and believes that SAARC must continue to operate. The strong will of South

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abundance of favourable conditions and opportunities for regional collaboration, South Asia as a whole is unable to fully take advantage of them.

The conflict between India and Pakistan, along with India's bullish attitude in the

are rooted in a supremacist mindset by the country's current ruling party. That mindset is fundamentally incompatible with signalling equitable cooperation towards its smaller neighbours. And it has all but paralysed SAARC, undermining both regional