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Discourses on Constructing Identity of Minority Muslims in Myanmar

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Abstract

The deeply entrenched anti-Islamic sentiment in Myanmar, rooted in narratives that depict minority Muslims as a fearsome "Other," necessitates a focused exploration of the identity construction processes underlying this phenomenon. This study critically examines the discourses framing Muslims as security threats, emphasizing the roles of ethnocratic regimes and influential actors—military juntas, political elites, Buddhist monks, and intellectuals—in constructing and perpetuating exclusionary identities. Key narratives shaping the "Otherization" of minority Muslims in Myanmar include historical tensions between Buddhists and Muslims, propagated fears of demographic and cultural threats through Buddhist nationalism, and the pervasive dissemination of anti-Muslim rhetoric. These narratives are reinforced by exclusionary frameworks strategically deployed by dominant actors. Legal discourses, such as the 1982 Citizenship Law, institutionalize statelessness and marginalization; securitizing narratives frame Muslims as threats to national stability; and psychoanalytical discourses dehumanize them, legitimizing violence and exclusion. Together, these intersecting factors construct Muslims as a fearsome "Other," institutionalizing discrimination, perpetuating social division, and revealing the mechanisms of "Otherization." This qualitative study, grounded in secondary sources, examines these processes and their implications for identity construction in Myanmar.

Keywords: *myanmar, islamophobia, identity, discourses, psycho-cultural interpretation, securitization*

1. Introduction

In Myanmar, Buddhism is seen as the dominant ideology where Muslims represent as a negligible socio political and religious minority. According to the 1983 Census, 3.9 percent of the population in Myanmar was Muslim, with 3.8 percent of Muslims being Sunni (Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs, 1986). The Muslims of Myanmar are diverse in terms of their socioeconomic status, geographic location, ethnicity, and religious and cultural beliefs.

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Lambrecht (2006) classified six primary Muslim ethnic groups in Myanmar. The Rohingyas, subject to ongoing citizenship disputes and facing significant challenges to their existence in the country, represent one group. The *Kaman* are the sole Muslim ethnic group officially recognized by the government. Other groups include the Malays, referred to as Pashu; Chinese Muslims, known as Panthay; Burmese Muslims, identified as Zerbadee; and immigrants from neighboring states (Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan), comprising Bengalis, Chittagonians, Tamils, Telugus, and Punjabis (Farrelly, 2016: 102). Despite traditional divisions based on the colonial-era system of ethnic/racial classification, these groups are frequently perceived as a 'common enemy' by the majority Buddhist fundamentalists and successive military as well as civilian governments. Myanmar's political, religious, and military elites have systematically marginalized Muslims by labeling them as 'illegal' immigrants, external 'evil forces', 'infiltrators' from neighboring regions, symbols of terrorism, and an 'existential threat' to the Buddhist majority's identity and religion (Foxeus, 2022). Muslims are predominantly accused of seizing control of the economy or state resources, religion, society, and political spheres, posing a perceived security threat and making the existence of the Buddhist mainstream identity vulnerable. Subsequently, the dominant Burmese military juntas, demagogic politicians, and extremist Buddhist monk groups propagated a nationalist discourse of exclusion against minority Muslims, ultimately leading to the process of Muslim "Otherization". For example, the 1983 Census purposely fudged the actual number of Muslims in Myanmar (Carroll, 2014). Specifically, the government-led census in 2014 only estimated the Kaman Muslims in Rakhine state, excluding the Rohingya and other mixed-rooted Muslim ethnic groups residing in the region (Kyaw, 2020: 198).

Furthermore, minority Muslims are frequently overlooked in the development of discriminatory legislative frameworks, encompassing laws, policies, and regulations. Additionally, they often face marginalization in the shaping of anti-Muslim psycho-cultural discourses, being perceived as 'foreigners,' leading to the denial of their constitutional right to citizenship. After the political transition in 2011, Myanmar experienced a surge in state-sponsored inter-communal violence between Buddhists and Muslims. The conflict originated in Rakhine state and subsequently spread to other regions such as Meiktila, Kanbalu, Thandwe, Hlegu, Mandalay, and beyond. Both Rohingya and non-Rohingya Muslims, including the sole recognized Muslim ethnic group—Kaman—were compelled to be displaced and fled to nearby border states (Green, 2013:94). The Burmese authoritative forces propagated the narrative that Islam and Muslims pose a persistent existential threat not only to the identity and religion of Buddhists but also to the nation's sovereignty. Consequently, they argued that unless the growth of Islam and Muslims is curtailed, the existence of the majority of Buddhists and Buddhism as a religion will soon erode. The colonial-era myth of deracination against immigrants from India, encompassing both Hindus and Muslims, has resurfaced in Myanmar's post-independence era as Islamophobia directed against the minority Muslim population.

The bi-cultural ties to adjacent border territories frequently encounter profound identity dilemmas. Dominant actors within these cultures often perceive this through a national security lens, portraying it as a formidable 'other' and a potential threat to various ideologies, identities, and religions. The making of ethnic minority 'Rohingya' Muslims as an existential threat and enemy 'other' within Myanmar has been remarkably under-theorized in the academic area. The existing literature, such as works by Kyaw (2015), Lee (2016), Zarni and Brinham (2017),

Schonthal (2016), Win (2018), Kyaw (2020), Wade (2017), Foxeus (2022), Green (2013), and Howe (2018) documents the marginalization and persecution of the Rohingya Muslims, often focuses on historical, political, legal exclusion anti-Muslim propaganda, and social aspects but lacks a cohesive theoretical framework to systematically analyze how the 'otherization' of Rohingyas is constructed and perpetuated within Myanmar's national security discourse. This research aims to fill this gap by employing the securitization model to provide a deeper understanding of the mechanisms and dynamics involved in the construction of Rohingyas as an existential threat and enemy 'other' within Myanmar under successive civilian-military regimes. The primary goal is to shed light on the mechanics of the 'otherization' process and the refusal to acknowledge the existence of the Rohingyas in Myanmar. By focusing on the marginalization process or dimensions of constructing 'Rohingyas' identity as fearsome 'other,' this study explores new ways to understand the existing dynamics involved in the (Buddhist-Muslim) ethnic conflict in Myanmar across time and space, emphasizing the role of dominant actors in portraying Rohingyas as an existential threat to ideologies, identities, and religions.

2. Theoretical Underpinning

Securitization is the deliberate action of actors who have a specific objective and try to portray an issue as an existential threat to the mainstream people and their culture, identity, or state. Dominant actors often manipulate public perception, instilling the belief that specific issues pose imminent threats to their existence, demanding immediate attention or resolution. These influential figures morph a regular concern into a security dilemma, framing it as a pervasive threat to the majority. They achieve this by introducing it into the national discourse, aiming to establish legitimacy and gain the trust of the public. Subsequently, they seek to politicize the issue through the enactment of legislation or other regulatory measures. Securitization is not limited to the state; other actors such as religious organizations, military institutions, and societal structures can also securitize issues. Buzan, Wæver and Wilde (1998: 23-24) illustrated the concept of securitization and its threshold as:

> *Security is the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics. Securitization can thus be seen as a more extreme version of politicization. The act of framing something as an existential threat to a referent object, in the form of discourse, does not automatically result in securitization. While this framing constitutes a securitizing move, the issue becomes securitized only when the audience, either through coercion or consent, acknowledges and accepts it as such. It conveys the idea that delayed intervention could lead to a point of no return, jeopardizing our existence. Thus, by labeling it as a security, an agent claims a need for and a right to treat it by extraordinary means. Securitization, in language theory, is a speech act. Its significance lies not in referencing a tangible reality, but in the act of utterance itself. By saying the words, something is done.*

A "speech act," which is thus interpreted as a discursive activity that assigns the label of "security" to a problem, presents and dramatizes it as being of the utmost importance, and then justifies an agent's claim to respond to these challenges using emergency measures (Buzan et al., 1998: 26). Securitization is a context-dependent process where a specific discourse is elevated from ordinary politics to the realm of high politics, imbuing it with urgency as an "emergency security issue" (Laura, 2017:283). Verbal declarations that a problem poses an existential threat to the state, nation,

or community shape community beliefs, psychology, and ideology. George Orwell (1974) argued that political language significantly influences political thought (Geis, 1987). Security risks are identified not necessarily based on the presence of an actual existential threat but because a subject is depicted or perceived as one.

However, Balzacq (2005) contend that the speech act model of security often inadequately explains the linguistic construction of security issues. His approach raises securitization above its normative confines, situating it within the social context as a realm of power struggles where actors strategically align on security issues to influence audience support for policies or actions. He advocates understanding securitization as a strategic or pragmatic practice influenced by various factors, including context, the psycho-cultural disposition of the audience, and power dynamics between speaker and listener. He argues that the effectiveness of securitization relies on the audience, context, and the securitizing agent, which are crucial for shaping the analysis of threat construction. Firstly, the audience's response is shaped by their understanding of the issue, trust in the securitizing actor, and their authority to support or oppose policy measures. Secondly, contextual factors, including societal trends and immediate circumstances, influence how the audience perceives and responds to the securitization process. Lastly, the securitizing agent's ability to communicate effectively and use appropriate language and frames within specific contexts is crucial for gaining political support from the audience targeted for securitization. Balzacq (2005) points out that while the public offers moral support to governments, it does not have the authority to mandate specific policies. Therefore, both moral support from the public and formal support from institutional bodies are crucial.

Furthermore, Roe (2008) emphasizes the distinct role of the masses in the securitization process. The author suggests that while an audience may agree on the security importance of an issue, they may disagree on the need for extraordinary measures. In that case, emergency measures required consensus among dominant actors or parties in relevant institution like parliament, emphasizing their central role in security decisions amidst public opinion variations. In this 'institutionalized securitization', the audience's role is typically minimized or often excluded (Roe, 2008). Where states may establish permanent bureaucracies, procedures, and military forces to manage ongoing threats (Buzan et al., 1998). Audience role 'varies according to the political system and the nature of the issue' (Wœver, 2003:12). According to Roe (2008), securitization involves a distinct two-stage process: the 'stage of identification', where an issue is identified as 'security', and the 'stage of mobilization', where responses to that issue are subsequently established. The relationship between actor and audience depends not only on the type of support needed—whether moral or formal—but also on the specific terms the audience is asked to endorse (Roe, 2008). In the Krebs and Jackson (2007: 43) model of 'rhetorical action', they stated audiences may accept the framing of an issue (the terms used by the actor), yet reject the policy implications that follow. Therefore, actors may need to reframe threats to ensure proposed policy responses garner sufficient agreement beyond mere recognition of the threat.

Williams (2003) argues that the Copenhagen School's ((Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998) concept of securitization, emphasizing existential threats and speech-acts, closely parallels Schmitt's theory of "political order," which involves exclusion, enmity, decision-making, and emergencies. This suggests that as issues are securitized—framed as existential threats requiring exceptional measures—they increasingly manifest Schmitt's idea that intense conflicts escalate into highly political events. Schmitt's concept of the political centers on the distinction between friend and enemy, linked closely to his theory of sovereignty. Sovereignty, as Schmitt argues,

entails the authority to make decisive decisions, particularly in declaring emergencies that suspend normal legal norms to maintain political order. This authority to decide on exceptions is fundamental to Schmitt's assertion that "sovereign is he who decides upon the exception" (1985:5), determining the existence of emergencies and the response to threats. Williams (2003) stated that the Copenhagen School's concept of securitization, viewed as a speech-act, shapes communicative actions and social practices beyond verbal or linguistic rhetoric, functioning as a performative action employing contextual, institutional, and symbolic resources to achieve effectiveness (Bourdieu, 1990).

3. Discourses of Labeling Muslims as 'fearsome other'

The minority Muslim population in Myanmar is considered a threat to national security, Buddhism, and the Buddhist identity under successive ethnocratic regimes. The authoritative forces such as, military dictators, government officials, religious elites or Buddhist monks, political elite, public figures and intelligentsia predominantly bought into the official view of minority Muslims as 'illegal immigrants', 'foreign invaders' and 'fearsome Other' through systematic tactful efforts. They construct this perspective by considering religion, demography, and economics. Firstly, they assert that minority Muslims aim to replace Buddhism, transforming Myanmar into an Islamic hub. Secondly, they argue that the rapid growth of the Muslim minority population could lead to Buddhists becoming the minority in their own nation. Lastly, they contend that economic control is at stake, as minority Muslims allegedly seek to dominate businesses, lands, and industries. The main propagandists of Islamophobia in Myanmar are the country's military and religious leaders, who portray Islam as an intrusive doctrine of terror and violence, and charging Muslims accountable for terrorist acts both within Myanmar and beyond. Muslims are viewed as 'evil forces; who are working to eradicate Buddhism and the Buddha's way of life in order to accomplish their objective of establishing Islamic hegemony in the Buddhist nation of Myanmar. Radical monks often claimed that various South Asian nations, including Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, had historically use to have a majority of Buddhists before becoming Muslim-dominated regions. In this context, radical Burmese Buddhist nationalist groups have specifically targeted the Rohingya, perceiving them as a potential threat to the nation's sovereignty. This perspective is rooted in the apprehension that the growth of the Rohingya community poses a risk to the preservation of Buddhism both as an ideology and as a distinct ethnic group, raising concerns that the Buddhist identity may face extinction. As per Zarni and Brinham (2017: 62), dominant civil society groups depict Muslim Rohingya as a menace, framing them as potential infiltrators who could evolve into "jihadists" with alleged support from countries like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The emergence of state-sponsored anti-Muslim discourses and the gradual shaping of a collective psyche in Myanmar that categorizes or constructs the identity of the minority Muslims as the fearsome Other can be attributed to several significant factors.

3.1. Historical grounds

Islam began in Arakan in the early ninth century when Arab traders arrived and started doing business, especially in the local market. Many Muslim merchants and sailors, also known as "Mohammedans," became stranded on the Ramree Island (Smart, 1917:19). They subsequently moved on to the adjacent regions and the mainland of the Arakan kingdom, ultimately establishing their settlement there. Despite their small percentage, these Arab traders increased

their business connections throughout the Middle East and the Far East in order to expediting Arakan's Islamization process. Yet, from the twelfth and thirteenth century onward, a large number of Muslim merchants landed in the area. The historical narratives of governance and subjugation in Arakan and Burma prior to 1784 were divergent. Following the Anglo-Burmese Wars of 1824–26, 1852, and 1885, the British incorporated Arakan and Burma into British India, establishing them as provinces under the British Raj. Unlike the pre-existing divisions between Arakan and Burma, the British rule unified the territories without international borders, fostering a more fluid environment for domestic migration. During this period, sentiments against Indians grew among the predominant Buddhist-Burman population. Besides, the British colonialists hired a huge number of Indian migrants in the colonial administration while overlooking the then-Burmese Buddhist religious hierarchy (Bischoff, 1995). To further solidify their influence in the region, the British colonizers employed the "divide and rule" policy throughout the colonial period, deliberately fostering distrust between the minority populations, both indigenous and settlers, and the majority Buddhist Burman population. Following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the British brought in a large number of Hindu and Muslim Indians as cheap laborers and moneylenders to British Burma in the 1870s and 1880s, particularly to fulfill the growing labor and financial requirements of the rice industries (Zarni and Brinham, 2017: 56).

During this period, the dominant political elites in Burma, along with the country's Buddhist nationalists, held strong anti-Indian sentiments. In the midst of the Great Depression in the 1930s, as numerous Burmese faced severe economic hardships and relied on Indian settlers, particularly Indian moneylenders, the upsurge of economic and cultural discontent had its roots among the Burmese elites (Chakravarty, 1971). Additionally, the growing farm and land ownership by migrants added fuel to the already-burning animosity against settlers. The thriving class of these migrants controlled the Burmese economy, society, and religion, pushing the Burmese nationalists to the bottom of the power pyramid. Interracial marriages between Muslim settlers' men and Burmese Buddhist women were also led to a fear of Muslim (British India) infiltration among the majority Buddhist community (Zarni and Brinham, 2017: 57). Since, Muslims have been viewed as different people, outside forces, and an existential threat to Buddhism as a religion, as well as to the Buddhist community as a whole. Thus, a feeling of "Otherness," discontent, and friction grew between the majority of Burmese Buddhists and the migrated ethnic groups, which resulted in racial riots against Muslims and Indians (Win, 2018: 256). The historical feeling of Indophobia, which had developed during the colonial era, subsequently manifested as Islamophobia in Myanmar.

The historical discrimination against Muslims in Myanmar is rooted in various significant events (Schonthal, 2016: 239). The political climate of insecurity and apprehension, triggered by the Rohingya's call for a distinct Muslim national area in 1947, extends further into Myanmar's post-independence era. During the 1947 partition of Bengal, Arakanese Muslim leaders, inspired by the religion-based "Two Nation Theory," pursued the dream of a separate Muslim area and approached prominent leaders from the Indian subcontinent for the inclusion of northern Arakan districts into East Pakistan (Ibrahim, 2017: 27). Even, in the post-independence period, several Muslims from the Arakan region petitioned the Constituent Assembly in Rangoon to include Buthidaung and Maungdaw in East Pakistan, but their efforts were strongly rejected. Since then, Myanmar's political elite and the majority of Burman Buddhists have been predisposed to label Muslims as a 'minority other' who are viewed as opposing Burma's independence and favoring separatism (Yeger, 1972: 112).

3.2. Regional and global dynamics

Within the power elite, especially among Burmese Buddhist nationalists, there is a belief that external forces with Muslim affiliations could manipulate the Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine state, using them as a tool to gain control in Myanmar and transform the predominantly Buddhist nation into a Muslim state (Anadolu Agency, 2020). Buddhists in Burma may fear that Bangladesh, a country with Muslim majority, might easily seize control of Myanmar's northern Rakhine state due to its strategic border proximity, historical ties and cultural affinities. A series of almost identical strategies in neighboring countries such as China, a Buddhist majority state uses the military in "re-education" camps where thousands of Uighurs Muslims have been detained for a long time and are subjected to severe military abuses and massive human rights violations. Under the pretense of reeducating the detainees, authorities devised the procedure with the intention of forcibly assimilating , not only seem to pursue anti-Muslim policies aimed at pushing certain groups out of their countries by depicting them as threats but also appear some level of apathy for Myanmar's anti-Muslim stance. A number of geostrategic forces that aim to reshape the regional equations of the border nations have also pushed the securitization of minority Muslim communities, most notably the Rohingya Muslim minority in the northern Rakhine state. This geopolitical dynamic appears to have enduring implications in perpetuating the process or psyche of 'Otherization' of the Muslim minority in Myanmar. It introduces significant obstacles to resolving the longstanding majority-minority conundrum, given the involvement of numerous players or stakeholders with conflicting strategic interests. Additionally, the way Muslims are portrayed in a worldwide context as the war on terror also influences Myanmar's dominant actors in constructing the perception of minority Muslims. Myanmar's anti-Muslim narratives persist across military and pseudo-democratic regimes, strategically framing insurgent Muslims as agents of global Muslim terrorist groups like the Islamic State and Al Qaeda (Schonthal, 2016: 241; Yegar, 1972: 110-112).

3.3. Intensifying Buddhist fundamentalism and nationalist propagations

In Myanmar, there are two Buddhist-dominated platforms which act for the promotion of Buddhism in Myanmar and disseminate Islamophobic narratives against the minority Muslims. These are the 969 movement and the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion, or ‘Ma Ba Tha’ in Burmese. The protection and propagation of Buddhist ideology and values is the ultimate focus of these Buddhist dominated nationalist organizations. Both platforms serve to exclude and condemn the minority Muslim population as the ‘other’ antagonist who constantly threatens Buddhist culture, history, and society as well as the sovereignty of the Buddhist state of Myanmar. The dominant anti-Muslim 969 platform backed by the Myanmar state, particularly by the Burmese political and military elite, has intimate connection with the recent anti-Muslim violence in 2012 and 2013. President Thein Sein referred to the 969 movement in public as a symbol of peace and demanded that Muslims, notably the Rohingyas, be ousted from the soil of Buddhist territory (Wade, 2013). Though substantial evidence of the 969 monks' direct involvement in these violent episodes has not been disclosed, the hate-filled messages and anti-Muslim speeches delivered by the 969 leaders in the public gatherings tactfully breeds Islamophobia among the grassroots Buddhist people. The prominent 969 leader Ashin Wirathu, who is named to as Burma's Buddhist Bin Laden for his hateful speeches and messages, prohibited his followers from doing trade with Muslim-owned businesses in order to protect Buddhist nationalism, which is under great threat from Muslim invaders (Kyaw, 2016; Azeem,

2017). In 2013, Wirathu deliver a speech in which he alleged, "buying goods from Muslim shops would increasingly makes 'them' economically solvent that will eventually destroy Buddhist race and religion. With a huge population force, these Muslims would over breed Buddhists soon, convert Buddhist women through marriages and drastically capture the high ranked political and non-political offices. They created a psyche among audience that once these 'evil' Muslims have control, 'they' will not allow 'us' to practice our religion. So, 'We' must be very careful. 'They' really hate 'us' and destroy 'our' religion" (Winn, 2013). Thus, the popular Buddhist monks spread self-constructed rumors and the colonial-era myths of 'we' versus 'they', and partial narratives about minority Muslims that has resulted in widespread Islamophobia across the country.

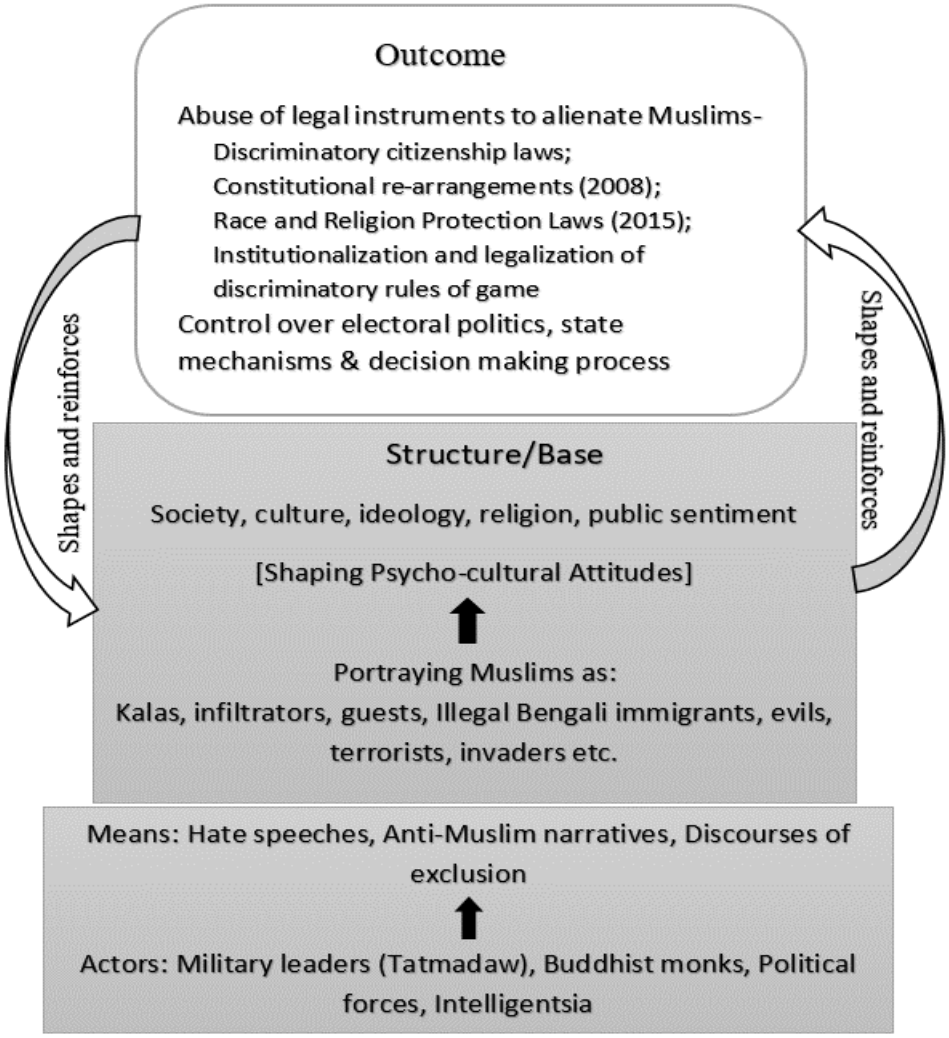
The Ma Ba Tha, most popularly known as the Organization for the Protection of Race or Religion, is another explicitly anti-Muslim organization run by a group of Buddhist monks who hold a high status among Burmese Buddhists. This platform, like the 969, is intensely determined to defend Buddhism and proactively sought to stop the expansion of Islam throughout Myanmar. By spreading anti-Muslim hate speeches, manipulating electronic and print media with self-fulfilling narratives, and utilizing written propaganda, this Buddhist-led Burmese nationalist organization has played a substantial role in the Otherization of Myanmar Muslims (Schonthal, 2016: 251). Initially, the Ma Ba Tha monks asserted that a specific religion posed a threat to Buddhism as an ideology and Buddhists as a race. Over time, they began to name out Islam and Muslims as an existential threat, especially at public gatherings, sermons, speeches, and other occasions. In fact, Ma Ba Tha spread anti-Muslim propaganda, implying that Islam is a violent ideology that empowers interracial marriages, in-conversion, and polygamy under the pretext that Muslim men convert Buddhist women to Islam forcibly, after which they reproduce more quickly than Buddhists and conspires to supplant the Buddhists with a rapid demographic growth. Even they widely spread the idea that Buddhists will eventually disappear as a dominant race and as a religion if these Muslim populations rise and the Islamic conspiracy are not checked (Kyaw, 2020).

3.4. Anti-Muslim narratives and exclusionary discourses

On the basis of the psycho-cultural views of the majority Buddhist population that developed over the years, the dominating Burmese elites in Myanmar have systematically constructed a variety of disparaging and conflicting cultural concepts about Muslims. Here, religion is one of the key forces in constructing exclusively 'layered' and 'selective' discourses of exclusion and historical interpretations based on religious myths, prioritizing (majority) 'our' control of the land versus (minority) 'their' invasion of the sovereignty (Yiftachel & Ghanem, 2004). Generally, derogatory ideas, terms, and myths about Muslims are being crafted, used, and propagated all over the nation in an effort to other the minority Muslim population, such as kalas, guests, illegal Bengali immigrants, and foreigners etc. These terminologies are purposefully devised by mainstream Buddhists at various religious events, political programs, official announcements or declarations, as well as in military training sessions, despite having severe negative connotations. The military juntas initiated a few training programs for government workers that are embedded with divisive anti-Muslim stereotypes and also made them mandatory for officials seeking promotion in their fields (Win, 2018). Additionally, government personnel are made aware of the potential risks that could come from the 'enemy others'—the Muslims—during the training sessions. This is how the military-backed successive governments of Myanmar proactively contribute to the formation of an anti-Muslim psyche among people of all classes, from elite to grassroots people, especially the

vast majority of the Burmese people who are Buddhist. After Myanmar's much awaited political transition from military rule to political liberalization, dominant actors of Myanmar including religious, military, political and intellectual persuaded an agenda of reinforcing anti-Muslim propaganda aimed at restricting the civil and political rights of minority Muslims censoring privately own media freedoms (Lee, 2016).

Figure 1: Correlation of elites' agenda, psycho-cultural settings and state's legal mechanisms



In the 2010 afterwards, both high-ranking officials and grassroots Buddhist communities in Myanmar have utilized democratic platforms, including state-owned uncensored media, public gatherings, and freedom of expression, to endorse and disseminate Islamophobia and exclusionary anti-Muslim discourses. Through both online and offline media, these discourses gained widespread acceptance and normalization. Fueled by falsified rumors propagated by the general Buddhist public on various social media platforms like Facebook, Messenger, Twitter, Muslims

are misleadingly portrayed as violent extremists and foreign invaders, intensifying the anti-Muslim sentiment. As a result, the integration of state-led initiatives and religious organizations in this domain hastens the marginalization of Muslims in Myanmar. In the present age of Myanmar's "superficial democratization" (Zakaria, 1997), political liberalization appears as a curse for Muslim ethnic groups in the pretext of which Burmese elites and the general public alienate Muslims and make 'cultural personhood' downgraded (Kyaw, 2015). In this way, the elites intended to influence the psycho-cultural sentiments of the general population toward the Muslim minority.

In effect, the shift from hate-filled speeches to anti-Muslim violence in Rakhine State and the beyond is not only an outcome of high politics centering ethnicity and religion but also is considered as an essential part of highly complex psycho-social processes (Howe, 2018:7) that contributes on constructing identity on purpose. In the townships of Buthidaung, Maungdaw, and Rathedaung, which have a majority of Muslims, at least 392 villages and towns were seriously affected between August 2017 and March 2018, and 178 villages were completely destroyed, according to UNOSAT's analysis of satellite imagery. Besides, the military seized and bulldozed hundreds of Rohingya villages, and launched construction projects including the security force bases.

Table 1: Number of Affected Villages and Towns (2017-2018)

Townships	Number of villages (Total)	Affected villages & towns	Destroyed structures	More than 50% destroyed	Completely wiped-out villages
Buthidaung	371	96	3,500	18	7
Maungdaw	399	277	31,300	62	156
Rathedaung	223	19	2,900	-	15
Total	993	392	37,700	80	178

Source: UNOSAT, 2018:7

3.5. State-sponsored legal mechanisms

The constitutions of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (1947, 1974 and 2008) predominantly preserve several provisions for the equality of all citizens regardless of race, religion and ethnicity. The current constitution, adopted in 2008 has inserted a provision in its Section 348 that declares "the Union shall not discriminate any citizen of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, based on race, birth, religion, official position, status, culture, sex and wealth". In addition, Section 347 of the constitution also asserts, "the Union shall guarantee any person to enjoy equal rights before the law and shall equally provide legal protection". Despite these formal guarantees of equal rights and legal protection has been enshrined in the constitutional framework of Myanmar, 'equality' in true sense has repeatedly stumbled throughout its political history, particularly since its independence. Even though Prime Minister U Nu acknowledged that the Muslim ethnic group 'Rohingya' shared an equal status with the Kachin, Karen, Mon, and Rakhine peoples (Ibrahim, 2017), the constitutional recognition of Buddhism's special position and the declaration of Buddhism as the state religion accelerated formalizing the 'othering' status of minority Muslims. According to Section 21(1) of the 1948's constitution, "the state recognizes

the special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the majority of the citizens of the Union" (Lee, 2016).

In 1970s, under the leadership of military-backed Ne Win government, a nationalist project to design a new citizenship law has been initiated across the country declaring that, the formerly adopted Union Citizenship Acts, 1948 became outdated. The Ne Win-led military dictatorship promulgated an exclusionary citizenship law in 1982 that completely faded away the notion of egalitarianism in Myanmar. The Union of Burma's constitution and previously adopted citizenship laws did not specify how the status of a community's indigenous races, or 'taing-yin-tha' in Burmese, would be determined. However, the 1982 citizenship law gave the Council of State exclusive authority to determine whether a community is an indigenous race or not. The recently introduced citizenship law divided citizenship into three categories: citizen (citizenship by birth); associate citizen (non-indigenous races that appealed for citizenship under the former Union Citizenship Act); and naturalized citizen (non-indigenous races that had resided in Myanmar prior to 1948 but did not apply for citizenship under the former Union Citizenship Act) (Ahmed, 2010; Kyaw, 2015). Section 3 of the 1982's citizenship law asserted that 'nationals' are those who belong to Burmese races such as Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Burman, Mon, Rakhine or Shan and to such racial groups who have settled in any of the territories included within the State as their permanent home from a period anterior to 1823 (Burma Citizenship Law, 15 October 1982). It is intriguing that the majority of 'nationals' included by the citizenship act are Buddhists, whereas many other Muslim ethnic groups have been tactfully kept out of this legislation. Several Muslim ethnic groups, including the Rohingya, the Panthay, and the Malay, were denied citizenship, making them stateless foreigners. Additionally, Section 22 of the 1982 Citizenship Law stated that "if citizenship of the respective classes is repealed or rejected for once, they may never re-appeal for their citizenship."

For the purpose of separating Muslims from the dominant Buddhist ethnic identities, the authoritative state actors have introduced a number of other exclusionary laws and restrictions aside from citizenship laws. Due to the anti-Muslim prejudice, successive governments established a number of exclusionary rules of the game, particularly for people who are Muslims by ethnicity and religion, in the recruiting of high-ranking government positions. These restrictions were extremely strict but deliberately informal. People from Burmese Buddhist races who are regarded as the real sons of Myanmar are given preference in the government's services, including the military and other state apparatuses, in this country. The national curriculum of educational institutions also gives Buddhism a special treatment. President Thein Sein's government enacted four anti-Muslim laws collectively known as 'Race and Religion Protection Laws' in response to monastic pressure from the 969 and Ma Ba Tha Buddhist monks. These include the Religious Conversion Law, Interfaith Marriage Law, Population Control Law, and Monogamy Law.

In accordance with the Religious Conversion Law, a person intending to convert their religion must seek permission from the Religious Conversion Scrutinizing and Registration Board in their township and s/he has to undergo through a rigorous examination by that body. The citizen compelled to face an in-depth interview related to that particular religious code of conduct

regarding marriage, divorce, property and inheritance practices. If the board considers the citizen worthy for conversion, it will issue a certificate without which religious conversion will be considered as punishable act in Myanmar (Rahman and Zeldin, 2015). The universal rights to freedom of expression, conscience, and religion, as well as the freedom to adopt a faith with one's own free will and without extraneous intrusion, are all violated by this law. Furthermore, Myanmar's discriminatory Interfaith Marriage Law, which stipulates that "any interfaith marriage requires permission from the township registrar", was introduced solely to delay the marriage of a Buddhist woman and a non-Buddhist man and such a couple wanting to get married must be submitted an application to the registrar and the concerned authority will post it publicly for fourteen days (International Crisis Group, 2017). According to the law, they will not be allowed to get married and the entire matter will be brought before the court if there is any objection to the marriage. In addition, the non-Buddhist man must not disgrace Buddhism by his activities; if he attempts to insult Buddhism or violates the law, he will be punished. Due to the fact that this rule only applies to Buddhist women and non-Buddhist men, it is viewed as a contentious and deceptive legal arrangement which purposefully set in favor of a particular group- the majority Buddhist people to serve the goal of establishing a Buddhist polity excluding the ethnic minority Muslims. Another law, the Population Control Law, is specifically targeted at the Muslim-dominated northern Rakhine state, where the previously implemented Two Child Policy was reinforced in order to control the Muslim minority population. It is noteworthy that the controversial birth control policy, which targets minority ethnic Muslim populations, has been implemented since 2005 in Rakhine state's Maungdaw and Buthidaung provinces, where 95% of the population is Muslim (The Guardian, 2013). The Monogamy Law has also been passed, targeting the minority Muslim population, some of whom engage in polygamy. It states that polygamy is strictly prohibited and will be viewed as a criminal offense.

All these four laws predominantly contradict with the constitutional guarantees of equality and freedom, including freedom from discrimination on the basis of religious belief (Lee, 2016: 203). These legal provisions also discriminate against the politically vulnerable and marginalized Muslim ethnic minority people. By enacting such laws, Myanmar's state actors have consciously disregarded the rights of the minority to freedom of religion, birth, marriage, and conversion, exacerbating the already-present tensions between Buddhists and Muslims and fostering Muslim-phobia. In addition, to get electoral triumph and gain widespread popularity among the majority Buddhist population who are regarded as 'vote bank', Thein Sein administration and the fellow Burmese Buddhist political and religious elites unconditionally supported these discriminatory laws making the ethnic minority Muslims as 'fearsome other'. These regressive Race and Religion Protection Laws have been set to legitimize anti-Muslim sentiment through a legal framework as well as to legalize systematic discrimination (Caster, 2015). Although Article 364 of the Myanmar Constitution explicitly prohibits the use of religion for political purposes and Article 348 states that "the Union shall not discriminate any citizen of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, based on race, birth, religion, official position, status, culture, sex and wealth," the political, military, and religious elites hardly show little respect for the constitution of the nation. Additionally, Articles 350, 351, 352, and 368 states about equal rights for men and women, equal opportunity, and nondiscrimination (United Nations, 2015) which also often curtail via these Race and Religion Protection Laws. These discriminatory and illiberal laws are also highly incompatible with existing international laws, norms, and treaties. It gravely violates its obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of

All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), despite having ratified the former in 1997.

4. Conclusions

Myanmar serves as an example of how a culturally diverse society, under successive ethnocratic regimes, has been progressively fragmented by deep-rooted discrimination and violence driven by ethnic and religious divisions. The securitization of the Rohingya Muslims reveals a meticulously orchestrated process of "Otherization" that intersects political, religious, and socio-economic domains. Dominant actors, including political elites, military juntas, Buddhist monks, and intellectuals, strategically constructed and propagated exclusionary narratives to consolidate power and perpetuate marginalization. These narratives were not merely reactive but deliberately crafted to justify exclusion and solidify the dominance of a singular ethno-religious identity. Central to these exclusionary narratives was the portrayal of the Rohingya as the fearsome "Other" and an existential threat to Myanmar's sovereignty and Buddhist identity. This framing relied heavily on historical reinterpretations, often rooted in religious myths and nationalist propaganda, which labeled the Rohingya as historical infiltrators from neighboring regions. By attributing control of economic, social, and political spheres to this minority group, the dominant actors sowed deep-seated fear and hostility within the Buddhist majority.

The findings highlight a multi-layered securitization process. First, authoritative figures systematically labeled the Rohingya as illegal migrants and existential threats, leveraging speech acts to embed these ideas into the public consciousness. This labeling was not confined to rhetoric; it permeated legal, educational, and administrative systems. Second, the normalization of anti-Rohingya sentiment was achieved through repeated derogatory language, dramatic public declarations, and nationalist propaganda, which collectively dehumanized the minority group. Over time, this discourse justified institutionalized exclusion, such as redesigning educational curricula to exclude the Rohingya's historical presence, administrative rearrangements that marginalized them, and legal measures like the 1982 Citizenship Law that effectively rendered them stateless. Third, the institutionalization of exclusionary frameworks provided a veneer of legitimacy for the use of coercive measures. These included restrictions on movement, denial of basic rights, and the systematic implementation of violence and displacement. This stage was marked by military operations and pogroms that not only uprooted the Rohingya but also obliterated their cultural and physical presence from Myanmar. Fourth, these actions served broader political, economic, and religious agendas, enabling dominant actors to consolidate power, redirect public discontent, and unify the Buddhist majority under a common, constructed adversary. The findings underscore the systematic and deeply institutionalized nature of this securitization process. Religion, particularly the propagation of Buddhist nationalism, emerged as a central force in constructing exclusionary discourses. By weaving religious myths and historical reinterpretations into national narratives, dominant actors fostered a selective and layered understanding of identity that excluded minorities while amplifying the perceived threat they posed. The process was not only reactive to historical tensions but also proactive, systematically embedding discriminatory practices across legal, social, and political structures to sustain their marginalization and exclusion. A key recommendation from this study is to address the deeply entrenched exclusionary frameworks through international intervention and domestic reforms.

Efforts must focus on dismantling discriminatory legal structures, particularly the 1982 Citizenship Law, and replacing them with inclusive policies that recognize and protect minority rights. Additionally, education reforms should counteract divisive narratives by promoting accurate, inclusive historical accounts and fostering interfaith understanding. Regional and global collaboration is essential to ensure accountability for human rights violations and to develop sustainable solutions for the safe repatriation and reintegration of displaced populations. Finally, countering securitization narratives through media, civil society engagement, and international advocacy remains critical to fostering a pluralistic and inclusive Myanmar.

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