

Hidden Truths of the Invisible: The Experiences of Double Minorities in Northern Rakhine State during Violent Conflict

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Abstract

In 2012, communal conflicts arose between Muslims and Buddhists in northern Rakhine, later causing one of the world's biggest humanitarian crises of 2017. Since the very beginning of the conflict, the Myanmar military (the Tatmadaw) and the Rakhine ethnic group became the perpetrators of the conflict on the pages of international reports, while the Rohingya ethnic group were described as Muslim extremists and terrorists in local reports. Among these polarized reports focusing on only the primary conflict actors, the situation of other minority ethnic groups directly experiencing the violent conflict has remained invisible, creating a huge gap of knowledge that is necessary to paint a complete picture of the situation on the ground. For this reason, this study investigated the situation of ethnic double minorities during the

six-year-long violent communal conflict in northern Rakhine through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The main questions of this investigation regarded: 1) the invisibility of the double minorities; 2) their experiences as a targeted group during the conflict; 3) their security during the conflict; 4) assessment of their citizenship rights, and; 5) their humanitarian assessment after the conflict. The findings showed that these minority groups have a potential to initiate the reconciliation and peace-building process in Rakhine State, as they understand both sides of the conflicts through their experiences. Furthermore, the findings also suggested that limitations and discrimination faced by these minorities in every sector of their daily lives in this country should be eliminated in order to increase their participation in the peace-building process.

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Introduction

Rakhine State is one of the poorest and least developed states in Myanmar, with the lowest labor force participation rate and the highest unemployment rate in the country. While the state performs poorly on most social development indicators such as access to primary education, healthcare, clean water and sanitation, it also has to face yearly natural hazards like storms and floods (United Nations Children's Fund, 2015). On top of that, the socio-economic status of Rakhine State has been getting even worse since the outbreak of inter-communal conflicts in 2012, which escalated into an armed conflict between a Muslim rebel group later known as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the Myanmar government in October 2016. Thousands of people have been displaced from their homes, suffering from food insecurity, interrupted livelihoods and education as well as a lack of access to markets (United Nations Children's Fund, 2015). In August 2017, the armed conflict reached a climax after ARSA's second attack and a huge military mission by the Tatmadaw, which led to one of the biggest refugee crises of 2017. The report of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State (2017; known as the Kofi Annan Commission) affirmed that Rakhine State's poverty rate was 78%, almost double the national rate.

According to a brief search through both local and international media websites, the title of the communal conflict in Rakhine State had gradually transformed from a Buddhist-Muslim conflict in 2012 into a more specific conflict between Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims after 2014 (Htet Lynn Oo, Htoo Htet Naing, Kyaw Zin Lin, Myo Myo Kyaw, Saw Mar Gay Htoo, & Thura Aung, 2018). Then, the source of the conflict was not only the religious diversity in the state, but also the right to self-identification of the Rohingya ethnic group. In line with this, most international reports have portrayed the military and Rakhine people as the perpetrators and the Rohingya as the victims, recommending granting citizenship rights to the Rohingya (e.g. Fortify Rights, 2018). In contrast, local reports have presented only the Rakhine ethnics as the victims of the inter-communal conflicts (Htet Lynn Oo et al., 2018). Yet, what both sides of these polarized reports have excluded are the voices and perspectives of other minority conflict actors in the region. As a consequence, unfortunately, the situation of these grassroots level stakeholders and their ideas related

to how they would like to solve the conflict have been forgotten in the Rakhine conflict analysis presented in previous studies.

Double Minorities or Minorities within Minorities

Inside an already multi-ethnic country, Rakhine State is in fact composed of seven official ethnic groups, known as Rakhine, Mro and Khami or Mrokhimi¹, Thet, Daing-Net, Mramagyi, and Kaman. Since the Rakhine are already regarded as one of the minority groups of Myanmar, the other groups living in Rakhine State are typically overlooked in studies on ethnic minorities². Therefore, in this study, they will be referred to as *double minorities*; minority ethnic groups that are parts of a bigger minority ethnic group. Typically, the term double minority refers to a subset of minorities such as sexual minorities, women, and other lower social classes, who are embedded in the officially recognized minorities' category (Das, 2009). According to Beeri and Saad (2014), minorities within minorities are groups who identify themselves separately from a minority population based on their ethnicity, nationality, or religious belief.

Even though the double minorities of Rakhine State have not been described nearly as much as those who are commonly seen as the primary actors of the conflict, there is some evidence pointing to the fact that these minority groups have been victimized during the six-year-long communal conflict. Specifically, one study on the Kaman and Mramagyi showed that these ethnic groups were actually targeted (Myanmar Information Management Unit, 2015). In spite of this, even a major governmental organization such as Union Enterprise for Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement and Development in Rakhine (UEHRD) does not recognize the Kaman and Mramagyi as victims of violent communal conflicts nor does it include them in its resettlement and development projects (UEHRD, 2018). Moreover, another report found that Mro have negative feelings towards the majority Rakhine and the government administration, based on their experiences in the sectors of governance, resource sharing, livelihoods, public services such as healthcare, education, and transportation, since they have been discriminated against (Nyein Chan Aung, 2018). The

same report also mentions that the local government departments and organizations are mostly dominated by the Rakhine majority and Burmese.

Based on the above, this paper argues that neither governmental organizations such as UEHRD nor international organizations have been able to initiate an effective reconciliation in conflicted Rakhine State, because they have not considered the existing situation of these neglected minority groups. According to a paper titled

Minority Rights: The Key to Conflict Prevention (Baldwin, Chapman, & Gray, 2007), it is crucial to ensure fully inclusive participation of minority groups when it comes to conflict prevention. Even after a conflict has occurred, the recognition of knowledge and participation of minorities is critical in peace-building and conflict transformation efforts. Hence, in order to fill this gap, this research will explore more effective and inclusive conflict resolution strategies with respect to the conflict in Rakhine State and the ways to overcome challenges faced by its double minorities.

Methodology

Qualitative methodology was used in this study, because the study's aim was to get an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the double minorities during the conflicts in northern Rakhine. Furthermore, the region still had ongoing armed conflict and was not stable enough for collecting a sufficient number of participants necessary for quantitative or mixed-method research. In order to get a general understanding of the situation of double minorities during the communal conflicts, the researchers met with a young Kaman man who had left his home for Yangon because of the conflict as well as went on a networking trip in four townships of northern Rakhine before the actual data collection. The local context and conversations helped the researchers to identify questions that would be suitable to ask the participants without making them feel unsafe or uncomfortable.

Both individual interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were used in this study, because some participants felt insecure to talk in front of other people, while other participants could not recall their memories without the help of their neighbors. As the stories of the participants were expected to be different according to their respective region and ethnicity, the interviews and FGD guides were semi-structured in order to allow for follow-up questions. The guides included 20 questions in total, organized under five main questions: 1) What are the experiences of local double minorities during the communal conflict? 2) What do they think about the ways the local authorities treated them during the conflict? 3) How did they feel during the conflict? 4) How do they see the rehabilitation process of the government and other organizations? 5) What are their expectations when it comes to the future of their region?

Sample and Sampling

The research participants were selected based on the following criteria: 1) members of the Mro, Khami (or Mrokhimi), Thet, Mramagyi, Daing-Net, Kaman, or Hindu³ ethnic groups who had been directly or indirectly affected by the conflicts in northern Rakhine; 2) active community leaders or social workers of the targeted groups who have broad knowledge about what had been happening throughout the regions, and; 3) community members who have personal experience of the conflicts but are rarely accessible to international or national media. A snowball sampling tactic was employed to find more participants with the help of the existing participants. In the end, a total amount of seven people was interviewed individually and eight people were involved in two FGDs. Each interview and focus group discussion took around 1.5 hours on average. The data collection took place in five regions, including two townships and four villages in northern Rakhine, during January 2019. The interviews were arranged at the homes of the participants, as the conversations were too sensitive to have in public spaces. For the FGDs, these were conducted at community centers, where most active people easily meet and discuss community affairs. Due to the escalating armed conflict in the region, the Thet ethnic group could not be included in the sample, and instead, a Hindu participant agreed to participate.

Verbal informed consent was used in this study instead of a written form because the researchers believed that it may make the participants uncomfortable if they were told to sign a document that is related to very sensitive issues. In the verbal agreement, the researchers promised to keep the profiles of the participants and the locations of the data collection confidential as well as to destroy all data and records after publication.

Findings and Discussion

The results of this study found that the experiences of minorities in northern Rakhine during the conflicts fell under six main themes: 1) their relationship with Muslims, Rakhines and other ethnic groups in northern Rakhine; 2) the impacts of the conflicts on them and their area; 3) their perceptions of the conflict actors and root causes; 4) their perceptions of the Tatmadaw and the government; 5) the assessment of human rights in their regions, and; 6) their perception of the government's rehabilitation and reconciliation process.

Minorities' Relationships with Muslims and Rakhines

The relationships between the double minority groups, Muslims, and Rakhines depended on the regions they live in, the ethnicities they belong to, and on whether specific conflicts affected them directly or not. Before the 2012 communal conflict, most of the participants agreed on the fact that a relatively better relationship had existed: "We always visited their [both Muslim and Rakhine] villages, slept there at nights, and they also always visited us", said Mro participant P 2. Furthermore, besides a social relationship, there was also a better business and trading relationship. According to Mramagyi participant P 3, the two different communities (Mramagyi and Muslims) were supportive of each other in market places, in forests when cutting wood, in the rivers and fisheries and in other such local businesses. However, the results showed that during the 2012 communal conflict, some Mramagyi became directly involved in the conflict on the side of the Rakhines, while other members of the same ethnic group in a different area were able to keep the peace with both Rakhines and Muslims. On the other hand, the Kaman became direct victims of the conflict, because they are Muslim and were regarded to be on the same side as the Rohingya Muslims. As soon as the riots had been stopped, the government separated Muslims and non-Muslims by force into different places.

The relationships between the other ethnic groups and the Muslim groups became totally broken when the 2016-2017 conflicts erupted. As a result of the violent activities of ARSA, a lot of non-Muslim ethnic people did not trust the local Muslims anymore. At the same time,

the relationships between the double minorities and the Rakhines worsened as well. P 1 and P 4 both agreed that the Mramagyi were discriminated against in internally displaced people camps, where the Rakhines did not give them a place to stay or a bed to sleep on: "They [Rakhines] hate us. They even called us 'Mrama dogs'" (P 4). According to these results, it can be concluded that the relationships between the double minorities and Muslims were not broken by their own doing; in several areas, they were separated by force through the government's conflict prevention plans. Moreover, a few successful stories of preventing direct violence during the 2012 communal conflict prove a positive attitude of some minorities towards Muslims. Most of the participants did not see Muslims as their enemies; moreover, they expressed that Muslim communities were economically essential for them. On the other hand, some of the participants were afraid of Muslims, because they thought Muslims were going to seek revenge against Rakhines someday and did not want to be confused for Rakhines. In brief, the participants' fear of both Muslims and Rakhines became very high after the conflicts; however, they still wanted to rebuild positive relationships with those two conflicting groups.

Impacts of the 2012 and 2016-2017 Conflicts

Both directly and indirectly affected regions of northern Rakhine suffered negative impacts of the conflicts. The results of this study showed that it was mainly people's livelihoods and mental health that were affected, the severity of the wounds depending on whether the participants witnessed violence or not and whether they were targeted in the conflicts or not. Of all participants of this research, one participant was directly involved in the 2012 communal conflict and three participants directly witnessed the 2016-2017 conflicts in their respective areas. Mramagyi participant P 1 was severely affected by the violent acts that he had committed: "According to the teaching of Buddha, we should sympathize with and help the innocent Muslims. Honestly, I am afraid of hell. But, it had been already done for the sake of nationalism". In the 2016-2017 conflicts, Hindu participant P 5 and Mramagyi participants P 3 and P 4 witnessed extremely violent situations. As a consequence, P 4 expressed that

she could not concentrate on any work and did not have any motivation to start a business, because the conflict was never-ending and the community always had to be alert to the sounds of bombs.

According to Mro participant P 2, the broken relationship between Muslims and other ethnic groups after the 2012 communal conflict had a huge impact on the local economy: "There were no employees to hire as farmers anymore. The farmers had to go to the townships just to sell their agricultural products as the traders could not reach their villages". Kaman participant F 1.2 said, "During 2012, it was really difficult for us. We could not go to the bazaar. We could not sell anything. We could make our livelihood just around this village". Moreover, all cultivated lands in the village became occupied by the Tatmadaw due to security reasons. F 1.3 stated that all Kaman businesses moved to Yangon as there was nothing left to do in Rakhine State after the 2012 communal conflict. Sadly, these negative impacts got even worse after the 2016-2017 conflicts: "If something [conflict] happened, the transportation was shut down. Then, it became more and more difficult for our livelihoods", said Hindu participant P 5.

Hence, the results presented in this section show that the livelihoods of the people in conflict-affected regions were destroyed both by the conflicts and the security activities of the central government and the Tatmadaw after the conflicts. Instead of reconciling the conflicting communities after the direct violence had ceased, the conflicting groups were separated by force into different places and transportation within the state became very limited, especially for Muslims, due to the so-called security concerns. As a consequence, most of the participants mentioned that the labor market and local businesses declined as almost the whole Muslim population could not visit their localities. In regard to the insecure feelings and traumas, all participants believed that the conflicts were not over yet and feared the re-occurrence of direct violence between Muslims and Rakhines.

Perceptions of the Conflict Actors and Root Causes

Most of the participants thought that their ethnic groups were just victims of conflicts that happened between two

majority groups: Rakhine and Rohingya Muslims. At the same time, it seems that the participants perceived the main conflict actors of 2012 to have been different from the ones of 2016-2017: While they mentioned that the ones who had destroyed and burnt down the houses in 2012 were Rakhine, they stated that the 2016-2017 conflicts started only when ARSA began fighting against the Myanmar military, and they strongly believed that ARSA was the main perpetrator. An obvious example of this was the fact that 103 Hindus were brutally killed by ARSA, and some Mros and Mramargyis were also murdered. "Those Bengalis hate Buddhist people and they want to conquer Rakhine State. That is why they tried to kill us", said Mramagyi participant P 4. However, there were also some examples of good relationships and coordination between Muslims and non-Muslims during the conflicts in order to protect their regions from attack. These groups kept community guards mixed from both communities during the conflict until everyone had to flee. "Actually, innocent civilians from different communities, Rakhine, Mro, Muslims or whoever, that did not have any interest in or understanding of any political profit, always have to be the victims", said Mro participant P 7.

Some participants believed that the conflicts were happening due to political intentions of some groups. For instance, the participants mentioned that the human rights movement of Rohingya became noticeable around the world after the conflicts, and that the international community was putting pressure on the Myanmar government to accept the citizenship of the Rohingya. At the same time, there were some groups who were happy to see Rohingya flee away from Rakhine, wishing they would never come back. Some thought that the conflict had happened because Rakhine people were getting jealous of the Muslim communities and began to worry about the future of their state, because they thought the Muslim population had grown too much and their business was better than Rakhines'. On the other hand, some stated that the Rohingya want to conquer northern Rakhine and have their own territory. Among these conflicting views, one participant considered the main reason of the conflict to be the democratic transition. "The root cause that created these conflicts was democracy. People just thought democracy is about asking what they want", mentioned Daing-Net participant P 6. To sum up, according to this study, some

ethnic groups see the conflicts as religious and racial ones, while some groups think the conflicts happened intentionally for political purposes.

Perceptions of the Tatmadaw and the Government

The participants in this study had different opinions on the Tatmadaw and the government as well as on how these handled the conflict, possibly because different ethnic groups had experienced different extents of protection and communication from the government during the conflicts. For instance, the Hindu participant that had suffered direct violence by ARSA mentioned that the military had taken on an essential role in providing security and stability for the region. In addition, some participants clearly stated that the Tatmadaw had had nothing to do with these violent occurrences; they had just been doing territory clearance operations to protect people from terrorists, even providing medical care to the ones who had been injured and sending them to a safe place while the fighting between the Tatmadaw and ARSA was happening. However, there were also some other thoughts on the role of the government and military during the conflict. “No protection was provided by the Tatmadaw during the conflict. We had to struggle by ourselves”, said Mramagyi participant P 3. Some participants mentioned that they felt unsafe and insecure when seeing the Tatmadaw in their region:

“The behavior of the military is different based on whether information can be accessed in the region or not. Sometimes, in very rural areas, they behave unusually, searching for things in innocent civilians’ houses. We do not know what they are searching for. But, everyone from both communities feels unsafe about them holding guns right in front of them, although what they are meant for is giving security to the people”, said Mro participant P 7.

On the other hand, there were some opinions that the Tatmadaw was not responsible for what happened, and only the government was. “The military can do nothing to prevent the conflict until the martial law is released. They are not the ones who govern the region”, said P 1. The distrust in the rule of law by the government played

a big role in the participants’ memories. “I went to the Human Rights Commission located in Yangon to request an investigation of a Mramagyi’s death. No one paid attention to us. They said they were busy with meetings”, Mramagyi participant P 1 said. By looking at these facts, the role of the Tatmadaw in the northern Rakhine and its influence on the local people is undeniable. It is a reminder to everyone who is interested in solving the northern Rakhine conflict to think about whether portraying the Tatmadaw as the main perpetrator that needs to be punished, without recognizing what the other sides had done, can really help bring peace. Based on the findings of this study, we can also assume that even though the people would like to rely on government institutions for justice and the rule of law, the government still cannot meet the demands of civilians. Furthermore, it was found that the government authorities were not responsive enough when the conflict started to happen and spread through the region.

Assessment of Fundamental Human Rights

Regarding the exercise of civil and political rights, some participants believed that the conflict made it neither worse nor better. “Nothing changes. We still need to offer bribes if we want to get National Registration Cards (NRCs)”, said Mro participant P 7. According to the Mramagyi participant P 3, none of the people in his village had had NRCs before 2015: “It was in 2007. He [the immigration officer] said we were Kalars and we would not get NRCs”. Hindus have also been facing the same situation for a long time. Hindu participant P 5 said, “Only five members of my family have got NRCs, but my eldest son, middle son and my wife still have not gotten it yet”. In contrast, the limitations to social rights have increased for the Kaman. After the 2012 communal conflict, the Kaman have been discriminated against by government institutions due to security reasons, as their villages became regarded as conflict zones. Kaman participants F 1.1, F 1.2, and F 1.3 mentioned that they cannot access public healthcare to the same extent as Rakhines because they are Muslim. The situation in the education sector is similar: “It is not easy to reach even Grade 8 and 9. They are intentionally making us uneducated. We are not allowed to study at schools in townships. That is discrimination”, said F 1.1. Furthermore, Kaman students

cannot access higher education, as most of them do not have NRCs and cannot travel to Yangon or even different townships in Rakhine State.

According to our research, Muslims and Hindus are always being suspected and assumed terrorists by the authorities. They often experience checks by the authorities because of their appearance. Hindu participant P 5 expressed that “I feel so sad about that. It has been happening for a long time; since the previous regime. We always have to get out of the bus to be investigated at the highway checkpoints”. In the political sector, Mro participant P 7 thought they were being marginalized: “The opinions of ethnic groups that do not have armed organizations are usually neglected”. Furthermore, some Mro participants felt that they were being discriminated for being Christian, especially regarding job opportunities. The participants also mentioned that they did not have the same status as Rakhines in doing business because of the abusive behaviors of the Rakhine majority. “Nobody in our village is doing business today. We do not dare to go out from our region to do business with Rakhines. We are afraid of them”, said Mro participant F 2.3. All in all, this study found that the double minorities in northern Rakhine had faced discrimination and the lack of human rights even before the conflicts. They face many challenges and limitations in their daily lives, being discriminated against in several sectors by both the majority ethnic group and the government institutions.

Perceptions of the Government’s Rehabilitation Process

This study found that the people who lost their houses and land during the conflicts of 2012, 2016, and 2017 have still not been rehabilitated. Mostly, the participants mentioned that they had received humanitarian aid, such as basic food and temporary shelters provided by the government, non-governmental organizations, and individuals. However, participants from all ethnic groups agreed that what they needed was not only aid:

“It is good that we get humanitarian aid. But, no one can provide for our lives in the long-term or

take responsibility for our children’s education. What we need is not only the aid, but also ways to survive in the future without the aid”, said Mramargyi participant P 3.

The study clearly identified concerns about the future, with the participants repeatedly mentioning that creating job opportunities, providing agricultural technologies, effective transportation, and creating markets for local products is urgently needed in their areas. At the same time, the findings showed that the different ethnic groups have been part of separate processes. For example, while the Hindu, Kaman, and Rohingya groups are still living in camps, Mramargyi are already living in new buildings in their original area, supported by the government. Based on these diverse situations, it seems that the members of the different communities do not have trust in the rehabilitation process, since it is creating even more division between them. On the other hand, some participants thought that conflict would happen again since, in their opinion, the Rohingya people want to conquer northern Rakhine for their own territory.

The study discovered that members of these different communities were willing to talk about why conflicts had happened, and negotiate with each other for the future of their communities. In addition, most participants thought that there could be no solution to past conflicts if the main conflict actors did not talk to each other, and they strongly believed that the government should initiate this dialogue. Furthermore, the participants thought future conflict could be prevented if everyone living in the region had equal access to education and livelihoods: “If someone becomes educated, and has the right to work as a teacher using that education, he or she will prevent other members of their community from committing violence as they already possess guaranteed stability to live peacefully”, mentioned Hindu participant P 5. This study confirmed what most previous reports about Rakhine State had found: That all communities suffer from poverty, poor social services, and a scarcity of livelihood opportunities. Furthermore, this research found that these factors were perceived as one of the causes of the conflicts, and hence needed to be considered to prevent conflicts from re-emerging.

Conclusion and Recommendations

To summarize the study's key findings, the double minorities are not only affected by the conflicts between Rakhines and Muslims, but also suppressed through institutionalized discrimination by government institutions and through social discrimination by the Rakhine majority group. Based on this, the barriers to their participation in the peace-building and reconciliation process in northern Rakhine are considerable. At the same time, this study found that the double minorities represent potential resources for peace-building, because they do not stand on the opposite sides of the conflicting communities; instead, they are the people on the ground that understand both sides of the conflict well. Therefore, we recommend the following:

- 1/ The laws restricting the basic human rights of these minorities, such as the right to freedom of movement, the right to education and healthcare, the right to free choice of employment (both in private and public institutions), and the right to equal protection of the law, should be repealed as soon as possible
- 2/ The rehabilitation process needs to become more effective than in the past six years, which could be done by the government and policy-makers including grassroots participation in the current peace process of the country.
- 3/ Peace-builders working for the ongoing reconciliation process in northern Rakhine should offer the double minorities sufficient space, and that by: i) implementing projects where the voices of double minorities can be raised up, ii) creating platforms where double minorities can engage not only with the government but also with both Rakhine and Rohingya communities when it comes to violent conflict prevention plans, and iii) allowing them to represent their ethnic groups in the ongoing national reconciliation process. This way, effective results for the future of northern Rakhine could be reached.

Endnotes

1. The Myanmar government census (Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population, 2014) defines Mro and Khami as different ethnic groups, but some members of these ethnic groups claim that Mro and Khami are the same ethnic group and believe they should be identified as Mrokhimi.
2. The obvious exception is the Rohingya ethnic group that has received a lot of attention since 2012, the year in which the communal conflict started.
3. On National Registration Cards, these people are identified as "Hindu", while this group is not included among the 135 official ethnic groups of Myanmar.

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