

ROHINGYA, A STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION AS “INDIGENOUS”

“Those, who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”

-Philosopher George Santayana-

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ABSTRACT

Rohingya first came to Arakan State, Burma (Myanmar) between the eighth and ninth centuries. They are a Muslim minority ethnic group who have been struggling for their indigenous identity. Their arrival in Arakan correlated with the British colonialism and Japanese colonialism (1942-1945) which played a crucial role in initiating the conflicts between Muslims and Buddhists. In consideration of various definitions, Rohingya are obviously defined indigenous because they have lived in a specific territorial for long with their own language, culture and religion. This paper aims to argue that the Rohingya issue should be seen as indigenous group. To address the issue, we use a qualitative approach relying on the available secondary sources by giving historical background, theoretical framework and discussing on inter-religious conflict issue, a form of struggle for indigenous recognition. It is found that despite qualifying the standards to be admitted as indigenous, the Rohingya have been still refused to be minority ethnic group, even not accepted to be legal citizen by the Myanmar government, they are seen as foreigners or illegal immigrants instead. Three lessons are learned from this study on the failure of Rohingya's recognition. First, the two colonialists were the “dark records” of the Rohingya conflicts. Second, the Myanmar governments have not treated the Rohingya with fair and similar policy during the historical time. Third, all protests and demonstrations conducted throughout the world to condemn the Myanmar government and all financial supports should be done on behalf of humanity, not a religious-solidarity to avoid unexpected effects for inter-religion conflicts nationally and internationally.

Keywords:Rohingya, Muslim,indigenous,recognition, identity, conflict, illegal immigrant.

INTRODUCTION

Rohingya is a Muslim minority group living in Arakan State, Burma (Myanmar) with an estimated population around 1.5 million including those who are in exile (Smith, Allsebrook, et al. 1994, p.30; Nemoto 1991; Mahmood, Wroe, et al. 2017). Some historians believe that Muslims first came to Arakan between the eighth and ninth

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centuries who were initiated by Arab seafarers, merchants, and holy men. Rohingya Muslims came about 1824 (Nemoto 1991). The arrivals of Rohingya in Arakan correlates with the British colonialism that occupied Arakan during 1824-1826. The British encouraged a high number of Indian immigrants including many Muslims from Chittagong (now a part of Bangladesh) called the Chittagonians or the Mahomedan or later named themselves as *Rooinga* (Rohingya) (Mahmood, Wroe, et al. 2017). There was no any significant clash with Arakanese Buddhists at the time of their arrivals. The physical conflicts flared up with the coming of Japanese colonialism (1942-45). Japan utilized Buddhist Arakanese to fight against the British, and the British armed Muslims for counter-attack (Nemoto 1991).

In the era of the Ne Win government, since 1974, Rohingya people have not been recognized as one of the citizenship categories in Myanmar (Nemoto 1991; Blomquist 2016). The name “Rohingya,” which is accepted and used by the United Nations and some other international institutions, is not recognized by the Myanmar government. They refer this community as Bengalis or Bangladeshis (Mahmood, Wroe, et al. 2017) and also foreigners or illegal immigrants (Nemoto, 1991).

Rohingya people have suffered from the hostility of the Myanmar government and Rakhine Buddhists. Some were killed, the women were raped, and many houses, villages, and mosques were burnt. In 1978 and 1991, they were forced to flee in huge numbers with over 200,000 people in each of these years. Although making agreements with Bangladesh on the repatriation, the Burmese Government has not intended to let Rohingya stay peacefully in Arakan. It can be seen from the recent data that since 2012, over 159,000 people fled to neighbouring countries (Mahmood, Wroe, et al. 2017). Recently, 370 Rohingya people and 15 members of Myanmar security forces died (The Washington Post, 2 September 2017) caused by confrontations in Arakan. According to the United Nations report, the total death caused by this conflict is more than 1000 people (Kompas, 9 September 2017).

The violence and expulsion or some call it “ethnic cleansing” (Cf. Fussell 2001; Ritu 2012; Zawacki 2012) or even genocide (Macmanus, Green et al. 2015) experienced by Rohingya people in Myanmar have been an international issue attracting the attention of the world community and create a perception that it is an inter-religious conflict (The Diplomat, 2015) or inter-religious violence (Coates, 2013) between Muslims and Buddhists. However, by looking at the historical background of the Rohingya and Arakan, both colonizers, the British and Japan in the middle of the twentieth century played a big role in initiating the conflicts. Therefore, rather than seeing the conflicts as inter-religious conflicts which may cause excessive fanaticism from followers of these two big religions, this essay would argue that Rohingya issue should be seen as a struggle for recognition as “indigenous.” This view is essential to avoid misunderstanding that this is solely an inter-religious conflict.

METHODOLOGY

This paper will use a qualitative approach relying on the secondary sources, e.g., books, journals and media news. According to Creswell (2012, p. 128), qualitative

research will allow researchers to examine the notion of a central phenomenon, where key concepts, ideas, or processes can be explored and documented. Furthermore, this method provides a comprehensive theoretical framework, valid survey data, and inter-relationships, especially it is best suited to address a research problem needing to be explored. Particularly, this essay will first give historical backgrounds and theoretical frameworks of indigenous issues. It will then discuss on religious conflict issues involving Muslims and Buddhists in Myanmar under British and Japanese colonialism. The struggle against the Myanmar government for recognition of Rohingyas will also be explored. The paper will end with a conclusion and lessons learnt.

RESEARCH

A. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Indigenous peoples call themselves as indigenous (Kenrick and Lewis 2004, p. 4; Maybury-Lewis 2002). The “indigenous” term which has many debatable definitions comes from the Latin “indigena” meaning someone born in a specific area. Indigenous was used legally in the era of European colonisation in the 19th century (Erni 2014, p.8). When the Spanish arrived, Indians in America were called indigenous to America, a name which initially was not imposed on European settlers at the time. Some time later, Europeans who were born in the Americas, felt and called themselves as “indigenous” too. It seems not difficult to call Indians in America, Aborigines in Australia or Maoris in New Zealand as indigenous in contrast to those who came later; but in a broader meaning, such differences are hard to define in Asia, Europe or Africa (Maybury-Lewis 2002, p.6). In the context of Asian, the “indigenous peoples” term is commonly understood for various existing cultural groups (UNDRIP, A Manual for National Human Rights Institutions, 2013).

Langton (2012) defines indigenous as ‘*applied to territorially based ethnic groups that were culturally distinct from the majority population of the nation states in which they find themselves, that were politically marginalized and who identified as indigenous*’ (cited in the 19th footnote of McIntyre-Mills 2017, p.58). The Chairperson-Rapporteur of the Working Group on Indigenous (WGIP) mentions four factors to understand the concept of indigenous. First, priority in time, it concerns the occupation and use of a specific territory. They occupy a specific area for a long period. The second is the voluntary perpetuation of cultural distinctiveness, such as language, religion, and spiritual values. In other words, they may have their own preserved particular features such as cultures and religion, differentiating them from other groups. Third, self-identification, as well as recognition by other groups, or by State authorities, as a distinct collectivity. Fourth, an experience of subjugation, marginalization, dispossession, exclusion or discrimination, whether or not these conditions persist (Kenrick and Lewis 2004, pp. 1-6). Those four principles may be used to analyse whether a group of people is indigenous or not.

B. DISCUSSION

- ***Inter-Religious Conflict Issue***

Many people respond the Rohingya conflict in Myanmar as an inter-religious conflict. Demonstrations are conducted in some Muslims majority countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Turkey. They protested and condemned the brutality of the Burmese government and people against the Rohingyas. In Indonesia, some Muslim community protest in some parts of Indonesia such as Jakarta, Aceh, Yogyakarta, and Lombok. Even, a considerable demonstration would be conducted in the most famous Buddhist site, the Borobudur Temple, one of the Seven Wonders of the World, but it was cancelled (Kompas, 5 September 2017). In Turkey, President RecepTayyipErdogan condemned the deaths of at least 400 Rohingya Muslims; he derided the silence of the Islamic countries on this genocide issue. In Malaysia, a demonstration also involved the Malaysia Prime Minister, NajibRazak (theguardian.com, 2 September 2017). Those protests and demonstrations mostly involving Muslims on behalf of Muslim solidarity impress the Rohingya conflict as an inter-religious conflict which may disrupt the relations between Muslims and Buddhists in general in which each religion has large population worldwide.

However, steadily confrontations between Muslims and Buddhists in Rakhine involving the Burmese government have a long historical context. In the beginning of Chittagonist arrivals, there was not any serious conflict between Muslims and Buddhists Rakhine. The arrival of the first unit of Aung San's Burma Independence Army (BIA) supported by Japanese Army encouraged tensions, however. The tensions were marked by crucial clashes between those two communities from 1942 to now. Most Muslims were loyal to the British, while most Rakhines joined BIA or underground communist movement related to Japan. That historical background indicates that the arrivals of the British bringing in Chittagong people and the antagonistic position between the British and Japan during the World War II (1939-1945) became the lighter of the conflict between Arakanese Muslims and Buddhists. This argument is reinforced by the absence of serious conflicts long before when Islam came for the first time in Arakan around the 9th century.

- ***Struggling for Identity as Indigenous***

Living hundreds of years in Arakan has not caused Rohingya people as one of the recognized indigenous groups in Myanmar. Looking at the definition given by Langton (2012) and the four factors provided by the Chairperson-Rapporteur of the Working Group on Indigenous, Rohingya people qualify as one of the indigenous groups.

First, in the context of a territorial-based ethnic group, they have been living in a specific territorial called Arakan (Rakhine) from generation to generation. Second, like what Langton defines and the second factor, they have different culture and religion compared to the majority of the Myanmar population. They are Muslims who speak a different language (Rohingya), while the majority of Myanmar population is Buddhist. However, it is not exactly the same as the Langton's definition. Though finding themselves more than being marginalized, they are not identified and recognized as indigenous.

Third, the third factor expresses what the Rohingya peoples are facing. They are identified or recognized as a distinct collectivity such as by naming them as Bengali or foreigners or illegal immigrants and the refusal to use Rohingya name (Smith 1996). Actually, in the era of U Nu government (1948-1962), Rohingya was recognized as one of the national groups in Burma. It changed in the age of Ne Win government by issuing the 1974 Emergency Immigration Act. According to this new rule, ethnic Rakhine Buddhists get a real recognition, and they have been promoted as the real inhabitants and indigenous people of Arakan. Muslims feel that it was the beginning of discriminations against them in which they are excluded as Arakan people and also their culture. The fourth, which is apparently seen, as a distinct community, they suffer from subjugation, marginalization, exclusion or discrimination. Such bad treatments are still going up to now in the forms of killings, torture, rape and arbitrary detention, and destruction of their homes and villages (Smith 1996; Macmanus, Green, et al. 2015).

Although the Rohingya have almost all of the four factors, they, not only are refused to be indigenous, but also, according to Nemoto (1991, p. 4), are considered ineligible to be one of the three Myanmar citizenship categories, namely, ordinary citizens, associate citizens and naturalized citizens. Instead of getting the National Registration Certificate/NRC, they only get Foreign Registration Certificate/FRC (Smith 1991; Nemoto 1991; Blomquist 2016). If we see the Rohingya people from the definition of indigenous in America in which not only Indians are indigenous, but also Europeans call themselves indigenous since they were born there following their ancestors, the Rohingya people should also be one of the recognized indigenous groups. They are indigenous by definition using the root of the word 'indigena' meaning those who were born in particular place. A generation of Rohingya people living in Rakhine today was born in Rakhine; they are not newcomers like their ancestors two centuries ago. In the Asian context, they are indigenous because they are a part of ethnic groups who have their own cultures.

There are four reasons in which an inter-religious conflict approach is inappropriate, while the struggle for recognition as indigenous might be a better option. First, looking at the historical background, both Rohingya Muslims and Buddhists living in Rakhine initially were under colonialism. The first was colonized by the British and the latter by both the British and Japan. BIA supported by Japan and Muslims supported by the British sparked the tensions. Prolonged conflicts between them might not happen if both colonizers did not come to Arakan. Second, Chittagonists came from India not as trained-armies but as ordinary people forced by the British. Although they came as Muslims, they did not mean to fight or be hostile to the Arakanese Buddhists, rather they did not have any other choice as colonized people. Third, and this may be the most convincing reason, if the Rohingya case is an inter-religious conflict, why Burmese government does not treat the same to the other group of Muslims such as Muslim Kamans, Indian Muslims in Rangoon and Panthay

(Burmese Chinese Muslims). Those groups of Muslim are recognized as indigenous and legal citizens (Ayako 2014).

Also, the last and additional reason, looking at the Rohingya issue as an inter-belief conflict may bring in broader conflicts globally. Both Islam and Buddhist are two of the major religions in the world. Islam has around 1.8 billion followers while Buddhist about 0.5 billion (Pew Research Center, 2015). If a religious sentiment is raised, it will affect the peace-relation between Islam and Buddhist in other parts of the world. In Indonesia, for example, among other population in which Muslim is the majority, Buddhist has significant followers, i.e., almost two million. They live peacefully without any serious conflict. Interestingly, although being a minority, a Buddhist site, the Borobudur Temple, becomes the pride of Indonesia, not a mosque or something related to Islam. Therefore, the Rohingya case posted by some media as inter-religious conflict raises religious solidarity-based protests in Indonesia which is an adverse circumstance for Islam-Buddhist relation.

CONCLUSION

All kind of discriminations experienced by Rohingya, despite a form of violations of indigenous human rights, the historical background of the conflict is significant to understand. Since these discriminations only applied to Rohingya people, this issue should not be seen as an inter-religious conflict. In fact, it is a struggle to get identity recognition as indigenous people in Myanmar. Considered as illegal immigrants or the descendants of illegal immigrants, Rohingya is not admitted as one of the official citizen groups living in the territory of Myanmar. The Myanmar government should know that most of the people of ethnic groups are indigenous according to where they were born. Rohingya people, with no regard for the origin of their ancestors, are indigenous. They also have rights to live in Rakhine and get recognition as citizens of Myanmar.

Looking back to the History of Arakan, there are at least three lessons-learned. First, the two colonialists, the British and Japan were the “dark records” of the point of departure of the Rohingya conflicts. It should not be a justification for the following conflicts but for a lesson to not repeating the same conflicts. The importance of looking history is like what Philosopher George Santayana said that those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it. Second, related to recognition, the Myanmar government has a good precedent policy in the era of U Nu government in which Rohingya name was accepted, and this ethnic group was recognized as one of the indigenous or ethnic groups in Myanmar. This is important to make them mindful that their treatments to Rohingya people are not only wrong, but it is also cruel, and finally they can imitate and make a similar policy with that was issued in the U Nu government. Third, by looking at the first and the second, all protests and demonstrations conducted throughout the world to condemn the Myanmar government and all financial supports should be done on behalf of humanity, not a religious-solidarity. This option is to avoid unexpected effects for Muslim-Buddhist relations nationally and internationally.

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