

VIOLENCE BY SO CALLED NON-VIOLENT: A CASE STUDY OF MUSLIMS IN MYANMAR (BURMA)

*Amir Latif**

*Hafiza Sabiha Munir**

*Rana Ghulam Mustafa**

In Buddhism, wisdom is the core of the teaching and compassion is the core of the practice, it is also called as the religion of very polite and comparatively non violent peoples. But in July/August 2012 thousands of Muslims have been brutally killed and injured while Muslim women were dishonored by this community. According to BBC report a women was dishonored by some Muslims and in reply to this full state of Maynamar (Burma) barbarically killed innocent Muslims and their dead bodies prevailed all across the cities of Burma. As we all witness that Myanmar is quite famous for its long and stressful efforts for democracy led by Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. This paper will seek the plight of Myanmar Muslims into lime light and guide activists in the perspective of its in-depth reality. A time when Islam is being main target of criticism, it is imperative that the religious hatred and its victims may be tackled with due concern.

Introduction:

Union of Burma was formerly known as the Union of Myanmar (name changed in 1989) geographically is the largest country in Southeast Asia (mainland). Population of this country is ethnically diverse in nature; majority belongs to Theravada Buddhism, along with minorities of Christians, Hindus and Muslims as well. Country shares borders with China to north, Laos to east, Thailand to south east, Bangladesh to west and India on north west with Andaman Sea to south and Bay of Bengal to south west (approximately a total of about two thousand kilometers of coast line). Myanmar was ruled by military junta under General Ne Win from 1962 to 1988, after that under the rule of General Than Shwe in 1992. This military junta which is known as State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) was formerly as State Law & Order Restoration Council (SLORC). This has become recognized for its authoritarianism forced labor (including young labor also), in government run and sponsored projects, limiting laws related to citizenship, underage soldiers and enforcement of junta's in the cruelest style and this has made this country a well known violator of human rights of the world.¹

* M.Phil. Scholar, Department of Political Science, Minhaj University, Lahore.

* Scholar, Dept. of Islamic Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore.

* Lecturer, Govt. Islmia College, Railway Road, Lahore.

Muslims in Myanmar:

According to rough estimate, composition of Burma's ethnic total population is about 2/3 Tibetans and Chinese of about 47 million, that control both the army and the government. According to government stats about 3% of population is Muslim, but other studies recommend that it is as high as 13%², and are around seven millions. This population is majority Indian Muslims who settled in the country when Myanmar was under colonial rule and settled in the areas along the country's mountainous frontiers. Main portion of this Muslim population lived widely in Rakhine/Arakan State in the west of Myanmar (a dominant religion of 1 million, Indians as well as some Bengalis). There are also a few locals who converted in to Muslims of mixed Burmese-Indian cultural heritage.

In early 1950s a few Muslim intellectuals (Bengali) of Arakan began to use term **"Rohingya"** for themselves. They were descendants of immigrants from Chittagong District of East Bengal (now Bangladesh), who had migrated into Arakan after the province was granted to British India³ and they have the longest history in Myanmar. Arab mariners and traders that arrived were believed as the first Muslims who settled in this region on the Rakhine coast in eighth and ninth centuries. After that, in the later centuries Turks, Persians, Pathans, Bengalis and Moghals came to the area. From 1824-1825 to 1948 during British colonial period there was massive migration from Chittagong to Rakhine State. It is also pertinent to mention here that some dates of Islamic calendar are also recognized as Muslim official public holidays and government occasionally facilitates its passport issuance procedures (which are quite hard) for Muslims for performing the Hajj.⁴

Burman-Buddhist Nationalism:

In Myanmar anti-Muslim and anti-Indian violence is an old phenomenon. It has deep roots in the history of Myanmar's colonial rule, and there is significant rise Burman nationalism in present situation. Deadly violence started frequently in different parts belonging to minorities of the country. But the lifting of authoritarian controls and with modern communications means there is greater risk of spreading violence all across the country (These violations of human rights are particularly against ethnic minorities, non-Buddhists, women and children). These incidents

of violence mainly occurred in context of Buddhist nationalism which is because of growing pressure of monk-led “969” movement (a movement against Muslims “786”) with an agenda of intolerance and boycott of businesses of Muslim community. Acts of discrimination were prevalent against Muslim community in the country. That includes; withheld citizenship, facing of restrictions on movement along with various abusive policies.⁵ After these anti human activities about 250,000 settled in neighboring Bangladesh and over 110,000 in to Thailand.

The Role of Buddhist Monks:

In Myanmar, “969” is known as Buddhist extremist movement, which represent itself as a grassroots belief. Name of its chief promoter is Wirathu, which was once jailed for instigating violence against Muslims and once called himself as “Burmese bin Laden.” But actually origin of 969’s relates to an official of dictator era that have once ruled the country, and is also a direct predecessor of today’s government. This movement now experience support from government functionaries, some members of opposition National League for Democracy (political party of Aung San Suu Kyi). In Burmese politics Monks play an important role they were central point against military rule in pro-democracy “**Saffron Revolution of 2007**”. The generals, including current President Thein Sein and other senior members of government controlled them, but now they have freed about 500,000 monks, to fulfill his ambitious program of reforms and freedoms of speech and assembly. Now, they can move to any part to spread Buddhist teachings, including propaganda of 969 doctrine⁶. Main agenda of which is to boycott Muslim businesses, and propagating for adoption of laws to control inter-religion marriages. It is also alarming that these monks going to start an electoral boycott of the members of parliaments who oppose the law.⁷

Muslim Specific Abuses:

There were anti-Muslim riots in the Mon State capital Mawlamyine of serious nature, in 1983, resulted hundred of affectees shifted to the Thai border. In 1988, during famous democratic revolution, a group of violent attackers aimed Muslims community in Pyay, Taunggyi including adjacent towns of Shan State. About hundreds of monks violently attacked homes of the Muslim community, their mosques and shops in the city of Mandalay in 1997, which caused major destruction and resulted in

deaths and waves of this violence then spread to other towns as well. In the year of 2001, riots broke out in state capital Sittwe between Buddhists and Muslims. This whole episode was started on an argument among group of young monks and Muslim stallholder that intensified into violence, that took 20 lives and homes and shops were burned. To control the situation curfew was imposed for several months in the specific city. This series of violence also widen to neighboring Maungdaw town where many mosques as well as madrasas were burned. During same year violence against Muslim communities spread in other parts of Myanmar also⁸.

World opinion regarding these abuses and violence:

- According to United States Department of State (30 July 2012) “Muslims as well as other ethnic communities like, Chinese and Indians, are often required to get permission from town authorities to leave their home and to travel across the country. Whereas, authorities often denied Muslims living in Rakhine State to grant permission to travel for any purpose; however, permission sometimes obtained through bribery. Muslims in residing in other parts were granted permission travelling but with restrictions. For example, Muslims living in Rangoon required permission from immigration department to travel in and out of Rakhine State. Muslims in Rakhine State, continued to experience the severest forms of social discrimination. It is also reported that Buddhist physicians do not provide endorsement required by Ministry of Health to travel outside Rakhine State to seek medical treatment to the Muslim community”⁹.
- An Inter Press Service report (15 June 2012) states: “In western Myanmar due to sectarian violence against 800,000 Muslim Rohingya, a persecuted minority in 2006 is facing a 'slow-burning genocide'. A day before, in the violent clashes among Rakhine and Rohingya in Buddhist Myanmar (formerly Burma) had resulted in killing of 29 persons and displaced about 30,000, and according to official accounts of it is the worst communal violence in any country of Southeast Asia in years. About 2,500 houses have been burned and nine Buddhist religious places and seven mosques were destroyed. On June 3, a gang of about 300 Buddhists stopped a bus of Muslim pilgrims and beat 10 to death”¹⁰.

- An Amnesty International report (19 July 2012) states: "Organization received credible reports of abuses related to human rights against Muslims (that includes killings, destruction of property, rape, physical abuse) by both Monks and security forces as well. The authorities should curb these incidents and prevent others from doing it. On Tuesday, a mob of local Buddhists killed 10 Muslims in suburb area in Rakhine State, who were travelling by bus to their homes in Yangon. Myanmar's National Human Rights Commission said on 11 July that about 78 people were killed since violence began, but according to unofficial resources the toll exceeds 100."¹¹
- The Summary of a Human Rights Watch report (1 August 2012) states: "During June 2012, ethnic sectarian violence started in Arakan among Buddhists and Muslims. The violence broke out on the reports that an Arakan woman was raped and killed by three Muslim men in Ramri (town), on May 28. Details of this incident was circulated through a provoking pamphlet due to that on June 3, a large mob of villagers from Arakan stopped a bus and barbarously killed 10 Muslims passengers. According to this organization it was witnessed by its officials that police and soldiers stood still and watched these brutal killings and did not try to stop this heinous crime."¹²

On-going violence:

In June and October 2012, there erupted clashes once again between Buddhists and Muslims in Rakhine State left about 200 dead and approximately 140,000 internally displaced (with Muslims majority). Communities remained isolated to this day, and the humanitarian situation is dire. In early 2013, the violence spread to central Myanmar also. The worst incident of these incidents was happened in Meiktila, where a dispute at a shop led to anti-Muslim violence, which started brutal killing of a Buddhist monk sharply intensified the situation, and during two days of violence resulting in widespread destruction of Muslim properties and leaving about 44 dead (20 students and several teachers massacred) at an Islamic school¹³.

According to BBC (25 August 2013) about 43 people were killed (Muslim community) in a violence that started after an argument started at a Muslim-owned shop. The violent clashes

started in three other towns and more than 12,000 Muslims displaced due to these clashes. The series of violence in Meiktila were the worst since start in the Rakhine state last year, in which about 200 people were killed and thousands others forced to leave their homes. This conflict was started in Rakhine involving Buddhists and Muslims community (a community not recognized as citizens). After this incident of violence many displaced Muslims living in tents and temporary camps.¹⁴

If we analyze the behavior of Muslim States and Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) than its response came quite late. The members OIC accompanied with officials from Turkey, Egypt, Djibouti, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia and Bangladesh arrived in Myanmar on November 14, 2013 and met government officials in the capital Naypyitaw to discuss “peace and stability of Rakhine state and rehabilitation,” and brutal killing of Muslims of Myanmar. Whereas, on the next day about 3,000 monks marched through roads of Sittwe, capital of Arakan state, to protest against OIC’s involvement in their internal issues. The Myanmar government responded by saying that they manage to end all these acts of violence. They ensured to protect civilian population and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, in Rakhine State¹⁵.

The Government’s Response:

Both government and forces to control law and order situation have been widely criticized, nationally and internationally in connection with their poor response in the incident of violence, and if they reacted their response was biased and inadequate. In all the incidents, it is evident that police did nothing to control the situation of these violent attacks. There are also reports that in most cases Police remained unsympathetic to the victims related to Muslim community and so much so they were aligned in the heinous crimes against Muslims. According to witnesses in Meiktila, police remained unable to initially control the anger the crowd at the gold shop, this inability then resulted in rapid increase in number of the activists. This appeared lack of will, training, equipment, and strategy that might have enabled them to control the situation, and this may save several lives¹⁶.

Forgotten Lesson:

By the passage of time Muslim world, lost its unity and vigor and came under the influence of new world powers, due to

its internal conflicts and turmoil and external pressures. The masters became the slaves and the western empires colonized the Muslim world and believers' community after First World War was divided on the criteria of nation states. This division further weakened the concept of Ummah because now the governments of Muslim world took decisions on the criteria of nationalism rather than the Muslim World. For them the important is to go for their national interests rather than to think of collective interests of the community, religious brotherhood and Islamic solidarity. On the surface it seems as if the Ummah has lost its existence. Nevertheless, on many occasions the world saw the inner unity among the members of Ummah¹⁷.

Conclusion:

The direct responsibility lies with the government of Myanmar for the persecution against Muslims in Myanmar since start. It must be noted though, that the lack of decisive action by the international community has allowed the situation to worsen and spiral into violence of a scale and nature that may amount to ethnic cleansing – particularly if allowed to continue. It is hoped that strict action on all that are capable of and responsible for the protection of Muslim minorities in Rakhine state will be carried out to stay safe and protected against this type of violence and intolerant behavior.

Recommendations:

- Taking up of every step to stop violence immediately and protection of all individuals, in an equal and nondiscriminatory manner for the time to come also (future planning).
- Immediate prevention and punishment on all abuses and crimes by security forces and civilians against Muslims in Rakhine State (popular racism and discrimination in the society at large).
- Full cooperation with United Nations and international agencies to eradicate discriminatory provision and support to all affected communities.
- Victims of violence may not be kept in the shelters cells for long rather they may be sent back to their towns as soon as possible. And assistance may be granted for rebuilding their homes.

- Honor the inquiry commission reports and establishment of an impartial and transparent international enquiry into causes of violence, with objective of identifying and bringing those responsible to justice.
- Reformation will be carried out in the citizenship laws to eradicate discrimination and ensure equality among all races and ethnicities including monitor and document the situation in troubled areas.
- Provide resources and technical support to Myanmar in taking steps for promoting equality and respect for human rights in Myanmar.

Myanmar government may be ensured that these incidents do not result in long-term displacement or segregation of communities.

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