



The Rohingya Crisis: Perspectives of Bangladeshi Religious Leaders

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore Bangladeshi religious leaders' perspectives on the Rohingya refugee crisis and its implications for Bangladesh. We have employed a triangulation of methods composed of content analysis, qualitative intensive interviews and a robust Internet search to conduct the study. Bangladesh has experienced many impacts from the massive influx of the Rohingya into its territory. The Bangladeshi religious leaders reject the Burmese Government's official narrative that the Rohingya are illegal Bengali immigrants. They condemn the Rohingya's human rights abuse and opine that Burma must accept the refugees and reinstate their citizenship. The article, in the end, offers some pragmatic policy recommendations to surmount the Rohingya crisis.

Keywords Rohingya ethnic cleansing · Buddhist extremism · Burma · Bangladesh · religious leaders

Introduction

The Rohingya in Burma are one of the most marginalised, excluded and persecuted minorities in the world (Kingston, 2015; Ullah, 2016; UNHCR, 2014). They have been living in Rakhine (Arakan), in Burma for centuries (Dussich,

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2018; Ibrahim, 2016). Located on the western coast, the State of Rakhine borders the Bay of Bengal to the west and the Chittagong Division of Bangladesh to the northwest (Green et al., 2015).

Britain gave Burma independence in 1948, after giving British-India (including Bangladesh, as a part of Pakistan) independence in 1947. The military government, which took power in the 1962 coup d'état, later renamed Burma 'Myanmar', in 1989 (Haque, 2017; Kipgen, 2014). However, the renaming has remained a contested issue: it is considered to be an ethnocentric term and many political and ethnic opposition groups within Burma and many countries in the international arena continue to use 'Burma', as they do not accept the ruling illegitimate military government and recognise its authority to rename the country (Steinberg, 2001). Thus, we have used 'Burma' instead of 'Myanmar' throughout this article.

The Rohingya continued to hold Burmese citizenship from 1948 until the early-1960s (Ullah, 2011). Between 1948 and 1961, a small number of Rohingya served as members of both the Parliament and Cabinet of Burma (Farzana, 2017; Parnini et al., 2013). However, the successive military rulers, after 1962, refused to consider the Rohingya, most of whom are Muslim by religion, citizens of Burma. Burma's Governments continued to falsely brand Rohingya as 'outsiders' ('Bengali immigrants'), which made them a stateless ethnic minority inside Burma (Zarni & Cowley, 2014; Ullah & Chatteraj, 2018).

Since the 1970s, Burma's security forces have often attacked the Rohingya, forcing Rohingya refugees to flee Burma. Refugees from these attacks seek asylum in neighbouring countries: Thailand and Malaysia, but especially Bangladesh, as the latter is the first country most border-crossers encounter leaving Burma's Rakhine State (Goodwin-Gill, 2001). The Citizenship Decree 1982 recognised 135 ethnic groups in Burma; however, the Rohingya were not included (Dussich, 2018; Haque, 2017), making them one of the most marginalised, excluded and stateless ethnic minorities in the world. Zarni and Cowley (2014) wrote:

Over the past thirty-five years, the Union of Burma has intentionally formulated, pursued, and executed national and state-level plans aimed at destroying the Rohingya people in Western Burma. This destruction has been State-sponsored, legalized, and initiated by a frontal assault on the identity, culture, social foundation, and history of the Rohingya, who are a people with a distinct ethnic culture (p. 684).

Thus, Burma's military rulers consciously formulated an official policy of persecution to eliminate the Rohingya. The Citizenship Decree 1982 legitimised and systematised the persecution of Rohingya, making it necessary for them to flee Burma; thus, beginning the 'Rohingya problem' for Bangladesh. However, the Rohingya have been recognised as an ethnic community of Burma by the international community, including the UN (Kipgen, 2014).

Bangladesh hosts the most Rohingya refugees in the world, after some 40 years of Rohingya flight from Burma and influx to Bangladesh. Over the years, these Rohingya refugees have started life in Bangladesh in refugee camps, near

the borderlands, in Cox's Bazar and Bandarban Districts. However, most of them had settled in the Chittagong Division before 2017, acquiring citizenship and participating in the local economy as traders, farmers or labourers (Parnini, 2013). Nonetheless, in August 2017, the 'clearance operations' of the military of Burma created a whole new dimension to Bangladesh's 'Rohingya problem', creating the 'Rohingya crisis.' The 'clearance operations' were massive and constituted a 'textbook example of ethnic cleansing' as described by the United Nations (Sahana et al., 2019), certainly a contravention of international human rights law and justice.

The 'Rohingya Crisis' of 2017 was far worse than the Rohingya or the borderland Bangladeshis had ever encountered. More than half a million Rohingya arrived suddenly in Bangladesh over a short six month period, almost destitute, many suffering physical or psychological trauma: this was a scale and speed of Rohingya influx never before witnessed in Bangladesh. Bangladesh was unprepared to handle such sudden and massive immigration and was one of the world's developing nations, lacking surplus resources to allocate to the Rohingya. Nearly one million Rohingya are present in Bangladesh (Haar et al., 2019; Sarkar, 2019).

The Bangladeshi Government policy, since 2017, has been that Rohingya refugees should be confined to camps and have no rights to work, travel, be educated (even if children), do business or earn a livelihood, or do anything in Bangladesh except breathe, reside, eat and drink what the Government or NGOs give them.

There is a considerable amount of literature regarding the Rohingya problem and crisis. This literature elaborately deals with the past, present and future of the Rohingya refugees (Medecins Sans Frontières, 2002); the historical perspective of the Rohingya's problems (Alam, 2019); the Rohingya's ethnic cleansing and the arbitrary deprivation of their citizenship (Ullah & Chattoraj, 2018); the trajectories of the Rohingya and Burmese nationalism (Akins, 2018); the process of a slow genocide of the Rohingya ethnic minority for several decades to which both the state and non-state actors in Burma had their contributions and the continual avoidance of the international community towards it (Zarni & Cowley, 2014); the Rohingya's exclusion, systematic marginalisation, persecution and forced migration (Sahana et al., 2019; Ullah, 2011, 2016); Rohingya's victimisation and gross human rights violations resulting from complicated ethno-religious tensions (Dussich, 2018); the impacts of the Rohingya crisis on Bangladesh–Burma relations (Parnini, 2013; Parnini et al., 2013); Bangladesh's security dilemma over the Rohingya refugees (Rahman, 2010); the borderland politics and the denial of Rohingya's identity (Farzana, 2015, 2017); the effects of the crisis on the region and beyond and insignificant attention to it by the international community (Zawacki, 2013); the responsibility to protect the Rohingya under international law (Kingston, 2015); the informal humanitarian response or 'grassroots humanitarianism' to the Rohingya refugees (Lewis, 2019); the response of the international community and international institutions to the Rohingya crisis (Kipgen, 2014); and how the crisis can be resolved (Kipgen, 2013).

Scholarship on the Rohingya broadly covers the Rohingya's genocide and ethnic cleansing. Ibrahim (2016) argues that seven characteristics that will determine if a given instance of ethnic tension is likely to turn into an act of genocide. These

include: (a) the previous instance of severe ethnic tension; (b) political upheaval; (c) the governing elite is drawn overwhelmingly or entirely from a particular ethnic group; (d) that elite has an ideology that believes it is right to persecute a particular ethnic group; (e) the regime is autocratic; (f) the regime is closed to the broader international order; and (g) a minority is targeted for severe political or economic discrimination. All these features, Ibrahim (2016) warned, applied in Rakhine, and Burma then, one year before the clearance operations, stood on the verge of genocide, meaning the intentional destruction of an identified ethnic group.

The published academic literature suggests that the Rohingya live in Ackoff's 'mess' (Choukroun & Snow, 1992): the theory that most human problems are conjoint of many other political problems and do not stand alone. The 'Rohingya problem' is not a Rohingya problem: it is a Burma's governance problem; a Bangladesh governance and socio-economic problem; a racism problem; a religious bigotry problem; a regional stability problem; and a failure of international law enforcement/international governance problem. All of these problems combine to destroy the Rohingya.

The Rohingya refugee crisis impacts mostly Bangladesh. Yet how the Bangladeshi people perceive this crisis has not been studied robustly. This study attempts to fill this literature gap: Bangladeshi religious leaders' perspectives about the Rohingya refugee crisis and its implications for Bangladesh. To be precise, the study has dealt with these significant questions: What are the ideas of the Bangladeshi religious leaders about Burma's assertion that the Rohingya are illegal Bengali immigrants in Burma? Why have Burma's authorities persecuted the Rohingya, according to the Bangladeshi religious leaders? What do the Bangladeshi religious leaders think of the effects of the Rohingya crisis on Bangladesh? How do the Bangladeshi religious leaders see the international response to the persecution of the Rohingya?

The Johns Hopkins University (2021) defines religious leaders as the 'leaders within religious groups.' A religious leader is a person recognised within a specific religious group as holding authority within that group. Religious leaders are often regarded as the most respected people in their communities. Imams, monks, pastors, and priests play a powerful role in shaping attitudes, opinions and behaviours as their community members trust them. Community members and political leaders listen to religious leaders (The Johns Hopkins University, 2021). Religious leaders, particularly, the *imams* or Muslim religious teachers, continue to exert enormous influence on Bangladesh's politics, society and culture (Islam & Islam, 2018a; Zakiuddin, 2015). Bangladeshis listen to their Islamic religious leaders and take their views seriously, at least equally with those of political leaders. The ideas and pronouncements of religious leaders comprehensively regulate Bangladeshis' moral and intellectual life. The religious leaders also influence public policy formulation (Islam & Islam, 2018b, 2020). The Government of Bangladesh also recognises their vital social role (Azad, 2016) and effectively engages them in social development programmes considering their enormous social power and moral authority (Adams, 2015).

Although Bangladesh is constitutionally a secular country and continues to be ruled by secular laws, Islam has been predominant in Bangladesh politics and society (Huque & Akhter, 1987; Islam & Islam, 2017; Riaz, 2020). Even the predominance

of Islam has been constitutionally recognised: the Constitution retains the provisions of State religion (which is Islam) and the Qur'anic phrase *bismillahir-rahmanir-rahim* (in the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful) in its preamble (Islam & Islam, 2018b; Riaz, 2020). Both state and non-state actors have significantly contributed to Bangladesh's Islamisation (Islam & Islam, 2020; Riaz, 2004), which has also buttressed and strengthened Islamism in the country. Most often, the dominant secular political parties have to make alliances with Islamist parties and groups to capture power (Islam, 2021; Riaz, 2017). As some scholars have rightly pointed out that the Bangladeshi people have such strong attachments to Islam that 'the slightest aspersion on Islam results in hostile public reaction, which is why neither the government nor the opposition political parties of Bangladesh speak out against Islam. Even the leftist secular political parties, which consider religion to be an instrument of exploitation, do not make anti-Islamic statements in public' (Huque & Akhter, 1987: 200). In such a predominantly Islamic society in Bangladesh, the thoughts and voices of religious leaders (particularly, the imams and the Islamic religious leaders) greatly matter. Thus, the exploration of religious leaders' perspectives about the Rohingya crisis, which has become a major national issue in contemporary Bangladesh, is an important endeavour.

Following this brief introduction, the article in the second section highlights the methodology of this study. The third section outlines the Bangladeshi religious leaders' thoughts about Burma's assertion that the Rohingya are illegal Bengali settlers in Burma. Section four analyses the reasons for the persecution of the Rohingya, as understood by the Bangladeshi religious leaders. The fifth section explores the impacts of the Rohingya crisis on Bangladesh. It also informs the readers of how Bangladeshi religious leaders see the international response to it. The article in the final section presents the authors' concluding remarks and offers several policy recommendations for the policy-makers of Bangladesh and the international organisations responsible for protecting human rights around the world.

Methodology

This study was a qualitative one based on empirical evidence. We employed a triangulation of methods comprising in-depth interviews, content analysis and a robust Internet search to collect and analyse data. We aimed to learn the perspectives of the Bangladeshi religious leaders about Burma's official narrative that the Rohingya are illegal Bengali immigrants, their persecution by Burma, and the impacts of the Rohingya crisis on Bangladesh. Thus, we conducted intensive qualitative interviews with 12 religious leaders belonging to different religious faiths, such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity. No religion is monolithic in terms of their ideologies and interpretations: there are diverse doctrinal and ideological groupings within each religion, for example, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism or Buddhism. Nevertheless, they broadly identify themselves as Muslim, Christian, Hindu or Buddhist. Intensive interviews with a dozen research participants seemed reasonable to explore the research questions adequately.

The respondents were purposively selected as the research questions required views from a select group of people in society. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique which groups research participants according to pre-selected criteria relevant to a particular research question or a set of questions (Mack et al., 2005). The main criteria for selecting the respondents were renowned religious scholars, imams of large mosques, and leading priests of large temples, viharas and churches.

Thus, the sample consisted of eminent religious leaders: six Islamic and two each of Hindu, Buddhist and Christian. The apportionment was designed to give equal representation and voice to Muslims, who make up approximately 90% of the population of Bangladesh (Hossain, 2016) and the other significant groups represented in the population. The Muslim religious leaders were *imams* (priests) of mosques and/or *madrassa* (Islamic school) teachers. The Hindu religious leaders were mainly the leaders of Hindu religious organisations and/or temple priests. The Buddhist and Christian religious leaders were, respectively, priests of Buddhist viharas and Christian churches. These religious leaders lead their respective following and are highly respected as pious men. The overwhelming majority of the Bangladeshi Muslims and Christians, respectively, follow Sunni Islam and Catholic Christianity. The vast majority of Hindus are called Bengali Hindus largely worshipping Devi (goddess) Durga or Kali, often alongside her consort Shiva. The Hindu religious leaders are commonly referred to as Brahmins. The majority of the Bangladeshi Buddhists adhere to the Theravada School of Buddhism. Therefore, in terms of religious denominations, our respondents were Sunni Muslims, Hindu Brahmins, Catholic Christians and Theravada Buddhists, who represented the majority followers of their respective faith group. Table 1 shows the breakdown of the respondent religious leaders.

The respondents were mainly based in Dhaka (Bangladesh's capital city) and Sylhet (a north-eastern district of the country). Dhaka is cosmopolitan and the largest city in the country in which the large religious institutions and influential religious leaders are based. To garner rich and comprehensive data, we needed to interview these influential religious leaders who were mostly based in Dhaka city. Beyond this, Sylhet is popularly known as the 'spiritual capital' of the country because of its rich religious (particularly, Islamic) traditions. Even the leaders of the dominant

Table 1 The apportionment of respondent religious leaders

Religious affiliations	*Religious followers (%)	Respondents' religious denominations	Number of respondents
Islam	89.6	Sunni Muslims	6
Hinduism	9.3	Hindu Brahmins	2
Buddhism	0.6	Theravada Buddhists	2
Christianity	0.3	Catholic Christians	2
Total respondents			12

*The percentage of Bangladeshi religious followers was cited in Islam and Islam (2020: 14).

political parties use to launch their national election campaign by visiting and offering prayers to shrines of spiritual figures and religious institutions in Sylhet for understandable reasons. Thus, we collected data from the religious leaders based in Dhaka and Sylhet cities. The respondents were influential religious figures who often appeared in electronic media to discuss issues related to religious precepts and practices. A large number of religious followers visit them regularly for religious sermons and advice. Also, the Muslim religious leaders whom we interviewed often address the large religious gatherings, popularly called *waz-mahfils*, organised by civil society groups in different areas of Bangladesh. The interview sessions were very enlightening, and the respondents were much interested in sharing their thoughts with us.

Initially, we developed a checklist according to the study theme line. We left open-ended/unstructured questions to the respondents to obtain their independent and comprehensive insights required for this study. Interviews were intended to collect primary data for this research.

After developing the checklist, we contacted the respondents and informed them about the aims and objectives of the study. The respondents willingly agreed to participate in it, and we then sought their appointment for the scheduled interviews. The time and places of the interviews were selected according to the choice of the respondents. We analysed data throughout the study.

To analyse the data collected, we also used content analysis (Weber, 1990) and Internet search (Hewson, 2007) as qualitative research methods. Content analysis is recognised in qualitative research (Bos & Tarnai, 1999). Content analysis means looking for common themes among a wide range of data sources, including here both publications and interviews. Publications included credible secondary literature such as books, journal articles, newspaper articles, occasional papers and Internet documents. Documentary evidence was used to verify oral evidence by triangulation (Olsen, 2004).

We took all reasonable measures to comply with ethical standards in conducting this qualitative data collection. We informed the respondents of the research objectives and the ethical issues of qualitative research, including their rights to informed consent, to withdraw, and to confidentiality (Saunders et al., 2007), and thus obtained their informed consent to participate. We have kept the respondents' names and identification confidential and used pseudonyms in this article. We ensured their psychological and physical safety. We tape-recorded the interviews with the permission of the sample members. We also took notes to draw meanings from their discussion. Transcription of the interviews was done soon after data collection to preclude the loss of relevant information. Taken as a whole, we employed a robust methodology to garner data for our analysis.

The Rohingya in Burma: Illegal Bengali settlers or native Burmese?

At present, the Rohingya in Burma are the largest single 'stateless' community in the world after Palestinians. Their 'statelessness' or lack of citizenship enhances their growing vulnerability. Without citizenship and constitutional entitlements

to any legal protection, they are deprived of fundamental human rights, such as access to education, health care, employment, freedom of movement, and political participation (Ullah & Chatteraj, 2018). Burma's authorities have claimed that the Rohingya are illegal Bengali settlers (Kipgen, 2013; Ullah, 2016). Our respondents have overwhelmingly suggested that the Rohingya are an ethnic minority in Burma's Rakhine State. They have been living there for generations. Burma arbitrarily and unjustly stripped Rohingya of their citizenship and thus forced them into statelessness and vulnerability. Maulana Shehjad Ahmed (pseudonym), an imam of a mosque, in his interview, stated:

The Rohingya are not the citizens of Bangladesh. Branding them as Bangladeshi citizens is entirely a concocted story. The Rohingya are the citizens of Burma. The present Rakhine State is formerly Arakan. Rohingya have been living there for hundreds of years. Even, at the time Burma's independence in the 1940s, the Rohingya were citizens of the country, and also they had representation in the Parliament afterwards. If they were not citizens, how could they become members of Burma's Parliament? Since the 1960s, when the military took over Burma, the Rohingya were subjected to ethnic and racial discrimination. They were eventually stripped of citizenship and thereby forced into displacement by a notorious genocide upon them.

Maulana Shafiqur Rahman (pseudonym), a Muslim religious leader, also maintained:

Geographically, Bangladesh is a close neighbour of Burma. The two countries share a border. Even during the British colonial period, East Bengal [now Bangladesh] and Burma were parts of a single country: British-India. So, Bangladesh and Burma are connected both historically and geographically. The Rohingya are Muslim by religion. They have been living in Arakan [Rakhine] for centuries. Islam entered and became deeply rooted in Arakan in the eighth century, as the historians report. So, the Rohingya are not outsiders in Burma.

Respondents asserted that Burma's Government consciously changed the name of Arakan to Rakhine to obliterate the genealogical history of the Rohingya in Burma. The name 'Arakan' is claimed to be rooted in Islamic history and culture. Maulana Kalim Uddin (pseudonym), a Muslim preacher, explained:

The history of the Muslims and the Rohingya in Burma is the history of at least 1,200 years. The word 'Arakan' is an Arabic word which has been derived from another Arabic word 'Rokun.' The word 'Rokun' means foundation. The Muslims came to Arakan from the Arab world and laid the foundation of Islam there in the eighth century. Hence the name of this place is Arakan. As the Rohingya are inhabitants of former Arakan, they are the citizens of Burma. The Burma Government cannot wipe out the Rohingya's historical connections with Arakan just by changing its name to Rakhine.

The history of the Rakhine Rohingya dates back to the early seventh century, when Muslim Arab, Moorish and Persian traders settled in that region. As scholars and historians report, since the eighth and ninth centuries of the Common Era, Islam began to spread to the east bank of Meghna to Arakan long before the establishment of the Muslim kingdom in the frontier region (Huq & Karim, 1935). The Rohingya are the descendants of the Moorish, Arab and Persian merchants as well as Moghul, Turk, Pathan and Bengali soldiers and migrants, who arrived between the ninth and fifteen centuries, married local women and settled in the region. The Rohingya are, therefore, a mixed group of people with multiple ethnic and racial connections (Ahmed, 2009; Razzaq & Haque, 1995). Francis Buchanan, a Scottish physician who had travelled the region on a political mission in the 1790s, wrote in a 1799 study of the Burmese languages:

The Mohammedans settled at Arakan, call the country Rovingaw ... I shall now add three dialects, spoken in the Burma Empire ... The first is that spoken by the Mohammedans, who have been long settled in Arakan, and who call themselves Rooinga, or natives of Arakan (Buchanan, 1799, pp. 223, 237; also cited in Akins, 2018, p. 231).

These historical facts suggest unambiguously that the Rohingya are native people in Burma. Arguing for the Rohingya as Burma's citizens, Boloram Chandra Das (pseudonym), a Hindu priest and leader of a prominent Hindu religious organisation, in his interview, said:

Since the language of the Rohingya is similar to the language of the people of Chittagong, their ancestors may have been residents of Chittagong. However, they have been living in Rakhine for hundreds of years; they should naturally be Burma's citizens. Rohingya's demand for the citizenship of Burma is very logical and justified.

The respondent's argument is very logical. Burma's official narrative rejects Rohingya's citizenship of Burma arguing that the Rohingya are ethnically, culturally and religiously related to the Bengalis. This narrative is completely flawed, because citizenship is a political idea and people of the same ethnicity, language, culture and religion may have different national identities, such as the Arabs, the Chinese, and the Tamils. Maulana Kalim Uddin (pseudonym) thus argued (interview):

We share the same language [Bengali], the same ethnic and cultural heritage with the people of West Bengal in India. This similarity does not mean that they [people of West Bengal] are the citizens of Bangladesh. Similarly, the affinity of language and religion between the Rohingya and Bangladeshi people does not prove that the former are the inhabitants of Chittagong of Bangladesh.

The similarities between India's millions of West Bengalis in language, ethnicity and culture are far greater than the similarities between the Rohingya and most Bangladeshis. Thus, Maulana's argument is very cogent. Jogen Sharma (pseudonym) (Hindu religious leader) thus argued:

Once Chittagong was under the independent Arakan state. However, after the end of British colonial rule and, further, after the birth of Bangladesh, Arakan and Chittagong became separated. So it is illogical to say that the Rohingya are Bengali. If Burma claims it, Bangladesh can also claim that the people of Chittagong are Burmese and not the citizens of Bangladesh.

The historical fact is that prior to 1828 there was no border between Burma and Bengal. People would migrate from one country to the other for various reasons such as searching for livelihood or escaping persecution. The Burmese migrated to Bengal (Chittagong) and the Bengalis migrated to Burma (Arakan) freely during those times. Furthermore, after the British annexed Burma through the Anglo–Burmese Wars (Myint-U, 2006), Bengal and Burma became a borderless territory and the British administrators encouraged the Bengali inhabitants from the adjacent areas to migrate into fertile lands of Arakan for labour requirements, especially in the agricultural sector. Many Bengali inhabitants then migrated to Burma (Chan, 2005; Lewis, 2019). Therefore, the respondents have correctly noted that the Rohingya must remain the inhabitants of Burma. Their close link with the Bengalis does not logically preclude them from being Burma's citizens.

Over the centuries, Muslims of Rakhine have had many terms by which they have identified themselves, including the terms 'Rakhine Muslim', 'Arakan Muslim', and 'Rohingya', the last of which has recently become more prominent. The Rakhine nationalist narratives accord that the term 'Rohingya' was created in the 1950s to propagate the political demands of the Muslims in Burma. These narratives are indeed socially and politically constructed for the exclusion, marginalisation and persecution of the Rohingya.

It is obvious that the Rohingya and Bengalis are closely related ethnic groups: their physical features, languages, faiths and cultures hardly vary (Ganguly & Miliate, 2015). Nevertheless, the respondents, regardless of their faiths, have agreed that the Rohingya have been living in Burma for centuries and thus they have become Burma's naturalised citizens. They are not illegal immigrants; rather the Government of Burma has illegally deprived them of their citizenship.

Persecution of the Rohingya: Religious, political and economic reasons

Burma's authorities have systematically persecuted the ethnic Rohingya for decades (Dussich, 2018; Ullah, 2016). The Bangladeshi religious leaders have shared their insights with the authors about Rohingya's persecution. The Muslim religious leaders identified the main reason for this persecution as religious. Maulana Anwar Pasha Chowdhury (pseudonym), in his interview, stated:

The Rohingya in Burma have two significant identities. One is their ethnic identity, and the other is their religious identity. Burma has denied Rohingya's existence as a distinct ethnic group in Burma. It always branded them as illegal Bengali immigrants which is not valid or fair. The Rohingya can speak a kind of Bengali dialect. Still, they are an ethnic minority who have

been living in Burma for several centuries. The State authority suppressed their ethnic identity, mostly because of their Muslim religious identity. The Rohingya are Muslim, and Burma's non-Muslim Governments have not tolerated Rohingya's Muslim religion and culture. Burma's authorities and security forces perceived Islam to be a threat to their majoritarian culture and tradition. So, they engaged in the Rohingya's ethnic cleansing, persecuted them and thus attacked Islam itself.

Muslim respondents have argued that Burma's increasingly radicalised Buddhist organisations, such as *Ma Ba Tha*, the 969 Movement, and their vast number of followers perceived the visibility of Islamic symbols, culture and tradition as an existential threat to Buddhism. They recognised that military rulers in Burma had also consciously used these Buddhist extremist organisations for strategic alliances. The root of the Rohingya crisis, as perceived by the Muslim religious leaders, is due to Rohingya's religion. This perception percolated through to Bangladeshi Muslims, generating an adequate social and political pressure upon the Bangladesh Government for sheltering the persecuted Rohingya.

However, non-Muslim respondents have stated that the Rohingya have been persecuted out of ethnic hatred rather than religious consideration. Jogen Sharma (pseudonym), a Hindu religious leader, in his interview with the authors, argued:

The majority of the Rohingya are indeed Muslim. However, there are Hindu Rohingya too. The Rohingya have not been persecuted along religious lines. Alongside the Muslim Rohingya, the Hindu Rohingya were also persecuted. Many Hindu Rohingya also fled Burma to escape persecution and took shelter in neighbouring countries, including Bangladesh. The number of Hindu Rohingya is smaller than that of the Muslim Rohingya. So, the former was not as substantially focused on in the media.

The majority of Burma's Rohingya are Muslim. There also remains a small percentage of Hindu Rohingya. Despite their different religious identity, they hold similar ethnic identity and the Burmese authorities have persecuted them regardless of their religious identity. However, the Burmese authorities and radicalised Buddhist groups organised virulent campaigns and spread hatred mostly against Islam and the Muslims (Wade, 2017).

Rev. Prizum Shangma (pseudonym), a Christian priest, interviewed by the authors, has stated that 'Burma has carried out an ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya. The military conducted a drive to destroy a particular ethnic nation.' Although the Muslim respondents considered religion as the prime cause of the Rohingya's systematic exclusion and persecution, they also suggested other causes for them. Maulana Shehjad Ahmed (pseudonym), in his interview with the authors, said:

It seems that there are multiple causes of the Rohingya problem. However, the principal cause is their religious identity which is Islam. The other causes include growing Burmese ultra-nationalism, economic interests in making the Rohingya's regions of Burma an 'economic zone', interna-

tional politics and business interests of superpowers and regional powers like China, Russia, and India, Rohingya's historical and geographical connections with Bangladesh, and Burmese military's political and economic interests. However, whatever the reason/reasons is/are, the fact is, that if there would be an influential Muslim country as a neighbour of Burma, Burma could not dare to oppress the Rohingya, let alone doing genocidal acts. There are currently 57 Muslim countries in the world. However, for the disunity, weakness, and the lack of genuine leadership of the Muslim leaders, the Muslims are being oppressed throughout the world, sometimes by their own Muslim rulers and sometimes by their non-Muslim rulers.

This respondent's statement reveals a new dimension of the cause of the Rohingya crisis: the lack of unity and solidarity and the absence of leadership of the Muslim world to support and protect the Rohingya at least indirectly caused this appalling human disaster.

Ven. Nityananda Thero (pseudonym), a Buddhist priest, however, pointed to a different cause:

Burma's military rule, meaning the absence of democracy, caused the Rohingya's victimisation. Military rulers need political support from the masses, which they cannot get by voting and politics. They found the anti-Muslim rhetoric, which was developed over the last few decades, to be useful in this case. Over the years, the military rulers patronised several radicalised groups, particularly against the Rohingya. The military had no legitimacy to govern the country. So, they deliberately used these groups to fuel and promote anti-Muslim rhetoric to divert people's attention from military corruption and misgovernance. Politically wrong decisions of the ancestors of the Rohingya have also worked as a source of conflict between the minority Rohingya Muslims and the majority Rakhine Buddhists.

Historically, the Rohingya always supported the British rulers. During World War II, the majority Buddhist population supported the Japanese army, while the Rohingya took the side of the British army (Sarkar, 2019; Slim, 1956; Yegar, 1972, 2002). When the British left India and India and Pakistan were created in 1947 and also the British Government was discussing Burma's independence with the Burmese leaders, the Rohingya leaders initially aspired to found an independent Rohingya state, or wanted their region at least to join Pakistan (Yegar, 1972, 2002; Calamur, 2017; Ahmed, 2019). Whether these political decisions were 'politically wrong', as the respondent Ven. Thero argues, is subject to further discussion. However, these historical events seem to have been considered by the Burmese Buddhist population as a betrayal of their country, which also helped grow anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya rhetoric in Burma.

Over the past few decades, the extremist Buddhist nationalist-religious organisations such as *Ma Ba Tha* and the 969 Movement have been at the heart of inter-communal violence in Burma (Howe, 2018; Walton & Jerryson, 2016). *Ma Ba Tha* was formed in 2014. It has been quite influential in spreading Buddhist religious education and remained active in demanding laws to limit the rights of Muslims (Walton

& Hayward, 2014). In 2017, *Ma Ba Tha* reorganised under the name *The Buddha Dhamma Paramita Foundation* (Fink, 2018; Howe, 2018). The 969 Movement is a religious extremist organisation of Buddhist monks originating in the early 1990s. Its main message was/is Burma for Buddhists, particularly for Bamar Buddhists rather than other Buddhist tribes (Coclanis, 2013). The 969 Movement opposes what it sees as Islam's expansion in predominantly Buddhist Burma. It is responsible for much of the anti-Muslim violence in Burma. Aswin Wirathu, a leader and ideologue of 969 Movement, has widely been called a 'Buddhist Bin Laden.' He was also featured on the cover story of *Time Magazine* as 'The Face of Buddhist Terror' on July 1, 2013 (Time, 2013; Walton & Hayward, 2014). The major political parties, both the 'governing' National League for Democracy and the military's United Social Democratic Party, are dependent on these organisations for much of their electoral support, giving them substantial influence over the political process. The old military regime funded and supported Buddhist religious extremists to foster instability among regime opponents. The extremist Buddhist groups believed that Theravada Buddhism, which is adhered to by a large number of people in South and South-East Asia, would protect their religion.

Wade (2017) quoted a member of *Ma Ba Tha*:

Buddhism stands for truth and peace. So, if the Buddhist cultures vanish, truth and peace would steadily disappear. Even now, you can see *kufi* caps everywhere. It cannot be right at all. This country [Burma] was founded on the Buddhist ideology. If the Buddhist cultures vanish, Yangon will become like Saudi and Mecca. Then there would not be the influence of peace and truth. There will be more discrimination and violence. It can make for the fall of Yangon. It can also make for the fall of Buddhism. And our race will be eliminated (p. 5).

The Buddhist nationalist and religious organisations such as the 969 Movement and the *Ma Ba Tha* have used Buddhism as an effective tool to massively radicalise the Rakhine Buddhists through massive Islamophobic campaigns for decades. They have successfully indoctrinated their followers with a sense of their own superiority and the perceived danger of Muslim visibility in Burma. Their followers have readily eaten up their consistent propaganda that Islam is a threat to Buddhism and therefore to save Buddhist ideology, Islam needs to be buried. Thus, they legitimised violence against the Rohingya Muslims. They used Buddhism as an excuse for violent attacks on Islam.

However, our respondents, including the Buddhist religious leaders, have opposed this legitimisation and argued the opposite: One of the major principles of Buddhism is non-violence and *Ma Ba Tha's* inference is not the correct interpretation. Nityananda Thero (pseudonym) (Buddhist priest), stated the relationship among Buddhism, peace and violent extremism clearly:

Buddhism is based on the principle of non-violence. In Buddhism, there is no place for religious extremism. The principles of Gautama Buddha were founded on the principle of non-violence. However, sometimes the religious Gurus speak to their followers from their superficial knowledge as if it is the dictum of God. Thus, their followers become misguided and misdirected.

Some Buddhist monks and religious leaders have deviated from the fundamental principles of their religion.

The respondent's view clearly reveals a significant finding that both the Burmese anti-Rohingya Buddhist campaigners/radicalised Buddhist organisations and the Bangladeshi Buddhist religious leaders (whom we interviewed) adhere to the same Theravada School of Buddhism, yet their understanding of Buddhism conflicted with each other. While the Burmese nationalist Buddhist leaders legitimised violence against the Rohingya, the Bangladeshi Buddhist leaders regarded Rohingya's persecution as an act of anti-Buddhist ideology; the latter also considered the former to be misguided as well as deviated from Buddhism. Here is a gap between religion and the understanding of religion. Buddhist leaders in Bangladesh and Burma subscribe to the same Buddhism, yet their understanding differs. This may also be the case with regard to other religions. According to the respondents, Buddhism is a peaceful religion which rejects violence and propagates peace and harmony instead. However, Burma's extremist Buddhist organisations such as *Ma Ba Tha* and the 969 Movement have deviated from the correct path of Buddhism and engaged in violence in the name of protecting their faiths. These radical Buddhist organisations have provided enormous supports to the Burma's Government to successfully carry out an ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya.

The respondents have unanimously agreed that the successive military Governments of Burma have consciously radicalised the Buddhist groups such as the 969 Movement and the *Ma Ba Tha* for both their political and national economic interests. They have also unanimously rejected the radicalised Buddhist groups' interpretation of Buddhism and the use of religion to engage in violence against the Rohingya. However, Muslim religious leaders have considered Rohingya's 'religion', while non-Muslim religious leaders have considered Rohingya's 'ethnicity' to be the primary reason for their persecution.

Impacts on Bangladesh and the role of international organisations and communities

Bangladesh is a geographically small, economically poor, socially vulnerable, and politically unstable country. Nevertheless, with less than 0.3% of the world population, the country now hosts 4.7% of its refugees (UNDP, 2018). Respondents felt that the world has abandoned Bangladesh and dumped the whole responsibility for looking after Rohingya refugees on their poor little country. The world has flooded Bangladesh with cash for Rohingya projects, but this has been paying the Rohingya to stay in Bangladesh: the donor countries have not opened their borders for Rohingya refugees as they did for Syrian, Iraqi, Kosovo, Kurdish and Rwandan refugees. Thus, all the impact has been concentrated and contained in Bangladesh.

The significant implications of the refugee crisis for Bangladesh, as our respondents perceive, include economic, social, political, security, environmental, health, drug and religious militancy problems. Maulana Shafiur Rahman (pseudonym), in his interview with the authors, noted:

Bangladesh is a developing country. The massive influx of refugees into its territory has already created a massive burden on its economy. Although our Prime Minister has said: ‘If we take a meal, the Rohingya will also have a meal’, it will not be an easy task, although it sounds good, because we are already short of meals. Moreover, thousands of Rohingya babies are born every month to add the burden. This huge refugee population have also impacted on the domestic market. Local population, and particularly the marginalised among them, are most sufferers: prices of daily essentials in local markets have risen. Local day-labourers and more impoverished people are losing work to refugees, who are ready to accept far lower wages. Beyond economic impacts, the refugee crisis has also added social vulnerability. The problems of social integration between the locals and the refugees have furthered social unrest. Recently, the Rohingya have allegedly killed a local politician in Cox’s Bazar and a couple of his alleged killers have been killed in crossfire by law enforcing agency, which has created enormous tension between the refugees and local people.

Another non-Muslim respondent, in his interview with the authors, pointed to the security threat to Bangladesh and the region triggered by the Rohingya refugee crisis:

After the Burmese military’s ‘clearance operations’ and Rohingya’s ethnic cleansing in 2017, Al-Qaeda in the subcontinent issued a declaration in which they urged Bangladeshi Muslims to raise an armed struggle in support of the Rohingya. Earlier, Middle East-based IS called on Muslims to join them to help the Rohingya. Local and regional extremist networks are gaining influence centring on the Rohingya crisis.

Bangladesh has experienced horrible acts of militancy since the mid-2000s (Momen, 2020). The local militant groups are believed to have their international links. Although the Government has successfully suppressed their networks, they might be reorganised by exploiting the Muslim sympathy towards the persecuted Rohingya and spread their network within the Rohingya camps in the form of humanitarian support to the refugees. The religiously affiliated NGOs have been active in the refugee camps with relief aid. Often, their humanitarianism created tensions with the authorities after allegations were made that some Islam-based NGOs had distributed materials sympathetic to an Islamist party which is banned in Bangladesh. Later on, the authorities imposed restrictions on these organisations’ activities in the camps (Lewis, 2019).

Other respondents have also echoed the adverse impacts on Bangladesh from the legions of Rohingya refugees. Ven. Nityananda Thero (pseudonym), a Buddhist priest, in his interview with the authors, noted:

Bangladesh is not the origin of the Rohingya problem. However, the country has largely been impacted by it. Bangladesh’s economy has been under tremendous added pressure. Although international organisations and communities are sending huge humanitarian relief to support the refugees, this

relief does not cover all the economic costs of the Bangladesh Government; Bangladesh Government is spending huge amount of money every month for them. The Government is providing full-time administrative and security supports to them, which has made additional pressure on the different administrative bodies such as civil administration, police and para-military forces. There are also health hazards for the countrymen: we have learned from the media that a substantial number of refugees have been identified as HIV/AIDS positive. Drug trafficking from Burma to Bangladesh is well-known. Bangladesh Police have already arrested many Rohingya for carrying addictive and socially dangerous drug like ‘*Ya ba*’ [tablets containing a mixture of methamphetamine and caffeine]. The refugee camps are useful for the drug peddlers to carry on their drug, particularly *Ya ba*, business.

A rising number of Rohingya have been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS in refugee camps (Islam & Nuzhath, 2018; Molla & Jinnat, 2017). Many Rohingya refugees have worked as carriers of drug to earn their livelihood; many of them have been arrested (Aziz, 2019; Mahmud, 2018). The refugees also have harmed Bangladesh’s politics and environment (Haque, 2018; Mukul et al., 2019). Rev. Prizum Shangma (pseudonym), a Christian priest said:

There is a term called ‘refugee politics.’ The Rohingya are mostly unemployed and living in chronic poverty. They are being used politically to serve the cause of interested Bangladeshi political Parties. They have made a strong constituency of support, especially for local parties and leaders. There has been a significant adverse impact on the environment, as well. For their settlement, thousands of acres of national forests have been cleared, and a substantial part of green hills have been razed. Local people mostly rely on forests for their food, firewood, medicine, and other needs. So, a social tension has been generated between the borderland’s citizens and the refugees. Chittagong and Cox’s Bazar Districts hold most of Bangladesh’s eco-parks and biodiversity resources which have been severely affected.

The respondents perceive that the refugee crisis has multidimensional implications for Bangladesh. Bangladesh is a small and developing country, and therefore it cannot look after a vast refugee population for so long. The refugees must return to their homelands and Bangladesh, along with international communities and organisations, should work in that direction, the respondents opined.

The role of world leaders and international organisations is significant in resolving the refugee crisis in Bangladesh. The United Nations (UN) expressed sharp reactions to human rights abuses of the Rohingya. Especially, after the incident in 2012 and the recent massacre in 2017, the UN continued to urge the Burma’s Government to stop violence and allow the displaced Rohingya to return to their homes and to review relevant laws to allow equal access to citizenship and human rights (Kipgen, 2014). The UN boldly termed the 2017 Rohingya massacre as ‘a textbook example of ethnic cleansing’ (Sahana et al., 2019). However, our respondents’ perspectives reveal that the UN failed to prevent human rights abuses and ethnic cleansing and protect the Rohingya. Maulana Monowarul

Haque (pseudonym), an imam and Islamic preacher, in his interview with the authors, stated:

The international organisations have not played an active role in protecting the Rohingya ethnic minority. They have just verbally condemned the incident and only discussed the issue. However, they have not done anything effectively to impose pressure on Burma internationally. They have spoken many words in favour of the Rohingya without taking any stern measures against the Burmese Government.

The UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in December 1948. Furthermore, in the 1960s, the UN adopted International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) as well as International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). These international human rights documents suggest for a long list of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights to be followed by the State parties. Nevertheless, the Rohingya in Burma have consistently been deprived of these human rights by the Burmese Government and the international communities, including the UN, have just restricted their role to making comments over the years. The UN have not moved seriously to protect the Rohingya. Rev. Prizum Shangma (pseudonym), in his interview, noted:

There has been no useful role played by the international organisations and communities to defend Rohingya's human rights. Why don't the UN send a military force [peace keeping force] to Burma to maintain peace in Rakhine State? The fact is that the UN is not sending its soldiers to Burma. It is not creating any sufficient pressure on the country. So, the role of the international communities is questionable.

The international communities, including the UN, have not sought to enforce the duty of Burma under international law of 'responsibility to protect' (R2P) to prevent the Rohingya genocide. A nation has a duty under international law to protect the human rights of all, especially of minorities and vulnerable groups. Burma's Government and Army have not only failed in this duty; they have scoffed at it. As the international community and their organisations have failed to enforce this duty, they bear some responsibility for the genocide of the Rohingya. Maulana Anwar Pasha Chowdhury (pseudonym) (interview) said:

The UN does not do anything to protect the interest of the Muslims. The UN could have sent their soldiers to Burma. They could have imposed economic sanctions against the country. The UN has played no such active role. The world leaders of the developed countries are also playing no such part. The UN is indirectly supporting Burma. The resolution of the problem is possible should the UN take a productive initiative. The crisis is not resolved due to the veto of China and Russia, two permanent members of the Security Council of the UN. So, the actions of the UN have thus been logically questioned.

The UN's role has been limited to publishing highly critical reports of little impact, providing the most necessities and services in the refugee camps in

Bangladesh and enriching some lucky Bangladeshis with consultancies in ‘projects for’ the Rohingya at more than six times the average local wage. Especially Russia and China, which have increasingly become the ‘dictators’ last resort’ in the UN, have opposed action in the Security Council for the Rohingya (Ibrahim, 2016). The veto power of the members of the Security Council prevented the UN from making any effective steps to protect the Rohingya from being victims of notorious ethnic cleansing and genocide. Thus, the structural problem of the UN remains a significant constraint in the way of its effective functioning in the international system.

Maulana Shafiur Rahman (pseudonym) also pointed to another part of the international community who should have been involved but did nothing:

The Muslim world has not played an active role on many occasions because of its problem of leadership and disunity. However, it is noteworthy that some Muslim countries such as Turkey, Malaysia, and Saudi Arabia have stood by the Rohingya and provided them with financial and other support. These countries have boldly condemned the Rohingya’s ethnic cleansing.

Sometimes Muslim Governments have sent troops to prop up other Muslim Governments, as Saudi Arabia did in Bahrain and Yemen and as Turkey did in Syria and Iraq. However, there is disunity in terms of ideology and policy among the world Muslim leaders, and the Rohingya have no status as a nation or Government. Maulana Kalim Uddin (pseudonym) seemed to understand the limitations of the Muslim community:

The Rohingya problem is not a problem of the Muslim world alone. It is Burma’s internal problem, and Bangladesh has been its victim. The Muslim world has provided financial aid to the Rohingya. The OIC (Organisation of Islamic Countries) had meetings to discuss the issue. What else can the OIC do? OIC has no army to send to Burma to prevent the genocide of the Rohingya.

The international organisations, international community and society, and the Muslim world have had meetings, discussions, and provided critical statements against Burma’s abuse of human rights. However, they have not prevented the ethnic cleansing and genocide of the Rohingya. Powerful countries such as Russia, China and India have provided consistent support to Burma for their own economic and strategic reasons. These countries have billions of dollars’ investment in transport infrastructure, oil and gas, and other commercial projects (Zhao, 2008). Thus, the role of the international organisations and communities has yet to be proven useful to save the Rohingya and Bangladesh.

Bangladesh’s role in sheltering the Rohingya refugees has been admired throughout the world. The respondents have also appreciated the Bangladesh Government’s role in sheltering the refugees. Maulana Monowarul Haque (pseudonym) said (interview): ‘The role of Bangladesh’s prime minister in sheltering the Rohingya is praiseworthy.’ However, the Government should play a more active part to reach a permanent solution, i.e. to reinstate the refugees in their home country so that they no longer stay refugees, the respondents viewed. Maulana Kalim Uddin (pseudonym), in the interview with the authors, contended:

Bangladeshi prime minister's endeavour to shelter them [the refugees] is very commendable. However, the initiatives taken so far by the Government to reach a permanent solution to the problem do not seem much adequate. Bangladesh has not been able to organise international diplomatic support to end the crisis. Bangladesh Government's bilateral efforts with the Burmese Government to repatriate the Rohingya refugees have failed as the refugees still fear for their safety in Burma. Bangladesh Government needs to engage international organisations and the international community to repatriate the refugees and decisively end the crisis successfully.

As of August 2021, Bangladesh–Burma bilateral efforts to repatriate the refugees in Burma have been a failed exercise: no refugees agreed to repatriate voluntarily (Ellis-Petersen & Rahman, 2018). The Rohingya refugee crisis is not a bilateral problem between Bangladesh and Burma. The problem is either just a problem of Burma being a failed state in terms of governance and human rights, or it is a multi-lateral problem in terms of regional stability and world security. The solution to the problem thus lies in either creation or imposition of real democracy and protection of human rights for all, including the Rohingya, in Burma or in the concerted efforts of the international communities and organisations to protect the rights of the Rohingya whether in or outside Burma.

Thus, even getting the Rohingya home requires multilateral action to protect their rights in Burma. If that is impossible, as it is clearly in the short-term, it requires multilateral action to give the Rohingya somewhere to go. For respondents, and in terms of world security, leaving the Rohingya to rot in Bangladesh is not an option. Maulana Shehjad Ahmed (pseudonym) argues:

It is not possible to resolve this problem through bilateral efforts and negotiations. The Government of Bangladesh should seek solutions to this problem in the joint efforts of the influential Muslim states, the UN, and the OIC. The Bangladesh Government also needs to improve its diplomatic relations with the powerful countries such as Russia, China and India, which continue to support Burma and its Rohingya policy.

Boloram Chandra Das (pseudonym), a Hindu priest, said:

Bangladesh is not in a position to resolve the refugee problem unilaterally. The country needs to increase diplomatic correspondence with the influential heads of governments. The involvement of China, Russia and the UN needs to be enhanced. Notably, the Government is required to convince China and Russia to reach a sustainable solution to the problem. Bangladesh also needs to internationalise the problem to generate global awareness for the refugees.

The Rohingya refugees have encountered a genocide (Ibrahim, 2016; Zarni & Cowley, 2014), and they have been traumatised. Our respondents have overwhelmingly suggested that Burma must accept the refugees and ensure their human rights and security. The international organisations and communities must ensure that Burma accepts them as its citizens: Burma must review its current laws of ethnicity and citizenship. Bangladesh has been burdened with this refugee crisis and, thereby,

has to play a proactive role to resolve the crisis. Bangladesh needs to involve the international community in the crisis for its viable solution, the respondents opined.

The Bangladeshi religious leaders perceive that the Rohingya are Burma's citizens whom Burma's military rulers stripped of their citizenship unjustly. Burma deliberately carried out an ethnic cleansing of their people (Rohingya). The survivors fled to Bangladesh's territory and became refugees, which caused multidimensional implications for Bangladesh. The international organisations, communities and world leaders have failed to respond to the Rohingya's ethnic cleansing effectively. Bangladesh's response has been commendable. Now Bangladesh needs to involve international organisations and societies in the process of resolving the crisis through rigorous diplomatic efforts. The international community must exert pressure on Burma's Government so that it is compelled to accept the Rohingya refugees soon by ensuring their citizenship, legal rights, and safety and security.

Conclusion

The Bangladeshi religious leaders, especially, the *imams* or Muslim preachers, play an authoritative role in the society (Zakiuddin, 2015). Bangladeshi people, by and large, listen to their Islamic religious leaders and take their views seriously. These leaders' ideas and pronouncements mainly regulate Bangladeshis' moral and intellectual life. The Bangladesh Government also recognises their vital social role (Azad, 2016) and effectively engages them in social development programmes given their enormous social influence and moral authority (Adams, 2015).

The Rohingya are an ethnic minority in Rakhine State, who have been living there for generations. They are the citizens of Burma. Burma unjustly and unfairly stripped them of their citizenship and thus forced them into statelessness and vulnerability. The respondents regardless of their faiths recognised the Burmese military's 2017 'clearance operations' to be ethnic cleansing and genocide of the Rohingya ethnic minority. They have condemned the Rohingya's human rights abuse and genocide by the Burmese military and Buddhist nationalists. Specifically, both the Burmese nationalist as well as anti-Rohinga Buddhist leaders/organisations and the Bangladeshi Buddhist leaders subscribe to the same Theravada Buddhism. Yet the former legitimised Rohingya's ethnic cleansing, while the latter condemned it. The latter also regarded the former as misguided and deviated from the teaching of Buddhism. While the former invoked Buddhism to unleash violence against an ethnic minority (the Rohingya), the latter believed that there remained no place of violence in Buddhism at all.

Islamic leaders identified the Rohingya's ethnic cleansing primarily as a religious aggression against Islam. They argue that the Rohingya were persecuted because they were Islamic people. Non-Islamic leaders, however, opined that the Burmese military had conducted genocide against the Rohingya mainly out of ethnic hatred. Both Islamic and non-Islamic leaders also referred to the other causes of the Rohingya crisis, which include growing Burmese ultra-nationalism; Burma's economic interests in making the Rohingya's regions of Rakhine State an 'economic zone'; international politics and mercantile interests of superpowers and regional powers

such as China, Russia and India; Rohingya's historical and geographical connections with Bangladesh; and Burmese military's political and economic interests.

Burma's radicalised Buddhist organisations perceived Islam and Rohingya Muslims as a threat to Buddhist domination and nationalism. The Burmese military patronised and used these organisations for their strategic and political reasons. Several dominant countries such as China, Russia and India continue to support Burma and its Rohingya policy for their economic and strategic interests. All of these factors combine to destroy the Rohingya. Both Muslim and non-Muslim religious leaders have unanimously agreed that international organisations and communities failed to protect them.

The Rohingya refugee crisis impacts mostly Bangladesh. The significant implications of the refugee crisis for Bangladesh include economic, social, political, security, environmental, health, drug and religious militancy problems. The respondents have agreed that Bangladesh is not a part of the Rohingya problem; however, Bangladesh is most affected by the Rohingya crisis.

Bangladesh sheltered the Rohingya refugees on two significant moral and historical grounds: the Bengalis experienced an appalling crisis in the 1971 war of independence in which they became refugees fleeing state-sponsored persecution and the Rohingya are closely linked through language, culture and religion to the Bengalis. Both Muslim and non-Muslim Bangladeshi religious leaders appreciated Bangladesh's role in sheltering the Rohingya refugees. However, they emphasised that Bangladesh needs to increase diplomatic relations with the dominant countries of the world to resolve the Rohingya crisis. The Rohingya refugee crisis is not a bilateral problem between Bangladesh and Burma; instead, it is primarily a Burmese internal problem turning into a world problem. We offer several policy recommendations for the policy-makers concerned to surmount the Rohingya crisis:

First, the Burmese Government must stop violence and allow the displaced Rohingya to return to their homes. It must review relevant laws to allow the Rohingya equal access to citizenship and human rights.

Second, the international organisations, mainly the UN, must play an active part so that the Burma authorities ensure safety and security of the Rohingya and create a congenial environment for their return to Burma. Burma's Government must build trust among the Rohingya so that their traumatic experience of ethnic cleansing does not hinder them from returning to their home country. The UN should deploy a 'peacekeeping force' in the State of Rakhine of Burma to monitor and observe the human rights situation of the Rohingya at least for an interim period.

Third, the perpetrators of the Rohingya genocide, both from military and civilians, must be tried in the International Court of Justice. Genocidal crimes can in no way go unpunished.

Fourth, Bangladesh needs to engage international organisations and international communities in the crisis, through rigorous diplomatic efforts, to find effective and permanent solutions to the crisis. The solution is that Burma must accept the refugees, provide them with citizenship, and ensure their human rights and safety and security. International organisations and international communities have the responsibility to protect this stateless, persecuted and excluded ethnic and religious minority.

Finally, the UN should be reformed and restructured. Particularly, its Security Council should be reorganised to protect human rights and peace and security throughout the world. The current organisation of the Security Council, especially the veto power of its five permanent members, continues to prevent the UN from effective responding and functioning.

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