

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The end of the Cold War brought about a significant trend of an increase of ethnic conflicts in the international system as states were freed from the massive ideological confrontation between capitalism and communism.¹ As explained by Goldstein, ethnic conflicts are stemmed “from a dislike or hatred that members of one ethnic group (a group of people who share a common identity based on similar cultural, religious, or ancestral backgrounds) systematically feel toward another ethnic group.”² More often than not, a certain degree of uneasiness or hardship of coexisting with one another within the political and territorial boundaries of modern-day nation-states may result in violent disruptions among ethnic groups.

In most circumstances, ethnic hostilities between different groups involve “historical conflicts over specific territories or natural resources, or over one ethnic group’s economic exploitation or political domination of another.”³ More complex, however, is the cause of the divide between ethnic groups which is based on the so-called identity principle.⁴ Additionally, cases are more severe, where there is a majority-minority schism—where the dominant group controls most if not all sectors in the governmental conduct of a state, resulting in the lack of representation of minority ethnic groups, especially, in the process of policy-making.

¹ Rogers Brubaker and David D. Laitin, “Ethnic and Nationalist Violence,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 24, no. 24 (1998): 424-425, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/223488>.

² Joshua S. Goldstein and Jon C. Pevehouse, *International Relations* (New Jersey: Pearson, 2013), 162-164.

³ Goldstein and Pevehouse, *International Relations*, 162-164.

⁴ Goldstein and Pevehouse, *International Relations*, 162-164.

Similar to other regions in the world, Southeast Asia—with its “enormous ethno-religious diversity”⁵—continues to face prolonged issues of ethnic conflicts. One of the reasons behind the hostility between different ethnic groups of the region is the centuries of domination by Western colonial powers, who for their sake, established arbitrary territorial borders and alongside that, implemented the so-called “divide and rule” policy—deliberate segregation of ethnic or religious groups—within their colonies.⁶ Furthermore, with the end of colonialism, most Southeast Asian states in their processes of nation-building established national identities based on the dominant groups of their states; e.g., the Thais of Thailand, the Malays of Malaysia, and the Khmers of Cambodia. The ascendant representation of the majority groups in these states contributes to the issue of ethnic conflicts—especially, between majority and minority groups—which continues to pose “significant threats to the polities of the region.”⁷

As a multi-ethnic state, Myanmar continues to face issues of ethnic conflicts, mainly between the dominant Bamar and non-Bamar groups. Ever since the end of colonialism, it continues to be a hard task for Myanmar's "ruling elite to deal with tensions between the majority Bamars [Burmans] and the other ethnic groups, especially on the issue of autonomy for the latter who have held long-standing grievances against majority rule.”⁸ Years of British rule and the socio-cultural and

⁵ Peter Chalk, “Separatism and Southeast Asia: The Islamic Factor in Southern Thailand, Mindanao, and Aceh,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 24 (2001): 242.

⁶ Chalk, “Separatism and Southeast Asia: The Islamic Factor in Southern Thailand, Mindanao, and Aceh,” 241.

⁷ Chalk, “Separatism and Southeast Asia: The Islamic Factor in Southern Thailand, Mindanao, and Aceh,” 241.

⁸ Tin Maung Muang Than, “Dreams and Nightmares: State Building and Ethnic Conflict in Myanmar (Burma),” in *Ethnic Conflicts in Southeast Asia*, ed. Kusuma Snitwongse and W. Scott Thompson (Singapore: ISEAS Publications, 2005), 65.

political divide that caused, contributes to the inability of the ethnic groups of Myanmar in bridging their differences and constructing “a sense of belonging and bonding”⁹ with one another. Additionally, Myanmar's ineffectiveness in establishing a common unifying national identity generated countless issues of violent armed conflicts between the government’s military and many insurgent groups representing different minority ethnic groups—who fought for a vision of greater autonomy or merely, ethnic recognition. Most if not all of these groups represent the hope for manifesting the right of self-determination shared among the ethnic minorities of Myanmar.¹⁰

One prominent case of ethnic conflict in Myanmar which have triggered the establishment of some insurgent groups throughout the decades is the Rohingya conflict. This case is rather special compared to other long-standing conflicts in Myanmar, because of the stateless status of the Rohingya.¹¹ Before northern Rakhine got heavily militarized, the violent conflict mostly happened between the majority ethnic group of the region—the Rakhine—and the Rohingya. It was not until the 1960s that the state of Myanmar started to involve itself in the conflict; when the military government produced the National Security Act which banned Rohingya organizations.¹² Moreover, the Rohingya have long been regarded as non-citizens of Myanmar. “All of the successive governments denied that

⁹ Than, “Dreams and Nightmares: State Building and Ethnic Conflict in Myanmar (Burma),” 71.

¹⁰ Than, “Dreams and Nightmares: State Building and Ethnic Conflict in Myanmar (Burma),” 75.

¹¹ Gabrielle Aron, “Reframing the Crisis in Myanmar’s Rakhine State,” *US Institute of Peace* (2018), <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep20200>.

¹² Afroza Anwary, “Atrocities against the Rohingya Community of Myanmar,” *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 32, no. 1/2 (June-December 2018): 92, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26608825>.

Rohingyas were one of the country's 135 official ethnic groups, which was required to claim citizenship."¹³ For the longest time, the government of Myanmar has conducted countless military crackdowns in the region of northern Rakhine, causing the deaths of hundreds if not thousands of Rohingya and forcing millions to flee to countries such as Bangladesh and other neighboring Southeast Asian states.

Throughout the years there have been a couple of insurgencies that have emerged in relation to the Rohingya conflict. More recently, however, a group was established by the name of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). ARSA was formally launched as an insurgent group in 2016 when it attacked Myanmar's border check-posts; killing more than ten security personnel.¹⁴ Additionally, the group is also considered responsible for more coordinated attacks against Myanmar police and border security officers in the following year.¹⁵ These attacks were followed by an extreme military crackdown on the Rohingya in 2017 causing the deaths of around 7,000 people including children, and the displacement of more than 700,000 Rohingyas—most of whom fled to Bangladesh.¹⁶

Having long been a common destination for Rohingya seeking refuge, Bangladesh currently hosts nearly one million Rohingya living in established refugee camps located near Cox's Bazaar, Chittagong. The Bangladeshi government runs two refugee camps—the Kutupalong camp network and the

¹³ Anwary, "Atrocities against the Rohingya Community of Myanmar," 93.

¹⁴ Bashar, "Rohingya Crisis and Western Myanmar's Evolving Threat Landscape," 14-15.

¹⁵ Anwary, "Atrocities against the Rohingya Community of Myanmar," 96.

¹⁶ Alistair D. B. Cook and S. Nanthini, "Pathways for ASEAN Contributions to Sustainable Peace and Security in Rakhine State, Myanmar," *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies* (2020): 5, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep24331.6>.

Nayapara camp—in the area mentioned.¹⁷ Cox’s Bazaar and the bordering regions of Bangladesh are known for their crime-ridden nature (with rampant cases of drug trafficking, murders, and militancy).¹⁸ The existence of camps whereby hundreds of thousands of refugees live without adequate provision of basic rights such as education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, in turn, contributes to the instability of said area. This issue as well as the existence of ARSA in the refugee camps and its operations launched from the Myanmar-Bangladeshi border, therefore, beg the question of how the insurgent group’s involvement in the Rohingya conflict threatens Bangladesh’s national security.

With the consequential role of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army leading up to the 2017 Rohingya refugee crisis, the topic raised for this research paper is valuable to discuss. Looking into the details of the reasons that contribute to the establishment of the group, its actions, and how these actions bear consequences as well as challenges—not only for the Rohingya or the state of Myanmar but also for Bangladesh—would be beneficial in further understanding the complexities of the Rohingya conflict.

1.2 Research Questions

With the information provided in the background, I choose to proceed with a discussion on the issue of the Rohingya conflict through conducting a study on the case of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army and how the group’s involvement in

¹⁷ Thomson Reuters Foundation News, “Life for the Rohingya in the world’s largest refugee camp,” *Thomson Reuters Foundation News*, <https://news.trust.org/packages/life-for-the-rohingya-in-the-worlds-largest-refugee-camp/> (accessed November 24, 2021).

¹⁸ Bertil Lintner, “Religious Extremism and Nationalism in Bangladesh,” in *Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia* (Honolulu: Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2004), 413-429.

said conflict threatens Bangladesh's national security. With that said, I suggest the following research questions:

1. What reasons contribute to the establishment of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA)?
2. How does ARSA's involvement in the Rohingya conflict threaten Bangladesh's national security?

1.3 Research Objectives

Aligned with the research questions mentioned above, the objectives of this research are:

1. To mention and explain the reasons that contribute to the establishment of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA).
2. To explain in detail how ARSA's involvement in the Rohingya conflict threatens Bangladesh's national security.

The outcome of this research will supplement scholarly studies on the issue of the Rohingya conflict and the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army. Additionally, it will elucidate the establishment of ARSA and its involvement in the Rohingya conflict and the security implications of said involvement in regards to Bangladesh's national security.

1.4 Research Significance

This research aims to explain thoroughly the causes of the establishment of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army and how the group's involvement in the Rohingya conflict threatens Bangladesh's national security. I believe that this research will contribute to studies on the complex and long-standing issue of the

Rohingya conflict by explaining one of the—less-discussed—actors which have played a consequential role in the recent development of the conflict particularly since 2016—i.e., ARSA. In addition to that, this research may also supplement existing scholarly studies on non-traditional security issues prevalent in South and Southeast Asia concerning insurgencies. Lastly, I hope that this research may come useful to those seeking to conduct research of their own on a similar topic or to expand their knowledge on the complexities of the Rohingya conflict.

1.5 Structure of Thesis

The first chapter introduces the topic of this study through the provision of preliminary and background information on the Rohingya conflict and the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army. Additionally, the research questions, the objectives, and the significance of this study are also clearly spelled out in this chapter.

The second chapter, theoretical framework, includes a review of published scholarly literature on the topic of this thesis as well as the international relations theory and concepts considered appropriate in analyzing the findings of this study.

The third chapter, methodology, includes a clear explanation about the research approach, research method, data collection technique, and data analysis technique which were used in the step-by-step process of conducting this study.

The fourth chapter is the core of this study. In this chapter, the data or findings collected in relation to the research questions mentioned in the first chapter were analyzed through the use of international relations theory and concepts explained in the second chapter.

The fifth chapter includes concluding remarks and a summary of the findings explained in the fourth chapter as well as a reiteration of the significance of this study on the basis of the findings.

With the introduction on the topic as well as the objectives of this research given, the next chapter of this thesis includes a literature review and an explanation on the international relations theory and concepts that will be used in analyzing the data collected in chapter four.

