

IDENTITY, RELIGION AND GLOBAL JIHAD: FACTFILE OF CHINA AND MYANMAR

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ABSTRACT

The essay describes evolution of Islamic radicalism in China and Myanmar during modern times. The paper further argues how the Rohingya crisis in Rakhine area of Myanmar and concomitant exodus of refugees has spurred pan-Islamic movement in neighbouring countries like Bangladesh. The essay provides insight into source of funding of the engaged groups and can be a useful guide for policy makers in the region to stall the rising danger of global jihad in cockpit of Asia.

Keywords: al-Qaeda, Bamar, Hui, jihad, Rakhine, Rohingya, Shan, Sittwe, Yunnan.

INTRODUCTION

In 2012, huge anti-Muslim riots swept across Myanmar cities and towns. The primary targets were the Rohingya, when, in Rakhine, four men of their community allegedly raped a Buddhist woman. Crowd razed houses of Muslims who were not Rohingya and even Chinese Muslims called Panthays or Hui were not spared. The Panthays are descendants of Ghengis Khan, whose grandson Kublai Khan ruled China from 1260-1294 AD by establishing the Yuan dynasty. Kublai descended on Yunnan in 1253 AD and subjugated the Dali Kingdom by his conquest. The history of Panthays or Hui Muslims of Yunnan begins with Kublai's conquest of the region.

The Panthays settled in Northern Myanmar in Shan, Kachin and Sagaing province after the Panthay rebellion (1856-1873 AD) which was crushed by Qing Emperor in China, making the community flee across Chinese borders. Many of them got involved in the Opium trade of the Golden Triangle but the rebellion shifted the drug trade from China to further south inside Myanmar.

China in their own country has been battling Muslim separatists in Xinjiang province from late 1960s. Anti-Muslim riots in Myanmar fended off any threat from its southern axis, which might have emerged as hotbed for Islamic fundamentalists in southwest China. The majority Bamars or ethnic Myanmarese are frustrated with the increasingly virulent rhetoric of Ashin Wirathu and Ma Ba Tha of the powerful Buddhist clergy of the Theravada sect.

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In China, only 9% of its population are of ethnic Muslim origin. Muslims in Myanmar today constitute 2.3 percent (2014 census) of its population and half of it are in Rakhine province alone. Just like China is wary of Muslims revolt (the Panthay) and later the Xinjiang rebellion, hardline opinion in Myanmar and China are not dissimilar. The Muslims are considered a threat by junta chiefs of Myanmar. To appease the clergy, they adopt similar positions as far as immigrants are concerned.

UYGHUR'S OF XINJIANG IN CHINA: BEGINNING OF JIHAD

Xinjiang, which was annexed into China in the mid-18th Century, was populated by Turkic speaking Uighur or Uyghurs. From 1949, the re-emergence of a new and centralized power enabled China to assert sovereignty over the region. The communist regime then introduced a policy for minorities modeled on the Soviet pattern. Fifty-five national minorities together with the Han make up the Chinese nation. After Turkish-speaking Uyghurs province of Xinjiang was made an autonomous region in 1955 AD, there began settlement of Han Chinese in Xinjiang. This internal colonization sowed seeds of the future revolt.

The Uyghur identity crisis of 1960s erupted once disproportionate increase of Han settlement was perceived. They began to express themselves with the formation of East Turkistan People's Party (ETPP) in the year 1968, and it went underground.

In 1980s, student unrest began in Xinjiang as Afghan war unfolded across the Durand line and fighters from the Islamic world joined the war alongside Afghan Mujahideen to battle Soviet troops in Afghanistan. In 1989, Tiananmen Square pro-democracy protest and its fall-out led the Chinese security apparatus to stifle dissent of any form across China. In the Baren (near Kashgar) insurrection of April, 1990 led by Zeydin Yusup of Turkistan Islamic Party, first acts of sabotage happened in Xinjiang. In February 1992, on the eve of the Chinese New Year, three persons were killed in a bus at Urumqi by Shock Brigade of Islamic Reformist Parties. On 25th February, 1997 four bomb blasts killed 9 and injured 74 in Urumqi, suspected to be carried out by East Turkistan National Alliance.

In another major attack on March 7th, 1997, the bomb went off in a bus in Peking's Xidan district leaving 30 persons injured and two dead. Responsibility for this attack, the first to affect Peking since 1949, was claimed by Islamist of East Turkistan Freedom Party based in Turkey. There were reports in Chinese media that Uyghurs in Kazakhstan joined Islamic Renaissance Party in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and Islamic movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) or Hizb-ut- Tahrir (HT). There were also reports that 10,000 Uzbeks went to Pakistan for religious training with Jamaat-e- Islami and Tablighi-Jamaat. In 1996, China implemented its *Strike Hard (da fa)* campaign including in Xinjiang. In wake of 9/11, China accelerated the *Strike Hard* in Xinjiang.

By early November 2001, police closed 13 illegal religious schools and arrested more than fifty persons to control religious extremism in Xinjiang. In 2008, the anti-communist Uyghur separatism forces called Turkistan Islamic Party threatened Beijing Olympics Games.

East Turkestan Information Centre (ETIC) based in Germany led by Abudujelili Kalakash, the World Uyghur Youth Congress (WUYC), ETHO (East Turkestan Liberation

Organization) and ETIM (East Turkestan Islamic Movement) are listed as terror groups by the Chinese security forces. ETIM emerged as a front-line Islamist group in Xinjiang and they established contact with Osama Bin Laden of Al-Qaeda. Chinese media released figures of 200 Uyghurs in Bin Laden Camps who participated in the Afghan Jihad, fighting alongside Hizb-e-Islami, Taliban and IMU. Salafi-Jihadist organization Lashkar-e-Taiba enrolled Uzbeks for Jihad in Jammu & Kashmir as did Hizbul Mujahideen. On 1st March 2014, 29 people were killed and 130 injured in Kunming railway station in a knife attack by Uyghur Jihadis that marked the coming of Jihad to the Chinese heartland.

JIHAD AND MYANMAR

Ne Win who seized power on 2 March 1962, followed a hardline policy against the Rohingya. On the eve of Burma's independence on 4 Jan 1948, Ne Win as Deputy Chief of Army battled the Mujahideen forces of Rohingya who wanted to join Pakistan. But the rebellion was put down and most of the leaders were arrested.

In 1978, Ne Win, a veteran of Rohingya insurgency launched Ops Naga Min (Dragon King) in Arakan. This operation started a long saga of migration from Arakan to Chittagong's Cox Bazar. As a consequence of these operations, clashes began between ethnic Buddhist or Rakhine people and Rohingya at the local level. The Cold War of late 1970s was all set to change the Rohingya issue as thousands of Bangladeshis joined the Afghan jihad launched across the Durand line in Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

By this time, Cox Bazar hosted a good 1-1.5 lakh Rohingya as the first Islamist group RSO (Rohingya Solidarity Organization). ARNO (Arakan Rohingya National Organization) made their appearance in Cox Bazar with a sprinkling of the fundamentalism spread among the Muslim community in Upper Burma in 1980s and 1990s.

The 1990s saw a much more concerted effort by the jihadi elements to take up the Rohingya issue as a fight against Myanmar's discrimination towards Rohingya. Burma meanwhile passed the Citizenship Bill in 1982 that does not recognize the Rohingya as one of the 135 ethnic groups of the country, denying them citizenship rights, and rendering them stateless.

Parallel to the growth of Rohingya resistance in Arakan (now Rakhine), the Rakhine Buddhists showed secessionist tendency from late 1960s inspired by similar insurgencies by other ethnic communities like Karens, Kachins, Chins bordering Arakan and Shans. The ALA (Arakan Liberation Army) is fighting the junta for an ethnic Rakhine autonomy. The Naga Min operations targeted the ALA and the pro-government militias that came up in Arakan took on the Rohingya, as Ne Win's policies turned sharply against them.

Al-Qaeda the harbinger of Islamic jihad was born in 1988 under its leader, the Saudi citizen Osama Bin Laden (OBL) who rallied jihadi forces to victory in Afghanistan with the Mujahideen rebels. The Bangladeshi component of the Afghan jihad returned home to form HUII-B i.e. Harkat-ul-Mujahideen-Bangladesh) in 1989 and took up the Rohingya issue. They only disclosed their formation in Dhaka in 1992, as the jihadist took out Afghan victory celebration in the streets.

By early 1990s, the first of the cadres of Harkat ul jihad ul Arakan under Abdul Quddus could send a forty-member team to train in Afghanistan and Libya. With this the global jihadi outfit al Qaeda tested the next jihadi venture after Afghanistan.

The policy of Ne Win vis à vis Rohingya are followed by his successors who ruled Myanmar from 1988 after he abdicated the post consequent to pro-democracy movement in Myanmar. The quasi-military nature of Than Shwe and Thein Sein's premiership in Myanmar implemented Tatmadaws (Myanmar military) strategy of *kill all, burn all, destroy all*, following the Japanese Army doctrine in Burma during World War II. This strategy was continued until 2012. The Cox Bazar Rohingya refugee camps became breeding ground of extremism fed by pan-Islamic jihad by preachers like Al Qaeda's Anwar al Awlaki (killed in US drone attack in 2011) and his follower Md Jasimuddin Rahmani of Bangladesh.

A shadow group of Harkah ul Yakin was formed by Karachi-born Ataullah who immediately went underground in 2011. Just in the aftermath of anti-Muslim riots, this group surfaced as self-styled ARSA (Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army). Between 2012-2017, Ataullah and his group could launch operations against Tatmadaw, culminating in August 2017 attack that left over fifty security forces of Myanmar dead. The emergence of ARSA gave renewed push for a joint force called Tatmadaw operations that saw over 600,000 Rohingya fleeing to Cox Bazar after the Aug 2017 ARSA attack.

From 2009 in the Hpakant jade mines of Kachin, a group of Buddhist Rakhine workers were recruited and trained by KIA (Kachin Independence Army) at Myanmar-Chinese border. The group called Arakan Army (AA) began as junior partner of Northern Alliance comprising of ethnic armies of Shans, Was, Palaungs and Kachins that took up arms against Tatmadaw. As a new force, AA insurgents fought Tatmadaw in Shan state in joint operations, earning praise from Alliance members. By 2014, taking a North South Corridor from Sagaing to Yesago (near Irrawaddy) to Kalay and another 130 kms beyond, the AA cadres marched to the rising massif of Chin hills. They established their base in Paletwa in Chin hills, across the Kaladan river in 2014. The Kaladan rises in the Chin hills, passing through Mizoram and drains into Sittwe port of Rakhine. Sittwe is also the capital city of Rakhine. From 2015, AA could infiltrate south into Arakan and forge links with Rakhine heartland in Buddhist townships of Kyawktaw, Mrauk-U, Min Bya and Ponnagyun close to Sittwe. AA also infiltrated into Rohingya townships of Buthidaung and Rathedaung. In 2016 it overran bases of ALA (armed wing of Arakan Liberation Party) in Paletwa. AA's standing with FPNCC (Federal Political Negotiating Committee) which declined NCA (National Ceasefire Agreement) in 2015 helped it to fill up the political vacuum that arose with Islamist upsurge within Rakhine.

Groups like UWSA (United Wa State Army) of 30,000 cadres, KIA (Kachin Independence Army) with 10,000 cadres and AA with 8000-9000 combatants is now considered as top three insurgent armies of FPNCC.

The Rohingya crisis which triggered an exodus of a million plus refugees got a renewed interest in pan-Islamic Islamist groups as ISIS made its appearance in 2014. This Salafist

group of ultraorthodox Islam made rapid inroads in Bangladesh and with the expatriate Bangladeshis eager to join it. Two such nodes are Canadian Bangladeshi Tamim Ahmed Choudhary and 'Ex Cadet Islamic Learning Forum' of Japanese Bangladeshi Saifullah Ozaki. On 1st July 2016, Tamim Ahmed Choudhary's Neo-JMB which pledged allegiance to ISIS carried out a gruesome attack on holy artisan bakery at Gulshan Dhaka killing 20 people, mostly foreigners including an Indian student.

The emergence of global Jihad Organization in Xinjiang and Rakhine province of China and Myanmar respectively from 1990s after the Afghan wars is quite unsettling for the geo-political balance in Asia as terrorist groups by overt use of violence try to influence the national policy of target nations.