Report: Arakan (Rakhine State) – A Land in Conflict on Myanmar's Western Frontier

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Rakhine State, historically known as Arakan, represents the post-colonial failures of Myanmar in microcosm: ethnic conflict, political impasse, militarisation, economic neglect and the marginalisation of local peoples. During the past decade, many of these challenges have gathered a new intensity, accentuating a Buddhist-Muslim divide and resulting in one of the greatest refugee crises in the modern world. A land of undoubted human and natural resource potential, Rakhine State has become one of the poorest territories in the country today.

Arakan National Conference, Kyaukpyu, 2014 / Photo credit The Irrawaddy

The current crisis is often characterised as a "Buddhist Rakhine" versus "Muslim Rohingya" struggle for political rights and ethnic identity. But the challenges of achieving democracy, equality and the right of self-determination have always been more complex and nuanced than this. Arakan's vibrant history reflects its frontline position on a cultural and geo-political crossroads in Asia.

Taking a narrative approach, this report seeks to analyse the challenges facing Rakhine State and its peoples during a critical time of transition from military rule. As always in Myanmar, a balanced understanding of local societies and perspectives is essential in a territory that reflects different ethnic, religious and political viewpoints. In the case of Rakhine State, the social and political challenges facing the peoples have been little documented or understood. Decades of civil war and international isolation have resulted in a dearth of reporting on the ethnic conflicts and governmental failures that have had a devastating impact on the ground. Equally resonant, the instabilities in Arakan cannot be separated from the challenges of peace and inclusion for all peoples and faiths in the sub-Asian region.

The situation is critical. While armed conflict and humanitarian suffering continue in northern Rakhine State, a new "great game" is underway as the United Nations, China, India and other international actors seek to engage over Arakan's political and economic future. It is vital that the voices of the local peoples are heard. Rakhine State should not be considered a peripheral or exceptional case of ethno-political crisis in modern-day Myanmar. The ambition must be that in the coming decade Rakhine State becomes a model for informed and progressive change. Equality and justice for Arakan's peoples are integral to peace and stability in the country at large.

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• TNI. Programmes: Myanmar in Focus. Series Special Reports. 18 December 2019: https://www.tni.org/en/publication/arakan-rakhine-state