

Guest Column

Myanmar's Junta Plays Both Rakhine and Rohingya for Fools

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The military regime is playing the ethnic card again in Rakhine State, and many Rakhine and Rohingya people are falling for it again. To clarify, it is the more radical of both communities who are dancing like junta puppets.



Rohingya protest in the Aung Mingalar quarter of Sittwe on March 21, 2024.

In the last six years, relations between the Rohingya and Rakhine have improved significantly. Many events and acts of kindness have contributed to this. Rohingya supported the Rakhine with food and transport during the Myanmar military's war against the Arakan Army (AA) in 2018-19. Rohingya boatmen transported fleeing Rakhine across the Kaladan River. There have been peaceful sports competitions between communities organized by themselves and the AA. After Cyclone Mocha, Rohingya distributed what little aid they received to Rakhine as well as their own communities. Now Rohingya can walk peacefully around Sittwe Town.

However, many of those who lack education and critical thinking and contact with the other community still harbor old prejudices. As far as the Rohingya are concerned it seems to be those who have been living outside Rakhine State for some time, or were actually born abroad, that still express hatred. One Twitter (now X) user's name is provocatively "Arakan is Rohingya's State", while another stated on Twitter: "There is no justice without fighting." This feeds into the old Rakhine worry, which has been around since the end of World War II, that Rohingya want their own state. The vast majority want the reinstatement of their citizenship and to live in peace.

Now, as the military are losing badly in Rakhine, in desperation, they are playing the race card again. A while ago there was a robbery and shooting in the Rohingya Aung Mingalar quarter of Sittwe that was blamed on the AA, but was subsequently found to have been carried out by the Arakan Liberation Army (ALA) working as a proxy for the junta. The junta later gathered 400 Rohingya from internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in Sittwe on Feb. 19 as part of their nationwide conscription drive. After two weeks of "training" at a military base next to Thet Key Pyin Village, which the junta documented for propaganda purposes, they quickly put them on the front line to be killed by the majority Rakhine AA.

After the military genocide against the Rohingya in 2017, it is pretty clear that Rohingya don't want

to join the junta military, but some Rakhine still believe they do, and some have insulted and threatened them for joining the military after seeing the junta training videos. As a result, many Rohingya are again cautious about going to the town market. The military forced the Rohingya to protest against the AA in Buthidaung Township on March 19. One person from each household had to attend and wave placards they were given. Also on March 19, at about 1.30 p.m., about 50 Rohingya were arrested by the junta in Kayin Tan village, Maungdaw Township to again be used as human shields.

While many Rakhine are not fooled into believing the Rohingya want to fight with the military who committed genocide against them, some surprisingly do believe it. For example, after the Buthidaung protest, a Rakhine woman made a TikTok video insulting the Rohingya for protesting against the AA, calling them “kala”—a very pejorative term—and threatening them. Also, a racist monk was found to have stated that 300 Muslims came out of a mosque shouting “jihad”. The next anti-AA protest was in Aung Mingalar, the Rohingya quarter of Sittwe, where the media were invited to watch an orchestrated demonstration by Rohingya.

In a related issue, it was reported that in Buthidaung some Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) members are providing training to Rohingya. The military is aware of this and there is speculation that the junta is cooperating with ARSA. There have been rumors about ARSA links to the Myanmar military from the time ARSA first appeared in October 2016. A Rohingya WhatsApp group reported some Rohingya houses had been burnt in Ward 5 of Buthidaung on March 20 and that approximately 1,000 Rohingya were rendered homeless. Rumors are being spread that the AA cooperated with Rakhine extremists in this arson. The author has been unable to substantiate the arson, which in itself may be an example of how the junta’s games can incite rumors and ethnic conflict. The traction that some of the military regime’s blatant attempts at ethnic division have had is seen in the fact that the AA head has requested Rohingya not to go into Kyauktaw town for a few weeks.

The latest anti-AA protest was on the morning of March 23 in the Bumay Rohingya quarter of Sittwe town, orchestrated by the junta following the same program as the previous ones: i.e., one participant demanded from each household, placards and printed papers prepared, and media invited. This time, Rohingya were threatened with conscription into the military if they didn’t attend the protest. The protest lasted from 9 to 10 a.m. with about 1,000 participants, most of whom were children. Interestingly, it was reported by a local that about 100 Rakhine were also forced to join the protest. Plainclothes police monitored the protest, which was recorded for junta social media.

Desperately trying to survive in Rakhine State with a large defeat looming, the junta are fomenting ethnic divide as fast as possible. The question is how deep the reconciliation between Rakhine and Rohingya is, to what extent they will see through and reject the junta’s games, and to what extent they will allow themselves to be the junta’s puppets again.

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P.S.

• The Irrawaddy. March 26, 2024:
<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/myanmars-junta-plays-both-rakhine-and-rohingya-f-or-fools.html>

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