

Bangladesh is hardening its policies on the Rohingya refugees to fend off another refugee crisis from the North

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While the issue of refugees has been a rather contentious one in Europe for the last few years, receiving continuous and widespread media coverage, far away in Bangladesh two refugee situations have become increasingly a source of tension in the past month or so. One of them is the already overblown Rohingya refugee crisis, which had received much international attention two years ago when it became a major crisis. The other one is the potential refugee crisis in Assam, where a large number of local residents are being dropped from the National Register of Citizens, and local politicians are talking about sending back these 'illegal Bangladeshis'. As Bangladesh faces significant challenges with these two situations, what the countries involved in these crises decide may have an impact well into the future for the entire region.

The situation became complicated after the Bangladeshi Government realized that the repatriation efforts so far have not yielded any result. Myanmar has not only taken back hardly any refugees, they are making it more obvious that they don't intend to take anyone back. The refugees, who have been living in makeshift camps in the Cox's Bazar district, also appear to be unwilling to relocate to a new offshore location. They claim, and possibly rightfully so, that this offshore location will only further isolate them from the world, which would lead to them being forgotten by everyone.

Two years on, the situation with the Rohingya refugees has remained at an impasse. On the second anniversary of the persecution, thousands of Rohingya refugees took part in a protest in Cox's Bazar. This was noted in many places around the world, but this especially rang an alarm in Dhaka, which was caught off guard with such an organized gathering. Since then, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) have appeared to become more stringent in imposing limitations and restrictions in an effort to control the refugees. There has been a string of reports on various media outlets that portrayed the refugees in a negative manner, trying to influence Bangladeshi popular sentiment against the refugees. GoB has hardened its administrative control over the refugee camps, and stricter rules have been imposed. NGOs and other organizations that work with the refugees have been scrutinized and moderated. Mobile phone networks in the camps have been severed. There are talks now to build fences around the camps, which would truly be a negative step.

In international settings, the GoB has also expressed more strongly its concerns regarding the lack of will from the Myanmar side. Government rhetoric has shifted towards the 'Rohingya as a burden' angle. All of this indicate that perhaps the more difficult days filled with tension regarding this issue could probably be upon us. Now there are a few reasons perhaps as to why the government of Bangladesh is playing it tough when it comes to supporting the Rohingya.

First, as has always been the policy of the Bangladesh government, they do not want to give the semblance of a modest or decent life in Bangladesh for the Rohingya people. The GoB has always allowed the provision of rudimentary life sustaining basics to the Rohingya refugees. In fact, one could argue that the Rohingya who are registered with the UNHCR in Bangladesh have never received all that the state should provide to refugees. Instead, they were only allowed the bare

minimum. They were never in the past officially allowed to study further than the primary level, even though some Rohingya have done that. They were not allowed to leave the camp. They were not allowed to work. They were also not allowed to marry other Bangladeshis. Perhaps many of these regulations in the past have been more visible on paper than in practice, but they certainly existed as policy. For the GoB, the fear always used to be that the possibility of a more modest life in Bangladesh would encourage further voluntary or involuntary arrival of more Rohingyas.

Second, as it becomes clearer that Myanmar is blatantly avoiding repatriation of their countrymen, who should be considered citizens even though the Government in Myanmar does not recognize that, the long-term consequences of dealing with this large population has begun to loom before Bangladeshi policymakers. There have been some opinions or commentary that perhaps Bangladesh could consider giving citizenship to the Rohingya refugees. While this sounds like a very benevolent gesture, something that would have been regarded as the right thing to do in an ideal situation, in reality this is a rather difficult decision to make. To begin with, it truly should be the Government of Myanmar that remedies the grievances caused by their actions to their people. There are other domestic issues for Bangladesh as well. Giving citizenship to the Rohingya will immediately invite the question of the long-stranded originally Urdu-speaking Bihari population in various camps in Bangladesh, most notably in Dhaka. If the GoB gave Rohingya citizenship, it goes without saying that the government would have no logical excuse left to deny citizenship to these Biharis. Would there also be an uproar among the Bangladeshis with such a large number of new citizens? This is hard to say, but most certainly the local Bangladeshis in the Chittagong region will not be amused by the prospect of officially sharing resources with the newcomers. Not to mention the first point again. If Bangladesh starts giving citizenship to the Rohingya, then no doubt Myanmar will do everything to send the rest of the Rohingya to Bangladesh.

Third, integrating the Rohingya into the Bangladeshi economy and society could be a concern for the GoB. Even though one could argue that in a place like Bangladesh where many of its citizens don't get to enjoy all the benefits of the modern state, society, and economy, the Rohingya could somewhat easily fit in. They could become a part of the large impoverished population of the country. It is not true that all the Rohingya are without skills or education. In fact, there are probably quite many of them who could very quickly pick up certain professions and earn a livelihood. Many others could be quickly trained by NGOs who have such skills, and then join the labor force in Bangladesh. It is doubtful that the arrival of the Rohingya in the workforce would put a significant strain or burden on the labor market and cause disruption. In terms of language and socio-cultural aspects, the Muslim Rohingya should not create much uproar either in Bangladeshi society, as perhaps they can become another of the minor ethnic groups. But the settlement of a large number of Muslim population would change the socio-cultural balance in the already difficult hill regions in Bangladesh.

Fourth, the Rohingya refugees bring in quite a bit of expediencies with them, although probably none for themselves. No doubt that a good amount of foreign aid and finances are coming in for the Rohingya cause. It also allows various charitable and development oriented organizations around the world to continue their drive for funds in the name of the Rohingya. But perhaps most importantly of all, GoB gets quite a bit of bargaining leverage in the international arena. One can argue that it was this international leverage that led to Bangladesh taking in such a large number of refugees in the first place. The timing was right, as the GoB was starting to face criticism regarding its various responsibilities to democracy and human rights. That period also followed the difficult pressures received internationally due to the War Crimes Tribunal and its proceedings carried out by GoB. The Rohingya card, as it has been mentioned, had the capacity to counter it all. But this card comes at a cost, as is plainly laid bare in front of us.

More recently though, another developing situation has alarmed the Government of Bangladesh.

This is due to the fact that in Assam, which is situated north of the border of Bangladesh, a large number of people have been kept outside of the National Register of Citizens by the Indian Government. Furthermore, these individuals have been labeled as illegal Bangladeshis living in India. This labeling is truly worrisome as it bears the hallmarks of another developing refugee situation. Myanmar used the same kind of wording to popularize the idea that the Rohingya are illegal Bangladeshis living in their territory. Furthermore, local politicians including elected members of the parliament have fueled the rhetoric of deportation, as a result of which there is a belief in some part of the local population that the 'illegal Bangladeshis' will be sent back. India has also started building fenced camps in order to house the 'illegals.'

The Government of Bangladesh perhaps wanted to take a pre-emptive stance before these Indian residents are pushed into Bangladesh. Their hope is that hardening the policies towards one set of refugees should give a signal to all. The question is, how credible is the possibility that India will send a large number of its people to Bangladesh? The situation regarding the Indian NRC was a political calculation, which was mainly around election politics. Even though it perhaps has started to get its own life, would it not be possible for the Indian political or judicial system to subdue it? Even though the Government of India is currently trying to manage this situation by calling it a small internal matter, it does not provide the assurance that a solution will be easily found to this challenge.

These two developing issues have the potential to be real challenges for the Government of Bangladesh for years to come. It appears that Bangladesh is reaching a critical stage in decision-making regarding the Rohingya in particular. Currently pressure is being created on the Rohingya by presenting them in a negative light through the media to the Bangladeshi population. How exactly it is supposed to defuse future tension is completely unknown. It would be very unwise to push the Rohingya further into the wall. Instead of vilifying them, a more harmonious solution must be proposed by the GoB. But that is exactly what they are afraid of doing at the moment, due to the fear of a large scale population push-in from India. But one thing is for certain, the decisions these countries take now will have a long-lasting impact for the entire region.

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P.S.

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