

## Rohingya

After some weeks of headlines about Thailand's navy pushing boatloads of Rohingya from across the Bay of Bengal back into the ocean, it was only a matter of time before there was an outburst from a Myanmar government official somewhere or another. In a letter to newspapers in Hong Kong that New Mandala has helpfully [posted online](#), the consul-general said that the Rohingya are not "Myanmar People" and, as has been widely reported, called them "as ugly as ogres" in comparison to his own handsome appearance. It remains to be seen as to whether or not his undiplomatic language will in any way affect the performance of his duties, but to date his government has not publicly rebuked him and nor has the Association of Southeast Asian Nations made an open complaint. (Neither is there any photograph on the consulate's website to confirm whether or not his complexion is as fine as he insists.)

Stephen [commented on NM](#) that, "A tragic aspect of this issue is not so much that [the consul] Ye Myint Aung reflects the 'official Myanmar position' (which he does...), but that he reflects a view widespread in civilian circles." Unfortunately, this is true. Decades of institutionalized chauvinism and historical memories built around communal conflicts from the last century and before ensure that the Rohingyas attract resentment among people from all walks of life in and from Myanmar, most of who may never have met one.

Some of the blame for this hostility lies not with army officers or diplomats, but with academics that have either joined in Rohingya-bashing or have published works that have been used to counter Rohingya demands for recognition. One scholar that spends much of his time coming up with material to deny the historical existence of the Rohingya is Dr. Aye Chan at Kanda University of International Studies, in Chiba City, Japan. Aye Chan asserts that there is no known reference to Rohingya before the 1950s. He has written a variety of pieces on this point, including in the [SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research](#). Although most of his work is crafted to avoid sounding prejudiced, anti-Rohingya activists use it to advance bigoted attacks on their opponents. His comments in online articles and radio interviews also come closer to revealing his true opinions. For instance, in December last year he [wrote on](#) the granting of refugee status in Japan to the author of a book on the Rohingya, ironically accusing him of abusing "the academic platform for political purposes" and continuing that,

The bizarre phenomenon created by [the author] Zaw Min Htut and his precursors is the literary wing of the political scheme that aims at changing the northwestern part of Arakan (Rakhine) State of Union of Myanmar, the original homeland of Arakanese (Rakhine) people into the Rohingya State.

This article is found, among other places, on Rakhapura.com, which includes a variety of contents, many of which can only be described as hate-mongering, like, "Bangladeshis: Unwanted guests in its [sic] neighboring countries" and a "report" that begins with "Muslims of Maungdaw are illegal

intruders from Chittagong and from other sides.” The site’s designer has also sown his political colours to the side column by linking with the website of a Hindu extremist group.

Then there is U Khin Maung Zaw, a former lecturer at Rangoon Institute of Technology and Humboldt University, who in 1993 presented a paper inquiring after the identity of the Rohingya at a conference in Berlin, in which he wrote that,

The so-called ‘Rohingyas’ nowadays are real illegal immigrant [sic] and most of them are illiterates, know nothing about history but have only heard about the name ‘Rohingyas’ and they claim themselves to be ‘Rohingyas’. Some Muslims in Burma and Bangladesh helping them also don’t know the origin and created the fabricated and fanciful stories mentioned above. The people backing the so-called ‘Rohingya Movement’ are fanatic Muslims and some Muslim countries, who do not know the reality but help them because of Muslim solidarity and brotherhood.

Shamefully, the organizers published the paper (uploaded to NM [here](#)) among the conference proceedings, in which Khin Maung Zaw concluded that the Rohingya should compromise on their insistence of being people native to Myanmar and instead “only request for residential permit [sic] in Burma as foreigners.”

The academic hostility to the Rohingya seems to boil down to the arguments that they didn’t exist more than 60 years ago and that they are really Bengali Muslims, who, it can be inferred if it isn’t said directly, aren’t entitled to live in Myanmar as one of the officially-designated national races: those groups whom in the state propaganda have persevered across the generations, through weal and woe, etc., etc., to build the Union up to what it is today. With all the study done around the world on constructed identities in the last few decades it’s a wonder that these arguments have any credibility at all. They make no reference the huge amount of work on how the institutions and communities that we take for granted are to one degree or another comparatively recent products of social and political change. And there have been plenty of studies in the last few years on the inventing of traditions and beliefs in Myanmar too, which is itself an exemplar of the imagined community, a product of the colonial enterprise in map-drawing and tribe-making. Which ethnic or religious group in its borders is not in some form a modern construct? Which of them is not being recreated daily through propaganda? Why do the Rohingya attract greater ire for doing no more or less than any of the others?

The answer comes down to what Ye Myint Aung made plain in his letter to the Hong Kong press: skin color. Returning to Stephen’s comment, and the admonishment in Burmese at the end—“Indians, *kala*, are also human; catfish are also fish”—the issue is not that the Rohingya are not human but rather that they are not Myanmar People, which is also what is implied by the analogy to catfish. The claim to humanity is not challenged, because being human doesn’t entitle them to a place in Myanmar. It requires more than that. And it is the attempt at being classed

among the national races that offends the nationalists, the academics and the diplomats. That the Rohingya have invented a past for themselves is neither remarkable nor in itself problematic, but that they have done this without official approval, as *kala* and Muslims, is insulting. And that they have had the impertinence to insist that for this reason they belong to Myanmar in the present is unacceptable.

In the end, this is less about the Rohingya than the people are who are writing and speaking against them, and the racist underpinnings of the state that has made these people who and what they are today. Speaking while drafting the 1982 citizenship law that effectively made the Rohingya stateless by virtue of its section 3 (“Nationals such as the Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Burman, Mon, Rakhine or Shan and ethnic groups as have settled in any of the territories included within the State as their permanent home from a period anterior to 1185 B.E., 1823 A.D. are Burma citizens”), the chairman of the commission writing the law remarked that citizenship is not about whether an individual is entitled to be a citizen or not, but rather, about national sovereignty. Ye Myint Aung merely expressed this idea in more colorful and direct words. If we take issue with him, we have to take issue with the idea of so-called ‘Myanmar’.