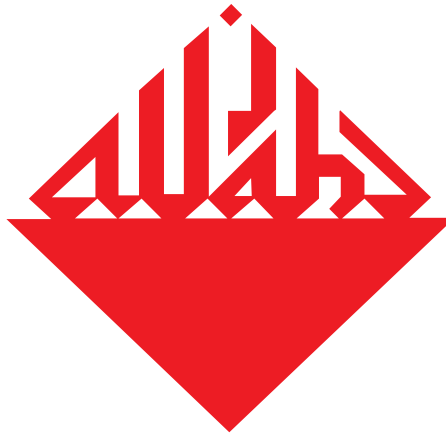


STUDIA ISLAMIKA

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PLURALISM, LIBERALISM AND ISLAMISM:
RELIGIOUS OUTLOOK OF MUHAMMADIYAH

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IN CONTEMPORARY INDONESIA:
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THREE FACES OF THE ROHINGYA CRISIS:
RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM, ASIAN ISLAMOPHOBIA,
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Imtiyaz Yusuf

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Imtiyaz Yusuf

Three Faces of the Rohingya Crisis: Religious Nationalism, Asian Islamophobia, and Delegitimizing Citizenship

Abstract: *Myanmar is a non-secular Buddhist majority country born out of the ashes of the murder of their leader of independence struggle, General Aung San, was assassinated on July 19, 1947, a few months before the independence of Burma on January 4, 1948. His failed legacy in integrating Myanmar into a multicultural nation which contains of Burmans as ethnic majority and non-Burman minorities continues to obsess Myanmar's people. The Rohingya crisis is not a religious conflict between Islam and Buddhism because both of them have a long-shared history of peaceful coexistence. Furthermore, it is also not only a case of Buddhist persecution against Muslims as recognized by the Rohingya nationalists. Actually, it is a clash between two views of nationalism over the claim to Myanmar citizenship. The conflict invokes Buddhist and Muslim nationalist in order to protect and preserve national ethnicities as religious identities in turn causing the rise of the new phenomena of Asian Islamophobia.*

Keywords: Rohingya, Myanmar, Islam, Buddhism, Asian Islamophobia.

Abstrak: Myanmar merupakan negara non-sekuler yang penduduknya mayoritas beragama Buddha yang lahir dari abu pembunuhan pimpinan pejuang kemerdekaan, Jenderal Aung San, yang dibunuh pada 19 Juli 1947, beberapa bulan sebelum kemerdekaan Burma yang jatuh pada tanggal 4 Januari 1948. Peninggalannya berupa kegagalan dalam mempersatukan Myanmar menjadi sebuah negara multikultur yang berisi mayoritas bangsa Burma dan minoritas bangsa non-Burma terus menghantui masyarakat Myanmar. Krisis Rohingya bukanlah perseteruan agama antara Islam dan Budha, karena keduanya memiliki sejarah panjang hidup berdampingan secara damai. Juga, bukan hanya kasus penganiayaan umat Budha terhadap Muslim sebagaimana diakui oleh nasionalis Rohingya. Ini adalah perseteruan antara dua paham nasionalisme atas klaim kewarganegaraan Myanmar. Konflik ini mengundang kalangan nasionalis Buddhis dan Muslim dengan tujuan melindungi dan melestarikan etnis-etnis nasionalis sebagai identitas keagamaan yang pada gilirannya menyebabkan munculnya fenomena baru Islamophobia di Asia.

Kata kunci: Rohingya, Myanmar, Islam, Budhisme, Islamophobia di Asia.

ملخص: ميانمار دولة غير علمانية كانت أغلبية سكانها من البوذيين. ولدت هذه الدولة من رماد اغتيال زعيم المقاتلين من أجل الحرية، وهو الجنرال أونغ سان الذي قتل في 19 يوليو 1947، أي: قبل بضعة أشهر من استقلال بورما الذي وقع في 4 يناير 1948. ومن آثاره فشله في توحيد ميانمار لتصبح دولة متعددة الثقافات تضم الأغلبية من الشعب البورمي والأقلية من الشعب غير البورمي، الذي لم يزل يمثل شبحا يطارد الشعب الميانماري. إن أزمة روهينجا لا تعتبر صراعا دينيا بين الإسلام والبوذية، فلكل منهما تاريخ طويل من التعايش السلمي. وهي ليست حالة الاضطهاد البوذي للمسلمين كما اعترف به القوميون الروهينجيون. إنهما خلاف بين فهمين قوميين للمطالبة بالمواطنة في ميانمار. وقد دعا هذا الصراع أو ساط القوميين البوذيين والمسلمين من أجل حماية العرقيات القومية والحفاظ عليها مما أدى بدوره إلى ظهور ظاهرة الإسلاموفوبيا الجديدة في آسيا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: روهينجا، ميانمار، الإسلام، البوذية، الإسلاموفوبيا في آسيا.

There are three faces to the ongoing Rohingya crisis in Myanmar viz., 1) race-based Buddhist religious nationalism; 2) the rise of Asian Islamophobia; and 3) the Rohingya claim to Myanmar citizenship - these three faces are largely obscured by the present common approach of treating the Rohingya crisis as being one of genocide and human disaster relief operation only.

The Rohingya crisis is not a religious clash between Islam and Buddhism, since both the religions have a long-shared, continuing history of peaceful coexistence. Nor is it merely a case of Buddhist persecution of Muslims as purported by the supporters of Rohingya nationalism. Rather it is a case of Burmese Buddhist nationalist racism, which contradicts the main teachings of Buddhism of alleviation of human suffering through the practice of compassion, equality and liberative action. The Buddha's life example and his religious teachings are a personification of religious tolerance (Kornfield 1993). It is a clash between two nationalisms: that of the Rohingya, and the state of Myanmar, both of which have now mutated into religious nationalist form. In this sense, it is not much different from other Muslim nationalist claims, such as that of the Palestinians, Pattani Malays, Kashmiris, the former case of Bosnian separatists, and other legally recognized ethno-religious minorities within the state of Myanmar. The Rohingya are not a legally recognized ethno-religious minority by the Myanmar state, and this makes their situation very complex. This scenario is further complicated by the reality that Myanmar is currently passing through a constant scene of uneven developments, in which both domestic and international factors and actors play critical roles. As Myanmar transits from decades of authoritarianism to an uncertain form of democracy, it is plagued by tensions between the government and the army, dozens of ethnic armed organizations demanding greater autonomy and rights of citizenship in relation to inter- and intra-community issues, including Buddhist-Muslim relations (South 2017).

Myanmar is a non-secular, Buddhist majority country. The majority of Myanmar peoples are Buddhist, including both ethnic Burmans and non-Burman ethnic minorities. Buddhists constitute 89.8% of the population, Christians 6.3%, and Muslims 2.3%. In the contemporary climate of Myanmar, many Buddhists see Islam as a threat to Buddhism; they use Bangladesh, Indonesia and Afghanistan as examples of Islam's takeover of previously Buddhist majority locations.

The current reductive, social science theory that religions are the source of all conflicts is an unfounded philosophical mistake and a historical fallacy. Even today, all religions continue to coexist peacefully around the world. A probe into the contents of any religion shows that the goal of religion is to alleviate human suffering and human exploitation due to oppression, injustice, and violence. Yet it cannot be denied that, as in the case of the Rohingya and others, religions have been employed as motivators for conflict and for legitimizing the superiority of a majority racial, ethnic, religious group over the others.

The Rohingya crisis is also one of the reasons behind the rising Asian Islamophobia expanding from India to Japan, including in the Buddhist majority countries of Sri Lanka and Thailand (Hirji n.d.).

The Rohingya crisis is nothing more than their claim to the right of citizenship in Burma, now called Myanmar. Hence, construing the Rohingya crisis as one between Islam and Buddhism, as religious, is dangerous and a grave mistake, which does not augur well for the future of Southeast Asia amidst rising Asia.

The relevance of this paper is based in addressing the Rohingya crisis as an ASEAN crisis, which has important implications for the past, present and future of Islam and Buddhism relations in Southeast Asia. It will have critical implications for both the domestic and foreign policies of the ASEAN member states of which Islam and Buddhism make up the two largest religions, constituting 42% and 40% respectively.

This paper also highlights the need for initiating study and research about Islam and Buddhism in Southeast Asia in the regional academic institutions for the benefit of building peaceful coexistence between the two communities.

Methodological Issues in Islam-Buddhism Studies

Studying, researching and writing about Islam and Buddhism today is a challenging task due to long time Muslim scholars abandonment of study of Buddhism from the perspectives of history and phenomenology of religion.

To some readers this paper may seem to be broad in scope because it is based in the field of interdisciplinary religious studies and not a particular discipline. Religious studies like the field of International Relations is interdisciplinary thus it borrows and integrates methods from different disciplines to make a point.

Today, there are only a handful Muslim studies about Buddhism, two of which are polemical, such as those by Imran Hosein and Harun Yahya (Hosein 2001; Yahya 2005). Exceptions are the recent books by Reza Shah Kazemi (2010), which seeks to build a spiritual bridge between Islam and Buddhism. There are also two dialogue sessions books on Islam and Buddhism between Abdul Rahman Wahid or Gus Dur's dialogue with Daisaku Ikeda (2015), and also dialogue between Daisaku Ikeda and Madjid Tehranian, which cover meetings between Buddhist and Islamic civilizations from the 7th century to the present, and their shared similarities (Daisaku Ikeda and Tehranian 2008). Chandra Muzaffar and Sulak Sivaraksa, Muslim and Buddhist activists from Malaysia and Thailand respectively, have discussed the role of Islam and Buddhism as a basis for alternative politics, political culture, political transformation, social reconstruction and building a civil society for Asian Buddhist and Muslim societies (Sivaraksa and Muzaffar 1999). But today there are hardly any academic research studies about the ongoing Muslim-Buddhist tensions and conflicts in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, and the need to address them through the perspectives of Islamic Studies and social sciences. Studies about Islam and Buddhism are also absent as research topics in Muslim universities in Central, South and Southeast Asian countries, which have a shared Islam-Buddhism legacy.

Thus, today one ventures into the un-paddled waters of Islam-Buddhism studies gingerly. The state of Islam-Buddhism studies and research in the area of academic study of religion offers no previous clues, guidelines and directions from contemporary scholars interested in the study of the interface between Islam and Buddhism.

While in the area of the theological or confessional studies and practices of Islam and Buddhism, as engaged in by their religious leaders and followers, there is much disinformation about these two great religions, which have played significant roles in the liberation of humanity from the clutches of oppression, corruption and human injustice (Yusuf and Schmidt 2006). Comments about Islam and Buddhism are at best superficial, or based on hear-say and propaganda. There are also many theologically or doctrinally condemnatory comments about Buddhism present among Muslims, and about Islam among the Buddhists. This is primarily due to the large gap in Islam-Buddhism scholarship and also due to the fact that in Southeast Asia,

religions are largely viewed as communities of ritual action, with little interest in their deep philosophical worldviews.

The majority of studies about Islam and Buddhism in Southeast Asia today are in the fields of ethnography,¹ anthropology, international relations or terrorism studies (Jerryson 2011; Johnson 2012; Liow 2010; McCargo 2008; Pitsuwan 1985). It is hoped that there will soon be more forthcoming studies about Islam and Buddhism in the area of Islamic Studies, and also religious studies. This paper is one such attempt in this direction.

Brief History of Islam and Buddhism Relations

Islam and Buddhism have a long history of mutual understanding and coexistence going back to the 7th-8th centuries, and the production of Muslim scholarship of Buddhism during the 11th-15th centuries by Muslims scholars of comparative religion and world history contributed to the scholarly study of Buddhism over other monotheistic religions. This information is largely unknown to contemporary Muslims and Buddhists.

‘Abd al-Karīm al-Sahraṣṭānī (1086-1153), an influential Persian historian of religions, a historiographer, and the author of “*Kitāb al-milāl wa al-nihāl*” (lit. The Book of Religious Parties and Schools of Philosophy), was one of the pioneers of an objective and philosophical approach to the study of religions. He paid high respects to the Buddha. According to al-Sahraṣṭānī, the Qur’anic perspective of the universal institution of prophethood counted the Buddha among prophets that have appeared in different places and different languages (Lawrence 2012).

Rashīd al-Dīn Hamadānī (1247 - 1318), a Persian statesman and historian, was a Jewish convert to Islam and the author of a universal history, *Jamī‘ al-tawārīkh* (Compendium of Chronicles). It has been referred to as the “first world history.” It contained a detailed life story of the Buddha (Blair 1995).

Hafiz-e Abru (died June 1430), a Persian historian working at the courts of Timurid rulers of Central Asia, who wrote the book *Majmā‘ al-tawārīkh*, a universal history up to the year 830/1426, also wrote about the life story of the Buddha and his *Nibbana* – Enlightenment.

The two famous Muslim poet-mystics, Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī and Muḥammad Iqbāl, have written couplets praising the Buddha and

Buddhism. Rūmī in his *Kulliyāt al-shams al-tabrizī* and Iqbāl's in his two poems titled "Nanak" in *Bang-e-Dra* 143 and *Kalām 'allamahu Iqbāl* (Saeed n.d.).

Unfortunately, these appreciative works about the Buddha and Buddhism by Muslim luminaries are not well known among contemporary Muslims or Buddhists, hence the inching towards the clash of ignorance between the two communities.

Currently, there are no scholars, or any other means or mechanisms, academic, religious or social, to tackle the rise of Buddhist Islamophobia. It is sad to note that although the Muslims and Buddhists of Southeast Asia make the two largest religious communities of the region, at 42 and 40 percent respectively (out of the total population of approximately 568,300,000 million), and have coexisted for the last 900 years, today there is not one Muslim scholar of Buddhism and not one Buddhist scholar of Islam. The main reason for this is that while Southeast Asian Muslims, who were formerly Siva Hindu-Buddhist, adopted Islam fervently and religiously and whose culture is even today influenced by their Hindu-Buddhist past, they did not continue the early Muslim tradition of studying Asian religions, which constitutes their own Siva Hindu-Buddhist past and also culturally shapes their contemporary coexistence with neighboring Buddhist countries² (Ariswara 1994; Miksic 1990). They adopted Islam as religion and completely whitewashed the past Asian religious identity. Unlike the Middle Eastern Muslims, who in their understanding of Islam, continue to reference their pre-Islamic religious past and the Judeo-Christian tradition of the Middle East.

The study and research in Buddhism among Muslims has stagnated since the 15th century colonialism, in spite of the fact that contemporary Southeast Asia is home to these two world religions. And Muslim scholarship in Islamic and Comparative Religious Studies became dependent on Western sources for the study of Buddhism and Buddhist societies. Thereby terminating an important aspect of Muslim scholarship in comparative religion.

This lacuna is largely caused by the modern age ethno-racist interpretations of Islam and Buddhism in Southeast Asia, more than any other reason. Confessionally, Islam and Buddhism share the common ground of both being religions of liberation, directed towards removal of suffering and hardship caused by human practices of inequality, injustice and oppression.

On the other hand, the Jewish-Buddhist-Christian dialogue, as a religious, academic and policy framing project, is a thriving and established tradition today, while there is a total absence of projects directed to building Muslim-Buddhist understanding.

The poverty of Islam-Buddhism studies is evidenced by the lack of Muslim world political leadership, its academics and civil society groups lack of understanding of the Rohingya crisis in a Buddhist majority country, and its treatment largely as a disaster relief operation for the *fuqarā' wa al-masākīn* - the poor and needy). And resorting to condemning Buddhism as a religion.

Meanwhile, contemporary Buddhist animosity to Islam and Muslim criticism of Buddhism, both based on little self-knowledge of each other or informed analysis, continues to fuel the contemporary clash of civilizational ignorance between Muslims and Buddhists.

Southeast Asian Religious Scenario – Islam-Buddhism Relations

Southeast Asia's population of about 618 million is comprised of 42% Muslims and 40% Buddhists. 25% of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims lives in Southeast Asia, and it is home to 38% of the world's 350 million Buddhists. Buddhism was domesticated in Southeast Asia from the 2nd-11th centuries, and Islam from the 12th-15th centuries. After the end of Buddhism in India, today Southeast Asia is the home of Buddhism.

Southeast Asian states are semi-secular, where religions serve as political symbols and ethnic identities. Southeast Asian political cultures are rooted in religions: there is Buddhist political culture in Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia – the Theravadin Buddhist kings and political leaders seek to be guided by the Buddhist political theory of *Dhammaraja*, comprised of the political virtues of the Buddha toward the kings and rulers of his time. The *dasavidha-rajadhamma* - the tenfold political virtues are: 1. *Dana* - charity; 2. *Sila* - morality; 3. *Pariccaga* – liberality; 4. *Ajjava* - honesty; 5. *Maddava* - mildness or gentleness; 6. *Tapa* - restraint of senses and austerity; 7. *Akkodha* - non-anger; 8. *Avihimsa* - non-violence; 9. *Khanti* - patience and tolerance; 10. *Avirodha* - non-opposition and non-enmity (*Jataka* III. 274). In Malaysia and Brunei, the sultan is the custodian of Sharia – the principles of Islamic law; in the Philippines and East Timor, Catholic social teachings inspire social and political action and development; and

in Indonesia - belief in God is the first principle of its national ideology, *Pancasila* (Moore 2016). In Southeast Asia, the world religions operate along ethnic lines: Here an Indo-Malay is a Muslim; a Thai, Burmese, Laotian, and Cambodian is a Buddhist; a Filipino is a Catholic; and the local Chinese is a Taoist/Confucian/Buddhist.

Unlike in the past in Southeast Asia, when the Muslims and the Buddhists coexisted peacefully, the state of their relations since the colonial era until today has been tense, worrying and edging towards violence. It is a situation of compounded ignorance, in which the winds of fanatical religious xenophobia are flurrying and blowing disquietingly in both the communities. Instead of building bridges of compassion and understanding, religions are employed to promote xenophobia, conflicts, hatred and violence by spreading false information through social media. It is not a state of simple religious - *avidya* (Sanskrit, Pali) or *jāhiliyah* (Arabic) - ignorance but of compounded ignorance.

History informs us that the Buddha offered political advice to the kings and rulers of his time, which later inspired the famous Buddhist Emperor Ashoka of the Mauryan Empire (269-232 BCE) to install his famous pillar edicts advocating the Buddhist Four Noble Truths and the virtues of compassion, non-violence, religious tolerance, constructing civil amenities and caring for the subjects of the kingdom, encapsulating the main teaching of the Buddha. The 13th Major Rock Edict articulates:

On each occasion, one should honour another man's sect, for by doing so one increases the influence of one's own sect and benefits that of the other man, while by doing otherwise one diminishes the influence of one's own sect and harms the other man's. Again, whosoever honours his own sect or disparages that of another man, wholly out of devotion to his own, with a view to showing it in a favourable light, harms his own sect even more seriously. Therefore, concord is to be commended, so that men may hear one another's principles and obey them. This is the desire of the Beloved of the Gods, that all sects should be well informed, and should teach that which is good, and that everywhere their adherents should be told, 'The Beloved of the Gods does not consider gifts or honour to be as important as the progress of the essential doctrine of all sects' ... (Thapar 2012, 376-96)

This is parallel with the Prophet Muhammad's role as a prophet and a statesman in drawing the *Mithāq al-Madīnah*, commonly referred to the Constitution of Madinah, defining the duties, rights and responsibilities governing the relationship between Muslims, between

Anṣār and *Muhājirīn*, the relations of Muslims with non-Muslim Arab tribes, the Jews and others (Hamidullah 1975).

But both of these historical politico-religious precedents cannot be applied to the contemporary state of ethno-religious relations between the Muslims and the Buddhists in Southeast Asia, especially in the cases of Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand because of the change in the political character of both these and other Southeast Asian states, modelled along nation-state lines (Ali 2015; Kawanami 2016; Suaedy 2010).

The essentially nationalist-racist Myanmar-Rohingya crisis, which is being misconstrued as being religious, will prove deadly for the future of Muslim-Buddhist relations in the ASEAN region (Akins 2018). It is also being influenced and shaped by the violent, communalized Muslim-Buddhist-Hindu conflicts of Sri Lanka and India, and Islamic radicalism from the Middle East. The general absence of a deep knowledge about Islam and Buddhism in the larger ASEAN Muslim and Buddhist communities makes everyone vulnerable to violence. In a 2013 interview, Aung San Suu Kyi, the democratic leader of Myanmar told the BBC that the Buddhists lived in fear of “global Muslim power” (Taub and Fisher 2017).

Islam in Myanmar

Myanmar is a non-secular, Buddhist majority country. The Theravada Buddhists and the Christians are the two main religious communities groups in Myanmar, with the Muslims being the third group. The enumerated population of Burma shows that Buddhists make up 89.8 percent of the population, Christians 6.3 percent, and Muslims 4 percent, or about 2 million people out of the total Myanmar population of 55 million.

The state of Myanmar recognizes the majority Bamar, and 134 other distinct, ethnic groups, officially grouped into the following eight “major national ethnic races” viz. Bamar; Chin; Kachin; Kayin; Kayah; Mon; Rakhine and Shan as the only legitimate citizens of Myanmar. The Rohingya are not included, as there is a pathological racist hatred towards the Rohingya.

Ignoring the aforementioned historical and political facts, and treating the current Rohingya crisis in Myanmar as a solely religious conflict involving Muslims-Buddhists or the religions of Islam and Buddhism is a dangerous recipe.

Myanmar is a hard and a difficult country, born out of the ashes of the murder of its integrationist freedom fighter General Aung San, who was assassinated on 19 July 1947, a few months before the independence of Burma on 4 January 1948. His legacy of seeking integration, and the legacy of violence associated with his murder, continues to impact Myanmar today (Oung, 1996).

Sociologically, the Muslims of Myanmar are a diverse group. They are separated along racial and ethnic lines between:

1. The Zerbadee/Pathi Muslims of mixed parentage, with a Burmese mother and Muslim father. Known as “Burmese Muslims,” they are linguistically and culturally integrated into Burmese society;
2. The Indian Muslims, brought by the British colonists, reside mostly in Yangon and have tense social relations with the Burmese majority;
3. The approximate 50,000 Panthay-Chinese Muslims are mostly traders residing in the Mandalay region, and they hold full Myanmar citizenship. They migrated from China’s Yunnan province during the turmoil of the the 19th-century war between local Muslims and the central Imperial government, during the era of the Taiping rebellion. They claim to have been granted land by King Mindon, who ruled from 1853 to 1878, and are currently seeking to be identified as a separate ethnic group by the Burmese government (Forbes 1986; Yegar 1966);
4. The small number of Malay or Pashu Muslims in southern Burma; and,
5. The Arakan Muslims, or Rohingya living in the Rakhine state. The Rohingya, numbering around 1 million, are natives of the Arakan state. The Rohingyas Muslims are of Indo-Aryan descent, from the ancient Buddhist kingdom of Arakan, which had close political relations with Bengal when there were no borders in the northwestern part of present Myanmar. They speak a Bengali influenced dialect (Thu n.d.).

A Brief History of the Rohingya

I first heard about the case of the Arakan Muslims some 30 years ago, when few people knew about them. The first ever well-documented information and research about the Rohingya, who were described as insurgents, was done by an Israeli diplomat named Moshe Yegar.

Mr Yegar was posted as the Second Secretary at the Israeli Embassy in Rangoon (Yangon) in the 1960s. Moshe Yegar's two books are titled *Between Integration and Secession: The Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, and Western Burma/Myanmar*, and *The Muslims in Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*. Both are indispensable in order to learn about the Rohingya and Muslims of Burma, both of whom have different historical trajectories (Yegar 1972, 2002).

The Rohingya Muslim people have been living in the Arakan state for centuries, long before the creation of Burma, a country established in 1948. In the past, people resided in kingdoms with no marked territorial borders.

Rendered stateless today, the Rohingya are described by the United Nations as one of the most persecuted minorities in the world, and have been gradually stripped of their citizenship rights in Myanmar.³ In order to understand the complex situation of the Rohingya, one needs to know about their past history, their current situation, and uncertain future in the ongoing political transition of Burma from military rule to democracy.

It is also important to keep an eye on the scramble for Myanmar's rich natural and mineral resources by international and regional players, such as the USA, China, India, Israel, Japan, and Australia (Sputnik n.d.).

We also cannot turn a blind eye to the rise of Theravada Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar, and its transnationalist religious links with Sri Lanka and Thailand - the other 2 Theravada-majority countries - and also the Hindutva religious nationalists in India with whom they have established an anti-Muslim bond (Press Trust of India 2014).

On the other hand, one should also keep in view the vulnerable condition of the Buddhist minorities in the Asian Muslim countries of Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei and Bangladesh, which also do not have an outstanding record. The Buddhist minorities in these countries, identified as ethnic groups, have also faced much discrimination (Amrith 2015, 224–25; Thompson and Adloff 1970).

The historical presence of the Arakan Muslims in today's Myanmar is rooted in the past, when there were no territorial boundaries, and there was free movement between Chittagong in Bengal and the kingdom of Arakan. Rohingya writers hold that the Rohingya are descendants of

mixed Asian and Arab identities and have been present in Arakan since the 9th century. Bertil Lintner, a Swedish journalist based in Yangon, and Jacques P Leider, a Swiss research scholar at the *Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient* in Bangkok/Yangon, contest the Rohingya claim to an independent non-Bengali identity. In their view, the Rohingya is a political construct and not an ethnic identity. They agree that although Muslims have been living in Arakan kingdom since the 9th century, the majority of them today are Bengali immigrants from the time of British Burma in the 20th century (Lintner n.d.; These Buddhist Kings with Muslim Names n.d.)).

Rakhine Buddhist writers claim that their land (the *Rakhine-pray*) was visited by the Buddha several times, making it a land of sacred geography, and that the Rohingya are descendants of Chittagonian migrants. While the Rakhine nationalist writers view the Rohingyas as Bangladeshi immigrants, who fled to Myanmar during the 1971 Bangladeshi war of independence, and want to take over the Arakan land. The state of Myanmar designates them as illegal Bengali immigrants, brought into Rakhine after it was annexed by the British in 1826.

The Rohingya claim their presence in modern Burma dates back to the times of the Kingdom of Mrauk U (1430-1785), which ruled over much of present-day Bangladesh and Burma (Berlie 2008, 48). The Burmese national historical narrative does not recognize the existence of the Mrauk U kingdom. The founder of this kingdom was Naramaikhla Min Saw Mon, a Buddhist also known as Suleiman Shah. He became king in 1404 but was driven out of his kingdom in 1406 by the Burmese Crown Prince Minye Kyawswa of Ava. Naramaikhla Min Saw Mon lived as an exile in Bengal for twenty-four years, regaining his throne in 1430 with the military support of Sultan Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah of the Sultanate of Bengal. As a result, the Arakanese Buddhist kings came under strong Muslim influence, even adopting Muslim political titles (e.g., Shah) (Rogers 2012, 133–34). Prior to this event, Arkan does not figure in Burmese history (Bischoff 1995).

From 1430 to 1531, Mrauk U was a protectorate of the Bengal Sultanate, a vassal state of the Buddhist kings of Arakan. Islamic gold dinar coins from Bengal were legal tender within the kingdom. King Naramaikhla minted coins with Burmese characters on one side and Persian characters on the other, embossed with the *kalimah* (the Islamic declaration of faith). During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,

Mrauk U was an important maritime port visited by large trading ships in the Bay of Bengal. The Arakan kingdom “maintained sea-going craft with Chittagong seamen” (Harvey 2000, 140).

In 1784, the Bamar king Bodawpaya invaded and conquered the Arakan kingdom and incorporated it into his kingdom. The British annexed Arakan in 1826 after the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26). The British brought the Indians into Burma to assist in colonial administration, as well as in business and labour sectors (Jha 2008). Their descendants today are among the economic elites of Myanmar (Egretau 2011, 33–54).

The 1875 Census Report of British Burma (p. 30) reported that: “There is one more race which has been so long in the country that it may be called indigenous and that is the Arakanese Mussulman. These are descendants, partly of voluntary immigrants at different periods from the neighbouring province of Chittagong, and partly of captives carried off in the wars between the Burmese and their neighbours ... differing from Arakanese but little except in their religion and the social customs which their religion directs.”

The British censuses of 1872 and 1911 recorded an increase in the Muslim population from 58,255 to 178,647 in Akyab District. In the 1942 Arakan massacres, the British recruited the Rohingya against the Buddhist Rakhine people, leading to separate ethnic identifications of the two communities.

During the British Burma Campaign in World War II, the British established the V Force as a reconnaissance and intelligence-gathering organization against the Japanese; they recruited the Arakan Muslims to V force while the Buddhist Arakan supported the Japanese. This caused permanent damage to the relationship between the Buddhist and Muslim communities of Arakan. The Rakhine Buddhist see themselves as a separate ethnic minority in Burma.

The Rohingya claim their rights to the land on the pretext that they were a recognized ethnic group during Burma’s democratic era (1948-1962). There were radio programs broadcasting in the Rohingya language over the Burma Broadcasting Service (BBS). This is denied by the present regime.

Today, the Rohingya constitute approximately 1 million out of the 3 million people in the Rakhine state. 140,000 of them live in refugee camps as internally displaced people following the eruption of

ethnoreligious clashes in 2012. An additional 1.5 million Rohingya are living in exile in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, UAE, India, Malaysia, Thailand, UK, USA, and Australia.

In the 1940s, during the period of Burmese independence and partition of India into two Pakistans, there was an Arakan insurgent group named Mujahids, who sought to separate their territory from Burma and join. They contacted Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, for their agenda. Jinnah was not supportive of separation, and he discussed the matter with General Aung San, who assured him that the Arakan Muslims would be protected in the new Burma. The situation changed after the military takeover of Burma and the nationalization of Buddhism by the majority Bamar group, to maintain their political domination over the other Buddhist and Christians ethnic groups in the country (Ayooob 2007; Egreteau and Robinne 2015; Helbardt, Hellmann-Rajanayagam, and Korff 2013; van Klinken and Aung 2017; McCarthy and Menager 2017; Means 2009; Schissler, Walton, and Thi 2017; Weiberg-Salzmann 2014).

Religious Nationalism

Han Kohn, an erudite scholar of nationalism, classifies nationalism into two types: 1) the democratic nationalism of the West, which is rational, nice and civic, and 2) the Asian ethnic nationalism, which is nasty and irrational. The former is based on the claim of racial citizenship and the latter on the claim of ethnicity rooted in the primacy of language and culture (Kohn 1960, 1967; Kohn and Calhoun 2005).

The post-1960s era saw the rise of religious fundamentalism, which challenged secular nationalism's expunging of religion from public life (Berger 1990). Fundamentalism started as a movement to fuse religion and politics, first in American Christianity, and was soon adopted by the Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Sikh and Buddhists, and it has now evolved into religious nationalist models of each of them (Almond, Appleby, and Sivan 2003; Jansen 1997; Marty and Appleby 1995).

All types of religious nationalists share the common characteristic of rejecting modernity—the separation of religion and politics, the modern political philosophies and ideologies of representative democracy and communism. They all endorse a religious state based on the politics of race, ethnicity and religion, religious militancy, and violent political action against their religious minorities.

In our global age, all types of nationalism have now acquired the additional feature of attaching the religious identity of the majority group with nationality, which is suspicious of the political loyalty of the minority religious groups residing among them.

Today, the mainly ethnic types of Asian nationalisms have also transmuted into a religious form of nationalism or religious nationalisms, which are causing political havoc in contemporary India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Myanmar, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines (Fokas, 2016). This type of nationalism stirs fears in small numbers among the religious majority groups by inventing the demographically and scientifically untenable proposition that the minority groups are growing in numbers by leaps and bounds, and they will soon overtake the majority religious group (Appadurai 2006; Juergensmeyer 1993, 2009; Juergensmeyer, Kitts, and Jerryson 2015). The emerging religious nationalisms of different types are verging toward religious fascisms (Goldberg 2006; Grant 2009; Jerryson 2011; Jerryson and Juergensmeyer 2010; Sand 2010; Sharma 2016).

Religious nationalism is an ideological stage, which has emerged after the unresolved clash of accommodation between secular nationalism and religious fundamentalism. The failure of religious fundamentalists in transforming the secular state into a religious one transformed the radical fundamentalists among them into religious nationalists (Juergensmeyer 2009).

Since the success of the 1979 Iranian Islamic revolution of the Shia version, based in the political theology of preparing Iran for the return of the 12th Shia Imam from occultation as an example of religious nationalism, the world of nationalist politics has now taken a religious nationalist turn, peaking in the rise of religious nationalisms also in the non-Muslim countries of Myanmar, Sri Lanka and India (Ayooob 2007; Bayat 2013; Esposito and Kalin 2011a; Esposito and Voll 1996; Hefner 2008; Means 2009; Momen 1987). They seek to establish their versions of religious nationalist states.

The recent rise of Islamophobia in the USA with president Trump, UK, Italy, Hungary, Poland, and Germany, which combine Protestant and Catholic religion and theology, represents new, Western types of secular-politico-religious nationalisms that place themselves as the First or the rest of the world (Whitehead, Perry, and Baker 2018).

Currently, there is no one definition or coherent theory of religious nationalism, it is commented upon by academics engaging in the study and research of religion and international affairs, a few political scientists and anthropologists.

Religious nationalism, as both a national and transnational religious ideology, marks an ideological evolution from democratic, ethnic and language based nationalism, to religious based nationalism.

Religious nationalism privileges the rights of the religious majority group over the religious minorities on the bases of racial and religious identity. It rejects both the democratic and communist models of governance, as it views them as privileging the rights of the minorities over the majority.

Religious nationalism looks like fascism but it is not fascism that protects the rights of the national majority group. There are no previous models of religious nationalism or a religious nationalist state, be it in the pre-colonial or postcolonial eras. In a sense, a religious nationalist state is not a religious state based in the primacy of one political theology or religious doctrine. Instead it is based in the primacy of the racial or ethnic religious identity of the majority group in the country. It is closer to political Zionism, based in the ideology of the racially-endowed divine right of the majority to land or territory in which the religious minorities are outsiders or rebels who have no legitimate right to citizenship.

Religious nationalism poses a formidable challenge to secular nationalism, and there are greater chances that the religious nationalists will take over government through the ballot box.

Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaida, the Taliban and ISIS in the Middle East; Ashin Wirathu and 969 - Ma Ba Tha movement in Myanmar (Crouch 2016; Wade 2017; Walton 2016); Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara and the Bodu Bala Sena in Sri Lanka (Deegalle 2006; Wijeyeratne 2017); the Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a militant leader of the Khalistan movement; the *Bajrang Dal* and the *Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP)*, which are part of the *Sangh Parivar*, a family of Hindu right-wing organizations in India (Flåten 2016); the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), Tehreek-e-Jaferia Pakistan (TJP) in Pakistan in the Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan (Nasr 1994; Zaman 2018); and Bangladesh (Hossain 2012); Hamas in Palestine (Islam 2015; Riaz and Fair 2015); the right wing Zionists in

Israel like Rabbi Meir Kahane *Bayit HaYehudi* - The Jewish Home party (Plitnick 2014); the *Parti Islam Malaysia* (PAS) (Noor 2014); and the *Front Pambela Islam* and the ISIS branch in Indonesia (Jahroni 2008) are different versions of religious nationalisms.

The religious nationalists do not reject the idea of the nation-state but they rally against the secular nationalists. According to the religious nationalists, the nation-state is not secular but a religious contract. A religious nationalist state is legitimized by the politico-religious principles of the majority religious group in the country, and not the constitution.

Religious nationalism is a project of religious radicals, it privileges the rights of the majority religious group over that of the minorities. The religious nationalist state is the state of the religious majority.

Religious nationalism is a postmodern and post-fundamentalist phenomena born out of the mixture of race, ethnicity and religion. It is an exclusivist politico-religious ideology, which is growing in nearly every country. Religious nationalism is a by-product of the age of globalization, marked by conditions of ontological insecurity, existential uncertainty and resistance to the acceptance of human diversity at the global level (Kinnvall 2004; Juergensmeyer 2010).

It marks the taking of a sociotheological turn (Juergensmeyer 2013). It threatens to dismantle the modern age political and social principle of living in “unity amidst diversity,” as found in the religious teaching of the Baha’i Faith; the official slogan of the European Union; the Indonesian official motto of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, an old Javanese poem of *Kakawin Sutasoma*, or Jawaharlal Nehru’s reference to India in his book *The Discovery of India* (Nehru 1946).

Face 1: Burmese Race Based Religious Nationalism and the Making of the Stateless Rohingya

The root of the Rohingya crisis goes back to 1940s, when the Arakan Muslims, like other ethnic minorities in that country, felt insecure about their future in the proposed formation of the Union of Burma, which would be dominated by the majority Bamar race, which would assume a dominant political position. The resulting fears from this have escalated over the decades, climaxing into what is now referred to as the genocide of the Rohingya, which is denied by the state of Myanmar. The antagonistic state of inter-ethnic relations between

all ethnic groups in Myanmar has created an unmanageable political disorder in the country (Yusuf 2017).

In the absence of Buddhist religious textual references condemning Islam or any other religion, the contemporary Buddhist nationalists have resorted to inventing racist and nationalist interpretations of their ancient mytho-political-religious narratives of the past, pre-colonial Buddhist kingdoms, such as the 5th-6th centuries *Mahavamsa* - Great Chronicle, written by a radical Sinhala Buddhist in Sri Lanka (Pannasami and Upasaka) and the 1861 mytho-political narrative of *Sasanavamsa*, being the religious history of Buddhist Burma (Mahānāma and Geiger 1958).

Since the 1962 Burmese coup led by General Ne Win, which removed the then democratically elected Prime Minister U Nu from power, through to today with the powerful *Tatmadaw*, the Burmese military has pursued stubborn and isolationist foreign policy resisting and caring less for international pressures (Bray 2007). General Ne Win pursued a hostile racial policy against the ethnic minorities in Myanmar, and he opposed federalism. He also arrested members of the former government and ethnic leaders, and created xenophobic hatred towards the local non-Burman ethnic groups and foreigners. General Ne Win invented a new political ideology, which was a mix of Marxism, extreme nationalism, totalitarianism, and Buddhism, and it was named “The Burmese Way to Socialism” (Steinberg 2013). It laid the foundation for the rise of the current religious nationalism, which is unable to resolve the large scale ethnic crisis in Myanmar, and which is not only against the Christians and Muslims but also the cause of intra-Buddhist ethnic rivalries (Rogers 2016, 9–15).

On the international level, Ne Win isolated and sealed Burma from the foreigners. Myanmar did not join the British Commonwealth, and in its 69 years of existence until now, the Bamar race has dominated the army in power and the Buddhist Sangha. Burmanization means that the central power belongs to the majority Bamar ethnic group over others. And that the minorities should assimilate into the Bamar way of life (Berlie 2008). The Bamar race is viewed as representing the epitome of a civilized race and culture (Boutry 2015). The Myanmar government’s policy of Burmanisation, initiated by General Ne Win, stresses the racial purity and supremacy of the Burmans who are Buddhist by faith (Sarkisyanz 1965).

Today, Myanmar is a country of restive ethnic minorities. It has a three-tiered citizenship system made of “full,” “associate,” and “naturalized” citizenships, and the last two types are subject to revocation per the 1982 citizenship law.

The Rohingya are legally ineligible for all the three types of citizenships. Their delegitimization began under the 1974 military regime of General Ne-Win (Schonthal 2016). He promulgated a new Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Myanmar and the Emergency Immigration Act, both in 1974, which created the basis for race-based citizenship. The new citizenship law invalidated the former National Registration Certificates issued to the Rohingya as per the 1947 legislation. The delegitimization of the Rohingya culminated in the 1982 Burmese citizenship law, disallowing them from becoming Myanmar citizens, and the new law requires proof that their ancestors had settled in Burma before 1823.

In June 1989, as per the “Adaptation of Expressions Law” (Law 15/89), the name of the state of Arakan was changed to “Rakhine state,” and is identified as an exclusively Rakhine Buddhist state. In 1994, General Than Shew’s government stopped issuing Rohingya children with birth certificates. The final stroke making the Rohingya stateless came in 2015 when, following the 2012-13 riots and violence, and pressure from the ultra-nationalist Buddhist group *Ma Ba Tha* (Association for the Protection of Race and Religion) or the 969 movement. Led by the radical Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu, who calls himself the “Buddhist Bin Laden,” they pressured the then Thein Sein government to invalidate the White Cards identity held by the Rohingya. The White Cards were temporary household identifications cards issued by the Myanmar government with which they had formally voted in the 2008 constitutional referendum and the 2010 national elections (Heijmans 2015). The stripping of 400,000 White Cards from the Rohingyas made them stateless people.

The 2015 census declared that Myanmar had a population of 51 million people and 135 official ethnic groups. The Rohingya are not included in the list, as they were declared to be outsider “Bengalis” from Bangladesh, making them the only stateless people in Southeast Asia (Zan and Chan 2005).

Prior to the 2015 elections, the military regime, under pressure from the Buddhist religious nationalist group of the 969 - *Ma Ba Tha*, passed

laws for the protection of “race and religion” aimed at the Rohingya and the broader Muslim community. These laws effectively disenfranchised the 4-10 percent Myanmar Muslims of various ethnicities on the pretext that their parents were not recognized as citizens at the time of the candidate’s birth.

In anticipation of the 2016 Myanmar election, the *Ma Ba Tha* nationalists issued a 12-point policy statement calling upon the voting public to consider alleged threats to support the protection of race and religion when voting. It also pledged to step up for the passage of laws for the protection of race and religion that will place emphasis on population control, restrictions on interfaith marriage, religious conversion and polygamy. The group has also called for a ban on wearing Islamic headscarves and the ritual slaughter of cows during the Eid al-Adha festival (Zaw and Lewis 2015).

Further complicating the case of the Rohingya is that their community has also been infiltrated by Bangladeshis seeking economic opportunities in Myanmar. Bearing similar racial features and nearly the same language, it becomes difficult to distinguish the native Rohingya from the migrant Bengalis. This confusion has forced the Myanmar state to declare all the Rohingyas as Bengalis thereby cutting their claim to citizenship through rationales of both *jus soli* (territorial) and *jus sanguinis* (parentage).

In my frank view, the Rohingya will never get citizenship in Myanmar, no matter how much lip service leaders like the State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi talks of the need to change the citizenship law, or how much they speak (in response to foreign pressure) of “our efforts to solve the issues in a holistic manner” (“Myanmar Refuses Visas to UN Team Investigating Abuse of Rohingya Muslims,” 2017).

Hence, there is no chance for the promulgation of any new legislation that will favour giving the human right of citizenship to the Rohingya. They are also not recognized as the original inhabitants of Myanmar on the basis of their dark skin colour and belonging to a non-Mongoloid race.

And, since the 2008 constitution establishes that the military will always hold a quarter of the seats in Parliament, it retains the power to veto any legal changes. It is a hardball game. These developments have also erased the long-time role played by the other Myanmar Muslims in its national history of freedom struggle. The racist Buddhist nationalists

of the Ma Ba Tha view all Myanmar Muslims as illegal migrants who have to be expelled from Myanmar.

Following the formation of the new democratic government in April 2016, the new minister of religious affairs Aung Ko remarked that those who practice Islam are not full but associate citizens of Myanmar. This is in spite of the fact that Burma's constitutions from 1947, 1974 and 2008 recognize Islam as a religion practiced by citizens of the country, and does not mention the Muslims as being "associate citizens" (NLD Religious Affairs Minister 2016a).

After winning the 2015 Myanmar election with a landslide majority, the State Counsellor Suu Kyi, the powerhouse behind the current Burmese political scenario, declared that from now on the Rohingya will be referred to as the "Muslims in Rakhine state," thereby distinguishing them from the majority (Buddhist) population (Paddock 2016). She has also denied that there is ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya, and advised the new United States ambassador to Myanmar to stop using the term "Rohingya." An United Nations delegation of investigators seeking to look into allegations of killings, rape and torture against Rohingya Muslims by security forces were denied visas on the pretext that it will hamper the Myanmar government's "efforts to solve the issues in a holistic manner" (Aung San Suu Kyi 2017).

In 2016, the democratically-elected government established an Advisory Commission on Rakhine State led by the former UN secretary general, Kofi Annan, with a mandate to examine the Rohingya issue and propose recommendations. However, the commission was not mandated to "investigate specific cases of alleged human rights violations."

The Commission report released on August 24, 2017 recommended the state of Myanmar scrap restrictions on movement and citizenship of the persecuted Muslim Rohingya minority as a solution to avoid the conflict from spiraling into radicalization within both communities (Advisory Commission on Rakhine State: Final Report 2017).

On 28 January 2017, U Ko Ni, a prominent Burmese Muslim human rights lawyer and a legal adviser to Aung San Suu Kyi who played an important role in crafting her legally political position of "State Counsellor," enabling Suu Kyi to oversee Myanmar's cabinet, was shot dead at Yangon International Airport on Sunday (Moe 2017; NLD Religious Affairs Minister 2016b; Suu Kyi stays silent on Ko Ni's first death anniversary n.d.).

Face 2: Islamophobia And Asian Islamophobia

Contemporary Islamophobia emerged after the 9/11 event, and it raised global fears about Islam by constructing it as a violent religion of the terrorists disseminated largely through all types of media - social, print, virtual and even academia (Esposito and Kalin 2011a). John L. Esposito remarks that Islamophobia in the West has long and deep historical roots. It is also the outcome of the American and European domestic and foreign policies, and the role of Western media in dominating and shaping its global discourse.

I distinguish between Western and Asian types of Islamophobia. The Western type of Islamophobia is rooted in the Judeo-Christian theological rejection of Islam as a post-Judeo-Christian religion and the Christian view of Crusades as holy war against the Muslims. In response to which emerged the Muslim reinterpretation of *jihād* as a holy religious war.

The newly invented Asian Islamophobia or the Asian fears of Islam, have emerged under the strong influence of global media-created image of Islam.

Unlike the Western type of Islamophobia, rooted in religious sources of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Asian version of Islamophobia, while sharing the common European stereotype of the Muslims as being dark skinned, dirty, unmodern, uneducated religious fanatics, view the local native Asian Muslims as being outsiders or rebels in their own lands. In the Asian version of Islamophobia, Islam is an outsider religion in Asia.

Asian Islamophobia's fears about Islam, from India to Japan, are rooted in the colonial age fabrication of Buddhism as a religion of peace and Islam as the religion of violence (Masuzawa 2012).

There are different types of Asian Islamophobia depending upon location, history, culture, the state of local minority and majority communities and also the state of interreligious relations between Islam and Asian religions.

Unlike the monolithic racial-cultural face of European/Western Islamophobia, the different faces of Asian Islamophobia vary from region to region depending on local histories and the socio-economic-political and professional status of the Asian Muslims.

In the case of Muslim minorities, Asian Islamophobia in India is conditioned by the Hindutva majority interpretations of the past

Muslim rule in India; in Sri Lanka it is shaped by the economic status of the Sri Lankan Muslims as traders and the non-trader economic class and their non-Sinhala ethnic identity; in Myanmar by the status of Indian Muslim traders in Yangon, the Panthay Chinese Muslims and the Rohingya; in the case of Thailand, Islamophobia has two different faces: One, an ethno-religious nationalist version in relation to the three deep southern provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat, rooted in the 112 years of Siam-Pattani conflict, and two, the socio-cultural transformation of the rest of the Thai Muslim community across the country from a previously largely culturally inclusive community, which has now acquired a religiously and culturally exclusivist social identity that regulates its relations with the majority Buddhist community on the basis of Muslim jurisprudence concerning halal dietary rules and dress codes, such as hijab, etc.

This creates fear about Islam in the majority Thai Buddhist *social imaginaire*, who view such Muslim attitudes as shifting from a former state of social inclusivism to religious exclusivism. This is not a good sign for the future of Buddhist-Muslim relations in Thailand, the largest and most developed Buddhist country in the world. I am not proposing religio-cultural assimilation but saying that Islam as a cosmopolitan religion has never been socio-culturally exclusivist in its worldview. The erosion of this positive mark of Islamic cosmopolitanism in world history and civilization is an out-of-order development.

From the perspective of world history, Islam has not been an exclusionary but rather an inclusionary religio-cultural society, which has now eroded, or led Islam and the Muslims to be seen as an anomalous religion and culture today. As a cosmopolitan religion, Islam has always maintained a clear line of separation between its monotheistic theology and socio-economic and cultural pluralism, which is now corroded due to several internal and external factors.

This does not mean that all Asians hold Islamophobic attitudes. The majority of them do not, but they are baffled by the rise of the exclusionary face of Islam in the world, and in their neighborhood.

The Rohingya and the Rise of Asian Islamophobia in Myanmar

The rise of the Buddhist non-violent extremists of Ma Ba Tha, or the 969 movement led by radical monk Ashin Wirathu, are on a roll, creating collective fear of Muslims among the Myanmar Buddhists.

This first began as a protest against Indian Muslim businesses. Without consulting anyone, Ashin Wirathu wrongly interpreted the Indian Muslim adoption of the Islamic symbol of 786 - a reference to the first Qur'anic verse: "In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful," which they frame as a blessing and a good omen in their business offices, stores, homes and even print on their transaction slips as a talisman with occult powers. He interpreted the hanging of the 786 symbol in Muslim-owned places as a secret plot to convert Burma into a Muslim country by the end of the 21st century. He based this belief in his farfetched view that adding $7+8+6$ equals 21, hence a Muslim scheme to convert Burma into a Muslim country. In order to counter the occult powers of 786, Ashin Wirathu called on the Buddhists to use and display the Buddhist symbol of 969, written in Burmese numerals ၉၆၉ and not Arabic numbers, as a cosmologically powerful deterrent to 786. The Burmese symbol 969 represents the "Three Jewels" – the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. 969 has now become a symbol of Burmese Buddhist Islamophobia opposition to Islam.

Racism, Religion and Violence:

The Status of the Rohingya in the Emergent Democratic Era

The Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party won the historic 2015 Myanmar elections, putting Myanmar on the path of democracy after a long, oppressive 50 years of military rule. But in the face of strong Buddhist nationalist opposition from the Ma Ba Tha, which supported the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), and also Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party, neither parties fielded any Muslim candidates to contest for a parliamentary seat. Currently, it is the first time in history that there are no Muslim members of the Myanmar parliament. This development is strong proof that the Myanmar elite, irrespective of their political affiliations, strongly believe that Myanmar is only for the Burmans and those who accept Buddhism. Therefore, the minorities will have to adapt themselves to this political position (Ibrahim 2016, 139).

The gradual political exclusion of the Myanmar Muslims by the religious nationalists has now taken the form of practicing collective discrimination against all Muslims in Myanmar. This is sheer racism in the name of religion (This is racism, not Buddhism | Bangkok Post: opinion n.d.). It has been reported that in light of the recent large

Rohingya exodus to Bangladesh, the Myanmar military plans to reduce the Muslim population of verified returnees in its northwestern towns to around 60%, and that of the Buddhists there to 40%. The military will resettle thousands of ethnic Rakhines and other Buddhists into the Rakhine's abandoned and burned out villages. This will create a new ethnic population balance, with less Muslims and more Buddhists living under the absolute control of the Myanmar military (Lintner n.d.). All this goes to show that, in the face of the rise of Burmese Buddhist nationalism, there is no clear solution for the Rohingya issue. And that there is no political will on the part of the government and no political mood on the part of the Myanmar people to grant citizenship rights and include the Rohingya as members of the Myanmar nation (Jirenuwat 2016).

Yet, there is a small glimmer of hope that Myanmar will allow the repatriation of refugees listed by Bangladesh after a complicated verification process (First Rohingya Family Repatriated to Myanmar, Thousands More to Go 2018).

Face 3: The Delegitimizing of Rohingya Citizenship and the Rise of Terrorism

Post-World War II Asian countries from Pakistan to Japan have engaged in the task of dealing with and managing the interface between religion and politics in a variety of ways.

In the case of semi-secular Southeast Asia, religions play a central role in the making of ethno-nationalist identities which effects the state of interrelations between the different ethnic religious groups in their countries in many strained ways.

There is no monolithic model of organizing religion and political relations in Asia, it differs from country to country. And it is true that achieving a clean or sensitized separation between religion and politics in the case of Southeast Asian countries is an impossible task, for each of them have identified their majority religion as the main pillar of their state. Hence, religious nationalism in Asia has its own trajectory, different from that in the West or as seen through Western lenses.

The long historical process of delegitimizing Rohingya citizenship is a case of the Burmese Buddhist majority's agenda; it is not the agenda of Buddhism as a religion. In fact, such action has no place in the religious ethos of Buddhism.

The recently commenced process of the gradual delegitimization of the Rohingya in Myanmar has naturally frustrated and angered the Rohingya. This deprivation of their humanity and destruction of any hope for a good future has resulted in the rise of Rohingya radicals, who use violent means to achieve their dignity.

No religion supports violence or terrorism but religions become evil when humans are deprived of their dignity and hope in life. Religions become evil when the following five conditions or symptoms appear in any religion: 1. Absolute Truth Claims; 2. Blind Obedience; 3. Establishing the “Ideal” Time; 4. The End Justifies Any Means; 5. Declaring Holy War, irrespective of whether they believe in God or not, or whether they define themselves as religions of peace, love or tolerance (Kimball 2008).

Religions are not the only sources of terrorism, but they are used for the purpose of terrorism. Terrorism is a violent political activity, whereby the terrorists seek revenge by intimidating and influencing an audience with their politico-religious causes.

Religious terrorism is not limited to Christianity (Christian Fundamentalists), Judaism (Religious Zionists) or Islam (al-Qaida, Taliban, ISIS), and has now also grown in other contemporary religions, including Hinduism (Hindutva) and Buddhism (BBS and 969), as seen in the case of India, Sri Lanka and Myanmar.

Religious terrorists promote a mixture of religious and material objectives to acquire political power, imposition of their religious laws, acquire land or territory. Jessica Stern identifies five causes of terrorism: alienation, humiliation, demographic imbalance, erasure of history and the loss of territory. As a modern-age activity, terrorism possesses the modern sociological features of having an organizational structure that is led by charismatic leaders, lone-wolf avengers, military commanders, and a cadre. The religious terrorists see their organizations as the ultimate religious organization, which will settle the score of religious conflicts with their own victory over the other religious groups (Stern 2004).

The Rohingya have also engaged in a separatist insurgency through the Mujahid movement, led by Kassem Raja between 1947-1961, on the East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and Myanmar border. This has made the Burmese suspicious of the Arakan Muslims. In the period between 1971-1988, the Rohingya separatist insurgency was led by the Rohingya Liberation Party (RLP), which did not last long.

The 1980s saw the formation of the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), and also the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF), located in the Cox's Bazaar district in southern Bangladesh.

In 1994, the Burmese army massacred hundreds of Rohingyas in response to the armed activities of the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) (Rogers 2016, 132). In 1998, RSO and the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF) jointly founded the Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO), with the Rohingya National Army (RNA) as its armed wing, and it is said that they have international jihadist connections (Rogers 2012, 132).

The most recent Rohingya resistance group currently engaging with the Burmese army is the newly formed Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). It is led by Ataullah Abu Amar Jununi, a Rohingya man born to a refugee family in Karachi, Pakistan. He grew up in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Incensed by the suffering of fellow Rohingya, he gave up his affluent Saudi lifestyle to fight the Myanmar government for his people. ARSA has denied links with international jihadist groups (ARSA Group Denies Links with al-Qaeda, ISIL and Others n.d.), however other sources deny this.

On the other hand, Dr Aye Maung, President of the Arakan National Party (ANP), a self-declared ethno-centric, xenophobic and racist party, is seeking to become Chief Minister of Rakhine State, and has been named as one of the main instigators of the violence against the Rohingya. The ANP and Rakhine Buddhist monks insist that the Rohingya are a threat because of their Muslim faith.

The recent exodus of 700,000 Rohingya from Myanmar in September-October 2017 has been referred to by international organizations as a genocide. The Myanmar Army commander, Sr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, called it "clearing the Rohingya" from the soil of Myanmar, and "unfinished business" dating back to World War II (Hookway 2017). He also remarked that the Rohingya have no place in Myanmar, they "do not have any characteristics or culture in common with the ethnicities of Myanmar," and that the tensions in Rakhine state were "fuelled because the Bengalis demanded citizenship They are not the natives" (Myanmar army chief says Rohingya Muslims "not natives," numbers... 2017) (Myanmar army chief says Rohingya Muslims "not natives," numbers... 2017; UN Chief "Shocked" by Top Myanmar General's Comments on Rohingya 2018).

The army, the radical monks, and many others say that the Rohingya are illegal “Bengali” migrants from Bangladesh. Two Burmese historians, U Shwe Zan and Dr. Aye Chan have remarked that they are “Influx Viruses” from Bangladesh (Zan and Chan 2005).

Conclusion

This paper emphasizes that the Rohingya crisis is essentially a nationalist and race related crisis related to their right to citizenship in Myanmar. It is not a religious conflict, despite being described as such. It resurfaced in 2015 and has now reached a critical condition. This situation is being exploited and depicted as a conflict between Islam and Buddhism by radical religious leaders and groups in both the religious communities. This will be disastrous for the future of peaceful religious coexistence between Muslims and Buddhists in Southeast Asia. It will also jeopardize the socio-economic future of the ASEAN region. Political leaders and national policy makers cannot afford to turn a blind eye to the rise of the religious nationalist threat in Southeast Asia.

The Rohingya crisis has all the ingredients of becoming the strong catalyst for transnational Muslim-Buddhist religious conflict and violence across Southeast Asia. And it also serves as the case for similar grievances experienced by the Buddhist minorities residing in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei. There are grave implications for the future of the ASEAN region if there is no early resolution of the Rohingya crisis. This will critically affect the future of Muslim-Buddhist relations in Southeast Asia. As of the present time, both the ASEAN Muslim and Buddhist communities, who make up the two largest religions of Southeast Asia, are lacking in their local self-knowledge about Islam and Buddhism and their history of relations.

Since its independence in 1948 Myanmar has failed to become a multicultural society of ethnoreligious equality and plurality. The violent events involving Muslims-Buddhists in the case of the Rohingya from 2012 until today, in the form of the rise of Burmese religious nationalism, the rise of Asian Islamophobia, denial of the right of citizenship to the Rohingya by side lining the recommendations of the Kofi Annan-led Advisory Commission on Rakhine State Report of 2017, and the emergence of the violent Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) militants indicate a risk-full future for Muslim-Buddhist relations in the Southeast Asia. This situation will be further affected

by the transnational Asian Islamophobic influences from Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka, with whom both Burma and Thailand have long historical Theravadin sectarian relations (Sirisena 1978).

The influence and impact of the external religious conflicts in Sri Lanka, India, and the Middle East are a worrying factor for the future of Buddhist-Muslim relations in Southeast Asia. It can be alleviated only by promoting critical historical, political and religious understanding of Islam and Buddhism based on a solid knowledge of their past and present conditions, which is generally absent in their respective communities, government, academia and policy-making bodies, who resort to only a confessional understanding of their religions. Leaving the matters of religious understanding, without insights into the history and politics of their relations, in the hands of the less informed and biased Muslim clerics and the Buddhist monks is a dangerous prescription. Viewing the current violence-prone condition of Muslim-Buddhist relations in Southeast Asia through the dominant, exclusivist, ethnoreligious understandings of Islam and Buddhism is a flawed approach to building interreligious understanding.

The currently fragile state of Muslim-Buddhist relations calls for the development of civil relations between the two religious communities. Positive communication would help Buddhists and Muslims to discover their rich shared resources and embark on a dialogical journey to build peace and overcome dangerous religious nationalism. ASEAN Muslims and Buddhists also need to transcend attitudes that equate ethnicity with religion, for the former is local while the latter is universal and diverse (Yusuf 2014).

This does not mean that there are no moderate Buddhist monks who oppose this abuse of religious teaching for racism. Just as all Muslims are not terrorists, all Buddhist laity and Buddhist monks are not racist. Historically, Buddhism has an impeccable record of religious tolerance and non-violence unmatched by other world religions until the rise of the current Buddhist religious nationalisms in Myanmar and Sri Lanka. The rise of transnational Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand also does not augur well for interreligious relations in these countries. Though each of them have different political histories, the political leadership in these countries are under tremendous pressure from Buddhist nationalist monks to declare that Islam is a violent and dangerous religion.

Treating the Rohingya crisis as a disaster relief operation only by international humanitarian agencies will only exacerbate their condition. In terms of their human resources development, they're making it a case of bottomless pit funding.

Amidst the worldwide Muslim uproar about Myanmar's inhuman treatment of the Rohingya, the Muslim media's condemnation of Buddhism as the religion of violence, and calls for withdrawal of the Noble Peace Prize of Aung San Suu Kyi that she received for the cause of democracy, and not for the cause of the Rohingya, is the wrong approach. It have resulted in burning the bridges of communication.

Najib Razak, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia had warned Myanmar and the ASEAN group of nations that without a just and durable solution to the Rohingya crisis there is a great threat to regional security. It offers fertile ground for the arrival and recruitment to Islamic radical groups such as ISIS and affiliated groups (Taylor 2018). As international players seek to gain control over Myanmar's rich natural resources, it offers a fertile ground to become the new Afghanistan.

This requires Myanmar to rethink its old style domestic and foreign policy of isolation and the promoting of Buddhism as the ideology of majoritarian religious nationalism.

As Myanmar enters into its still yet undefined democratic era, at the present juncture there is little hope whatsoever for the solution of the Rohingya crisis unless there is genuine political will on the part of the Myanmar government, its Buddhist community and the Rohingya to resolve this problem constructively. It requires moving away from myopic ethnoreligious nationalism.

In the end, the case of the Rohingya is nothing more than a claim to Myanmar citizenship, and thereby to citizenship of the world – a basic human right for 7 billion inhabitants of the world today. It needs urgent attention and a resolution that is both political and religious at the same time.

Endnotes

1. Ethnography is the study of the entirety of people's lives: their work, family relations, religion and habits. Anthropology is the comparative study of human societies in order to understand what it means to be human. Based on observations as outsiders in the community under study, anthropologists try to understand people from the viewpoint of those being studied.
2. The physical evidence of this is in the presence of the two important historical sites of the Prambanan Hindu and Borobudur Buddhist temples in Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world. There are other similar historical sites in the region, such as the Pengkalan Pegoh in Ipoh, and the presence of Siamese Buddhist community in Kelantan, both in Malaysia and the past history of Brunei.
3. Myanmar, is the new contested name of former Burma. It was adopted by the military government 1989. Myanmar and Burma are ethnic names of the majority Bamar ethnic group in the country.

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Guidelines

Submission of Articles

S*tudia Islamika*, published three times a year since 1994, is a bilingual (English and Arabic), peer-reviewed journal, and specializes in Indonesian Islamic studies in particular and Southeast Asian Islamic studies in general. The aim is to provide readers with a better understanding of Indonesia and Southeast Asia's Muslim history and present developments through the publication of articles, research reports, and book reviews.

The journal invites scholars and experts working in all disciplines in the humanities and social sciences pertaining to Islam or Muslim societies. Articles should be original, research-based, unpublished and not under review for possible publication in other journals. All submitted papers are subject to review of the editors, editorial board, and blind reviewers. Submissions that violate our guidelines on formatting or length will be rejected without review.

Articles should be written in American English between approximately 10,000-15,000 words including text, all tables and figures, notes, references, and appendices intended for publication. All submission must include 150 words abstract and 5 keywords. Quotations, passages, and words in local or foreign languages should

be translated into English. *Studia Islamika* accepts only electronic submissions. All manuscripts should be sent in Ms. Word to: <http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/studia-islamika>.

All notes must appear in the text as citations. A citation usually requires only the last name of the author(s), year of publication, and (sometimes) page numbers. For example: (Hefner 2009a, 45; Geertz 1966, 114). Explanatory footnotes may be included but should not be used for simple citations. All works cited must appear in the reference list at the end of the article. In matter of bibliographical style, *Studia Islamika* follows the American Political Science Association (APSA) manual style, such as below:

1. Hefner, Robert. 2009a. "Introduction: The Political Cultures of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia," in *Making Modern Muslims: The Politics of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia*, ed. Robert Hefner, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
2. Booth, Anne. 1988. "Living Standards and the Distribution of Income in Colonial Indonesia: A Review of the Evidence." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 19(2): 310–34.
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5. Utriza, Ayang. 2008. "Mencari Model Kerukunan Antaragama." *Kompas*. March 19: 59.
6. Ms. *Undhang-Undhang Banten*, L.Or.5598, Leiden University.
7. Interview with K.H. Sahal Mahfudz, Kajen, Pati, June 11th, 2007.

Arabic romanization should be written as follows:

Letters: ' b, t, th, j, ḥ, kh, d, dh, r, z, s, sh, ṣ, ḍ, ṭ, ḏ, ḡ, f, q, l, m, n, h, w, y. Short vowels: a, i, u. long vowels: ā, ī, ū. Diphthongs: aw, ay. *Tā marbūṭā*: t. Article: al-. For detail information on Arabic Romanization, please refer the transliteration system of the Library of Congress (LC) Guidelines.

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تم اعتماد ستوديا إسلاميكا من قبل وزارة البحوث والتكنولوجيا والتعليم العالي بجمهورية إندونيسيا باعتبارها دورية علمية (رقم القرار: 32a/E/KPT/2017).

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الطفوس وعلاقتها بهوية مسلمي
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إبراهيم

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