



**Intercommunal Violence Incarnated:
The Persecution of Rohingya Ethnicity in Rakhine, Myanmar**

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Abstract

The Rohingya refugee crises in Bangladesh and recent UN Security Council's debate on whether to prosecute Burmese military general for genocide once again brought the Rakhine-Rohingya conflict to public attention. As this research aims to inspect the Rakhine-Rohingya relation, I will be analyzing the series of riots that occurred in 2012 and ended as the 2016 crackdown started. This incident epitomizes the resurgence of the persecution of Rohingya Muslims. It marks a new turning point of the conflict between the Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims residing in the Rakhine state of Myanmar. A case study approach will be taken to develop a comprehensive understanding of the issues, and thus provide adequate facts and evidences for making recommendations.

Keywords: Myanmar, Rohingya refugees, interethnic conflict, interreligious conflict, conflict resolution, peacebuilding, sustainable peace

Introduction

Multiculturalism in Myanmar is headlined by the intercommunal violence between Buddhists and Muslims in the Rakhine state, southwest of Myanmar. The country is predominantly Buddhist with a growing Muslim population. A long-history of Muslim enslavement by Burma-Buddhists and perceived religious superiority of being Buddhist have caused ongoing quarrels interfering the peaceful coexistence of the two religious groups (Royal Historical Commission of Burma, 1960; World Bank, 2014). In Rakhine, Buddhists named Rakhine and Muslims named Rohingya are experiencing such a challenge on a regular basis. Rohingyas are among the most discriminated Muslim population in Myanmar (Crisis Group, 2013).

This paper will focus on one of the most infamous Muslim persecution incidents in the modern era – the 2012 Rakhine state riots. Although the military crackdown from late 2016 to early 2017 is more recent, its aftermath and repercussion are ongoing as the number of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh is splurging and the UN Security Council recently addressed the prosecution of Burmese military generals. Therefore, the 2012 riots, which officially ended when the 2016 crackdown started, may allow us to dissect the Rakhine-Rohingya tension more comprehensively rather than focusing on post-catastrophe management.

The 2012 Rakhine Riots

On May 28, 2012, Muslim men, allegedly, sexually assaulted and murdered a Buddhist woman in the Rakhine state (Crisis Group, 2013). The subsequent murder of ten non-Rohingya Muslim pilgrims in Toungup township of Rakhine transformed the clash into an interethnic and interreligious matter (Crisis Group, 2013). Antagonism was casted as Buddhists versus Muslims in Rakhine state, rather than retained within the initially conflicted parties. The military, consisting mainly of ethnic Rakhine, sided with its own identity group and took a lead in the ‘ethnic-cleansing’ of the Rohingya. More than a-month-long of violence resulted in the death and severe injury of hundreds of Rakhines and Rohingyas. Thousands of homes were destroyed, and many residents were displaced. Whether planted politically or inevitable, these confrontations elicited a larger scale of violence in the Rakhine state. Ceasefire was urged by the central government and the United Nations few months later but new waves of violence kept emerging. Essentially, the 2012 Rakhine riots exhibited how nationalist sentiments easily manipulated the distrust between the Rakhines and Rohingyas.

The rising Burma-Buddhist radical nationalism in Myanmar significantly contributed to the escalation of tension between Muslims and Buddhists in the Rakhine state. Radical nationalism promoted the ethnocentrism of Rakhine Buddhists and degraded Rohingya Muslims through hate speech, violence, and crimes against humanity. The 969 anti-Muslim movement, commenced by Burmese monks, boycotted Muslim owned businesses and further impaired the financially marginalized Muslims in Rakhine state (Burke, 2016). A previous research pointed out that the Rakhine community and Rohingyas shared a common belief that the government and military were responsible for the 2012 riots (Lee, 2016). Some speculate that the central government directed the whole tragedy in Rakhine, even though the government insisted that the military has absolute independence over authoritative power. Extreme nationalism prompted and deteriorated the violence; however, the primary drivers were something more deeply rooted.

The Ongoing Rohingya Crisis

The perceived incompatibility and disaccord between Muslims and Buddhists in the Rakhine state encompassed many elements. Dispute derived from religious differences is only the shallow layer that we witness (Wolf, 2015; Blomquist, 2016). The core of this conflict is about ethnocentrism and racial superiority. Myanmar is a culturally diverse country consisting of more than 100 ethnicities, in which Rohingya is not an officially recognized ethnic group. In addition, within the Rakhine state where resources are scarce and poverty rate is the highest in the nation, residents are influenced by authoritative power imposed by the local and federal governments. They are also impacted by land and resource competitions and restrained by the lack of economic development. Externally, undocumented Muslims fleeing Rakhine state and making treacherous journeys through the Bay of Bengal have raised human rights concerns and received criticism from the United Nations and INGOs. With Burmese Buddhists being killed in Malaysia, a state-declared Muslim country, the Burmese government is thus threatened by a potential jihad terrorist attack on its homeland. Therefore, the Buddhist coalition, from the central government to Rakhine community, use segregation and discrimination as a self-protection scheme to secure their social and religious supremacy.

Aung San Suu Kyi's administration promised to manage the interreligious conflict more proactively. However, no constructive actions have been taken and a new round of riots broke out in October 2016. The central government has ineffectively intervened in the ongoing inter-communal conflicts happening in the Rakhine state and discouraging radical nationalism. The government's inaction to prosecute the perpetrators signals a reluctance to mediate Rakhine-Rohingya tensions and favoritism towards the Rakhine ethnic group.

Despite continuous efforts of the United Nations and other international NGOs, refugee management remains extremely inadequate in Rakhine state. As of April 11, 2017, an Advisory Commission on resolving Rohingya issues, headed by Kofi Annan, decided to shut down three displacement camps in strife-torn Rakhine state including the one holding thousands of Rohingya IDPs (AFP, 2017). A headcount of Rohingya refugees fleeing the Rakhine state has reached 655,000 by late 2017 whereas the sum of affected populations that requires humanitarian assistance increased to 1.2 million (UNICEF, 2018). While reintegration and resettlement plan are undetermined, new ferocity could arise again since the fundamental disputes between Rakhines and Rohingyas remain unsettled.

Literature Review

Theme 1: Competition

Competition is a common characteristic of intercommunal or intergroup conflicts. It involves two parties or more, and establishes some type of linkages between the parties. Such relationship insinuates interdependence where one party's goals and power can affect that of another party. Parties' goals could be incompatible or interfering when they try to dominate the situation.

Morton Deutsch (2014) describes the relevance of interdependence and conflict. According to him, "if they are completely independent of one another, no conflict arises" (See pp. 23-40). Deutsch (1973) claimed in the crude law of social relations that the characteristic processes and effects elicited by a given type of social relationship tend to elicit that type of social relationship – whether competitive or cooperative. The sense of competition is usually exhibited through attitudes and emotions that are mostly

negative, for example, hostility and eagerness to win. An action of rivalry implies that the parties may have needs requiring the use of same resources, but those needs are addressed differently.



Competitive interdependence implies a negative correlation between two parties' goal attainments. "Bungling actions" with shared similarities with destruction and competition, worsen the chances of obtaining a goal (Deutsch, 2014).

Interdependence and action together affect three basic social psychological processes – substitutability, attitudes and inducibility (Deutsch, 2014). Substitutability examines whether one party's actions can satisfy another's intentions. This process allows the parties to accept the activities of others in order to fulfill their own needs, through either cooperation or competition. Attitudes, here, refer to like or dislike towards one's environment or self. The tendency to embrace the beneficial and expel the harmful is innate (Deutsch, 2014). This mentality explains human perceptions towards cooperation and competition. Inducibility, the complement of substitutability, determines one party's readiness to accept another's influence. Negative inducibility usually connotes destruction or competition. All three elements can signal a party's intention for competition.

The nature of distinguishing the human factors, such as intentions and manners of actors, from escalation or cultural context incentivizes the crude law to be used for unraveling the chaotic relationship between Rakhines and Rohingyas as well as cross-hierarchical or cross-sectional relationships. The crude law model also illustrates the competitive-destructive dynamic, or the "malignant social process" that high-intensity intergroup conflicts are increasingly dangerous and costly (Deutsch, 2014). It provides reasoning to social tensions in the Rakhine state due to protracted intercommunal conflict.

Theme 2: Escalation

Escalation is inseparable from any types of conflict, whether latent or manifest, whether hot or cold. Escalation and de-escalation are associated with changes in conflict dynamics. It shows the movement of a conflict – ups and downs. The magnitude of tension tends to increase with escalation. Robert Jervis (1997) argues that the causes of a conflict are complex, intertwined, and situationally dependent. Conflict escalation is tied to these causes or dynamics of conflicts; it is either a component or a consequence of the causes. Securing the ability to dominate one's enemy could be the motive or incentive for conflict escalation.

The dynamical system theory (DST) understands complex conflict systems in terms of attractors. It dissects strong and coherent patterns that can draw parties in and resist change. By translating non-mathematical insights into a mathematical form (Liebovitch et al., 2010), the theory conceptualizes how cooperation and competition dynamics escalate or deescalate conflicts. One actor's response to another actor can be understood through this process. Two actors are situated in a neutral state when the strength of that feedback is less than the absolute value of their own resistance to change (Liebovitch et al., 2010). This applies to both positive (cooperation) and

negative (competition) feedbacks. When the strength of the positive or negative feedback exceeds the threshold, a distinctive change in behavior can be observed (Liebovitch et al., 2010). A conflict can be de-escalated to at least a neutral state if one actor unilaterally shifts behavior to cooperation. Then, the loser can temporarily reverse feedback from negative to positive for a limited time to become the winner. The introduction of negative feedback loops deescalates the conflict after the thresholds, promoting alternative peaceful attractors to emerge and disassembling strong negative attractors (Coleman et al, 2006).

The dynamical system theory addresses the complexity of the 2012 Rakhine riots where value differences, radical nationalism, economy, and politics are intertwined. The dynamics and linkages between components quantified by DST suggest that within the controlled parameter of the Rakhine riots, the system's behavior is attracted by the politics of Myanmar. Resource competition, economic insecurity, political instability and human rights violations all evolve around this attractor.



Theme 3: Culture

Culture is a broad term that emphasizes on the collectiveness of human intellect. It is part of individual's social identity, as it creates belongingness, group mobilization, and, frequently, segregation. In-group similarity makes members feel attached to and understood by the group they belong to. The cohesion culture creates sometimes drives members to put group interests ahead of their own. However, strong group identity – ethnic, racial, religious, political, and so on - alienates out-group members that are believed to be beneath certain standards or screening criteria to enter the group. Objectively speaking, this condition shall simply create difference between people, which may not elevate one group and impair another. What can really instigate conflicts to emerge is inner-group identity protection. Members of a group strive to preserve that group's pride by blindly undermining or even sabotaging another group, and therefore, make themselves more superior. These actions may not necessarily align with the real interest of the group.

The realist group conflict theory by Campbell (1965) explores groups in reaction to the psychodynamic view of ethnocentrism in authoritarianism. It suggests that scarce resources, power and value differences, unmet needs and physical threat can cause a perception of threat. This perception of threat, thus, causes hostility to the source of threat, in-group solidarity and awareness of in-group identity, and increases ethnocentrism. Glorifying in-group thinking and denigrating out-groups is the principal characteristic of "ethnocentrism" (Fisher,

2014). Attitudes and behaviors become ethnically centered under such circumstances, meaning that individual reaction to an issue is prompted by on that person's ethnic identity rather than intuition. This ideology results from a conflict of interest and intergroup competition to attain their goals. Moreover, when there is a history of antagonism between groups, the chances of engendering hostility toward the threatened outgroup surge (Levine & Campbell, 1972).

As the realistic group conflict explains intergroup reaction to psychodynamics of ethnocentrism in authoritarianism (Campbell, 1965), it rationalizes Rakhine ethnic group's urge to take power. A history of undermining Muslim populations in Myanmar and the ethnocentric presumption of privileging Buddhists are rooted in the decision-making of contemporary politicians, militants and monks. Both ethnic groups showed strong unity when their oppositions used the 2012 riots as an act of retaliation.

Underlying Issues

During and after the 2012 Rakhine riots, Rohingyas held a hostile attitude against Rakhines and the central government that empowered negative interdependence and competition. The appearance of coercion, threat, deception, and Rakhine's attempts to enhance the power differences witnessed prior to and during the riots fundamentally induced competition between the Rohingya and its counterparts (Deutsch, 2014). The lack of communications after the Rakhines accused Muslim men of sexually assaulting Rakhine women exacerbated the competition. The central government's delayed intervention also worsened the relationship. Gradually, their awareness of similarities in values which was already minimal was replaced by increased sensitivity to opposed interests. These parties took a rigid stance on cracking the fundamental issues between them, and thus they have no intention to resolve the conflict constructively. The violence also exacerbated the impoverishment in Rakhine state.

Rakhines and Rohingyas share a common objective to boost economy of the Rakhine state but the incompetence to address each other's ethnic and religious differences tend to thwart their peaceful negotiation on the fair distribution of resources. Therefore, resource competition in industries such as agriculture and fishing has encumbered job creation and rising wages. In two of Burke's interviews with rice entrepreneur and fishermen (Burke, 2016), both reflected that mismanagement of common resources has led to loss of profits for both the Rakhines and Rohingyas that conduct businesses in these industries. Rakhine accuse Rohingya of infringing industry standards and agreements. More social-emotional and less instrumental conflicts tend to induce more socially rational and less economically efficient orientations (Coleman et al., 2012). Disputes on resources often transitioned into the Rakhines suppressing the Rohingyas via forceful means and failed to benefit both parties economically. The long-hauled impoverishment of the Rakhine state makes conflict resolution even more challenging. National politics have impeded the economic development of the Rakhine state, leaving it with a poverty rate of 78% and almost twice of Myanmar's national average (Lee, 2016; UNDP, 2017). Self-identity crises along with radicalistic movements against Rohingyas in recent years escalated the tensions. Benign relationships were mainly broken down. The accumulation of rage and mutual mistrust between Buddhists and Muslims in Rakhine activated the 2012 riots.

How the Conflict Escalated?

Escalation of tensions can be witnessed in many intercommunal violence situations including the Rakhine riots. Ethnic and religious differences are at the core causing the 2012 Rakhine riots. Centralized governmental power, political turmoil, protection of cultural identities, lack of trust and injustice constituted the escalation components. Each fragment of the Rakhine communal conflict can be matched with one stage of the escalation model.



President Thein Sein’s political regime in 2011, after the stepdown of a former decades-long opaque military junta (Burke, 2016), brought changes to the political environment in Myanmar. This rapid political change is marked by an increase in democratic space in Rakhine state and across Myanmar, enabling new political movements to emerge (Burke, 2016). The initial discussion stage, therefore, was expected to help the Rakhines and Rohingyas discuss and resolve pre-existing issues including unemployment, citizenship and ethnic segregation. Since state parliaments established under the new administration had limited administrative capacity or control to take concrete actions over public affairs, negotiation between Rakhine and Rohingya ethnic groups was never arranged.

Trivial disputes between Rakhine and Rohingya were unmanaged on the micro-level. Human Rights Watch (2013) pointed out that the local police, ethnic Rakhine themselves, showed limited interest to reset social order and in some cases participated in the violence against Muslims in 2012 and 2013. The gesture of the local police and government siding with their ethnically identical group empowered the Rakhines to be more aggressive in ‘self-defense’ while oppressing the Rohingyas with unlawful force. The local police’s participation in fueling violence, which both the Rakhines and Rohingyas interpreted as ordered by the local government, pushed the conflict to its polarization stage.

Ignorance of the governments, anti-Muslim propaganda, social fear and insecurity led to the rigorous alienation of the Rohingyas from ethnic Rakhines. Freedom of expression and the internet became tools to spread hate speech (Holland, 2014). Politicians had no intention or action to intervene, or to mitigate the tensions between the Rakhine and Rohingya communities. The stage of segregation contains high levels of mistrust and disrespect, limited direct communication, and the use of threats (Fisher, 1990). Without effective arbitration or power mediation to moderate Rakhine-Rohingya tensions, consequently, the growing radical patriotism against Muslims in Myanmar escalated the conflict to segregation.

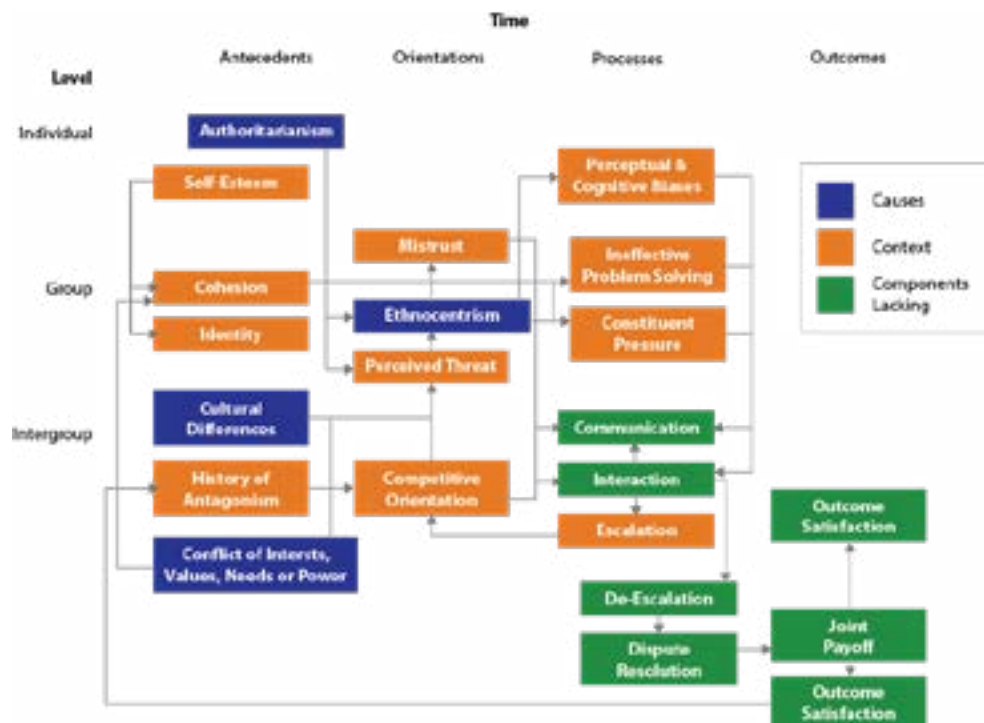
Destruction was portrayed by the 2012 riots itself. Disputed parties view each other as “subhuman” and prejudicially attempt annihilation of an identity group as in genocide for their own survival (Fisher, 1990). Ethnic cleansing was widely witnessed during the riots. Not only that Buddhist militants viciously

burned Muslim villages and massacred the Rohingyas, officials from both the Rakhine and Burmese governments denied any human rights violations. They first argued that the violence was purely a civilian action, and that the governments should not be held accountable for property damages and human casualty. Then, after satellite image verified militants' participation in the riots, the governments again disputed that monitoring the military is out of their scope under Myanmar's 2008 Constitution (Amnesty International, 2016). The irritating denial is another form of destruction on the psychological level for the Rohingyas – losing hope in their governments.

These four stages altogether build a vicious circle that continues to cause new rounds of conflict since the root issues or needs remain unaddressed and unresolved.

Ethnocentrism and Intergroup Conflict

Intergroup conflict arises from fundamental cross-group differences in social power, access to resources, important life values, or other significant incompatibilities (Fisher, 2014). Moreover, desires for power - to control another group - ignite the fire and de-balance the social relations of polarized groups (Fisher, 2014). The 2012 Rakhine riot was driven by Rakhines' dominance over Muslim populations, their competition over limited natural and economic resources, and religious differences. Biases and subjection over their counterpart exacerbated the conflict.



While incompatible cultures or religions can coexist peacefully with a prerequisite of harmoniously respecting and supporting outside cultures (Fisher, 2014), ethnocentrism increases the level of difficulty to sustain interreligious harmony or congruence. Both the Rakhines and Rohingyas are ethnically centered that they are inclined to accept those who share their religion, and to denigrate those who belong to

outgroups. Fisher (2014) suggests that at base, it is a struggle for dominance, and often results in a tense stalemate and deadlock. Ethnic Rakhines have a history of battling with colonial authorities and national leaders after Myanmar's independence (Smith, 1999). Its insurgency has gradually become a concern for Muslim minority living in their territory. Increasing immigration and birth rates of Muslims are deterring Rakhines' majority status (ICG, 2014). Inclusion of self-group and exclusion of ethnic aliens helped redefine the Rakhine identity, and thus obtain power to govern their own affairs. Similarly, Muslim leaders in Rakhine are also successful in collaging the group. When Muslim communities advocated their interests and expressed their needs through human rights campaigning and diploma, they have used the term Rohingya universally (Burke, 2016). The Rakhines and governments have rejected to address them as 'Rohingya' but rather 'Bengali'. Constructing a 'Rohingya' reputation internationally retains the pride of the group and puts pressure on their opponents.

The 2012 Rakhine riots justified for the defensive and hostile counteraction that the Rakhines and Rohingyas showed through smaller disputes. Political and religious leaders of Myanmar showed their overcommitment and entrapment in the conflict, which Fisher (2014) articulates to be hindering the de-escalation of intercommunal violence. A tool of authoritarianism, which refers to expensing personal freedom in return for the enforcement of strict obedience to authority, was used by leaders to ensure the Rakhine communities were obeying their scheme. According to the Rohingyas stranded in the quarantined area, monks came to Rakhine villages and beat the residents who were secretly giving the Rohingyas food (HRW, 2013). This was the first step that the leaders took towards overcommitment and entrapment. A month after the violence, President Thein Sein suggested publicly to expel the Rohingyas to third countries (HRW, 2013). Simultaneously, when some monks of the Rakhine sangha interviewed with international media, they referred to the expulsion of the Rohingyas from Myanmar as a change to the demographic composition of Rakhine state (HRW, 2013). Overcommitment to defend radical nationalism and religious pride as Buddhists continued to invoke decision-makers in Rakhine state to view that 'deporting' the Rohingyas from Myanmar is an appropriate political solution. Therefore, the Rakhine coalition entrapped themselves into continuous destruction of their erroneous adversary – the Rohingyas and all other Muslim people in Rakhine. They have wasted resources – both material and financial - in pursuit of victory, of which the 2012 Rakhine riots is an example.

Intervention Strategies

One goal of my intervention strategies is to strengthen government policies and inter-communal dialogues to mitigate the tensions between Rohingya (Muslims) and Rakhine (Buddhists). Some useful means of reducing the complexity in this scenario would be policy making and capacity building on the central government level, and less resistance towards the equal treatment of the Rohingyas in Rakhine state.

Based on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, needs from the physiological, safety and belonging levels shall be addressed in the post communal violence environment in Rakhine state of Myanmar. On the physiological level, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) are necessary to support the basic daily activities of the Rohingyas, Rakhines and other Muslim groups living in the displacement camps. Economic safety becomes a major concern when IDPs seek to reintegrate to their local communities and attempt to revive livelihood. Islamophobia across the globe and governmental policies segregating Muslims in Myanmar threaten the Rohingyas' sense of belonging to Rakhine and to the country. Many of these needs are either not in existence or have not been advocated sufficiently. The overall goal of my

intervention strategies is to strengthen government policies and intercommunal dialogues to mitigate the tensions between Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists.

Proposed intervention strategies are designed to examine deeper information regarding each need, and to foster a safe space for creative problem solving. *Consensus Decision-Making* shall be implemented to require governments and residents to come to an agreement on how more WASH facilities can be constructed and how such resources can be distributed fairly among those who have the need (Bressen, 2007). *Collaborative Work Systems Design* is recommended to address issues associated with economic security and impoverishment, and to create a framework for successfully changing the organization to support collaboration and improve results (Tekell et al., 2007). *Future Search*, which emphasizes on the power of voluntary commitments made on common ground, allows stakeholders to discover and use common agendas and shared ideals in order to determine solutions on the Rohingya's legal and religious identities (Weisbord & Janoff, 2007). Although key actors and stakeholders are likely to encounter many challenges and threats in the planning or implementation stage, these interventions also incubate more opportunities for changes and, maybe, innovation.

Revisiting the 2012 Rakhine Riots

Intercommunal violence continued to deteriorate in Rakhine state even after the Nobel Peace Prize Winner, Aung San Suu Kyi, became the de facto leader of the Burmese new administration and her attempts to intervene in the Rakhine-Rohingya crisis are minimal. The most recent military and political crackdown against the Rohingyas in October 2016 marks an ineffective post-conflict management campaign after the 2012 Rakhine riots, and a shortfall to address and resolve underlying issues associated with the conflict (The Guardian, 2016).

Recent debate on the prosecution of Burmese military generals at the UN Security Council may shed lights on how the international communities would like to engage in the Rakhine-Rohingya conflict resolution process. However, post-conflict management requires more attention on government taking accountability for intercommunal violence, the prevention of future violence, as well as IDP reintegration.

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