

AZEEM IBRAHIM, *The Rohingyas. Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide*. London: Hurst, 2016. 256 pages, £12.99. ISBN 978-1-84904-623-7

Myanmar's Rakhine State has been in a state of emergency since October 2016. The north of Rakhine State on the border to Bangladesh is sealed off and currently belongs to a military operational zone. The reason for the military intervention was the series of coordinated attacks against Myanmar police border posts. Nine policemen were killed, and weapons and ammunition were seized in October 2016. According to the Myanmar government, the attackers belonged to a militant Rohingya organisation. Meanwhile, there are reports of human rights violations carried out by the Myanmar security forces against the local, predominantly Muslim population, including members of the Rohingya group, in the north of Rakhine State. Around 70,000 people have so far fled to Bangladesh. International criticism of the new government, which began its work in April 2016 and of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi is growing. The violent conflicts in Rakhine State between Buddhists and Muslims already led to the expulsion of Muslims in 2012. Since then, more than 100,000 people have been living as internally displaced persons in camps. There have been travel warnings for the region since 2012.

About 3 million people live in Rakhine State: Two-thirds of them are Buddhist Rakhine and other ethnic groups, one third are Muslims, among them members of the Rohingya group. Within Myanmar's population of 51.5 million, 88 per cent are followers of Buddhism and 4 per cent of Islam. Since 2012, anti-Muslim campaigns have been intensifying throughout Myanmar. The Rakhine State, as well as the Muslim group of the Rohingya have so far been under-researched. Thus the book *The Rohingyas. Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide* by Azeem Ibrahim represents a timely and courageous effort to shed some light on the darkness. The aim of the book is summed up in the cover text: "This lucid and starkly written exposé of the plight of the Rohingyas should help bring their cause widespread attention."

In the first part, Azeem Ibrahim, Adjunct Research Professor at the Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College (Pennsylvania), discusses the history of the Muslim Rohingya in Myanmar, while in the second part, he refers to their situation since the outbreak of the 2012 conflict in Rakhine State, in the isolated west of Myanmar. He focuses on the humanitarian situation, human rights violations and the legal status of Rohingya, which he outlines impressively. He postulates: "This is genocide: it is the deliberate destruction of an identified ethnic group. International indifference only encourages the regime to believe it can get away with it" (p. 16). Talking about a genocide aimed at the Muslim group of Rohingya in Rakhine State is controversial. Ravina Shamdasani, spokeswoman of the United Nations human rights office said when talking to reporters in Geneva in early February 2017 about the recent developments in North-Rakhine State: "The kind of systematic and widespread violations that we have documented could be described as ethnic cleansing", but noted that this

was not a legally defined offence provable in court (Mizzima, Hundreds Likely Killed in Myanmar: UN, www.mizzima.com, accessed 4 February 2017).

The government of Myanmar claims that the Muslim group of Rohingya are Bengalis, who are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, and denies them citizenship, as well as recognition as an ethnic group. Police and military forces were involved in the expulsion of Rohingya in 2012 (p. 81). It is not mentioned and differentiated by the author at this point that the expulsions were generally directed against Muslims in Rakhine State. Among them were Kaman Muslims, recognised as citizens and as an ethnic group, and people who identify themselves as “Rakhine Muslims”. The violence and the isolation in the camps, where more than 100,000 people, mainly Muslims, have been living since the conflicts of 2012 has redefined identity. Even within families there are different identities, and it is by no means a general practice, as Azeem Ibrahim puts it, to speak of “the Rohingya” as if they were a large uniform group. Discussions about the identity of the Rohingya are largely omitted in the book. There is only half a page dealing with the case of the Rohingya as a political movement or a political identity, which was only developed in the 1940/50s (p. 31; see Derek Tonkin: *The Rohingya Identity. British Experience in Arakan 1826–1948*, www.networkmyanmar.org, 9 April 2014; Jaques P. Leider: *Rohingya. The Name, the Movement and the Quest for Identity*, in: *Nation Building in Myanmar*, Yangon: Myanmar Egress & Myanmar Peace Center, 2013).

In the first part of the book, which deals with the history of the Muslim Rohingya in Myanmar, Azeem Ibrahim argues that the Rohingya had already lived in the territory of today’s Rakhine State since AD 1000 (p. 21). At this point, a reference to the difficult source situation and sources that have not been fully developed so far would have been helpful. The historian J. P. Leider, on the other hand, believes according to currently known sources that the existence of a Muslim community in Arakan (today’s Rakhine State) can be attested no earlier than the 15th century, the same being true of the group of Rohingya. However, it can be assumed that the first Muslims already traded in the Bengal sea in the 9th century. Azeem Ibrahim refers to a census from Charles Paton of 1826 to prove the existence of Rohingya in Arakan. The Rohingya, are not mentioned in the census, but they are included in the quotation by the author himself: “a large community in the north (the Rohingyas)” (p. 6).

When describing the Sangha, the Buddhist community, which is very diverse and which is the largest nationwide organisation outside of state structures in Myanmar with about 500.000 monks and novices, the author over-simplifies by assigning the monks to three groups, two of which are ultranationalist: “The 969 Movement, the MaBaTha and a small group of mainly older clerics who reject the anti-Islamic rhetoric” (p. 14). This creates the impression of an extensively radicalised and intolerant monk community, which however does not correspond to the reality of the situation.

The author analyses the root of the violence and the increase in the persecution in Rakhine State. Unfortunately, he offers over-simple justifications when he talks about the Burmese path to socialism, for example, which has led to an economic disaster: “The regime needed an easily identifiable group it could victimise and against which it could construct wider discrimination. The Rohingyas fitted this role. They were unarmed, ethnically easily identifiable, spoke a non-Burmese language and were Muslims in a country where 90 per cent of the population was Buddhist” (p. 53). His finding, namely that the Rohingya were “subject to the official distrust of all non-Burman groups” (p. 53) is not without evidence, but incomplete. It has to be mentioned that under General Ne Win xenophobia and latent racism was promoted: “[...] even people of pure blood are being disloyal to the race [...] if people of pure blood act this way, we must carefully watch people of mixed blood” (Mikael Gravers: *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma. An Essay on the Historical Practice of Power*. NIAS Report Series 11. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 1993, p. 69). Besides the Rohingya, this also affected Chinese and Indians, including Muslims in general and Hindus, who were accused of being illegal immigrants who had settled in Burma during the British colonial period.

Unfortunately, the book contains numerous inaccuracies. Facts in connection with the description of the political system in Myanmar are misrepresented: “25 per cent of the seats in the new parliament were reserved for the USDP” (pp. 12, 15). It was not the Union Solidary Development Party (USDP) which benefitted: 25 per cent of the seats are qua constitution reserved for the military and are not open for any other candidates in the election. A further inaccuracy: the writer refers to the current situation of the Rohingya in the “Rakhine Province” (p. 1), although the “Province” turned into the Arakan State in 1974 and was renamed Rakhine State later, in 1989.

The author mentions that he conducted interviews with local journalists and Rohingya politicians in Myanmar in 2015 (p. 159), but does not give much background information. It would have been very interesting to know more about how extensive the interviews were, what the main focus was, the background of his interview partners, whether he also spoke with other groups, whether he was in Rakhine State itself to get an overview of the situation. This deficit is regrettable as it weakens the credibility of the sources.

However, the authors’ engagement for his research area is highly commendable, although a more differentiated report on the complex situation might contribute better to a widespread perception of the Rohingya cause, as was the self-declared aim of the book. To further this undoubtedly important aim, well-founded studies on the situation of the Rohingya are urgently needed and of great current importance.

Mandy Fox