

2020 Myanmar Elections: No Signs of Change for the Rohingyas

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Summary

Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won a landslide victory at the national elections held on 8 November 2020 in Myanmar. One of the key challenges facing her government is the plight of the Rohingyas. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that there will be any change in her government's policies towards the Rohingyas.

This paper examines the position of Bangladesh, China and India on the Rohingya issue. India and Bangladesh are important because a large number of fleeing Rohingyas have taken shelter in these two countries, especially in the latter. It is significant to know China's position as well due to Beijing's close relations with Naypyidaw.

When the world anxiously watched the conduct of the United States presidential election on 3 November 2020, another important, though less dramatic, elections took place in Myanmar five days later. The National League for Democracy (NLD), under the leadership of State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, won an overwhelming victory in those elections. The elections that were arguably seen as a referendum on Suu Kyi's performance in the first term as state counsellor¹ were a repetition of her party's 2015 election victory.

In the 2020 election, while the NLD won 396 seats in the legislature, way above the 322 seats required to form the government. The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which is backed by the military, won 33 seats.² Some of the leading ethnic parties that participated in the elections were Shan Nationalities League for Democracy), Arakan National Party, and Pa-O National Organisation that won 42, 15 and 10 seats respectively.³ At the state level, the NLD won 501 seats, the USDP 38 and the others 73.⁴ Approximately 37 million people were eligible to cast their vote in the general elections, including five million first-time voters.⁵ Despite the risks posed by the outbreak of COVID-19, the voter turnout was high, at around 70 per cent.⁶

¹ Ashley Westerman, "Myanmar Election: Suu Kyi's Party Poised for 2nd Term", *NPR*, 13 November 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/12/933010012/myanmar-election-suu-kyis-party-poised-for-second-term>. Accessed on 9 December 2020.

² "Myanmar Election 2020", *Yway Mal*, <https://election2020.lovelyfamilymm.com/>. Accessed on 8 December 2020.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Rubayat Jesmin, "The 2020 Myanmar Election: A Stride on the Road to Democracy?", *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, 13 November 2020. <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-2020-myanmar-election-a-stride-on-the-road-to-democracy/>. Accessed on 10 December 2020.

⁶ Ashley Westerman, *op. cit.*

The NLD was given a second mandate in the elections and its landslide victory has highlighted the party's popularity among the Bamar community, the major ethnic group in Myanmar.⁷ Suu Kyi is likely to remain the *de facto* head of government since she is constitutionally barred from presidency. Article 59 of the Constitution prevents an individual from becoming president if his/her spouse, either of his/her parents, any of his/her children or his/her children's spouses are nationals of a foreign country; Suu Kyi is unable to contest since her children are British citizens.⁸

Myanmar's democratic transition in 2015 has been driven by several factors. First the decades-long international sanctions imposed on the country resulted in an economic slowdown. Second, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' policy of engaging Myanmar constructively may have played a role in its path to democratisation. Third, the ruling regime may have wanted more diplomatic options to reduce its dependence on China.⁹ Despite the shift from a military junta rule to a civilian government, the 2008 Constitution that was passed through a controversial referendum has validated the military's control across the state machinery. The Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces) has control of three key ministries (Defence, Border Affairs and Home Affairs) and 25 per cent of all seats in the national legislature and provincial assemblies are reserved for it. The military also has the power to take charge of the country in the case of an emergency and establish the National Defence and Security Council during such a crisis.¹⁰

The dominant issues of the 2020 general elections were the failing economy, restarting the peace process with the rebel groups and implementing a Constitution that guarantees a genuine democratic federal union. In its 34 page election manifesto, the NLD had outlined three main agendas: address ethnic concerns and achieve internal peace; a constitution that ensures a genuine democratic federal union; and bringing in sustainable development.¹¹ The party also pledged to form a corruption-free government; establish a free and impartial judiciary; and amend, repeal and rewrite the existing laws that would be in line with democratic standards.¹² Conspicuously missing from the elections' agenda was the Rohingya issue that has eroded Suu Kyi and her NLD party's reputation. There were also hindrances for Rohingya parties and individual candidates to contest in the

⁷ As of 2020, the Bamar community accounts for 68 per cent of the total population, constituting an overwhelming majority in the country.

⁸ San Yamin Aung, "Myanmar's Suu Kyi Still Barred From Presidency as Proposed Charter Change Fails", *The Irrawaddy*, 11 March 2020. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmars-suu-kyi-still-barred-presidency-proposed-charter-change-fails.html>. Accessed on 9 December 2020.

⁹ Sinderpal Singh, ISAS Brief No. 257, "Something of a Homecoming: Aung San Suu Kyi's Visit to India", Institute of South Asian Studies, 26 November 2012. https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/media/isas_papers/ISAS%20Brief%20257%20-%20Something%20of%20a%20Homecoming.pdf. Accessed on 9 December 2020.

¹⁰ Amit Ranjan and Kaveri, "Myanmar Polls: Here's Why the Rohingya Have No Reason to Celebrate Suu Kyi's Victory", *The Wire*, 9 December 2020. <https://thewire.in/south-asia/myanmar-election-aung-san-rohingyas-military>. Accessed on 11 December 2020.

¹¹ San Yamin Aung, "Myanmar's Ruling Party Vows to Reform Military in Election Manifesto", *The Irrawaddy*, 2 September 2020. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/elections/myanmars-ruling-party-vows-reform-military-election-manifesto.html>. Accessed on 8 November 2020.

¹² Ibid.

elections.¹³ Nonetheless, six candidates from the community were permitted to contest,¹⁴ but in the absence of a large number of Rohingya voters, there was little hope for them. Many Rohingyas have been pushed out of their country and are living in difficult conditions in Myanmar's neighbouring countries, including India and Bangladesh.

Plight of the Rohingyas

The identity of the Rohingya community is contested both within and outside Myanmar. The Myanmar government recognises the Rohingyas as Bengalis and refuses to acknowledge the term 'Rohingya'.¹⁵ This term, despite internal contestations, became commonly used in the 1990s to refer to residents of the Rakhine region.¹⁶ In spite of living in Myanmar for centuries, the 1982 Burma Citizenship Law revoked the citizenship of thousands of Rohingyas.¹⁷ The citizenship law also stated that eight indigenous groups (the Bamar, Kachin, Chin, Kayin, Rakhine, Mon, Shan and Kayah) form the demographics in the country.¹⁸ Until 2010, the Rohingyas were able to vote with temporary identity cards. However, before the 2015 elections, these cards were nullified, barring them from voting.¹⁹

While bouts of violence have broken out in Rakhine periodically, the most recent instances were in 2016 and 2017. Since 2016, a large number of Rohingyas have fled to third countries (mostly to Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh) to escape persecution at the hands of the military. An outbreak of violence was triggered in October 2016 when militants from the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked soldiers who were patrolling along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border. The second exodus was sparked a year later, in August and September 2017, following attacks by the ARSA on police posts. The Rohingya crisis has spiralled into a cross-border issue that has affected the regional security apparatus, placing enormous pressure on Bangladesh and Myanmar to find a long-term solution to the burgeoning crisis.²⁰

¹³ Moe Thuzar, "Why Myanmar's 2020 Election Matter", ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 3 November 2020. https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_126.pdf. Accessed on 11 December 2020.

¹⁴ Shoon Niang, "Rohingya politicians excluded from Myanmar elections", *Reuters*, 25 August 2020. https://mobile.reuters.com/article/amp/idUSKBN25L02T?_twitter_impression=true. Accessed on 12 December 2020.

¹⁵ Amit Ranjan, ISAS Working Paper No. 271, "The Rohingya Crisis – A Challenge for India and Bangladesh", Institute of South Asian Studies, 25 September 2017. https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/media/isas_papers/ISAS%20Working%20Papers%20No.%20271%20-%20The%20Rohingya%20Crisis.pdf. Accessed on 10 December 2020.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ann Wang, "Why the Rohingya will never be welcome in Myanmar", *South China Morning Post*, 30 September 2017. <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/long-reads/article/2113253/why-rohingya-will-never-be-welcome-myanmar>. Accessed on 8 December 2020.

¹⁹ "We don't matter': Rohingya deprived of vote in Myanmar elections", *Aljazeera*, 6 November 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/6/as-though-we-are-dead-unable-to-vote-myanmar-poll-robs-rohing>. Accessed on 11 December 2020.

²⁰ Roshni Kapur, ISAS Working Paper No. 287, "The Repatriation of the Rohingyas: A Flawed Bangladesh-Myanmar Agreement?", Institute of South Asian Studies, 16 March 2018. <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/ISAS-Working-Paper-No.-287-The-Repatriation-of-the-Rohingyas-A-Flawed-Bangladesh-Myanmar-Agreement.pdf>. Accessed on 6 December 2020.

The United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council (UNHRC) set up the independent fact-finding mission on Myanmar in 2017 to investigate allegations of human rights violations committed by the Tatmadaw.²¹ Its latest report released in September 2019 stated that 600,000 Rohingya civilians in Myanmar face the threat of genocide and systematic persecution.²² Earlier, the Kofi Annan Advisory Commission that submitted its final report to the Suu Kyi-led government in August 2017 also expressed the severity of the situation in Rakhine. It stated that both the Myanmar government and society need to take concerted action to prevent a relapse of violence and radicalisation of the community.²³

However, Suu Kyi defended the military's clearance operations in Rakhine State at a hearing at the International Court of Justice in 2019 when The Gambia filed a case at the court on behalf of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation alleging genocide against the Rohingya community.²⁴ Defending the government, Suu Kyi said "Regrettably, The Gambia has placed before the Court an incomplete and misleading factual picture of the situation in Rakhine State in Myanmar. Yet, it is of the utmost importance that the Court assesses the situation obtaining on the ground in Rakhine dispassionately and accurately. The situation in Rakhine is complex and not easy to fathom."²⁵ She blamed the ARSA insurgents for the disturbance in Rakhine.²⁶

The case filed at the International Court of Justice against the Tatmadaw on allegations of persecution and violence against the Rohingya community is not an isolated one. In November 2019, the International Criminal Court approved a full probe into similar allegations of war crimes. Although Myanmar is not a signatory to the Rome Statute, the International Criminal Court ruled that it has jurisdiction to start investigations since many Rohingyas are residing as refugees in Bangladesh that is a signatory to the statute, and a member of the court.²⁷ Then, an Argentinian court accepted a petition to launch investigations against Suu Kyi and the Myanmar military in 2020.²⁸ While the effectiveness of such court cases and their verdicts are uncertain, it is evident that the international community and individual nations are exhausting all possible options to hold Myanmar's leaders and its military accountable for the plight of the Rohingyas.

²¹ UN Human Rights Council, "Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar". <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/myanmarffm/pages/index.aspx>. Accessed on 8 December 2020.

²² "Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Myanmar's Rohingya Persecuted, Living under Threat of Genocide, UN Experts Say", 16 September 2019. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24991&LangID=E>. Accessed on 8 December 2020.

²³ "Advisory Commission on Rakhine State: Final Report", Kofi Annan Foundation, 24 August 2017. <https://www.kofiannanfoundation.org/mediation-and-crisis-resolution/rakhine-final-report/>. Accessed on 6 December 2020.

²⁴ Owen Bowcott, "Gambia files Rohingya genocide case against Myanmar at UN court", *The Guardian*, 11 November 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/11/gambia-rohingya-genocide-myanmar-un-court>. Accessed on 9 December 2020.

²⁵ Transcript: Aung San Suu Kyi's speech at the ICJ in full, *Aljazeera*, 12 December 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/12/12/transcript-aung-san-suu-kyis-speech-at-the-icj-in-full>. Accessed on 12 December 2020.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ "International Criminal Court approves investigation into violence against Myanmar Rohingya", *CNA*, 14 November 2019. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/icc-authorises-probe-myanmar-rohingya-abuse-war-crimes-12094592>. Accessed on 2 January 2020.

²⁸ "Argentinian court decision brings hope for Rohingya", *AA*, 2 June 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/argentinian-court-decision-brings-hope-for-rohingya/1861967>. Accessed on 2 January 2020.

Suu Kyi's overt support for the military has resulted in the erosion of her international image as an icon of democracy. There is an understanding among political analysts that Suu Kyi is no longer a threat to the Tatmadaw and has realised being a part of the state machinery could advance her political career.²⁹ Suu Kyi's dismissal of the allegations by the international community, however, has resulted in some repercussions. The European Parliament suspended Suu Kyi from the Sakharov prize community in 2019. She has also lost other human rights awards, including Amnesty International's Ambassador of Conscience Award.³⁰

Bangladesh's Position

Bangladesh-Myanmar tensions over the Rohingya issue can be traced to the 1970s when Myanmar alleged that a large number of Bengali-speaking Muslims crossed into its side of the border. A military operation was carried out to remove them from the country which resulted in their fleeing to Bangladesh. In 1978, Bangladesh and Myanmar decided to discuss the issue and concluded an agreement under which some of the Rohingyas were repatriated while others remained in Bangladesh. A somewhat similar pattern was observed in 1991-92 when fresh violence against the community prompted it to seek refuge in Bangladesh. As the crisis unfolded, after a visit by Myanmar's foreign minister to Dhaka, the two countries came out with a joint statement. Under the agreed criteria set out in the joint statement, a total of 236,495 people have been repatriated from Bangladesh to Myanmar between September 1992 and July 2005.³¹

In recent times, as mentioned, over 656,000 Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh following the outbreak of violence in August 2017, creating one of the biggest refugee exoduses in recent history. It is worth noting that approximately 30,000 Rakhine Buddhists and Hindus have also been displaced amid soaring violence.³² It is estimated that about 9000 Rohingyas were killed in Rakhine between 25 August and 24 September 2017.³³

Most of the Rohingya refugees are dwelling in overcrowded and unsanitary refugee camps, with limited access to food and water, south of Cox's Bazar. The mass exodus of Rohingya asylum seekers has strained the services, resources, infrastructure and local environment in Bangladesh.

Alienation, anger and the dire conditions of the Rohingya refugees have made them susceptible to radicalisation. In the past, links between Rohingya insurgent groups and

²⁹ John Greddie and Fathin Ungku, "Myanmar's Suu Kyi says relations with military 'not that bad'", *Reuters*, 21 August 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-singapore-myanmar-suukyi-idUSKCN1L600P>. Accessed on 11 December 2020.

³⁰ "Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi suspended from rights prize community", *Deutsche Welle*, 9 October 2020. <https://www.dw.com/en/myanmars-aung-san-suu-kyi-suspended-from-rights-prize-community/a-54886567>. Accessed on 10 December 2020.

³¹ "1992 criteria not realistic now", *The Daily Star*, 10 October 2017. <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/myanmar-rohingya-refugee-crisis-1992-criteria-not-realistic-1474135>. Accessed on 4 January 2021.

³² Amit Ranjan and Kaveri, op. cit.

³³ Dildar Baykan and S Ahmet Aytec, "Ethnic cleansing against Rohingya: 2017 year in review", *AA*, 25 December 2017. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/ethnic-cleansing-against-rohingya-2017-year-in-review/1014681>. Accessed on 4 January 2021.

global terror outfits such as the Taliban were discovered. Some of the Rohingya refugees were recruited from shelter camps in Bangladesh and trained in Pakistan before joining the Taliban to fight against the America-led International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.³⁴ Former Foreign Minister of Bangladesh and former Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies in Singapore, Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury concurs that refugee camps in Bangladesh could turn into breeding grounds for extremism.³⁵ He also observed that “[o]nce the Rohingya situation turns from resistance to insurgency, it becomes difficult to handle”.³⁶

In December 2020, Dhaka announced that it will be relocating Rohingya refugees from Cox’s Bazar to Bhasan Char, an island in the Bay of Bengal. Till date, approximately 1,600 of them have been moved to this island.³⁷ While it is not known if this transfer is voluntary, criticism has mounted from refugee and rights groups that some of the refugees were being coerced to relocate.³⁸

India’s Position

India’s relations with Myanmar have been complicated by the Rohingya crisis. Since 2011, many Rohingyas also have crossed into India, residing in impoverished camps in cities, including Delhi, Jammu and Jaipur, while engaging in casual construction work.³⁹ As of January 2019, approximately 18,000 Rohingya refugees have registered with the UNHRC in India and are residing across the country.⁴⁰ However, the number of Rohingyas in India has been estimated to be around 40,000 by Indian security agencies.⁴¹

The Rohingya community in India has been targeted by Hindu nationalist groups that have called for their eviction from Jammu. The Bharatiya Janata Party-led government has labelled Rohingya refugees as “infiltrators” or “illegal immigrants” who are a strain on the country’s limited resources and pose a risk to national security.⁴² Current Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, during his term as the country’s Home Minister (2014-2019), issued a directive to all state governments in 2018 to gather biometric details of Rohingya asylum

³⁴ Andrew Sleth. *Burma’s Muslims: Terrorists or Terrorised?* Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Canberra: Australian National University. (2005).

³⁵ Ravi Velloor, “Rohingya Issue and the Danger in Southeast Asia”, *The Straits Times*, 15 September 2017. <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/rohingya-issue-and-the-danger-to-s-e-asia>. Accessed on 12 May 2018.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ “Transfer of Rohingya refugees to Bay of Bengal island ‘must be voluntary’: UN refugee agency”, *UN News*, 7 December 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/12/1079392>. Accessed on 9 December 2020.

³⁸ Mohammad Ponir Hossain and Ruma Paul, “Bangladesh ships Rohingya refugees to remote island despite outcry”, *Reuters*, 4 December 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/bangladesh-rohingya/bangladesh-ships-rohingya-refugees-to-remote-island-despite-outcry-idINKBN28E0FK>. Accessed on 9 December 2020.

³⁹ Harsh Mander, “As India sends Rohingyas back to face certain persecution in Myanmar, every Indian is complicit”, *Scroll*, 4 February 2019. <https://scroll.in/article/911564/as-india-sends-rohingyas-back-to-face-certain-persecution-in-myanmar-every-indian-is-complicit>. Accessed on 8 December 2020.

⁴⁰ UN Human Rights Council, “UNHRC seeking clarification from India over returns of Rohingya”, 4 January 2019. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2019/1/5c2f2a374/unhcr-seeking-clarification-india-returns-rohingya.html>. Accessed on 10 December 2020.

⁴¹ Harsh Mander, op.cit.

⁴² Ibid.

seekers. This move was seen to be driven by the government's will to deport them at all costs.⁴³

During Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Myanmar from 5 to 7 September 2017, the two countries came out with a joint statement in which India condemned the August 2017 terrorist attacks carried by the ARSA in Rakhine State, wherein several members of the Myanmar security forces lost their lives. India and Myanmar agreed that terrorism violates human rights and there should, therefore, be no glorification of terrorists as martyrs. The two sides agreed that the situation in Rakhine State had a developmental as well as a security dimension.⁴⁴

The joint statement by New Delhi took Bangladesh by surprise. Shortly after the joint statement, the High Commissioner of Bangladesh to India, Syed Muazzem Ali, met the then-Indian Foreign Secretary and current Foreign Minister S Jaishankar and expressed his government's position on the joint statement mentioning the situation in Rakhine.⁴⁵ Later, due to regional and global outcries against the Myanmar government, there was a change in India's position on the Rohingya issue. The then Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj reportedly told Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina that India's position on the Rohingyas is the same as that of Bangladesh.⁴⁶ The Indian government also decided to provide around 7,000 tonnes of relief materials⁴⁷ through operation *Insaniyat* (Humanitarian) to Rohingya refugees stranded in Bangladesh.⁴⁸ In 2019, India also handed over 250 constructed houses for Rohingyas in Rakhine to the Myanmar government.⁴⁹ Welcoming Suu Kyi's victory in the 2020 elections, Modi tweeted, "The successful conduct of polls is another step in the ongoing democratic transition in Myanmar."⁵⁰ It will be interesting to observe how the two countries work during Suu Kyi's second term as the Rohingya issue is likely to have some impact on their bilateral relations.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "India-Myanmar Joint Statement Issued on the occasion of state visit of Prime Minister of India to Myanmar (5-7 September 2017)". [http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28924/IndiaMyanmar Joint Statement issued on the occasion of the State Visit of Prime Minister of India to Myanmar September 5 2017](http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28924/IndiaMyanmar%20Joint%20Statement%20issued%20on%20the%20occasion%20of%20the%20State%20Visit%20of%20Prime%20Minister%20of%20India%20to%20Myanmar%20September%205%202017). Accessed on 18 September 2017.

⁴⁵ Devirupa Mitra, "Exclusive: Public Anger Brews in Bangladesh Over India's Stance on Rohingya Crisis", *The Wire*, 10 September 2017. <https://thewire.in/176013/bangladesh-rohingya-crisis-myanmar-india/>. Accessed on 19 September 2017.

⁴⁶ "Rohingya crisis: India backs Bangladesh's stance, Sushma Swaraj reportedly tells Sheikh Hasina", *The Indian Express*, 15 September 2017. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/amid-deepening-crisis-india-pushing-myanmar-to-take-back-rohingya-refugees-report-4844861/>. Accessed on 10 December 2020.

⁴⁷ "Operation Insaniyat: India sends relief materials for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh", *DD News*, 14 September 2017. <http://ddnews.gov.in/international/operation-insaniyat-india-sends-relief-materials-rohingya-refugees-bangladesh>. Accessed on 12 December 2020.

⁴⁸ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Operation Insaniyat – Humanitarian assistance to Bangladesh on account of influx of refugees". [http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/28944/Operation Insaniyat Humanitarian assistance to Bangladesh on account of influx of refugees](http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/28944/Operation%20Insaniyat%20Humanitarian%20assistance%20to%20Bangladesh%20on%20account%20of%20influx%20of%20refugees). Accessed on 12 December 2020.

⁴⁹ "India hands over 250 houses for Rohingya in Myanmar's Rakhine", *Reuters*, 11 July 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rakhine-india-idUSKCN1U61TN>. Accessed on 9 December 2020.

⁵⁰ Narendra Modi, Twitter, 30 November 2020. <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1326930797530673163?lang=en>. Accessed on 11 December 2020.

China's Position

China shares a 1,500-mile long border with Myanmar, and its economic interests and desire to have political influence make it an important player in the internal matters of the country.⁵¹ While Naypyidaw's handling of the Rohingya crisis has strained its relations with almost all major powers of the world, China has "buffered" Myanmar from all kinds of international pressure and taken many steps to protect it from various criticisms and punitive actions in the UN Security Council.⁵²

To settle the Rohingyas after their return, in 2018, the Chinese sent grey boxes as quick and cheap housing. China has also tried to mediate and resolve the crisis but found it challenging. Between 2018 and early 2020, it has been reported that Chinese officials brokered three meetings between leaders of Bangladesh and Myanmar, made multiple visits to the sprawling Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, hired cattle trucks to bring a few returnees home and even offered cash inducements.⁵³ The sticking point is the security of the Rohingyas in Myanmar. Although Naypyidaw contends that it has created safe conditions for the Rohingyas' return, Bangladesh and the UN do not believe the proposition.⁵⁴ Moreover, the Rohingyas contend that they will not return without guarantees of rights, including citizenship and freedom of movement.⁵⁵

In January 2020, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Myanmar. The joint statement released reaffirmed Beijing's willingness to continue to mediate the Rohingya issue, and Myanmar thanked China for it. The joint statement stated:

"The Chinese side supports the efforts of Myanmar to address the humanitarian situation and to promote peace, stability and development for all communities in Rakhine State. Myanmar reiterated its commitment to receive verified displaced persons based on the bilateral agreement reached between Myanmar and Bangladesh. The Chinese side reaffirms its willingness to provide further support, within its capacity, to Myanmar in the repatriation process and resettlement of the displaced persons from Rakhine State. Myanmar thanked China for its understanding of the complexity of the issue and for all its support to Myanmar."⁵⁶

⁵¹ "China's Role in Myanmar's Internal Conflicts", United States Institute for Peace, 14 September 2018. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2018/09/chinas-role-myanmars-internal-conflicts>. Accessed on 10 December 2020.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Poppy McPherson, Ruma Paul and Shoon Naing, "China struggles in new diplomatic role, trying to return Rohingya to Myanmar", *Reuters*, 20 January 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-china-insight-idUSKBN1ZJ0SY>. Accessed on 9 December 2020.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Myanmar National Portal "Joint Statement between Myanmar-China issued on the occasion of the state visit of H.E. Mr. Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China to the Republic of the Union of Myanmar", https://myanmar.gov.mm/en/news-media/announcements/-/asset_publisher/idasset291/content/joint-statement-between-myanmar-china-issued-on-the-occasion-of-the-state-visit-of-h.e.-mr.-xi-jinping-president-of-the-people-s-republic-of-china-to-?_com_lif. Accessed on 14 December 2020.

During discussions with the Bangladesh government, Chinese officials mainly emphasised the importance of developing the Rakhine region instead of focussing on creating a conducive political and security situation for the Rohingyas.⁵⁷

After the results of 2020 elections were announced, Xi sent a congratulatory letter to Suu Kyi on her victory.⁵⁸ As the Chinese are trying to broker a deal between Bangladesh and Myanmar over the Rohingya issue, one has to observe its possibility and effect.

Conclusion

Elections create hope that they would lead a country towards democratisation. It is evident that discrimination against the Rohingya community is militarily and politically embedded in the country. Myanmar would need to find a long-term solution to the Rohingya crisis, end systemic corruption and state patronage and broker a peace deal with ethnic rebels before it can move towards a more democratic system.

The presence of the Rohingyas in such large numbers in Bangladesh and India create tensions with the locals as they are perceived to be a burden on the countries' limited resources. In Bangladesh, there is also fear that links with the radical groups may push some of the Rohingyas towards militancy. As mentioned in this paper, some of them have already joined the militant groups to fight in different parts of the world in the name of Islam.

India and China are talking of deporting the Rohingyas to Myanmar. The Chinese have even facilitated a dialogue between Bangladesh and Myanmar over the issue. The problem, however, is of the Rohingyas' security. Given the social and political character of Myanmar, it is tough for the Rohingyas to rely on the state for their security. They also need a guarantee on their basic rights, such as citizenship, that has been denied to them for long.

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⁵⁷ Poppy McPherson et al., op. cit.

⁵⁸ "Chinese President Xi Jinping on Monday congratulated Aung San Suu Kyi on Myanmar's National League for Democracy's victory in the recent election", *Global Times*, 17 November 2020. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1207096.shtml>. Accessed on 11 December 2020.