KGRI Working Papers

No. 2

Popular Nationalism vs International Norm:

The Case of the Rohingya

YAMAMOTO Nobuto

Keio University Global Research Institute

Popular Nationalism vs International Norm:

The Case of the Rohingya[1]

YAMAMOTO Nobuto[2]

Abstract

The cyberspace has provoked new questions concerning national identity. It has created a new sphere where people experience and express nationalism in various forms and degrees, but increasingly defensively and not in keeping with international norms. The Rohingya issue that has unfolded in Myanmar represents such case. The massive displacement of the Rohingya, a Muslim minority group in Myanmar, has thus far evolved into an uncompromising controversy between the government of Myanmar and the international community. I argue that the key to understanding this controversy lies in the way social media frames the issue.

It is through social media platforms such as Facebook that news and comments expressing hostility toward the Rohingya – thus far unrecognized by the state – gain broad viewership. Frame analysis affords us a way of to understand how fake news or disinformation works. This paper focuses on the less attended frame, that is, how the increasingly defensive nationalistic social media in Myanmar frames the Rohingya issue.

Using cases from Myanmar, my paper aims to sketch out how fake news feeds popular antagonism against the Rohingya minority and the international media reporting on them, how conflicting framing works, and how Burmese social media shapes nationalism in the country.

---

[1] A paper originally prepared for the 2018 ACMC International Conference Taipei "Examining the Socio-Political Economy of Communication" at National Chengchi University, Taiwan, 27-29 October 2018.

[2] Professor of Southeast Asian Studies and International Relations, Department of Politics, and the program chairperson of "Risk Society and the Media" project under Security Cluster at Keio Global Research Institute, Keio University, Japan. Contact email is nobuto[at]keio.jp.

Communities can be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined (Anderson 2006: 6).

Introduction

"A War of Words Put Facebook at the Center of Myanmar's Rohingya Crisis," thus a headline in *The New York Times* dated 27 October 2017. The article, penned by Megan Specia and Paul Mozur, describes how the social media platform Facebook gained popularity in Myanmar and became instrumental in the crystallization of ethnic hatred in the society there, more specifically in spreading anti-Rohingya sentiments among the citizens. The Rohingya are a Muslim minority group in the country and have a long history of discrimination and marginalization in the society. The article begins with an episode about Ashin Wiranthu, an ultranationalist Buddhist monk who was barred from public preaching for the past year, and yet has managed to remain active and vocal thanks to the Facebook platform. Facebook not only allowed him to remain in touch with his right-wing supporters but also reaching new audience. Every day he would post news and updates on Facebook, often with embellishments if not outright false information, that portray the Rohingya as aggressive outsiders (Specia and Mozur 2017).

This Myanmar episode is not entirely exceptional in the contemporary cyberspace. The cyberspace provides a uniquely democratic sphere, while it changes the patterns of information, knowledge, and cultural production. This is a globally spreading phenomenon over the last decade, and it has affected the political landscape domestically as well as internationally. There are many studies about how domestic political landscape is changing due to information technology, in particular cases drawn from the so-called advanced democracies. The 2016 marked the turning point in the way social media shaped actual political landscapes – namely, two crucial polls in arguably two most advanced democracies.

Those are the national referendum on 23 June 2016 in the United Kingdom on whether or not the UK should withdraw from the European Union, the so-called Brexit, and the Unites States presidential election on 9 November 2016. In both cases social media played a major role in shaping public opinion and popular votes, resulting in unexpected outcomes; the UK took the Brexit route, and Donald Trump elected president in the US. It is often argued that on social media, information is easily manipulated; false information proliferates, and yet citizens tend to believe the information they obtained on social media. The social media, once believed to be a groundbreaking tool to promote democratic participation, has turned out to sow division, disconnecting citizens and undermining democracy (Vaidhyanathan 2018; Kakutani 2018).

Amidst such fragmentation in the society, questions concerning national identity also take shape on the same digital platform. The social media provides a new, almost ungoverned, sphere where people express and partake in nationalism in various forms and degrees. Increasingly however the nationalist discourse becomes defensive and chauvinistic, not in keeping with international norms. In the case of Myanmar, the social media in general or Facebook in particular works well to both connect the citizens and reinforces their nationalistic sentiment, which is achieved by identifying or accentuating the "foreign" elements in the society. The plight of the Rohingya that has unfolded in Myanmar represents such a case. The violent campaigns against the Rohingya in the last few years has led to massive displacement of this group. While the tragedy of the displacement has been widely reported, in this paper I will discuss one specific aspect – that is, how the Rohingya case has evolved into an uncompromising controversy between the government of Myanmar and the international community.

Why do the Myanmar government and the international community stand on the opposite sides of the controversy? Not too long ago, the very same international community

celebrated the democratic reforms in Myanmar, led by its icon and now top politician Aung San Suu Kyi. I argue that the key to understand this controversy lies in the way the social media frames the Rohingya issue and in the way information related to it is shared and circulated. Using the case from Myanmar, my paper aims to sketch out how (dis)information and/or fake news feeds popular antagonism against the Rohingya minority and the international media that reports on them; how conflicting framing works; and how the Burmese social media shapes nationalism in the country.

Myanmar in the Age of Information

How do we make sense of the explicit and widespread anti-Rohingya sentiment in Myanmar? I contend that the key is precisely the democratization process inside the country that has taken place since March 2011 led by then President Thein Sein. It was arguably a rather unexpected move by the military-led government. Many important stakeholders – the government, parliament, political parties, civil society, and media – supported the democratization process. As part of the process, the President and speakers of the parliament urged the population to seize the historic opportunity by actively participating in what Ernest Renan would call "daily plebiscite" (Renan 1996: 53). Among others, freedom of expression and information was considered a key measure of democratic reforms, and was clamored by the stakeholders inside the country, as well as the international community that for decades had pushed for the democratization of Myanmar.

One of the first steps taken by the government was to liberalize the media. Thus the information age arrived in Myanmar in 2012, when the government relaxed control over the media and opened up internet access to large swaths of the population. In early 2012 it made it widely accessible the smart-phone, radically reduced the price of the sim-card, thus rendering mobile phone usage much more affordable, and develop the digital infrastructure.

With the introduction of mobile 3G internet in 2015, the World Bank estimates that roughly 20 percent of Myanmar's 53.8 million population gained access to the internet. Among the social media platforms, Facebook quickly became dominant, used by an estimate of 80 percent of internet users in Myanmar. In Myanmar, the Internet means Facebook, and Facebook is the Internet. Most striking fact was that it was the politicians who began using Facebook and used it to deliver their message to the public. They were eager to reach out to the people directly, not by way of the mainstream media. As in other places, for many Burmese, Facebook has become a free and convenient source of news. By the early 2018, Myanmar had racked up more than 10 million monthly active users – meaning about 20 percent of the country is active on Facebook (Trautwein 2018). Nearly nine out of 10 Facebook users access it from Myanmar's two main cities – Yangon and Mandalay. In these cities, almost everyone has a mobile phone, while men outnumber women on Facebook almost two-to-one.

Thus Facebook becomes the platform of "free" expression as well as open forum. The first citizen who began to use Facebook were parliamentary members. They started to use Facebook in 2011 to reach out to the citizens directly. Such actions came to be called providing "breaking news" – done by politicians as well as officials, both military and civilian. This kind of breaking news began to erode the role of conventional mainstream media. As politicians and official turned active on Facebook, breaking news immediately became popular topic of conversation among citizens. Breaking news soon unveiled some kind of rivalry in the relationship between the parliament and military; the former was the driving force of democratization, while the latter tried to hold on to the power that they enjoyed under the previous regime.

Citizens too became active on Facebook, because the information age encouraged people's active engagement in socio-political affairs. Facebook turns into the people's voice

and eyes. It is only a matter of time before it speaks the voice of the majority, in this case the Buddhist Burmese population. It was instrumental in stirring the Buddhist nationalistic sentiment that motivated the 969 movement and MaBaTha (the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion). These are the Buddhist nationalist movements led by Buddhist monks. Their alleged purpose is to protect and promote Buddhist values and traditions in the midst of the country's transformations. While they articulate Buddhist culture, values, practices, and identity, they also emphasize the fear caused by foreign elements within and outside of the country. In such discourse, "Muslims" serve as the menacing Other, seeking to replace Buddhism with Islam. They articulate anti-Muslim sentiments through sermons and publications, including online publications and posts. Many of their posts however are based on rumor or mischaracterization of Islamic teachings and practices (Walton and Hayward 2014).

Through social media platforms, Facebook in particular, such a discourse gain traction. It is arguable that the spread of anti-Rohingya sentiments in Myanmar is closely connected with the Facebook platform, where misinformation and fake news is indistinguishable from credible ones. News, stories, and comments expressing hostility toward the Rohingya – the Muslim population in the state of Rakhine, bordering Bangladesh – receive broad viewership. One popular and controversial Buddhist monk is Ashin Wirathu, who has been accused of instigating sectarian violence between Buddhists and Muslims through his sermons and on Facebook. The radical monk sees Muslims, who make up at least 5% of Myanmar's estimated 60 million people, as a threat to the country and its culture. "[Muslims] are breeding so fast and they are stealing our women, raping them," he tells me. "They would like to occupy our country, but I won't let them. We must keep Myanmar Buddhist" (Beech 2013). UN human rights experts who investigated on the possible genocide

of the Rohingya have pointed out that Facebook played a role in spreading hate speech against this Muslim minority (Al Jazeera 2018b).

In 1948 when Myanmar (formally called Burma)[3] gained independence from the United Kingdom, the Rohingya asked for the promised autonomous state, but officials rejected their request. Calling them foreigners, officials also denied their citizenship. In 1950, some Rohingya staged a rebellion against the policies of the Myanmar government. They demanded citizenship; they also asked for the state that had been promised them. Ultimately the Burmese army crushed the resistance movement. In 1982 when a restrictive citizenship law was introduced, most Rohingya eventually became stateless. The idea of "national races" or *taingyintha* was defined and included 135 officially designated categories, none of which was named Rohingya (Cheesman 2017). The Myanmar government usually refers to the Rohingya as Bengalis, implying that they truly belong in Bangladesh, a Muslim-majority country bordering with Myanmar. The public tends to call them using an epithet for dark-skinned South Asians or Muslims: *kalar*, roughly translated as "darkie." This derogatory word is often used on Facebook when a Burmese colloquially refers to a Rohingya person. Below are two examples of such putdown taken from Facebook (Stecklow 2018):

Stuff pig's fat inside the damn kalar's mouth (September 2017)

If it's kalar, get rid of the whole race (October 2016)

---

[3] In order to avoid the confusion, this paper uses the term Myanmar for the country's name. When the country gained the independence, it was called Burma. In 1989 the Burmese government changed its official name to Myanmar.

The Rohingya are also denied basic services and their movements are severely restricted. A few years into the so-called democratization process, in March 2015 the government revoked temporary registration certificates issued to hundreds of thousands of Rohingya. Due to this revocation, they can no longer vote. Public sentiment against Muslims — who are about 4 percent of Myanmar's population, encompassing several ethnic groups, including the Rohingya — has spread beyond the Rakhine State. In 2015 elections, no major political party fielded a Muslim candidate. Currently no Muslim serves in Parliament, which is the first time since the country's independence.

Since 2012 there have been several outbreaks of violence against Rohingya, each time resulting in a wave of refugees.[4] The first wave of unrest began in 2012. In June and October 2012 there were large scale attacks on Rohingya in the Rakhine State, following the allegedly gang rape of a Buddhist woman. Hundreds of people, most of them Rohingya, were killed in communal clashes in Rakhine State and about 140,000 people were displaced. The unrest exposed the dark side of Myanmar's historic opening: the unleashing of ethnic hatred that was suppressed during 49 years of strict military rule that ended when the generals stepped down from direct rule in 2011. Between 2012 and 2015, more than 120,000 Rohingya boarded ships to flee persecution, according to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees or UNHCR. The UNHCR says that 25,000 migrants left Myanmar and Bangladesh in the first quarter of 2015, about double the number over the same period in 2014. Confronted with overflow of this refugee crisis, the neighboring countries as Thailand, Malaysia, Bangladesh, India and Indonesia for the most part closed their doors; except for the charitable initiatives of private citizens in these countries, the authorities would rather push the Rohingya's boats back to the ocean (Tan 2015).

---

[4] A series of organized anti-Rohingya violence in Myanmar began four decades ago. Zarni and Cowley (2014) details the historical development of a state-sponsored process of destruction against the Rohingya since 1978.

Through recurring outbreaks of violence against this minority group, popular antagonism has not subsided but in fact has gotten worse after Aung San Suu Kyi – the Nobel Peace laureate and leader of Myanmar's pro-democracy movement – assumed power in 2016. However, in Myanmar, there is stark denial that any violent outbreak against the Rohingya, much less ethnic cleansing, took place. The divergence between how Myanmar and much of the outside world see the Rohingya is not limited to one segment of local society. Myanmar's government officials, politicians, religious leaders and even a good number of journalists and local human-rights activists have stood united behind this narrative – that the Rohingya are not rightful citizens of Buddhist-majority Myanmar, that they are immigrants from Bangladesh. Some even argue that through the power of a globally resurgent Islam, this minority group is some kind of a Muslim Trojan horse, or, at the very least they are trying to hijack the world's sympathy. Facebook postings have amplified the message, claiming that international aid workers are openly siding with the Rohingya, giving way to wild theories of international conspiracy against Myanmar. As Annie Gowen and Max Bearak report in *the Washington Post* (Gowen and Bearak 2017);

> An endless stream of provocative photos and cartoons claim that there is no "ethnic cleansing" against Burma's Muslim Rohingya minority. Instead, according to the posts, international news and human rights organizations are falsely accusing the military of carrying out atrocities against the Rohingya to help terrorists infiltrate the country, kill Buddhists and carve out a separatist Islamic province.

Through many of these crises, Facebook functions as the platform to express Burmese nationalistic sentiments and feelings as against Muslims (Rohingya) and the international community.

Two Conflicting Views

Since August 2017 more than 720,000 Rohingya fled to neighboring Bangladesh as reported in various international media. It is also reported that the Myanmar military carried out or at least instigated a number of massacres against the Rohingya during its campaign of "anti-terrorism" in northern Rakhine State. At least 288 Rohingya villages were partially or totally destroyed by fire in the Rakhine State after August 2017, according to analysis of satellite imagery by the Human Rights Watch (Human Rights Watch 2017). As of August 2018, an estimated 127,000 still live in squalid displacement camps inside Myanmar.

The United Nations assessed that the military offensive, which provoked large exodus of Rohingya, appeared to be a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing." In the opening statement at Human Right Council 36th session on 11 September 2017, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, condemned the Myanmar government with strong words (Hussein 2017):

> Last year I warned that the pattern of gross violations of the human rights of the Rohingya suggested a widespread or systematic attack against the community, possibly amounting to crimes against humanity, if so established by a court of law. Because Myanmar has refused access to human rights investigators the current situation cannot yet be fully assessed, but the situation seems a textbook example of ethnic cleansing.

The emergent refugee crisis continued. On 16 October 2017, UNHCR, Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, and International Organization for Migration issued a joint statement about the Rohingya refugee crisis. It said, "The speed and scale of the influx

made it the world's fastest growing refugee crisis and a major humanitarian emergency" (Grandi, Lowcock, Swing 2017).

The Rohingya, who reportedly numbered around one million in Myanmar at the beginning of 2017, are one of many ethnic minorities in the country. The Rohingya Muslims represent the largest percentage of Muslims in Myanmar, with the majority living in Rakhine state. They have their own religion, language and culture, and have been in the region for generations. But the government of Myanmar, a predominantly Buddhist country, denies the Rohingya citizenship and even excluded them from the 2014 census. It refuses to recognize them as its citizen or indigenous to Myanmar, and instead sees them as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. Therefore, legally speaking, the Rohingya are stateless people.[5]

There are two conflicting official views concerning the Rohingya refugee problem and related issues. They have to do with how to understand the Rohingya exodus of 2017 and how the media reported the facts and evidences of military's involvement and brutality in the massive displacement.

The first is about how the Myanmar military and the United Nations perceive the Rohingya refugees in recent years. In July 2018, the Myanmar military's department of public relations and psychological warfare published a 117-page book on the Rohingya crisis. It appears to be an attempt to justify the killing of thousands of Rohingya in attacks in 2017. The UN has condemned the attacks as genocide. The book traces the history of Rohingya,

---

[5] Historically, however, there were times when the Burmese/Myanmar government officially recognized the Rohingya as its citizen. It is to be noted that there are two such cases. Since the 1970s, the Rohingya have migrated across the region in significant numbers. According to classified as well as diplomatic documents between the Bangladesh government and the Burma/Myanmar government, the latter government recognized Rohingya as its citizen twice. In the Secret 1978 Repatriation Agreement, the Burma government acknowledged the Rohingya as "the lawful residents of Burma," whereas in the Joint Statement by the Foreign Ministers of Bangladesh and Myanmar of 1992 it regarded them as "Myanmar residents" and "members of Myanmar society" (Corr 2016).

portraying them as interlopers from Bangladesh, and contains the army's perspective about the Rohingya crisis in 2017, which has been distributed mostly via Facebook.

The book is controversial not only because it justifies the military's operation against the Rohingya and neglects the international reactions about the issue, but also because doctored images used in the book. A Reuters investigation reveals that three of the eight historical photographs in the book are false, not what they are claimed to be. They include photographs from Bangladesh of 1971, Tanzania of 1996, while the photo purporting to depict Rohingya entering Myanmar from Bangladesh actually shows them attempting to leave for Bangladesh in 2015. Using fake photographs discredits the book itself. Yet it does not seem to matter to the people in Myanmar. The book is on sale at bookstores across the commercial capital of Yangon (McPherson 2018).

A nearly a month later, on 27 August 2018, the United Nations-mandated Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar issued a report on the abuses, calling for top military generals to be investigated and prosecuted for genocide and crimes against humanity. The report says, "Systemic discrimination and crimes under international law occurred during a period of significant international engagement in Myanmar, and while the United Nations was supposed to be implementing its Human Rights Up Front Action Plan" (United Nations Human Rights Council 2018).

On 28 August 2018, the day after the publication was released, Aung San Suu Kyi made a public appearance at the University of Yangon. The same UN report also criticized Aung San Suu Kyi for failure to use her position as head of government, or her authority, to stem or prevent the horrendous events in the Rakhine State. Yet she remained silent on the UN report (Ellis-Petersen and Hogan 2018).

The second has to do with how journalists tried to obtain the facts and evidence of a rumored military involvement in a massacre in the village of Inn Din. On 3 September 2018,

the Yangon Northern District court sentenced two Reuters journalists, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, to seven years in prison under the colonial-era Official Secrets Act. Nearly nine months before, on 12 December 2017, the two reporters were arrested after being invited to meet with some police officers at a restaurant in Yangon. They were handed papers allegedly linked to the security force operations in the Rakhine State. They were eventually charged with unlawful handling of these supposedly confidential documents. The Myanmar Police Department arrested them for illegally obtaining and possessing government documents with the intention of sharing them the foreign news agency that employed them.

The international community including journalist groups that advocate human rights and freedom of expression were outraged by the verdict. Many reported how unfair the trial was, and how military officers admitted that they planted the "evidence" in order to snare the two Reuter reporters. Witness accounts of the arrest point to a case of entrapment. In April 2018, a police captain testified that Police Brig. Gen. Tin Ko Ko had ordered the officers to "entrap" the journalists by planting "secret" documents for them (Human Rights Watch 2018). During the trial, the international community also organized an international campaign to free Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo through Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms.

There is no doubt that the Myanmar's government as well as its military are aware of these critical international voices. And yet, ten days later, on 13 September 2018 during a one-on-one discussion at the World Economic Forum's regional meeting in Hanoi, Myanmar's leader Aung San Suu Kyi defended the country's security forces from charges of atrocities against civilians. She said, "We have to be fair to all sides ... The rule of law must apply to everyone. We cannot choose and pick." Regarding the verdicts that sentenced the two reporters to seven years in jail, she said, "The case has been held in open court ... They

were not jailed because they were journalists. They were jailed because ... the court has decided they have broken the Official Secret Act" (Mahtani 2018).

Not surprisingly, her comments were not welcomed by the international community. For a long time, she has been regarded as defender and champion of democracy in Myanmar, and a moral figure for the world at large. She had the opportunity to put her weight behind the persecuted journalists, yet she rejected international criticism of the unjust ruling by saying that the integrity of the court should be respected.

The international community obviously sees the Rohingya as rightful citizens of Myanmar and therefore deems it is imperative for the Myanmar government to shoulder the responsibility to protect the Rohingya and restore their livelihood. The Myanmar government, to the contrary, does not recognize the Rohingya as citizens, but rather foreigners or even illegal aliens, and therefore does not concede any legal or moral responsibility for their wellbeing. Moreover, from the point of view of the authority, Rohingya people as a group pose a threat to Myanmar's security and order. The existence of the militant organization ARSA or the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army is often invoked as proof of this threat. Most important of all, the authorities in Myanmar understand that hard-handed treatment of Rohingya and uncompromising responses to ARSA is widely supported by the general population in the country. It is fair to say that these two conflicting views have complicated the Rohingya issue.

Echo Chambers

Why does such radical discourse become popular in Myanmar? And why does Aung San Suu Kyi side with the military, her former antagonist, and snubs the international community that has supported her through the many years she spent as political prisoner? In order to understand the disparity of views about the Rohingya between the public in Myanmar and the

international community, two analytical frameworks can be deployed here – namely, frame analysis and the echo chamber theory.

Frame analysis affords us a way to understand how internationally recognized conflict is reported and understood. Robert Entman observes that frames "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in communicating texts" (Entman 2004: 53). The frame tends to exclude details; at the same time, what is included is emphasized in terms of importance. It is known that the press and the media habitually frame international conflicts and the responses to them (Hammond 2007). It is to be noted that framing operates in a one-way direction, from the media to the audience.

It is arguable that the discrepant view about the Rohingya between the international community and the Burmese society is an outcome of difference in framing. The Myanmar context reveals an unexpected turn from the conventional frame analysis. There are two conflicting frames that explain the Rohingya situation – the domestic frame and the international frame. This paper focuses on the less attended frame, that is, how the increasingly defensive nationalistic social media in Myanmar frames the Rohingya issue. The domestic cyberspace offers a stark picture – that the Rohingya is a national security threat that the international community has mistakenly painted as victims of pogrom. How does such discourse come about and how different is the domestic framing on the Rohingya issue from the international norm and media?

The domestic framing positions "Rohingya" as a terrorist group. Over the years, the Myanmar government and military have blamed insurgent attacks conducted by ARSA. Until recently, ARSA was little known beyond the borders of Myanmar. The armed group fighting Myanmar military in the Rakhine state wants an end to decades-long persecution of the Rohingya. They identify themselves as freedom fighters (Al Jazeera 2018a). ARSA evolved out of a series of violent clashes between ethnic groups and the military. Reportedly, since

2017 an armed Rohingya insurgency has grown. The government refers to ARSA as a terrorist organization and claims that its leaders have trained abroad (BBC 2017). There is a conscious effort to pin ARSA as part of a global jihad. The International Crisis Group has confirmed that the group was led by Rohingya people living in Saudi Arabia (International Crisis Group 2016). This alleged transnational network is used by the Myanmar government to justify military operation against ARSA, rendering it as a fight against transnational terrorism rather than domestic insurgency. Ironically, this attempt to tack on ARSA to transnational terrorism also suggests that the Myanmar government does not completely disregard international public opinion; the label "terrorist" is arguably a strategy to mobilize international public opinion on ARSA, making it international terrorist problem instead of Myanmar's domestic problem.[6]

In addition, the two starkly different frames of the Rohingya – victims and terrorists – circulate in different media ecosystems. A media ecosystem is traditionally confined in a national territory. In general it follows two ideological streams – the conservative and/or right-wing one, and the liberal or center-left one. Each of the segments of the media system operate differently. With regard to the Rohingya issue, my paper finds a rather peculiar media landscape and ecosystems that can be summed up as domestic and international. This paper reveals the differences in terms of incentives, mechanics, and practices between the two parts of the media landscape.

In the digital era, media ecosystem creates a political landscape that transcends national boundaries. The political landscape consists of international community, the national government, media outlets, and the public both national and international. The public

---

[6] Claire Sutherland mentions a similar tactics by the Sri Lankan government against the separatist group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), calling them terrorist in order to deny international sympathy and support (Sutherland 2012: 66-72).

consumes news and information according to their interest and curiosity. They want to know what is going on in the society and the world as well. More importantly, they gravitate to news, information, and stories that confirm their worldview and validate their sense of self.

This is how a typical echo chamber develops. Here, a sketch of media mapping may be instructive. In general, there are two media components on the Rohingya issue – one is the international media catering to the international community that is generally on the side of the Rohingya refugees, the other is Myanmar's domestic media that tends to support their government's position and public sentiment on the issue. The international media such as BBC, *The Guardian*, CNN, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and Al Jazeera almost always emphasize the plight of Rohingya refugees and their situation in and out of Myanmar. Their coverage tends to frame the Rohingya as victims of persecution and rising tide of Islamophobia. Together the international media forms an echo chamber where they confirm and amplify each other's narrative and viewpoint. The echo chamber inside Myanmar is another story; the majority of news and stories reiterate the government's and Buddhist nationalist's view of Rohingya as national threat. Even a once considered liberal media outlet, *The Irrawaddy*, known for its critical stance toward the authoritarian military regime in Myanmar, has become a supporter of the current government and the military's heavy-handed treatment of Rohingya. Written in mostly the Burmese script, it is easy to see how the domestic echo chamber heavily influences public perception of Rohingya as nuisance, if not terrorists. Thus in their separate echo chambers, the two contradictory frames get amplified, leading to irreconcilable constructs of victims vs terrorists. It has come to the point where readers and viewers on both sides are willing to receive and embrace information so long as it reinforces their preexisting beliefs. This in the end provides the basis for the uncompromising views on how to deal with the very real and ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis.

But the story does not stop here. There are local journalists in Myanmar who worry about the growing gap between the international public opinion and that of Myanmar.[7] There exist liberal minded journalists in Myanmar; those who work for international media outlets as well as local ones. They understand why Aung San Suu Kyi or the civilian government in general must remain cautious and avoid confrontation with the military, which continues to hold political power at national and local levels. Even after the 2015 election, 110 out of 440 seats in the House of Representatives are allocated to military appointees. They hold the second most seats after Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy that has 255 seats in the parliament. In the so-called conflict regions, such as the Rakhine State, it is obvious that the military's position and power are stronger than those of civilian politicians. In other words, although Aung San Suu Kyi is Myanmar's *de facto* civilian leader, she does not fully control her country.

As mentioned above, after the liberalization of information in 2011, the public in Myanmar have access to "breaking news" provided by politicians and military officials. They know and understand how these two forces have confronted each other. Most citizens in Myanmar support politicians and the parliament as opposed to the military because of bad memory living under the military regime for roughly half century. Nevertheless, when it comes to the Rohingya issue, they reject international media narratives, and instead support the military and concur with domestically provided information through Facebook. It means that, although the people do not really like the military, the framing of Rohingya as national threat has put the military in more favorable light as ardent defender and protector of the country. To appeal to the public, civilian politicians must toe the same hard nationalistic line.

---

[7] Interviews with Sithu Aung Myint (11 February 2018), and Kyaw Phone Kyaw and New Yin Aye (12 February 2018).

Everyone seems to agree that the international media coverage of Rohingya issue has been biased against Myanmar, and therefore reacts defensively.

Finally, it could be argued that the Rohingya issue has created a peculiar and complicated sphere of discourse. Both the international community and Myanmar government and people, unintentionally, politicize the Rohingya issue and refugee crisis. It is politicized because the international community emphasizes the international norm of human rights and humanitarianism, while the Myanmar government underscores its national integrity. Both sides exist in their own echo chamber, insist on their own worldview and perspective, and therefore find it difficult to compromise. Under these discursive circumstances, unfortunately, the Rohingya people are mostly left out. Since they do not usually have access to digital media, they are not in the position to make their voices heard. Instead, their destiny depends on the others; either the international community or the Myanmar government.

Works Cited

*All online articles are (re)accessed on 14 September 2018.

AFP (2017) "Facebook 'ban' of anti-Muslim slur sparks Myanmar outcry," *The New Straits Times* (29 May 2017).

Al Jazeera (2017) "UN rights chief denounces Myanmar's ethnic cleansing: Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein says 'brutal security operation' by Myanmar military against Rohingya has to stop," *Al Jazeera* (12 September 2017).

Al Jazeera (2018a) "Myanmar's ARSA: Freedom fighters or 'terrorists'?: Al Jazeera speaks with a Rohingya fighter about the discrimination and persecution that made him turn to violence," *Al Jazeera* (07 January 2018).

Al Jazeera (2018b) "UN: Facebook had a 'role' in Rohingya genocide: 'I'm afraid that Facebook has now turned into a beast'," *Al Jazeera* (14 March 2018).

Anderson, Benedict (2006) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised ed. London: Verso.

BBC (2017) "Myanmar: Who are the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army?" *BBC News* (6 September 2017).

Beech, Hannah (2013) "The Face of Buddhist Terror," *Time* (01 July 2013).

Carroll, Joshua (2018) "Why Is the U.S. Government Funding Anti-Rohingya Propaganda?" *Daily Beast* (15 November 2017).

Cheesman, Nick (2017) "How in Myanmar 'National Races' Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47 (3): 461-483.

Corr, Anders (2016) "Secret 1978 Document Indicates Burma Recognized Rohingya Legal Residence," *Forbes* (29 December 2016).

Ellis-Petersen, Hannah and Libby Hogan (2018) "Aung San Suu Kyi stays silent on US report on Rohingya genocide," *The Guardian* (28 August 2018).

Entman, Robert M. (2004) *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gowen, Annie and Max Bearak (2017) "Fake news of Facebook fans the flames of hate against the Rohingya in Burma," *The Washington Post* (8 December 2017).

Grandi, Filipo, Mark Lowcock, William Lacy Swing (2017) *Joint Statement on the Rohingya Refugee Crisis* (16 October 2017).

Hammond, Philip (2012) *Framing Post-Cold War Conflicts: The Media and International Intervention*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Human Rights Watch (2017) "Burma: Satellite Imagery Shows Mass Destruction: 214 Villages Almost Totally Destroyed in Rakhine State," *Human Rights Watch* (19 September 2017).

Human Rights Watch (2018) "Myanmar: 7 Years for Reporting the Truth: Conviction of Reuters Journalists a Major Setback for Press Freedom," *Human Rights Watch* (3 September 2018).

Hussein, Zeid Ra'ad Al (2017) "Darker and more dangerous: High Commissioner updates the Human Rights Council on human rights issues in 40 countries," Human Right Council 36th session (11 September 2017).

International Crisis Group (2016) *Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State*. Report No. 283 (15 December 2016).

Kakutani, Michiko (2018) *The Death of Truth*. London: William Collins.

Mahtani, Shibani (2018) "Aung San Suu Kyi defends prison sentences for Reuters journalists," *The Washington Post* (13 September 2018).

McPherson, Poppy (2018) "Exclusive: Face photos in Myanmar army's 'True News' book on the Rohingya crisis," *Reuters* (31 August 2018).

Renan, Ernest (1996) "What is a nation?" in Geoff Eley and Ronald Griger Suny (eds.) *Becoming National: A Reader*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 42-54.

Specia, Megan and Paul Mozur (2017) "A War of Words Puts Facebook at the Center of Mynamar's Rohingya Crisis," *The New York Times* (27 October 2017).

Stecklow, Steve (2018) "Why Facebook is losing the war on hate speech in Myanmar," *Reuters* (15 August 2018).

Strangio, Sebastian (2015) "Uncertainty looms for Myanmar's Muslims: Despite a historical election promising change, Muslims in Myanmar feel threatened and excluded," *Aljazeera* (16 November 2015).

Sutherland, Claire (2012) *Nationalism in the Twenty-First Century: Challenges and Responses*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Tan, Vivian (2015) "Some 25,000 risk sea crossings in Bay of Bengal over first quarter, almost double from year earlier," UNHCR (8 May 2015).

Trautwein, Catherine (2016) "Facebook racks up 10m Myanmar users," *Myanmar Times* (19 February 2018).

United Nations Human Rights Council (2018) *Independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar* (27 August 2018).

Yakupitiyage, Tharanga (2018) "Rohingya Crisis May Be Genocide, UN Officials Say," *Inter Press Service* (14 March 2018).

Vaidhyanathan, Siva (2018) *Anti-Social Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Walton, Matthew J. and Susan Hayward (2014) *Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar*. Policy Studies 71. Honolulu: East-West Center.

Zarni, Maung and Alice Cowley (2014) "The Slow-Burning Genocide of Myanmar's Rohingya," *Pacific Rim Law & Policy Journal* 23 (3): 681-752.