

ARGUMENT

Myanmar's Military Is Only Hurting Itself

As the U.N. warns of a continuing risk of genocide, Myanmar should seriously consider the last 30 years and ask if its security policies are helping anyone at all.

BY [ELISE CARLSON-RAINER](#), [ANISH GOEL](#) | NOVEMBER 8, 2019, 4:55 PM

The genocide of the Rohingya, and the exodus of 700,000 of them in the face of persecution by the Myanmar military, is now public knowledge. Rohingya refugees have lived mainly in camps in Bangladesh for the past two years. But it is less well-known that an additional 600,000 Rohingya still remain in the Rakhine state of Myanmar—and they are perhaps even more at risk than those who were forced to flee.

According to a 2019 [report by U.N. investigators](#) issued on Sept. 16, the Rohingya still inside Rakhine remain there in “deplorable” conditions and face a “serious risk of genocide.” The report explicitly accuses the Myanmar military of continuing to “harbor genocidal intent” in the treatment of the Rohingya and of renewed “war crimes” including forced labor and torture against civilians. By some accounts, the military has carried out mass killings and gang rapes. While the Myanmar military immediately rejected the report as “one-sided,” a broad consensus in the international community maintains that those Rohingya who remain in Rakhine continue to be in extreme danger. The situation described is appalling on almost every level.

Throughout the past 30 years, Myanmar's global standing has swung between pariah and darling—an oscillation that has been predicated almost entirely on human rights. More specifically, it is based on the abuse that Myanmar residents themselves have suffered at the hands of their own government. Other factors that often lead to international ostracization, such as sponsoring terrorism, developing nuclear weapons, or manipulating the economy, are simply not present.

One can never be sure why a government would turn on its own people. The Myanmar military claims that it is carrying out these attacks on the Rohingya to root out

insurgents and bring security and stability to the country. But the sad reality is that by

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trampling on the human rights of its residents, Myanmar is undermining its own security far more than any gains it may claim to be making.

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It is well-established in **international relations theory** and practice that human rights violations are often the root cause of domestic, regional, and international conflict. Whether it is discrimination based on religion, ethnicity, race, or national origin, the genesis of war is often found in the systematic denial of human rights. In numerous instances around the world, including in South and Southeast Asia, human rights abuses have led to the delegitimization of regimes, collapse of governments, and revolutions. How a country treats its own people can become the central factor for how the international community conducts diplomatic relations with that country. The systematic and comprehensive persecution of Myanmar's Rohingya population has now become the central human rights issue of the country. It is also the central issue on which the international community defines Myanmar's reputation and ability to become a modern trade and security partner.

Even if one were to leave aside for a moment the genocide of the Rohingya, the Myanmar military has shown itself to be incapable of maintaining peace and security within its own borders. At any given time, there are 17 different ethnic militant groups actively fighting for separation from the Myanmar state, and many of these insurgencies have been raging for decades. (The Rohingya are not one of these groups.) Wholly separate from Rakhine, ethnic conflict continues to threaten the legitimacy of the nation and hinders the realization of a stable country. Ethnic insurgencies threaten to tear the country apart, but the Myanmar military does not have the skill or ability to fight them. One significant limitation of the military is its lack of engagement with modern foreign militaries over the past 30 years. Because of the **sanctions placed on Myanmar** since the early 1990s, a direct consequence of human rights abuses, it has been unable to professionalize its military, learn about modern counterterrorism techniques, or benefit from advances in military technology.

Similarly, the degradation of security stemming from Myanmar's actions does not stop at its borders but instead sows insecurity and instability throughout the region. Refugee

based violence, health care, and education—and there is no strategy for the ultimate fate of the refugees, their lives hanging in limbo. The very existence of these camps destabilizes the entire surrounding neighborhood. Further afield, many Southeast Asian countries have sizable ethnic Rohingya populations. As the Rohingya remaining in Myanmar are abused anew, these populations become more susceptible to radicalization. In the past, foreign Rohingya have often concluded that the only solution to violence against the Myanmar Rohingya is to conduct jihad, thereby creating transnational terrorism. In fact, the U.N. special rapporteur on protecting human rights while countering terrorism has **documented** how the abuse of human rights by authorities can drive people to extremist ideology and thereby have an inverse negative impact on a nation's security.

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Looking beyond territorial security, there is also significant impact for Myanmar in economic security. The sanctions imposed in response to human rights abuses have stifled the economy and resulted in lower economic growth than might otherwise be expected. Independent research documents how the Myanmar textile industry sustained a substantial adverse impact after the imposition of U.S. sanctions in 2003, slowing its growth rate compared with other developing countries in Asia. In this case, sanctions harmed a potential growth industry that could have alleviated widespread poverty. More broadly, sanctions had a damaging effect on U.S. investment in Myanmar, precluding the type of cooperation that introduces new technology, better working conditions, and global market access.

There are countless other examples, but the broad point remains the same: By continuing to harm and attack its own people, the Myanmar military is hurting its national security. The myopic, shortsighted view of national security of Myanmar's military leaders reflects a global trend of security officials. There is often a wide divide between civilian and military policymakers. Military and defense leaders are rarely trained in international human rights norms. The long-term value of allowing all people to participate in the political system, as well as addressing societal violence and discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities, is vital for national security. Yet protecting these rights is often undervalued or overlooked by security officials. Women

contributing to long-term unresolved conflicts. In addition, when a country is struggling with economic development and security in general, an ethnic minority can become an easy scapegoat to blame for the government's own shortcomings. Perceptions of national security often trump human rights considerations, and this shortsightedness can lead to civil unrest and therefore ultimately impact national security.

In Myanmar, these actions are also fueled by a nationalistic and religious prejudice. The Myanmar government, especially the military, has long viewed the Rohingya as immigrants living illegally in the country, despite the fact that many families have been in Rakhine for generations. They are a different ethnic group from the native Myanmar people, and they are Muslim in a country dominated by Buddhists. Given this, the Rohingya are defenseless targets for the government and the military. By persecuting them, they are able to claim the nationalistic mantle that helps keep them in power. One can only assume that this hatred clouds the longer-term strategic judgment of the military.

The problem is that this hatred is unlikely to ease anytime soon—which means that the persecution will continue. When even a Nobel Peace Prize laureate like Aung San Suu Kyi refuses to condemn U.N.-defined genocide, it is hard to hold out hope that the situation will change. Instead it seems that the military will not stop until the Rohingya are eradicated from Rakhine. Such a situation would only further isolate Myanmar and lead to an even more precarious national security situation.

To be sure, the Myanmar military should halt its assault on the Rohingya for humanitarian reasons alone. Unfortunately, these reasons have not been enough to sway Myanmar's leaders in this direction. One would think that the security and stability of their own country would be.

Elise Carlson-Rainer is a doctoral candidate at the University of Washington's Jackson School of International Studies.

Anish Goel is a senior South Asia fellow at the New America Foundation.

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