



Myanmar and the Ongoing Rohingya Issue

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Abstract

As part of the response to the pogrom of Rohingyas in 2017, this article looks at why Aung San Suu Kyi became the personal face of the Rohingya issue and how the lopsided focus on her by the international media obscured and silenced central players and what should have been the focal point of attention: the Rohingya people themselves. The article discusses how different groups, namely the international media, United Nations, international

and local nongovernmental organizations, and Burmese Facebook users attempted to shape narratives about the Rohingyas and divided communities with their competing interests.

စာတမ်းအကျဉ်း

၂၀၁၇ခုနှစ်တွင်ဖြစ်ပွားခဲ့သောရိုဟင်ဂျာများအပေါ်တွင်ကျူးလွန်ခဲ့သည့် လူမျိုးကို ဦးတည်ဖိနှိပ်/ချေမှုန်းခြင်းနှင့်ပတ်သက်၍ ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်းစုကြည်သည် ဤပြစ်မှုကြီး၏ပုဂ္ဂိုလ်ရေး မျက်နှာစာအဖြစ်မည်ကဲ့သို့ ဖြစ်လာခဲ့ရခြင်းနှင့်နိုင်ငံတကာ မီဒီယာများကဤကျူးလွန်မှုကြီးအပေါ် ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်းစုကြည်၏ နှုတ်ပိတ်နေပုံကိုစောင်းပေးဖော်ပြခြင်းနှင့် အတူဤဖြစ်ရပ်ဆိုး၏အဓိကဇာတ်ဆောင်ဖြစ်သည့် ရိုဟင်ဂျာများ၏ အသံများကို သွယ်ဝိုက်၍ တိတ်ဆိတ်စေသကဲ့သို့ဖြစ်စေခဲ့ပုံများကို ဤသုတေသနဆောင်းပါးတွင် သုံးသပ်တင်ပြထားပါသည်။ နိုင်ငံတကာမီဒီယာများ၊ ကုလသမဂ္ဂ၊ နိုင်ငံတကာနှင့် ပြည်တွင်းပြည်ပ အစိုးရမဟုတ်သော အဖွဲ့အစည်းများနှင့် မြန်မာဖေ့စ်ဘွတ်ခ် အသုံးပြုသူများသည် ရိုဟင်ဂျာများနှင့် ပတ်သက်သည့် ဖြစ်ရပ်ဇာတ်ကြောင်းများကို မည်ကဲ့သို့ပုံဖော်ရန် ကြိုးပမ်းခဲ့ကြသနည်းဆိုသည့် သုတေသနမေးခွန်းနှင့်အကျိုးစီးပွားအားဖြင့်ကွဲပြားနေသောလူ့အဖွဲ့အစည်းအတွင်း သက်ဆိုင်ရာအုပ်စုအသီးသီး၏အကျိုးစီးပွားများကိုသာရှေ့ တန်းတင်ဆောင်ရွက်ခဲ့ကြခြင်းဖြင့်ရှုပ်ထွေးကွဲပြားမှုများပိုမိုဖြစ်ပေါ်လာခဲ့ပုံကိုယခုဆောင်းပါးတွင် ဆွေးနွေးထားပါသည်။

Background to the 2017 Exodus: Perfect Timing to Drive out Rohingyas

Hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas were driven out of Myanmar during the Naga Min (Dragon King) campaign in 1978. Many were repatriated afterward. In June 2012, another exodus took place after racial riots broke out in northern and other parts of

Arakan and the whole country, a series of events which popularized the slogan ‘the West gate has fallen’ among nationalists. The slogan implies that the country now cannot stop the influx of Rohingyas (as well as terrorists as attested by figure 1).

The reality, of course, is the opposite: after the crisis in August 2017, close to one million Rohingyas (and some Hindus) left through western borders to Bangladesh. Considered a coordinated attempt to derail Aung San Suu Kyi’s (ASSK’s) National League for Democracy (NLD) from winning the general election in 2015 and to destabilize her government after the NLD won the elections,¹ the killing of Rohingyas and Muslims in cities such as Meiktila were largely ignored by the government so it could avoid being implicated in the highly-charged, anti-Rohingya (and Muslim) framing of the riots. ASSK and the NLD shunned the media and resorted to using draconian tactics against the institution. Journalists who criticized nationalists, including Wirathu, the monk who incited hatred against Rohingyas and Muslims and whom *TIME* magazine branded ‘The Face of Buddhist Terror’,² were not protected or supported by the NLD and their followers.³

¹ Such consideration is not unfounded. Soon after the June 2012, the author had a chance to hold discussions with some politicians and civil society leaders and most argued that the NLD had to be careful about how they react to the Rohingya crisis, which was seen as a deliberate attempt by the army to derail the progress of the NLD. The removal by Facebook of several accounts including that of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing in August and October 2018 respectively supported the NLD and their followers’ fear that the army was behind the coordinated attacks, or in Facebook parlance, “coordinated inauthentic behavior” on Facebook (Meta Newsroom, 2018).

² Beech, 2013.

³ One such journalist is Swe Win, charged and tried under Article 66(d) of the 2013 Telecommunications Act (Thet Su Aung, 2018), which is seen as a legacy of the Orwellian State deliberately left in the law books by the Aung San Suu Kyi-led government to protect the government from criticism. Swe Win was later shot in an assassination attempt and fled to Australia (ABC Foreign Correspondent, 2021).

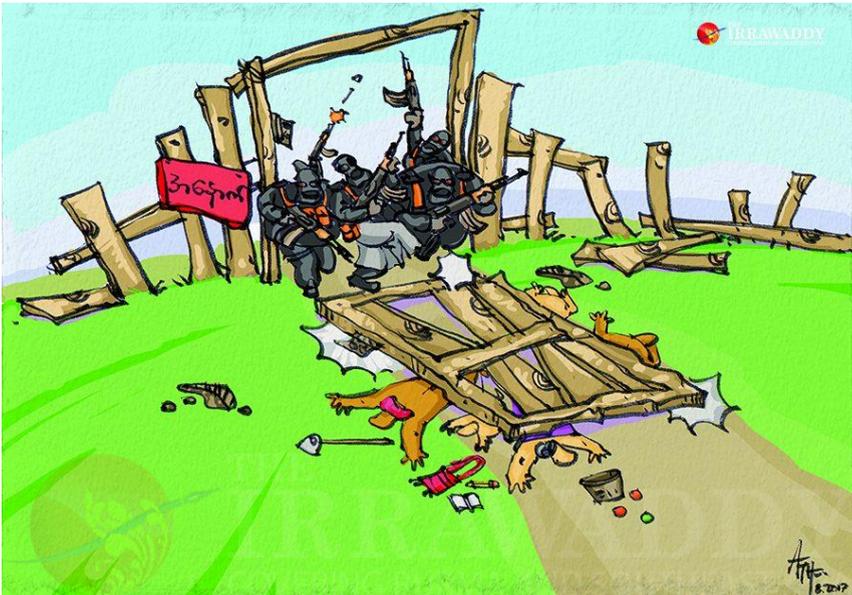


Figure 1⁴

It is not a coincidence that the recurrence of the “Rohingya Question” and escalation of the crisis began during the early days of the NLD government that came to power in 2015. National reconciliation—which could be historically interpreted as reconciliation between the army and the NLD⁵—peace, and the rule of law, are three pillars of the NLD party. In 2017 the NLD’s stance on constitutional reform seemed to no longer be the party’s priority.⁶ Understanding that the Rohingya crisis escalated post-2011, i.e., during the civilian government period, is important to keep in mind when evaluating the conflicting crisis narratives based on geographical regions, particularly inside and outside the country, as well as the different solutions suggested by regional and international groups.

⁴ ATH, 2018.

⁵ There were different international interventions to initiate and foster national reconciliation between Aung San Suu Kyi and the army (Maung Aung Myoe, 2002).

⁶ Sithu Aung Myint, 2017.

After the NLD won the 2012 by-elections and 2015 general elections and formed government, it focused a lot on reconciliation, i.e., NLD speeches for winning the support of the military; no other issues were prioritized so highly. In that context, the killing, mass exodus, and long-term internment of Rohingya inside the country were largely ignored by the NLD. Speaking for the Rohingya and protecting their rights, including citizenry rights, would have put the NLD in confrontation with the army. In addition, the NLD would lose followers who view the Rohingya as illegal immigrants.⁷ Under the perfect cover of and at the expense of the NLD and ASSK, in the name of promoting national reconciliation, the army could carry out its crimes against Rohingya people.⁸ The international media and community came to understand the NLD and particularly ASSK's positioning only after August 2017.

The Personification of the Problem

The peaceful transition to democracy in Myanmar was hailed as a hallmark of success for Myanmar and the international community that supported Myanmar's democratic causes during its dictatorship between 1988 and 2011. Little did the world know that the fairy tale everyone wanted to be a part of would end tragically in 2017, barely six years into the transition. The embodiment of Myanmar's democratic triumph, ASSK, has also been accused of ignoring her lifelong causes of democracy and freedom. Once a poster girl for internationalism, democracy, human rights, and good against evil tropes, after the Rohingya crisis ASSK was disowned by her friends; students and citizens demanded their governments strip her of awards and honorary citizenships,⁹ and the United Nations criticized her for not pre-

⁷ Cheesman, 2017.

⁸ One of the reasons ASSK supporters give when warning against criticism of her is that doing so is akin to falling into a trap laid by the military, which is often seen as the 'big black hands' behind national unrest.

⁹ Jett, 2018.

venting the crisis and even acting willfully in some cases to escalate tensions (and violence against minorities) by spreading fake news.¹⁰

While the world outside Myanmar viewed her as part of the problem for the ongoing Rohingya issue and a disgrace to democracy and human rights, her reputation inside Myanmar remained intact as testified by the following cartoon. In the picture, she is depicted as a woman carrying a badly-injured Myanmar (highlighting the Kachin State war in the north and the Rohingya crisis in the west) walking a tightrope with medals falling off her. This cartoon captured a largely sympathetic view the Myanmar public has toward her and is consistent with the popular trend among the general public to show their support with ASSK publicly. The cartoon also reflects the rising sentiment among the general public in Myanmar, i.e., victimization. Most thought ASSK and the whole country were portrayed negatively by the international media. Not only cartoonists, writers, and people who have access to media but also the general public with social media platforms voluntarily took part in defending ASSK and themselves against the international media. To both western media and the public inside Myanmar, ASSK became the center of the whole Rohingya issue, so much so that the real victims—Rohingya people, became less news-worthy than her.

¹⁰ The United Nations report stated “The State Counsellor, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, has not used her *de facto* position as Head of Government, nor her moral authority, to stem or prevent the unfolding events, or seek alternative avenues to meet the Government’s responsibility to protect the civilian population or even to reveal and condemn what was happening. On the contrary, the civilian authorities have spread false and hateful narratives; denied the Tatmadaw’s wrongdoing; blocked independent investigations, including of the Fact-Finding Mission; and overseen the bulldozing of burned Rohingya villages and the destruction of crime sites and evidence. Ignorance on the part of the Myanmar civilian authorities was effectively impossible”, (UN-HCR, 2018, p. 389).

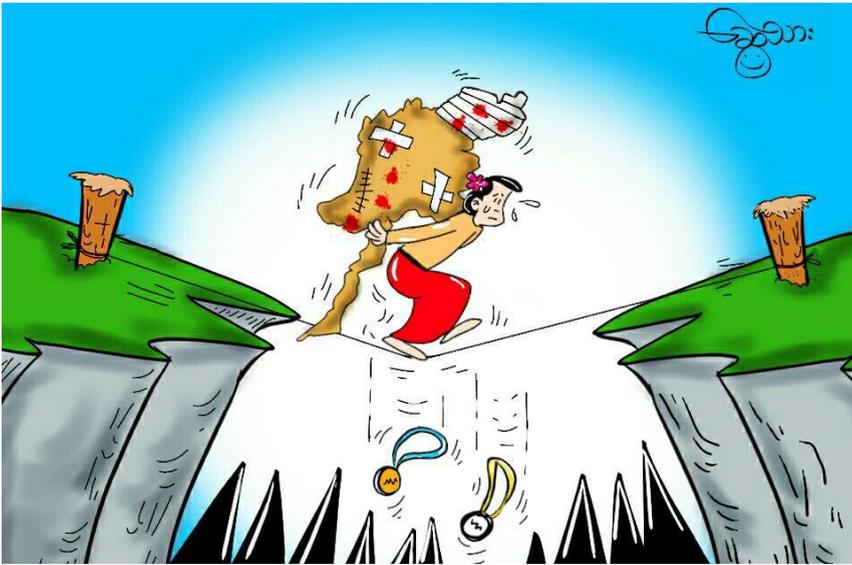


Figure 2¹¹

After March 2011, when the transfer of power to the Union Solidarity and Development Party civilian government was completed, international attention focused on how free and fair Myanmar's elections were and how smooth the transition was. The overwhelming narrative was there was a rupture in Burmese politics, a break from the long oppression, human rights abuses, and ongoing civil war with minorities. At long last, Myanmar, a benighted country that lived in the dark corner of the world, had arrived on the world democracy scene. Furthermore, the country needed much cheering on the global stage.¹² Invitations from world leaders were extended to ASSK, locked inside Myanmar for more than two decades. Then-US President Barack Obama and other world leaders Myanmar and met with her, thereby legitimizing the transition and glorifying the long-awaited democratic victory. Voices of the critics who pointed

¹¹ Aung San Suu Kyi's Burden, 2018.

¹² Her first visit to Europe after the long house arrest was hailed as a "triumphant visit" (Cumming-Bruce, 2018).

out that it was not a rupture but a continuation under disguise¹³ were silenced, and many were branded pessimists putting forward their agenda supporting outside-parliament practices, i.e., street protests, rather than supporting parliamentary democracy.



Figure 3¹⁴

It is essential to understand the enthusiastic support of ASSK then to understand how the world suddenly became disappointed with her after the August 2017 events. Even when she should not have been seen as a victim in 2012, the media still framed her as such. Few critics were listened to when they pointed out her silence on the renewed Rohingya crisis in 2012

¹³ This disguise could be understood as the military control was cloaked in the Aung San Suu Kyi-led civilian government. This is at least a narrative many inside Myanmar still circulate.

¹⁴ Many Facebook users in Myanmar changed their profile pictures to pictures like this in September 2017 amidst the escalating criticisms internally against Aung San Suu Kyi.

and then her collusion with the military and international mining companies when she persuaded disenfranchised farmers to accept compensation and accept jobs at the mining sites.¹⁵ Both inside and outside Myanmar, ASSK was given the benefit of the doubt, and many were hoping she would slowly speak out against the military on their treatment of Rohingyas and other military-related, old, unresolved issues. However, her spokesperson in 2017 denied she had any sympathy for Rohingyas, dispelling any lingering hope the international community had for her.¹⁶

Different Narratives in Different Circles

International Media

From the early days of her release, the prevailing narrative has been that a weakened ASSK is synonymous with a weakened Myanmar, and many are worried that divide over ASSK will inevitably strengthen the military.¹⁷ International media and the international community continue to view and understand Myanmar through the lens of ASSK. The same narrative persisted inside the country through the by-elections in 2012, the elections in 2015, and in October 2018, weeks before the by-elections, one of ASSK's ministers warned his constituents that without ASSK's leadership, the country would never enjoy peace and development.¹⁸ The NLD continued to use her pictures in their election

¹⁵ Criticism of her stance on the Letpadaung mining dispute came often from local and exile Burmese media. See Aung Zaw's opinion piece for one such critical report (2018).

¹⁶ McPherson, 2017.

¹⁷ One UK media outlet picked up such sentiment shortly after the June 2012 riots (Taylor, 2012).

¹⁸ ထက်နိုင်ဇော်၊ (၂၀၁၈၊ အောက်တိုဘာလ ၁၀)။ ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်းစုကြည်ကို မယုံကြည်ပါက တိုင်းပြည် ဒုက္ခတွေ့မည်ဟု မကွေး ဝန်ကြီးချုပ် ပြော၊ ဧရာဝတီ ။ <https://burma.irrawaddy.com/news/2018/10/10/172200.html>

campaigns despite her waning international acclaim. The narratives and headlines in 2018 and 2019, particularly about ASSK and her NLD party, should be understood in that context.

The hype about the success and the transition was so great that one could only expect dismay and frustration to that magnitude, and sure enough, we see such a scale of global awe at the incapacitated leader in the form of withdrawals of human rights awards. Western narratives about the Rohingya seem to be shaped more by the global democratic icon's silence on the plight than the plight itself. Moreover, we hear more about why ASSK is not speaking up rather than what could be done to help the country to bring back Rohingyas—not to their camps, but to their original communities. Such a narrative alienates local journalists and even human rights campaigners who disagree with the military and its operations but are still overwhelmingly supportive of ASSK. Local journalists, activists, and NLD supporters are frustrated that the media and the international community, including the United Nations (UN), did not separate ASSK from the military but portrayed both parties as colluding with each other to commit crimes. Whether there was collusion was a question probably six or seven years too late. The more attention the media put on ASSK, the more defensive locals became. Unfortunately, the strategy employed locally contained the damage done, and how to respond to international media and campaigns utilizing media and public relations.¹⁹

¹⁹ ရိုဟင်ဂျာ Crisis နောက်ကွယ်မှာ မဟာအင်အားကြီး နိုင်ငံတွေရဲ့ ကစားကွက်တွေ အများကြီးပါတယ်။ ကျနော်တို့ မအကြံဖို့လိုတယ် (ရုပ်/သံ)၊ (၂၀၁၈၊ အောက်တိုဘာလ ၁၀)၊ ဧရာဝတီ။ <https://www.facebook.com/theirrawaddy-burmese/videos/1967809533263189>. Ex-information minister, Ye Htut also opined that due to the government's inadequate handling of the media, the world did not have a chance to know that both sides—both Buddhists (and Hindus) and Rohingyas—suffered during the crisis (2018). Aung San Suu Kyi and the country's blame for the Rohingya crisis has been framed as a public relations failure on the part of the government that distracted from the deliberate killings and tortures committed by the army as reported by Amnesty International (2018).

ASSK, or rather her silence, has been influential in the shaping of international narratives of the Rohingya crisis. However, beyond the international media headlines, discourses and news about Rohingyas are eerily quiet inside Myanmar. Apart from occasional cartoons and news that respond to international news about ASSK and her government's handling of the Rohingya issue, few public discussions about the Rohingya take place. Domestic and international understanding and framing of one of the worst human-made tragedies of the modern time have been oddly centering around one figure, i.e., ASSK. International media and community attack her, and the domestic (non-Rohingya) population defends her. Otherwise, the central players and what should be the focal point of the crisis, i.e., the Rohingyas themselves, are missing from most debates. Rohingyas are left to defend themselves when the world discusses if and how much blame should be appropriated to ASSK. Rohingyas and non-Rohingyas in Myanmar talk past each other; the UN and other international agencies, including the media, inevitably play (often unhelpful) mediators between two parties. Events unfolded and solutions proposed spread far and wide, often via social media;²⁰ local communities no longer enjoy the privacy and right to resolve their problems behind closed doors, nor did they have agency to present their problems from their perspectives and find solutions on their own.

UN, NGO Circle and Academics

Amidst different narratives in the UN and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) circles and the international media, what could be a long-term solution for the crisis went missing. That is how to mobilize the remaining locals, who are not Rohingyas but ethnic Rakhine living in Arakan or Rakhine State, and other Burmans from the rest of the country, to build bridges over how the

²⁰ Immediately after the August 2017 crisis, a local police order for Ayeyarwady Region, i.e., the river delta, which can be accessed by sea from Rakhine State, to be vigilant about escaping Rohingyas (Bengalis in the documents and local language) was leaked to social media.

two warring communities could forge alliances and how they could live together again as they did before. Under the microscopic scrutiny of the media and multiple stakeholders, local attempts to help solve the problems were ignored. As the international community assumes that all Rakhine people and Buddhist Burmese are racists, there is no hope for communities to be able to live together again. Such assumptions are dangerous, and they can further alienate and disempower local communities, particularly brave small organizations and individuals who are desperately trying to find remedies with little resources – and Burmese and Rakhine journalists such as Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, who were jailed for their exposé on the killings of Rohingyas in Inndin.²¹

Concerning academic circles, unlike other conflicts, the Rohingya conflict saw the government welcoming scholars, particularly those that support the government's narratives that Rohingyas are not indigenous to Arakan. As a scholar and Burmese national, I think the silence of scholars with otherwise good intentions inevitably emboldens nationalists and alienates a few scholars who are outspoken about Rohingyas, and as a collective body, scholars could reflect on our roles and interactions with the country and its people. There is a disconnect between what we teach to our students that if you know more, you will be able to do more things to change your life and those around you and how we as scholars actually engage with our research communities. We keep telling ourselves that we need to know more to do things better - or even start doing things.

Domestic Populations and Facebook Users

Domestic narratives in teashops as well as on social media largely fell under three categories following 2017: 1) defense against what many see and call threatening/bullying tactics of western countries and media; 2) ongoing debates about sovereignty versus human rights that include the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and Chinese projects in northern Arakan and 3)

²¹ Wa Lone & Kyaw Soe Oo, 2018.

prospects for the 2020 elections. International and domestic narratives are, to a certain extent, linked and fueled by each other. Locals see the narratives of the international media and western countries as threatening the country's sovereignty, and many think international lobbyists are working to push the Rohingya agenda high on the UN security council. Many argue that though they do not like the military, they are together with the military if sovereignty is threatened. Furthermore, the Rohingya issue is the most critical issue many people think is threatening national sovereignty. Post-August 2017 rallying behind ASSK and the military, where the same people are now behind what was previously regarded as two opposition parties, could be understood as grassroots mobilization to protect the country's sovereignty.

In late 2017 and early 2018, amidst the talk of R2P, many assumed that the West has ulterior motives behind R2P and its campaigns about the Rohingya. Some argue such attempts aim to derail Chinese investments in Arakan state, including the Kyauk-Phyu economic zone. Regarding genocide and ethnic cleansing, a director from a local Myanmar think tank, National Reconciliation and Peace Center, argued that the onus of proof is on the accusers, and not on the government.²² Such argument dominates the local narrative, and the government seems to have invested heavily in promoting such narratives on social media.

The Ministry of Communication and Information Technology spent about 5 million USD on a Social Media Monitoring Team formed in February 2017,²³ and *The New York Times* argued that the genocide was incited on Facebook by mostly military personnel near the Myanmar capital.²⁴ Although Facebook took down the accounts of the military and its supports, including

²² Spoken in a video report for Kamayut Media, since removed from Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/kamayutmedia/videos/2079480092069176/>

²³ Facebook ကို စောင့်ကြည့်မယ်. (2018, March 20). *BBC News* မြန်မာ.

<https://www.bbc.com/burmese/burma-43477522>

²⁴ Mozur, 2018.

that of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, narratives denying genocide and posts promoting hate and violence against Rohingyas continue, and those sympathetic to Rohingyas are also still popular.²⁵ The Rohingya issue sustains nationalists' narratives on the need to protect one's religion and race, especially toward the goal of the main opposition party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party, winning the 2020 elections. On March 18, 2018, the president of the USDP party reminded his party that every citizen has to protect one's race and religion. This kind of narrative encourages the election cycle to closely align with a violence cycle.

Conclusion

History and historians lock Burma in the past; by contrast, liberation and democracy forces the nation and her people to rush to the future already defined by global forces including donors for various projects on democracy. Local Burmese are yet to have the privilege to imagine our future, redeem our past and curve a path from the violent past together. Violence buried will resurface as an even more powerful force to be inflicted on oneself and onto others, especially others that majority Burmans do not deem share their legacy. Building democracy in Burma requires transcending the tragic and brutal past dominated by colonialism and military regimes as well as conflicting donor agendas.

The year 2020 brought renewed hopes for the Rohingya issue. It is no longer about the trial against the government at International Criminal Court but reconciliation between Rohingya and Rakhine youth in Rakhine State. Rakhine people became the victims of military campaigns themselves and forged alliances with Rohingyas still living in the camps. Local voices, once suppressed, called for the war against Rakhine people to stop and many activists boycotted the NLD-led 2020 elections, a movement unheard of five years ago. Away from the global headline

²⁵ From the author's own experience reporting posts inciting violence, Facebook has been slow, sometimes taking up to a week to take down a post.

news, and perhaps in the absence of NGOs and democracy projects in the midst of pandemic, Burmese are slowly beginning to set their agendas. Local political and social movements against the government as well as the military however are seen by the NLD as derailing their plans for reelection in particular and the country's long-term democratic trajectory in general. Only time will tell whether the youth-led movements, which I see are a real hope for the country, will set both Rohingyas and Rakhine people free.

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ဓာတ်ပုံသတင်းထောက် ပက်ထရစ် ဘရောင်း(Patrick Brown) ရဲ့

The Rohingya Crisis: Documenting the recent mass exodus

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ထက်နိုင်ဇော်၊ (၂၀၁၈, အောက်တိုဘာလ ၁၀)၊

ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်းစုကြည်ကို မယုံကြည်ပါက တိုင်းပြည်

ဒုက္ခတွေ့မည်ဟု မကွေး ဝန်ကြီးချုပ် ပြော၊ *ဧရာဝတီ*။

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ကစားကွက်တွေ အများကြီးပါတယ်။ ကျနော်တို့ မအကြံဖို့လိုတယ်

(ရုပ်/သံ)၊ (၂၀၁၈, အောက်တိုဘာလ ၁၀)၊*ဧရာဝတီ*။

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