

## What Is Arakan? Territory, Historical Geography and the Ethno-National Dissent in Myanmar's Rakhine State

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State territories are defined by borders, yet these can shift, reconfiguring territories over time. Historical geography records these changes diachronically, while political geography focuses on the formation of new political units from a synchronic perspective. Beyond this, space is also experienced and imagined through ideological and cultural lenses. In Arakan (Rakhine State), one of Myanmar's seven ethnically denominated states, Buddhists and Muslims perceive and imagine space differently, often shaped by historical and cultural narratives. For instance, Rohingya-author Mohammed Yunus described the Bangladesh-Myanmar border as an Islámic 'Gateway to the Far East', while General Khin Nyunt framed Arakan as the 'Western Gate' where Myanmar's military counters the perceived demographic threat of Bengali migrants. These layered and conflicting territorial memories, tied to conquests, migrations, settlements and cultural dissemination, are reimagined in light of contemporary ethno-political imperatives. Assessing the prospect of Rakhine State's enduring conflicts requires an understanding of borders and ethnic spatialization.

As of 2025, large parts of Rakhine State are controlled by the Arakan Army ('AA') and its civilian wing, the United League of Arakan ('ULA'), which have resisted Myanmar's central state for nearly a decade. The AA-ULA's rise has been fuelled by two decades of socio-economic shifts and technological advances. Meanwhile, Rohingya Muslims, who dominate northern Rakhine, have endured another wave of persecution (2016–2017) but also gained unprecedented global recognition for their plight. This brief examines the political, historical and imagined geographies that illuminate the contrasting Buddhist and Muslim territorial perceptions of Arakan.

### 1. Arakan's Historical Geography

#### 1.1. The Waxing and Waning of Arakan's Territory

Rakhine State (used officially after 1982) covers 36,762 square kilometres along the north-eastern Bay of Bengal. The Rakhine Yoma, a steep, forested mountain range, separates Rakhine's coastal plains from Myanmar's Ayeyarwady Valley. Since the fifteenth century, the Yoma watershed has formed Arakan's border with Burma. Today, Rakhine borders Myanmar's Magway, Bago and Ayeyarwady regions. The Kaladan and Lemro Rivers flow north to south from Chin State, and the Naf River marks the international border with Bangladesh in the north-west.

For over 350 years (1430–1784), Arakan was an independent kingdom with its capital in Mrauk U. At its height in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, its territory was about 30 percent larger than modern Rakhine State. The Arakanese king extended his rule over the Upper Kaladan Valley and the coastline south to Hainggyi Island. North of the Naf River, Arakan's rule reached the Feni River, including much of today's Chittagong District in Bangladesh. Chittagong was a major trading hub under Arakanese control until 1666 when the Mughals took it. Arakan's navy patrolled the coastal seas for decades and tribute missions projected hegemonic power both inland to Tripura and south to Lower Burma.

By the eighteenth century, Arakan's territory had contracted. The coastline south of Gwa likely slipped from royal control, and Arakan was seen from Bengal as a haven for pirates and slave traders. When the East India Company began ruling Chittagong in 1761, a buffer zone formed between Ramu in Bengal and the Naf River, with northern Arakan sparsely

populated. Though the Mughals and Arakanese never formalized a border, the Naf River became the *de facto* boundary between British Bengal and Burma after the Burmese invasion in 1784.

Internally, the kingdom was a set of distinct regions. Until the colonial period, the term 'Arakan' in the vernacular (*Rakhine-pray*) referred primarily to the northern areas, encompassing the Kaladan, Lemro and Mayu river valleys. Another term, *Rakhine taing-gri* (kingdom of Arakan), was used to include the southern regions as well. In their censuses up until 1941, the British did not classify the Arakanese Buddhists as a single, uniform ethnic group. Similarly, they distinguished between indigenous Arakan Muslims and the larger group of Chittagonian immigrants.

After the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824–1826), the East India Company annexed Arakan, reorganizing the four regions under the Burmese king (Dhanyawadi, Rammawadi, Meghawadi and Dwarawadi) into three districts: Akyab (modern Sittwe), Kyaukphyu (including the islands of Ramree or Yanbye and Cheduba or Man-Aung), and Sandoway or Thandwe. The British also established the Arakan Hill Tracts in 1865, granting it frontier status. In 1948, the Hill Tracts were reintegrated into Akyab District but were transferred to Chin State in 1974 by General Ne Win. Later renamed Paletwa township, the area including border posts with India is under the control of the Arakan Army since early 2024.

The homogenization of the Arakanese as a single group and the broader application of the name 'Arakan' are contextual factors for understanding that the rise of Arakanese nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s was an ideology in the making rather than inherited. The assimilation of Muslim communities and the ethnification of the immigrant Chittagonians – manifested in the Rohingya movement of the 1950s – followed a comparable trajectory.

#### 1.2. A Porous Western Border and Concerns of Illicit Migration

When British rule ended in South Asia, the Naf River became the border between the newly emerging states of Pakistan (1947) and Burma (1948). Since mid-1947, Burmese authorities struggled to regulate cross-border movements between Chittagong district and Arakan, where the British had not monitored or restricted the flow of people and goods for 120 years. Under colonial rule, the wastelands along the Naf River were settled by immigrants and northern Akyab District became one of the most densely populated areas in British Burma. After World War II, poorly supervised returns of Buddhist and Muslim evacuees from India continued until 1947. Bengali labourers resumed seasonal migration to Arakan's fields in 1946. Border crossings were scarcely regulated until the introduction of the Burma Immigration (Emergency Provisions) Act in June 1947,<sup>1</sup> which made crossing the border subject to permits. During the Mujahid rebellion (1948–1954), the state's control was limited to a few towns and smuggling and illegal migration across the porous border continued. General Ne Win's Frontier Areas Administration (1958–1964) was an attempt to control Burma's borders.

Demarcating the international border with East Pakistan and Bangladesh proved lengthy, with Burma reiterating allegations of illegal immigra-

<sup>1</sup> Burma Immigration (Emergency Provisions) Act, 13 June 1947 (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/3efb59/>).

tion. The Burma-East Pakistan Boundary Agreement in 1966 recognized the land boundary, while the maritime boundary was delineated by a 1974 treaty with Bangladesh.<sup>2</sup> Disputes over the sea border, related to oil and gas exploration, were resolved in 2012 by the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea ('ITLOS').<sup>3</sup> Despite these agreements, the securitization of the border remained contentious, with military clearance operations leading to Muslim mass exoduses in 1948, 1959, 1978, 1991–1992 and 2016–2017.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Arakanese Spatial Identities

The ethnocentric narrative of the Arakanese conflates territory, ethnicity, the memorialization of a past kingdom, and Buddhist culture. Pre-modern Arakanese history becomes hereby a history of the dominant Arakanese, or rather a lineage of mythical and historical dynasties, who allegedly ruled over royal cities in the Kaladan and Lemro Valleys.

Though the realm's outer boundaries remain undefined, traditional historiography reflects the process of territorial unification of diverse regions into the early modern Arakanese kingdom of Mrauk U. Cultural identity was defined by a foundational myth linking Arakan's kingship to a visit by the historical Buddha. Holy relics of former Buddhas were believed to be buried across the royal territory, mirroring the physical space at a supernatural level.<sup>5</sup>

The Burmese conquest of Arakan in 1784 was remembered as a devastating loss of territorial sovereignty. The British annexation in 1826 further deepened the perception of 'national' humiliation. In the decades before World War I, the rapid expansion of agricultural communities by Chittagorian settlers intensified feelings of yet another territorial loss. This sentiment fuelled collective emotions and political mobilization in the twentieth century, such as patriotic pride, anti-Burmese nationalism, anti-Chittagorian resentment and, later, Rohingyaophobia.

The conquerors and colonialists, however, viewed Arakan differently. To them, Arakan was naturally a part of Burma, to which it was believed to inherently belong. Colonial scholarship reinforced this perception by highlighting ethno-linguistic and cultural similarities with the Burmese, portraying the Arakanese as little more than cousins of the majority population. This implicit assimilation of the Rakhine with the Bamar persisted in political perspectives into the twenty-first century. The normalized view of Arakan's integration within the Union of Burma-Myanmar warrants closer examination before addressing contemporary Arakanese ethno-nationalism.

### 2.1. Arakan's Place Within the Union of Burma

Arakan or Rakhine State is routinely introduced as a territorial and administrative division of the Union of Burma-Myanmar. However, the enormous success of the AA in pushing its agenda of territorial conquest and state-building in the second decade of the twenty-first century questions the historical certainty of Arakan's territorial integration. After the conquest of 1784, the administrative reorganization executed by court appointees went along with the uprooting of local throne pretenders, the repression of rebellions, and the streamlining of the influential monastic establishment. The British quickly suppressed some minor insurrections and focused their efforts on the commercialization of Arakan's rice production, strongly encouraging Indian immigration. While these developments normalized Arakan's status as a part of the Burmese kingdom, then temporarily Bengal (1826–1862), and finally British Burma, its geographical isolation and the persisting lack of infrastructure and communication slowed down the integration process in the twentieth century.

A seamless transition from anti-colonialism to ethno-nationalism is observable and unsurprising. After Burma's independence in 1948, post-colonial administrative and educational homogenization, along with a strong military presence, alienated the population and kept the desire for

<sup>2</sup> Burma and Pakistan: Agreement on the demarcation of a fixed boundary between the two countries in the Naaf River, signed at Rawalpindi on 9 May 1966 (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/najrjuml/>).

<sup>3</sup> ITLOS, *Dispute concerning delimitation of the maritime boundary between Bangladesh and Myanmar in the Bay of Bengal (Bangladesh/Myanmar)*, Judgment, 14 March 2012 (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/zb4myn04/>).

<sup>4</sup> Jacques P. Leider, "Mass Departures in the Rakhine-Bangladesh Borderlands", Policy Brief Series No. 111 (2020), Torkel Opsahl Academic EPublisher (TOAEP), Brussels, 2020 (<https://www.toaep.org/pbs-pdf/111-leider/>).

<sup>5</sup> Jacques P. Leider, "Relics, Statues and Predictions – Interpreting an Apocryphal Sermon of Lord Buddha in Arakan", in *Asian Ethnology*, 2009, vol. 68, no. 2.

autonomy alive among both Muslim and Buddhist political classes. However, Arakan's Marxist-inspired rebels from the 1960s to the 1980s were federalists, not secessionists, rejecting dictatorship but not Arakan's place within the Union. Even pro-democracy fighters in the 1990s did not contest the multi-ethnic consensus on federalism.

### 2.2. The Creation of 'Arakan State'

Since the establishment of British Burma in 1862, Arakan was administered as a single unit, the 'Arakan Division'. After Burma's separation from India in 1937, it was included in Ministerial Burma (Burma proper, as opposed to the semi-autonomous Frontier Areas). When Burma gained independence in January 1948, Arakan remained part of Burma proper.

In the 1950s, the Arakan National Unity Organization (ANUO), dominated by the land-owning class, emerged as a nationalist party advocating greater political recognition. However, the creation of an ethnically designated Arakan State, like those of the Kachin, Chin or Shan, faced opposition from Prime Minister U Nu's ruling Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League ('AFPFL') and Arakan's Muslim parties. U Nu eventually agreed to the proposal after returning to power in 1960, but General Ne Win's coup in 1962 halted the plan.

Under the 1974 Constitution,<sup>6</sup> Ne Win established an 'Arakan State' but reorganized the region, transferring the Arakan Hills Tract (Paletwa township) to Chin State. Despite its majority Chin population, Paletwa remains geographically and historically linked to Arakan. In 1989, Myanmar's military government renamed Arakan as 'Rakhine State', reflecting the local pronunciation. However, 'Arakan' remains the preferred spelling for many Buddhist and Muslim nationalists, as reflected in contemporary rebel group names.

Rakhine State's marginalization changed significantly in the early twenty-first century with the discovery of offshore gas resources and intensified China-India geopolitical rivalry. Myanmar's central government negotiated agreements with China for gas purchases from Rakhine's Shwe field and the Myanmar-China gas and oil pipelines (2009, 2013), with no direct benefit to Rakhine State. India's Look East Policy (renamed Act East Policy in 2014) initiated the slow-progressing Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Project (2008–2024), linking North-east India with Western Bengal via the Kaladan River Valley. Originally developed with Myanmar's military rulers, the project's success now depends on the co-operation of the AA.<sup>7</sup>

### 2.3. Ethnicity and Territory in the Arakanese Narratives

During the late colonial period, efforts to preserve Arakan's architectural and artistic heritage reflected growing historical interest. Nostalgia for the lost kingdom, though as noted under British rule, had limited influence on the anti-colonial discourse. U Ottama (1879–1939), a prominent anti-colonial monk from Arakan, was not an Arakanese nationalist. Similarly, U Seinda, a radical leftist monk whose rebel groups operated in central Arakan in the late 1940s, was labelled "the leader of the Arakan Separatist Movement" in 1947 but primarily opposed Aung San's AFPFL, advocating violent means for Burma's immediate independence.<sup>8</sup> U Aung Zan Wai, a prominent Arakanese in the post-war British Governor's Executive Council, created a group which "ostentatiously refrained from pressing separatist claims".<sup>9</sup> Between 1962 and 2012, Rakhine State's isolation, economic struggles, and Myanmar's censorship stifled expressions of Arakanese political sentiment. Cultural associations cultivated memorialization rather than academic reflection. In the 1990s, Mrauk U was seen merely as an "ancient capital" (in, for example, Shwe Zan's *The Golden Mrauk U*), not as the heart of a coastal empire.<sup>10</sup> Subtle dissent emerged when Arakanese interlocutors argued that Arakan was not a province (*taing*) or state (*prayanay*), but a territory (*pray*). Outside Myanmar, exiled Arakanese shifted focus from territory to ethnicity, portraying the Rakhine as threatened by Rohingya claims, as seen in Maung Tha Hla's *The Rakhaing*.<sup>11</sup> Arakan's suppressed ethno-nationalism lacked a coherent political vision, caught

<sup>6</sup> Constitution of the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma, 3 January 1974 (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/669058/>).

<sup>7</sup> Rajiv Bhattacharyya, "India-Myanmar: Why Kaladan transit project could resume soon", *The Week*, 1 December 2024.

<sup>8</sup> British Library, India Office Records ('BL IOR'), M/4/2503, 13 May 1947.

<sup>9</sup> BL IOR, M/4/2503, 9 July 1947.

<sup>10</sup> Shwe Zan, *The Golden Mrauk U – An Ancient Capital of Rakhine*, Rakhine Thahaya Association, Yangon, 1995.

<sup>11</sup> Maung Tha Hla, *The Rakhaing*, Buddhist Rakhaing Cultural Association, New York, 2004.

between resentment of the Burmese state and post-colonial grievances against the Rohingyas.

A more vocal, organized and forward-looking Arakanese nationalism emerged with the rise of the AA after 2009. Its struggle against the Myanmar army has been primarily military, with the conflict's territorial dimension becoming clear during intense fighting in 2018. The AA's goal extends beyond securing a foothold in Rakhine State for political leverage; it seeks to return the 'homeland' to sovereign Arakanese control. The AA's claim to defend Arakan's populations is tied to its use of the term 'fatherland', symbolizing authoritative protection. While its state-building vision promotes a society free from religious and cultural discrimination, it adheres to a unitary territorial conception. Notably, Buddhist territorialization is absent from the AA's national branding.

### 3. Muslim Spatial Identities

Unlike the ethno-centrism of Buddhist Rakhine, which acknowledges a history of expanding and receding territorial configurations, Rohingya Muslims' spatial identities are multi-layered, blending local, national and transregional perceptions. Locally, their identity centres on the area between the Naf River and the Mayu River's western side, where most Rohingyas live. Nationally, they anchor their claims to 'full' citizenship within the Union of Myanmar as a whole, rejecting a 'naturalized' status. Transregionally, their identity is religious and cultural, linking Islam's historical presence in Arakan to the Middle East and the maritime Indian Ocean world. These spatial references set Rohingyas apart from Buddhist Arakanese, other Muslims in Myanmar, but also neighbouring Bangladesh's society, despite being "an ethnicity with tremendous racial, linguistic and religious links with the erstwhile Bengal".<sup>12</sup>

Rohingyas emphasize a distinct genealogy linked to the term 'Rohang' which refers to Arakan as a whole. But until the mid-1990s, the political movement of the modern Rohingyas focused only on the creation of an autonomous Muslim zone in *North Arakan*. However, this lack of spatial cohesion in Rohingya self-descriptions has had little effect on their contemporary ethno-political struggle. Activists and media narratives have focused on their victimization by the state, bypassing the complexities of their spatial identities.

There are structural similarities in the narratives of Rohingya Muslims and Arakanese Buddhists. Both groups construct their geographies of religious origins by emphasizing antiquity over well-established chronologies of Buddhist and Islamic missionary activity. Arakanese Buddhists trace their tradition to a mythical connection with the historical Buddha Gautama, while the Rohingyas emphasize the foundational role of Arab traders in the Bay of Bengal during the first millennium CE. However, Arabic sources such as the ninth century *Silsilat al-Tawarikh* and the tenth century *Kitab al-Buldan* provide no direct evidence of early Islamic presence in Arakan. The placename 'Rahma', mentioned by Arab navigators and typically linked to the Buddhist Mon kingdom of Ramañadesa, was reinterpreted by Rohingya authors from the late 1950s to signify Arakan. Meanwhile, an older pre-Rohingya Muslim tradition suggested Arakan's political dependence on the Bengal sultanate during the early Mrauk U period. While Bengal's cultural influence during Alaaddin Husain Shah's rule (1494–1519) is evident, claims of Bengal's century-long political dominance over Arakan are unsupported. The following sections will explore the local perspective, situating the Rohingyas within the context of North Arakan after Burma's independence.

#### 3.1. From Wastelands to Arakan's Most Densely Populated Area

Until the early nineteenth century, Buddhist and Muslim villages co-existed in central areas of the kingdom, particularly around Kyauktaw, Mrauk U, and near the mouths of the Kaladan and Lemro Rivers. Under British rule, the Naf River became an administrative boundary, and colonial land settlement policies fostered a dominant Muslim community in North Arakan – a fact often overlooked by contemporary Rohingya writers.

Fiscal incentives and the promise of property rights drew Chittagonian farmers to convert 'wastelands' into rice fields, establishing new villages. By 1870, 80 percent of Maungdaw's population was recorded as "Bengali Muslims", later termed "Chittagonians" in colonial sources.<sup>13</sup> By the 1910s, Muslims had become the majority in Buthidaung, too.<sup>14</sup> After World War I,

<sup>12</sup> Md. Shahidul Haque and Mohammad Sufiur Rahman, "Revisiting the Rohingya policy of Bangladesh", in *Prothomalo*, 6 December 2024.

<sup>13</sup> *Reports on the Revenue Settlement Operations of British Burma for the Year 1867-68*, Volume I, Government Printing, Calcutta, 1869, p. 77.

<sup>14</sup> H.L. Eales, *Census of India 1891*, Volume IX, Burma Report, Part III, Gov-

ernment Printing, Rangoon, 1892; C.C. Lowis, *Census of India 1901*, Volume XII, Burma, Part III, Government Printing, Rangoon, 1902; C. Morgan Webb, *Census of India 1911*, Volume IX, Burma Report, Town and Village Tables, Government Printing, Rangoon, 1912.

#### 3.2. From 'North Arakan' to the 'Mayu Frontier Zone' and Beyond

Like the indigenized Muslims in Burma proper who sought recognition as 'Burmese Muslims' in the early twentieth century, indigenized Muslims in Arakan advocated for the label 'Arakan Muslims' from the 1920s onward. Concentrated along the Kaladan River between Akyab and Mrauk U, they did not tie their identity to a specific territory or claim a Rohingya identity. Active during the 1950s, the Arakanese (Rakhine) Muslims faded as a social and political force after 1962.<sup>15</sup>

The North Arakan Muslims of Maungdaw and Buthidaung, however, combined their pursuit of ethnic recognition as 'Rohingya' with a demand for a designated Muslim zone. In a letter to Prime Minister U Nu on 25 October 1948, the Jamiat ul-Ulema (Council of Learned Men) of Maungdaw claimed to represent "the majority of the people of North Arakan". They rejected being labelled as "Chittagonians", instead identifying as a "border race" descended from "early Arab settlers" known as "Ruwangyas or Rushangyas".<sup>16</sup> Asserting that "at least 95 percent of the population in this area are our people", they emphasized its unique character. While Rohingya writers have varied in explaining their ethnic origins, the geographical scope of their identity – Maungdaw, Buthidaung and parts of Rathedaung – remains unchanged. It was only in the early twenty-first century that Muslims outside North Rakhine began identifying as Rohingyas.

The most extensive political and territorial demands by competing North Arakan Muslim voices were articulated in a charter from the Arakan Muslim Conference held in Alethangyaw in June 1951. The charter proposed separate zones of self-rule for Muslims and "Maghs" (Buddhist Arakanese), calling for the establishment of a "North Arakan Free Muslim State" and the division of the port of Akyab into North and South Arakan units.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, Rohingya leaders strongly opposed the creation of an autonomous Arakan State dominated by the Buddhist majority.

When Prime Minister U Nu's AFPFL abandoned its opposition to creating an Arakan State in 1960, the establishment of the Mayu Frontier Zone ('MFZ') in 1961 was welcomed by Rohingya leaders. This Muslim-majority area (including Maungdaw, Buthidaung and a part of Rathedaung township) was placed under the army's direct administrative control in Rangoon, serving more as the civilian front for General Ne Win's Frontier Area Administration than an autonomous Muslim region. Despite its limitations, the MFZ (1961–1964) remains cherished by Rohingyas as a period of near-official recognition. After Maungdaw and Buthidaung were reintegrated into Akyab District in 1964, it was only in April 2011 that Maungdaw District was re-established as a Muslim-majority area.

Since the mid-1990s, the State Law and Order Restoration Council ('SLORC') began confiscating Muslim lands to alter the region's demographic balance, including establishing *Natala* (model) villages for Buddhists from central Myanmar. After 2017, the Myanmar army intensified efforts to 'deterritorialize' North Rakhine State, destroying Muslim villages following the mass exodus of over 700,000 Rohingyas. In May 2024, renewed clashes between Myanmar junta forces and the AA triggered an-

ernment Printing, Rangoon, 1892; C.C. Lowis, *Census of India 1901*, Volume XII, Burma, Part III, Government Printing, Rangoon, 1902; C. Morgan Webb, *Census of India 1911*, Volume IX, Burma Report, Town and Village Tables, Government Printing, Rangoon, 1912.

<sup>15</sup> Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims in Burma*, Harassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1972.

<sup>16</sup> "Address Presented by Jamiat ul-Ulema North Arakan on Behalf of the People of North Arakan to the Hon'ble Prime Minister of the Union of Burma on the Occasion of His Visit to Maungdaw on the 25th October 1948", Government of the Union of Burma, Foreign Office, 25 October 1948 (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/zews4c/>).

<sup>17</sup> Charter of the Constitutional Demands of the Arakani Muslims, June 1951 (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/b89bn0/>).



other wave of Rohingya refugees fleeing to Bangladesh. Bangladesh Government's Chief Adviser, Mohammad Yunus, called for a UN-guaranteed Muslim safe zone in Rakhine State.<sup>18</sup> As in past crises (1978, 1992), Bangladesh views repatriation as a priority. However, a gradual return now faces entirely new conditions, with the AA's control over North Arakan and the Rohingyas' unprecedented international visibility.

### 3.3. Ethnicity and Territory in the Muslim Narratives

The social, historical and cultural elements of the Rohingya narrative and the notion of a 'Rohingya nation' are diverse and often contradictory, reflecting the ongoing ethnogenesis of the modern Rohingya. The concept of space is rarely examined, with Arakan typically treated as a fixed geographical entity within its post-colonial borders. Rohingya rebel groups like the Rohingya Solidarity Organization ('RSO') and the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) often feature all of Arakan on their flags, rather than just the Muslim-majority northern region. Many Rohingya writers tend to pass over their regional heritage to counter the state's claims that they are ethnically 'Bengali', focusing instead on the Islamic elements of Arakan's precolonial Buddhist monarchy.

Mohammed Tahir Ba Tha, who pioneered the Rohingya Muslim narrative in the early 1960s, blends Muslim lore, colonial historiography, and Arakanese chronicles. He downplays the number of Bengalis deported into slavery by the Arakanese kings and does not mention the colonial-era Chittagong settlers. Ba Tha implicitly draws a sharp ethno-cultural division between Arakan and Bengal, while emphasizing the Middle East as the primary origin of the Rohingya Muslims. He portrays the Rohingyas as a composite group, descended from Arabs, Afghans and Mughals who migrated willingly to Arakan. According to Ba Tha, Arakan's statehood mirrored the sultanate system of government.<sup>19</sup>

Dr. Mohammed Yunus, founder of the RSO in 1983, similarly overlooked the colonial period's impact on North Arakan's demographic balance.<sup>20</sup> However, unlike later Rohingya authors, he openly acknowledged the connection between Arakan and Indian Islam, interpreting the region's cultural and political ties to Muslims as a result of geographical proximity. Yunus even emphasized the links with Chittagong, asserting that "Arakan is in fact a continuation of the Chittagong plain". He made the historically unfounded claim that "Arakan was once a thriving Muslim sultanate stretching from Dhaka and Sundarbans to Moulmein", closely connected to Muslim India.<sup>21</sup>

Forty years after Ba Tha, Abu Aneen further streamlined the complex history of Muslim communities in Arakan, merging them into the single category of 'Rohingya'. Unlike his predecessors, he argued that the Rohingyas are descendants of Indo-Aryans who lived in Arakan before the Buddhist Arakanese. On the other hand, like many other Rohingya authors, Abu Aneen also sees Arakan as a crossroads or corridor: "The physical boundaries of Arakan determined the opportunities for migration of people and cultures from Bengal to the west and Burma proper to the east". From this perspective, he suggests that "Arakan served as a bridgehead for Muslim penetration into other parts of Burma".<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> "Create 'safe zone' for the displaced people in Rakhine", *The Daily Star*, 15 October 2024; Najmus Sakib, "Bangladesh government chief calls for UN-backed 'safe zone' in Myanmar's Rakhine", *Anadolu Agency*, 15 October 2024.

<sup>19</sup> Md. Tahir Ba Tha, *A Short History of Rohingyas and Kamans of Burma*, Rohingya Association, Myitkyina, 1963 (translation: The Institute of Arakan Studies, Chittagong, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> "It is totally misleading and ill-motivated to allege that bulk of the Muslims entered Arakan during British era": Mohammad Yunus, *A History of Arakan Past and Present*, Magenta Colour, Chittagong, 1994, p. 53.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Abu Aaneen [Abu Anin], "Towards Understanding Arakan History (A Study on the issue of ethnicity in Arakan, Myanmar)", Yangon, 2002 (unpublished, available on the Burma Library's web site).

## 4. Conclusion

A review of historical, political and imagined geography reveals a complex landscape, where identity contests have driven tensions among Arakan's major groups. Territorial interests, border dynamics, and spatial perceptions of 'Arakan' – historical or imagined – have remained underexplored in critical analysis. These factors, however, are not transactional but deeply political and emotionally charged. Since 1948, the border has symbolized a defensive barrier for Buddhist Arakanese, while serving as an escape route for Muslims in northern Arakan. For Buddhists, people from Bengal and Rohingyas share a cultural space; for Rohingyas, the Naf River separates distinct ethno-linguistic groups. These observations raise crucial questions for the present political context.

The first question is geopolitical. The Arakan Army's near-exclusive territorial control and its vision of an Arakanese homeland governed by its own people raises fundamental questions about Arakan's place within the Union of Myanmar. The vision of an autonomous Arakan also contends with the constraints of a radically changed geopolitical landscape. Will Arakan once again become a crossroads of interaction or remain confined to the margins of regional geopolitics?

The second question concerns the Rohingyas, whose future depends on both legal status and territorial identity. The lack of alignment between their ethnic claims and imagined geographies creates political ambiguity. The Rohingyas root their claims for full citizenship in Myanmar rather than an autonomous Arakan. While Muslims are spread across Rakhine State, Maungdaw district is the only area where Rohingyas form a dominant majority. This is also where Rohingya armed groups seek control. On the other hand, they form a transnational community with significant diasporas in Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Middle East and Malaysia. The Rohingyas must therefore decide whether to align with a united Arakan, just a part of it, or Myanmar as a whole.

These questions converge on a third: the need for a shared narrative framework to address ethno-national dissent and foster co-operation among Rakhine State's Buddhist, Muslim and other, smaller communities. Unfortunately, consensus on what Arakan represents – and for whom – is obstructed by dominant narratives. Global media-focus on China, India and international actors overshadows Arakan's local political revolution. Meanwhile, the prevailing activist narrative of Rohingya victimization highlighting past discrimination is exclusively interested in retributive justice and criminal prosecution ignoring the wider regional context and political dynamics. At this critical juncture, a more inclusive perspective is essential – one that considers how local populations imagine their land and how hidden territorial conflicts continue to undermine political co-operation.

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