

Society, Religion, and Social Exclusion: The Rohingya Struggle in Myanmar's State

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Abstract

The Rohingya people, a Muslim minority ethnic group in Myanmar, has been in a long-fought dispute between its people and the state of Burma (Myanmar) itself, which resulted in countless human rights violations against the Rohingya. Classical definitions of society have often straightforwardly described this formation as a coherent, territorially-bounded, and institutionally unified, centered on a nation state. However, such definitions show critical limitations when religion, identity, ethnicity, power relations and state administrations are heavily involved in shaping claims to social belonging. Drawing on Justin Rosenberg's geo-social framework alongside several Myanmar-focused literatures (e.g., Imtiyaz Yusuf, Francis Wade, Aung Aung Sittwe, etc.), this paper argues how the Rohingya-Myanmar dispute exposes the limitations of the classical nation-state-centered definitions of "society" and how competing ontologies of it produce social exclusion, statelessness, and violence. This paper also situates the Rohingya experience through the concept of Subalternity, emphasizing how Rohingya voices are structurally marginalized within state discourse and omitted in official categories like "national races" in their own country.

Myanmar positions itself as a homogenous Buddhist-Burmese (Bama-hsan-jin) geopolitical society, legitimizing boundaries through their 1982 Citizenship Law, nationalist narratives, and the Buddhist identity corresponding with national identity. Conversely, the Rohingya people articulate society rooted in centuries of historical presence in the Arakan (Rakhine) region, shared Islamic faith, linguistic continuity, and kinship structures; lived social ties instead of political recognition. This paper also discusses the central role of religion, as a social institution, in formation of societies, its coherent social structures and citizenships as well as exclusion. Integrating Durkheim's concept of religion as a collective conscience and further strengthened by analyses of the historical political Buddhism and extremism in Myanmar, the paper analyzes how Buddhism and Islam function as powerful institutions that both sustain solidarity and reinforce ostracism and segregation.