



Ethno Religious Conflict in Myanmar: Explaining the Case of Rohingya

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Article Info

Article history:

Received September 9th, 2025

Revised September 25th, 2025

Accepted October 13th, 2025

Keyword:

Ethnic, Government, Myanmar,
Religion, Rohingya.

ABSTRACT

This study will discuss the Rohingya ethnic group in Myanmar to find out the reasons why the Rohingya ethnic group was not given citizenship by the government when the government gave 135 other ethnic groups. This research is a qualitative explanatory study using the theory of Constructivism to answer the problem of this research. The method to collect data by literature study, the journals used as references are reputable journals randomly obtained from several publishers such as Taylor & Francis Online and Sage. In addition, researchers also use Harzing Publish or Perish, which uses 500 articles for bibliometric analysis, which are then processed using Vos Viewer. When searching for articles, the primary key used by the authors in Harzing is 'the reasons why the Myanmar government does not give the Rohingya citizenship. The authors found that the reason the government did not grant citizenship to the Rohingya ethnic group was that the national identity was constructed based on national race, so the Rohingya were sidelined in the country. In addition, Buddhism is considered the country's national identity, so the government only grants citizenship to ethnic groups considered Indigenous to Myanmar. The religion practised by the Rohingya is considered incompatible with national identity and is considered a threat to the country.



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1. INTRODUCTION

Myanmar, also known as Burma, is a Southeast Asian country that gained independence on January 4, 1948 from the British government. This country has 135 different ethnicities. The state of Rakhine, previously called Arakan, is inhabited by the ethnic Rohingya (Hossain, 2024). When Britain colonized Myanmar, Britain promised to give an autonomous region to the Rohingya, so the Rohingya tried to demand that the government fulfil this promise after Myanmar gained independence (Maman Dicky Firmansyah et al., 2024).

The difficulty of obtaining citizenship status makes Rohingya referred to as the most persecuted ethnic group in the world; the difficulty is increasingly felt since the enactment of the 1982 citizenship law by the government, which makes it difficult for Rohingya to obtain political, civil and economic rights. Therefore, Rohingya are considered ineligible for citizenship status until now, and the government is reluctant to identify the Rohingya ethnic group as indigenous people of Myanmar (Haque, 2017).

Since 1991, Rohingya have often received inadequate treatment from the military, so around 250,000 Rohingya ethnic groups became refugees in 1991 (Storai, 2018). In 2017, the military security forces became more massive in committing human rights violations against the ethnic group, and even the mass killings carried out were considered genocide by the international community (Islam, 2024).

The crime was only felt by the Rohingya ethnic group, in contrast to the Kaman ethnic group, which is considered the original Muslim ethnic group in Myanmar, so ethnic Kaman is the only Muslim

ethnic group to which the government has granted citizenship. Therefore, this study wants to know the reasons why the government does not grant citizenship to the Rohingya based on religious and ethnic factors.

2. THEORY

This paper uses constructivism theory to discover why the government does not grant citizenship to Rohingya. This theory explains that Identity is important in representing the actor's understanding of who they are; a country that adheres to a particular identity is expected to comply with the norms associated with that Identity. Constructivism often sees the reasons for the actions taken by an actor, be it an actor in the form of a government, because an actor acts according to their Identity (Sarina Theys, 2018)

In other words, this theory focuses on the role of identity, norms and culture (David M. Mccourt, 2022). This theory assumes that the interests and identities of the state are built by social structures so that all social realities come from social construction (Maysam Behraves, 2011). In this study, the author will use the constructivist theory put forward by Alexander Wendth, which states that the state, in this case, the government, takes action based on identity because Wendth considers that identity is *the basis of interest*. Constructivism views the current structure as the result of social construction so that decisions, interests, and the impact of actor interactions on a country are greatly influenced by self-recognition that forms identity. Finally, Wendth considers that constructivism views conflict as a clash of values and norms (Simbolon, 2017).

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

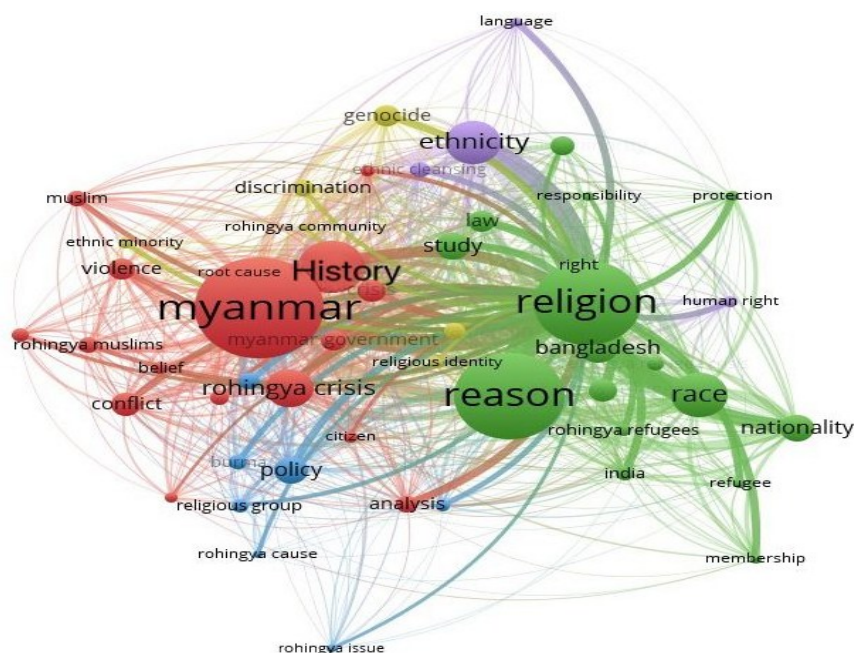


Figure 1. Processed Data using Vos Viewer

Based on Figure 1, there is processed data from 500 journals using Vos Viewer in this research. The author used the keyword "reasons the Myanmar government did not give Rohingya citizenship". Based on the bibliographic results above it shows that Religion and ethnicity have a significant influence on the Rohingya case, and there is a visible interrelationship between Religion and race, giving an illustration that Religion influences the construction of identity emphasized by the government. Therefore, the author focuses on finding out the reasons the government does not grant citizenship to

Rohingya based on religious and ethnic factors by dividing the discussion into three sub-topics, namely: Ethnicity in Myanmar, Religion: Anti-Muslim sentiment and Islamophobia and other Muslim ethnicities in Myanmar.

3.1 Ethnicity in Myanmar

Based on constructivism theory, Rohingya have not received citizenship until now because Myanmar's national identity is constructed based on ethnicity and national race, so Rohingya have difficulty obtaining their rights in Myanmar. The government in Myanmar, an actor in constructivism theory, will act according to identity because this theory emphasizes that identity is the basis of an actor's interest. In addition, the idea of the National Race, also known as Taingyintha, is considered the foundation of the state by the government. In Burma itself, Taingyintha can also be used to refer to the term national society, so to obtain citizenship in Myanmar, one must be a member of the national race so that, in this case, Rohingya are not included in the national race (Cheesman, 2017).

In addition, this social construction makes Rohingya sidelined by the Myanmar government. Myanmar's government does not grant citizenship because it considers the Rohingya to be foreigners. After all, the language used by this ethnic group is quite different from other ethnic groups in Myanmar, namely tending to use Bengali as well as the physical characteristics they have, and legally, Rohingya have been treated as foreign citizens by the Myanmar government (Naonori Kusakabe, 2018). In the census conducted in 2014, the government stated that the Rohingya were Bengali migrants who would never be granted citizenship in Myanmar (Rahman & Mohajan, 2019). Myanmar government uses the word "Bengali" to refer to the Rohingya ethnic group; they are excluded from fundamental rights, identity, social practices, cultural events, and education (Bhattacharjee, 2024)

Although the Rohingya call themselves the Myanmar people, it is rejected by other ethnic groups and local people in Myanmar because the term "Rohingya" is a label given by the international world, so they are still called illegal immigrants from Bangladesh living in Myanmar. This is different from the claim given by the Rohingya themselves, who say that "Rohingya are the first people to live in Rakhine and are the original tribe of Myanmar." (Nehginpao Kipgen, 2017)

In addition, the existing social construction based on constructivism theory certainly impacts Rohingya. The existence of differences in the designation of official and unofficial ethnic groups in Myanmar has caused Rohingya to be persecuted by the government, and even various forms of violence that occur are directly sponsored by the state (Ahsan Ullah, 2016). The 135 ethnic groups in Myanmar are grouped back into eight official ethnic groups, including Bamar (68%), Shan (9%), Karen (7%), Rakhine (4%), Kayah (1.83%), Chin (2.5%), Mon (2%), Kachin (1.5%). However, the Rohingya are considered an unofficial ethnic group by the government (Humanitarian.Uk, 2021).

Lastly, Alexander Wendt's constructivism theory emphasizes that actors will make identity the first factor so that the government considers the Bamar ethnic group as a national ethnic group. The strategy made by the government to prevent the development of Rohingya is that the government is trying to increase the Buddhist ethnic group by forming a settlement called Ntala in Arakan. Where these efforts show the norms of the Myanmar government, which is trying to make Buddhism a national identity while this is quite different from the values adopted by the international community (A. Ahsan Ullah et al., 2018).

3.2 Religion: Anti-Muslim sentiment and Islamophobia

Discussing about Muslims in Myanmar, since 1950, Muslims have become a feared religion in the country with the formation of anti-Muslim sentiment; according to Siegfried O. Wolf, the Rohingya conflict is "religious conflict" (Siegfried O. Wolf, 2017). In addition, in Myanmar, there were protests against Muslim workers, and many slogans emerged saying, "To become a Burmese citizen, people must embrace Buddhism. Since then, Buddhism has been considered a religion that the people of Myanmar must embrace. This was the beginning of Islam's difficulty in increasing its existence. According to Wendt's Constructivism, identity is essential so that the government has its way of

defining Religion. Buddhism is not only a belief in Myanmar but a national norm that must be believed (Knuters et al., 2018).

The government does not grant citizenship to the Rohingya because this ethnic group is considered a national threat that is contrary to the country's identity. In addition, the existence of anti-Muslim sentiment also makes it difficult for the Rohingya to access anything in Myanmar. Anti-monsoon sentiment has spread in Myanmar until now, marked by the 969 Movement, an ultranationalist Buddhist movement such as Ma Ba Tha, which has an impact on the existence of the Rohingya ethnic group. In this movement, Buddhist speech about anti-Muslims in the country even spread conspiracies that Muslims have plans to control the country (Government.UK, 2023).

In addition, the government created a race and religion law in 2015 to limit mixed marriages with Muslims. This happened because of the slogan of the threat of Islamization that would threaten the country because the government considered that Islam would take over the country. Therefore, the Rohingya, who are the largest Muslim population in Myanmar, are considered a threat to Myanmar's sovereignty. This is what caused almost 740,000 Rohingya Muslims to be forced out of Rakhine by the military and government (OHCR, n.d.).

In addition to the law, the government has also adopted laws targeting the Rohingya community, including a monogamy law that is contrary to the beliefs of Muslims who allow marriage to 4 women, a religious conversion law that aims to make it difficult for non-Muslim women who want to marry or convert to Islam (Zahed, 2021). report by *the Religious Freedom Institute* in 2018 stated that several laws that the government has enacted have made it difficult for Rohingya to obtain their identity cards (Katherine Marshall, 2023).

Based on an interview conducted by Al Jazeera with Hla Aung, a prominent activist and lawyer, he stated that the Myanmar government has a biased attitude towards Muslims. There is a fear that Muslims will spread in the country, so the anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya campaigns receive full support from high-level politics because the government is trying to maintain an identity that is considered an official identity by constructivism theory (Saif Khalid and Sorin Furcoi, 2018).

In addition to anti-Muslim slogans and campaigns, the increase in Islamophobia is also increasingly evident in Myanmar. Given that the majority religion in Myanmar is Buddhism, this makes Buddhists feel defeated because of the increasing number of Muslims in the country (Winarni, 2017). Even the increase in Islamophobia when the government increased hate attacks on the Rohingya ethnic group. During the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, she stated that "Islam is a terrorist religion and the government rejects the rights of the Rohingya as an ethnic Muslim to obtain citizenship." (Chowdhury & Sifat, 2024).

The presence of Islamophobia has been around for decades, but 2012 was the peak year in the country. In 2012, there was a massive riot between Muslims (Rohingya) and Buddhists. The riots that occurred were not the first between the two religions. The fear of the development of Muslims in Myanmar has grown over time because Muslims are considered a source of threat to the sovereignty of the country and a threat to the existence of Buddhism (Foxeus, 2023).

3.3 Other Muslim ethnicities in Myanmar

Regarding Muslims in Myanmar, the Rohingya ethnic group is not the only Muslim ethnic group in the country because there are Indian Muslims who moved to Myanmar and Muslim migration from China. The native Muslim ethnic group in Myanmar is called Pathi (Nasruddin, 2017). In addition, the Kamein ethnic group known as Kaman is the only Muslim ethnic group recognized by the Myanmar government, with a minimal number of around 2686 people in 1931.

The Kaman ethnic group is recognized as one of the official Muslim ethnic groups of Myanmar. Kaman is quite different from Rohingya because their historical evidence can be traced. Moreover, many historical relics of Kaman can be traced to this day. These historical relics can also be traced from Burmese historical sources, such as where the Kaman tribe was given land by the Burmese king in the 17th century for permanent settlement because they were considered the original ethnic group of Myanmar. Since 1920, Kaman has been referred to as the Pathi season by native Muslims from

Myanmar, where the Myanmar king gave this term at that time. The government received Kaman well because the community has a culture and norms similar to Rakhine. However, the Rohingya ethnic group raises various big questions regarding its historical origins to this day (Ashley South, 2017).

When comparing the two ethnicities, the number of Kaman is minimal compared to Rohingya, so their existence is considered not to threaten the demographics, especially in Rakhine State. Therefore, this ethnic identity is an important factor for Kaman to obtain citizenship; in several interviews conducted with Kaman leaders, Kaman leaders said that Muslims in Myanmar are guests, so Kaman is considered able to respect the national or majority Religion in the country. This is quite different from the Rohingya ethnic group; this ethnic group is considered an ethnic group originating from Bengali, so the government does not easily grant citizenship. In addition, the massive number in Myanmar is considered a threat to the original identity of Myanmar (Ashley South, 2017).

4. CONCLUSION

Myanmar is one of the Southeast Asian countries with a Buddhist majority. However, one of the ethnicities, called Rohingya, is not recognized as a citizen even though Rohingya have lived in Rakhine since the beginning of the British colonial period. Myanmar, which makes Buddhism its national identity, has an impact on Rohingya to fight for their citizenship. The government considers that the indigenous ethnicity of Myanmar is included in the national race that will be granted citizenship, but Rohingya are considered not to meet these standards. In addition, Myanmar has issued anti-Muslim sentiments. Therefore, the theory of Constructivism successfully answers the research question regarding why the government does not grant citizenship due to identity factors. The Myanmar government makes identity essential in granting citizenship to ethnic groups living in Myanmar.

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